

## Surprised by C. S. Lewis



*In which I meet a strange man claiming to be C. S. Lewis and our journey begins.*

C. S. Lewis died in 1963, but I met him last week. At least, I think I did. He appeared in my hospital room, sitting quietly in a worn but plush vinyl chair, working on a crossword puzzle in a tattered newspaper. The man must have come in while I slept. I remember opening my eyes, rubbing them to clear away the blur of my dreams and suddenly realizing I was not alone.

“Hello?” My voice, tired and dry, sounded hoarse and soft. The man ignored me, so I reached for a glass of water and took a drink in order to clear my throat, then spoke louder. “Hello?”

“Good evening, young man.” The man’s deep voice and distinctly British accent stirred me further into wakefulness. At thirty-three I did not consider myself a “young man,” but, compared to the stranger, it made some sense.

The man carefully folded the newspaper and tucked it into a coat pocket. