



Front Line

The shock wave from an air burst lifted Jack up and threw him backward twenty feet, his body twisting in midair as he flew. Where there should have been churned-up mud to cushion his landing, there was nothing. Instead, he was falling into a huge empty space in the ground. With a crunching thud, his face, and then the rest of his body, hit the sloping inner wall of a large hole. As he slid down, mud filled his ears, nostrils, and mouth.

His helmet had already been blown free, as had everything else: webbing, gas mask, and, of course, his Lee-Enfield rifle. He continued his headlong slide down the sharply sloping wall, mud gathering around his collar and easing itself inside his uniform. He finally came to rest, headfirst, in a pool of putrid water that had settled at the bottom of the hole. He lifted his head from the pool, spitting and coughing, and peered upward at the lip of the crater from where he had just fallen. Just then, the noxious mix of smoke and gray mist above the crater lip flashed a dirty orange, and the concussion from another explosion ripped through the air. Instinctively, he dunked his head back into the water, seeking protection from the fury above. He waited a few seconds, until an icy chill started to seep through to his skin, then scrambled his way up so only his boots rested in the pool. He was breathing hard, but the explosions had stopped, although he could still hear the chatter of at least one machine gun in the distance.

Suddenly, on the other side of the mud puddle, he noticed two bright blue eyes staring straight back at him. They shone piercingly from a mud-freckled face and were locked onto him, trancelike. Like Jack, the figure opposite was prostrate and caked in mud. Across the thigh of one leg, Jack could make out a large dark patch. The soldier had kept his helmet, and Jack could see the familiar spike that

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indicated that his companion was a soldier of His Imperial Majesty's Grand Army of the German Second Reich. He quickly scanned the other details—the *feldgrau* uniform, the black boots. Jack studied the face peering back at him; his German friend could not even be sixteen years old. He was pale and trembling. It was then that Jack realized, with dismay, that within his white, fragile, boy fingers, the soldier held a large black pistol—and the pistol was trained on him.

The heavy lump of black metal was comically out of proportion with the rest of the boy's frame—like when you see a child wearing his father's boots. Jack felt a new wave of panic start to build, sickeningly, from the pit of his stomach. The boy looked to be as terrified as Jack was, but Jack could see a pendulous index finger slowly squeezing the trigger of the pistol. Jack pushed out a hand in a vain gesture of protection and started to scream, but it was too late. There was an orange flash as the chamber of the pistol emptied. Jack shut his eyes and braced himself, pushing back hard into the dirt, hoping it would somehow enfold him in its thick, sticky blanket and insulate him from the impact.

But the impact didn't come. He opened his eyes and looked at the boy, who was now shaking even more, a look of incredulity on his face. He held the pistol up again, this time with both index fingers wrapped around the trigger, and squeezed. . . . Jack braced himself again. But nothing happened. There was a click: the gun was empty. Jack felt a wave of euphoria wash over him. The boy fumbled furiously at his belt, but the dark patch on his leg had started to grow ominously, and his movements were labored. Jack had no weapon. Everything had been blown from him in the blast. Should he stay put or scramble free from the crater and run?

It wasn't his decision. At that moment a second figure loomed from behind the lip of the crater and peered in. Even at that distance, Jack could see that this new figure was stockier and heavier than the boy opposite. He moved with a confidence that came with the professional soldier's greatest accomplishment—survival. The soldier's helmet had the same distinctive spiked silhouette as the boy's. It signified one thing: Jack was about to die.

Despite his stocky build, the soldier descended the side of the crater with ease, assessed the situation, and made his decision. He muttered something gruffly in German to the boy and, without breaking step, marched directly through the puddle to where Jack lay with his back pressed into the damp earth. The soldier reached for something on his belt, which glistened in what remained of the daylight above. He fastened the object to the end of his rifle: a seven-inch serrated-steel bayonet.

The soldier raised the barrel of the Mauser Gewehr rifle and moved the bayonet slowly toward him. Jack caught the soldier's eyes, but they showed no excitement, no fear, no emotion. The humanity had been drained from him through years of attrition. The soldier pinned the bayonet under Jack's chin, resting it momentarily on his throat. Jack felt the prick on his skin and prayed for death to come quickly. The soldier looked down at him, steadied his boots in the mud, and, with a grunt, pushed the steel hard into Jack's neck.



Point-of-Departure

Jack groaned in frustration, turning to Angus. “I’m dead—again. This level’s impossible.”

“You’re terrible.” Angus put both hands behind his head and leaned back in the moth-eaten armchair, grinning smugly.

Jack rolled his eyes and tossed the controller to his friend. “So why don’t you try?”

“Nah, this level’s too much for me. I get this stuff all the time from Dad. . . .”

“Get what?”

Angus yawned. “Can’t be bothered to tell you. . . .”

“Tell me what?”

“Great-Grandfather Ludwig . . .” Angus rolled his *r*’s mockingly.

“Who’s he?”

“I’ll tell you—but don’t say I didn’t warn you. My great-grandfather Ludwig, as we are all sick of hearing, was a German soldier—he fought in the war.” Angus pointed at the screen, where Jack had paused Point-of-Departure. “That war—the First World War.”

Jack was impressed. “You’re joking?”

“No. And I know that ’cause he’s still on the mantelpiece back home. In a jar.”

“A what?”

“A jar. Not all of him, you idiot, just a bit of him. A piece of his left tibia . . . whatever that is.”

“A bone in his leg.”

“Whatever.”

“Why would you have that on your mantelpiece? You guys are weird.”

“Dad likes talking about it—Great-Grandfather Ludwig and Great-Grandma Dot.” Angus looked across at Jack with a pained expression. “I’m going to have to tell you the whole story, aren’t I?”

Jack nodded.

“Great-Grandfather Ludwig was a German infantryman.” Angus nodded his head at the screen. “Like that guy who just owned you in the last level. Anyway, he fought in the war. He got medals and stuff. One day there was a big British offensive. Ludwig’s trench was about to be overrun. Apparently, he refused to budge, even though everyone else was retreating. In fact, he did the opposite—he went over the top to search for German survivors in no-man’s-land. Apparently, he saved at least one young soldier who would have died from his injuries otherwise.”

“Amazing.”

“Before he got back to his lines, the Brits attacked and he was captured, although he was wounded in the process—in his leg.”

“The bone in the jar on your mantelpiece?”

“Right. They patched him up and he recovered. In fact, it seems he developed a bit of a soft spot for the British. There is some story about how he’d met some guys, some lost British soldiers or something, out there in no-man’s-land when he was searching around. Apparently, they were going to kill him but decided to let him go. . . . I think so he could rescue his injured friend or something. I’m not sure . . . it’s a little hazy.”

“What happened to him?”

“He met Great-Grandma Dot. She was a nurse in the field hospital. She was Scottish. The war ended. They got married and he never went home. Moved to Scotland with Dot and took over the old sheep farm when Dot’s old man died.”

“What—your house up at Rachan?”

“Very same.”

“So you’re German, Angus?”

“I s’pose—eighth German or something. . . . My last name, Jud, is a German name, I think. It’s pronounced *Yood*—but no one knows that, so everyone just says Jud. It’s easier.”

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Jack smiled. “You never told me that before. It’s a good story.”

“Dad tells it all the time. I think he was close to his grandfather when he was a kid. I’ll bring a photo in tomorrow, if I remember, but I’ll leave the jar—” Angus suddenly looked at his watch. “I’m late!” He jumped to his feet and grabbed his coat, which had been discarded on the dusty basement floor. “Sorry, I’ll have to leave it up to you. I’ve got Pendelshape first thing tomorrow—and I haven’t even started my essay. You know what the Pendelino’s like. . . . He’ll go ape. I’m on his bad list anyway. He confiscated my iPod yesterday.”

Angus was already disappearing back up the basement stairs to the kitchen.

Jack shrugged. “See you, then. . . .” He picked up the controller, still moist from his sweaty palms, and turned back to the game. The console’s piercing light winked back at him, challenging him to try just one more time. Angus’s story had somehow made the game much more real. He felt the adrenaline in his veins and, while holding the controller with one hand, instinctively fumbled in his pocket with the other for his inhaler. He felt a rush of comfort as his fingers located and then encircled its familiar plastic outline.

He muttered to himself, “Captain Jack Christie’s ready—I hope you are.”



Cairnfield

Jack stood by the imposing wrought iron gates as school dispersed. He turned the collar of his blazer up and stamped his feet to thwart a biting autumn wind that whistled past the Victorian buildings. His hands were turning pink with the cold.

“Where is he?” he wondered.

His head was still buzzing from history class, which had just ended. They were studying the First World War. Dr. Pendelshape, the history teacher, had become even more animated than usual. The man was obsessed. Even though it was a world away, Jack could not help being caught up in Pendelshape’s story. Maybe it was because he had played Point-of-Departure so many times that he practically felt like a war veteran. . . . He could picture the opening screens of the game with its black-and-white pictures of the crusty, mustached generals of the great European imperial powers with their medals and uniforms—all the grandeur of empire.

Pendelshape had described the military hardware of that time: howitzers that could belch a shell Jack’s size twenty miles, landing in a maelstrom of shrapnel and fire that would create a hole bigger than a house; new guns that could fire six hundred rounds per minute, dismembering anything in sight. Pendelshape had said, “It all lay amassed and untried in that beautiful European summer of 1914—poised, unknowingly, for the bloodiest war that mankind had ever unleashed.” When he had said that, Jack had thought that Pendelshape was about to burst into tears.

Despite his interest, Jack hadn’t hung around after school to chat like he sometimes did. He got along well with Pendelshape. But he figured today he should really be thinking about, well, about happier things. After all, today was his birthday.

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He didn't want to wait any longer. He stamped his feet again, shivering. Suddenly he heard the pop and whine of a motorbike buzzing up the hill from the parking lot and saw the trailing plume of blue smoke from its 125cc two-stroke engine. Jack's heart sank. Angus had brought the bike to school again.

The blue-and-yellow Husqvarna WRE skidded to a halt, but Angus had misjudged the curb, and Jack jumped back to avoid being squashed.

"Idiot!"

Angus cut the engine and the air was suddenly still. He removed the full face helmet, revealing a mop of straight black hair. At sixteen, Angus was a year older than Jack, and at five foot eight, he was also six inches taller. With all the sports he did, plus helping his dad out on the farm, Angus was strong and broad shouldered. He had a wide face that always seemed to be flushed from physical exertion or from being outside. Jack, on the other hand, still had the slender frame of a boy. He had messy blond hair that could never decide whether it wanted to be curly or straight.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"Keep your shirt on, Jackster."

"You're not supposed to be riding that thing. You don't have your license."

"Well, the test is only a few months away. Anyway, how else am I supposed to get to school?"

"The bus?"

Angus shrugged. "It was early this morning."

"You were late, you mean."

"Who cares? We're going to your place, aren't we? Let's stop farting around." Angus unclipped the spare helmet and tossed it to Jack. He grinned. "Climb aboard, big man."

Jack remembered the last time he'd been on Angus's bike. It was at his folks' sheep farm up the valley in Rachan. The family loved machines, and Angus had grown up with bikes. Trouble was, Jack hadn't. He'd tried it once but lost his balance, and the bike had spun off in one direction and Jack in another. He had ended up with a face full of mud. Angus had laughed so much he'd nearly fallen over.

Angus shrugged. “Well, you can walk if you like.” He snapped down on the kick start, and the engine burst to life. Jack rolled his eyes, reluctantly donned the spare helmet, climbed behind Angus, and clenched his eyes firmly shut. Angus turned back the throttle, and the engine wailed; he dropped the clutch, and the bike jerked forward. The front wheel immediately lifted off the ground in a spectacular but completely unnecessary wheelie. Jack was taken by surprise and just avoided slipping right off the back. Once the bike had two wheels back on the road, it was too late for Jack to complain.

They soon reached the main bridge out of town. The river below was starting to swell from the extra rain in the hills. As they crossed it, Jack could feel the temperature drop. The river acted like the cold element of a freezer as it snaked through the fading light of the border hill country. In two minutes they would be turning into the long drive to Cairnfield. A journey that usually took him twenty-five minutes on foot had been completed in only five.

Jack and his mom had moved from Geneva back to Scotland to the home of Jack’s grandparents—just before Mom and Dad had split up. Jack had been only six. Jack and his mom had lived at the Cairnfield estate with Jack’s grandparents until they died. Then it was just him and Mom rattling around in the big old house together. Jack’s mom didn’t talk much about their life in Geneva or why they had left. Nor did she explain why she had split up from Jack’s dad soon after they’d moved to Scotland. She had just said he was “too obsessed with work” or “there wasn’t room for us and his work.” Jack sometimes tried to find out more, but his mom would clam up or quickly change the subject.

Jack prodded Angus as they made their way down the drive.

“Stop!”

Angus pulled the bike to one side, and the engine pattered into neutral.

“Put it somewhere, and we’ll walk from here. Mom’ll go berserk if she sees me on the back of this thing.”

“If you say so.” Angus pulled the WRE behind the hedge and they left their helmets with it and headed up the drive.

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Jack's mom looked up as they came through the back door and into the kitchen. Carole Christie looked a lot like Jack. She had the same gray-blue eyes and blond hair. She was still slim, although her figure had thickened a little with her forty-three years.

"You're back early."

Jack looked at Angus nervously. Angus avoided the subject and attempted his most winning smile, displaying a mouthful of uneven teeth in the process. It was a sight that would have traumatized a small child.

"Hello, Mrs. C. My cake ready?"

Carole Christie looked at Angus with mock affront. "So it's *your* birthday now, is it?"

Angus started to move toward a large bowl of chocolate cake batter.

"Looks tasty." He brought a large, dirty-nailed index finger dangerously close to the sugary mixture. But Mrs. Christie was too quick. She whipped out a wooden spoon and landed a swift blow expertly on Angus's knuckles. He yelped.

Jack approved. "Nice one, Mom."

"You'll have to wait," she said. "Go do something for an hour."

"Mom—has it arrived?" Jack asked.

His mom's smile quickly vanished, and she gave him the look—a sort of grimace that passed over her face whenever the subject of his father came up.

"It's in your bedroom," she said. "But I don't think it's much to get excited about, love . . . definitely smaller than usual," she added.

He ignored the comment and rushed out of the kitchen.

There it was, sitting on his desk, just like on all his other birthdays: a package wrapped in brown paper and string. He flipped it over and instantly recognized the writing. His heart beat faster.

"Come on—open it," Angus said impatiently.

But his mom was right. Based on size, the package looked disappointing—compared to earlier birthdays, anyway. He inspected it from each side in turn. His mind flicked through the presents from previous years. The year before, there had been the remote-controlled

airplane and before that, all the fly-fishing stuff. Every year the present had arrived like clockwork, and it had always exceeded his expectations. These birthday presents were his only connection with his father now.

Jack could no longer resist, and egged on by Angus, he tore open the wrapping paper. His jaw dropped in disappointment as the contents were revealed.

“It’s a book.” Angus was alarmed.

Jack picked it up and shook it. Maybe something would drop out—like a check for a thousand dollars or an airline ticket to some exotic vacation destination. But no. It was a book. And, worst of all, it was a textbook.

“It’s a school book.” Angus said. “It’s called *The First World War*,” Angus added with growing horror. “Dull-o-rama.”

“I can read.”

This present definitely did not have the wow factor of those from previous years, but maybe it was better than nothing, Jack thought.

He scanned the front cover and then opened it to inspect the crisp, sharp-edged photographs arranged in three sections. They showed trenches, ships, barbed wire, “over the top” howitzers, airplanes, tanks, maps, women in factories, leaders, soldiers, medals, observation balloons, trains, and more. . . . Some photos were blurred and sepia, others were crystal clear, but together they gave Jack an instant insight into four years of brutal war.

Angus had already lost interest and busied himself with a wooden pyramid puzzle. Angus had failed to master it even after several months of trying, though it had taken Jack four minutes and twenty-eight seconds.

“Weird,” Jack said.

“What?” asked Angus without raising his head from the puzzle.

“I get this history book from Dad, right? And Pendelshape was going on about the same stuff today in class.”

“What stuff?”

“You know—the First World War—all that . . .”

Angus shrugged. “So?”

“Interesting—don’t you think?”

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“For a nerd like you. Doesn’t do it for me.”

He looked up at Jack with a piece of the puzzle in each hand. “How do you do this stupid thing, again?”

Jack took the pieces and manipulated them expertly. In under a minute the puzzle was done. Angus stared at it in awe.

“See? Easy.”

“You’re really annoying sometimes.”

“Pendelshape was saying today that millions of people died in the war. Millions. And that if things had been slightly different, it might not even have happened.”

Angus yawned. “If you say so. For me, it’s all in the past. Gone, dead, finished.”

“What about Point-of-Departure? That’s based in the past. You like that, don’t you?”

“That’s different—it’s a video game. It’s real.”

It’s what Jack would have expected Angus to say. But something about the images and the clear black Antiqua text on each page of the book stirred a distant but strong emotion in Jack. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He sometimes got a similar feeling when he played Point-of-Departure. A sort of flashback—a connection to somewhere else, somewhere different. He was transported back to a time—he was not quite sure exactly when, but he had been very young—maybe only four years old.

He remembered that they had been on a family vacation. He had been vaguely aware that his dad had not had a day off from the lab for months and had been working very late. This was to be his first break in a long time. They had gone to France or Belgium and had visited Cambrai or some such place—a monument to the First World War. He had been aware that his father was interested in history and, he supposed, this period of history in particular.

What had happened and in what sequence had remained a disconnected patchwork in his head—sometimes fragments came into greater focus when he thought back, but they would evaporate, ghost-like, as he struggled to make sense of it all. He remembered

visiting graves—an endless sea of white crosses—and the grassy outline of old trench networks. He recalled a voice describing “how it was.” Maybe it had been his father’s voice, maybe a tour guide’s, or maybe some audio-visual show. He had not understood the words, or if he had, he no longer remembered them, but the serious, gravelly voice conjured up a strong image of the war and the plight of its young victims.

There had also been one of those short but violent summer thunderstorms. Jack remembered it being very hot and then getting wet and running for shelter. He had heard thunder and seen lightning and remembered thinking the raindrops were huge—big pea-size globs that exploded on the pavement. He hadn’t been frightened—more curious. The images of the thunder and lightning combined in his head with what his young mind imagined the soldiers must have endured. This had made it real to him—for a moment it was as if he had become one of them.

But the strongest memory of that time was waking up in the hotel. He’d had his own room, and the closeness of the night had woken him. He had opened the door to his parents’ room and seen his mom and dad standing there. He remembered thinking that it was strange that they were not in bed and that the bedside light was on. He would never forget the pleading expression on his mom’s face. Both his mom and dad had red eyes, and he felt uneasy when he realized that they were both crying. He had never seen an adult cry. Then his mom saw Jack there staring at them from the open door and whisked him back off to his bedroom.

He saw even less of his father when they returned home after that. He was hard at work at the lab—always working. Then the move back to Scotland had come, and suddenly one day his mom told him that his father had left and that “it would just be us now.”

“Hey, what’s this?” Angus had finally given up and tossed the pyramid puzzle onto the floor in disgust. The puzzle landed next to a piece of folded paper that must have dropped from the package when Jack had ripped it open. It was a letter.

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Jack,

I am so sorry that once again I can't be with you on your birthday, just as I have been sorry to miss so many important events in your life. I hope that one day I will have a chance to redeem myself and that I can make it up to you. Fifteen already! I hope you enjoy your day. This year I have sent a gift of a more cerebral nature. I hope you're not too disappointed. In time, I think you will appreciate its significance. I know that you are a great student and are destined for a great future, so I think you will enjoy it.

Love,

Dad

Jack stared at the page blankly. Suddenly a wave of sadness welled up from deep within him. For a moment his eyes moistened. He bit his lip hard.

"What does he say?"

"It's just a letter," Jack said quietly.

Angus shrugged. "Whatever. At least your dad sends you presents. My dad only ever sends me to the farm—to work."

Jack looked at his friend and put all thoughts of his father out of his head. "Food. Let's go."

They sat around the kitchen table. There was a smear of chocolate on Angus's top lip. On the table were a few crumbs where the cake had been. It looked as though the kitchen had been visited by a swarm of locusts.

Mrs. Christie looked at Angus.

"Any more?"

"Sorry, Mrs. C, I couldn't eat another thing."

"But you've only had five slices. . . ." Her eyes twinkled.

"It was very good, thank you, Mrs. C." Angus groaned. "But I think I need to lie down."

Jack leaned over and poked Angus in the ribs. "Don't they feed you at home?"

Angus grunted.

“Off you go, Angus,” said Mrs. Christie. “Jack, can you just help me clear the table?”

With some difficulty Angus rose from the table and waddled toward the basement.

Jack called after him, “Try the first level again. I’ll be down in a second.”

“So, come on then, what was the present?” His mom looked at him expectantly as they started to clear the table.

Jack shrugged. “Just some book.” He squeezed out a smile. “I think you were right, Mom, Dad’s presents are going downhill.”

“Sorry about that—it happens when you get older.”

Jack stared into the open dishwasher.

Suddenly he blurted out, “Mom, what happened to Dad? Where is he now”—he immediately regretted the question—“exactly?” The words hung uncomfortably in the air. His mom sat down, holding a plate, a sad look in her eyes.

“I don’t know. We just kind of grew apart. That sort of thing just . . . happens.”

“But why do we never see him? I mean, most people who are separated or whatever, well . . . they still see their kids, right?”

She shrugged. “Not necessarily. I don’t think it’s that easy for him.”

“Why did he leave?”

“It was . . . complicated.” She put a gentle hand on Jack’s shoulder. “He was always working. He was kind of a machine, truth be told.” She sighed. “Soon there was nothing left . . . for us, I suppose.”

“But I thought that all ended when we left Geneva and came here.”

His mom snorted. “What? It got worse! More work, more pressure, more stress. I loved him . . . and he loved me . . . and you, of course. But after a while, I figured”—her cheeks flushed—“he felt what he was doing was more important.”

“And then he left—just like that. Where is he now?”

“I have no idea.” She shrugged. “But whatever he’s doing, he thinks it’s important . . . and more important than us. And that’s the problem—always was.”

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“But people always have problems. Couldn’t you have made up? Shouldn’t you have tried, I don’t know . . . harder?”

This time she was defensive. “We did try. I tried, anyway. It’s not easy to explain.”

Jack knew he was about to reach the limit in this line of questioning. He didn’t want a fight, but he pressed on, more boldly than before. “Well, I don’t think you tried hard enough. I never hear from him. I get a present once a year—and that’s it. Is that normal?”

“I know it’s not a great explanation, Jack, but it’s the only one I have. I’m sorry.”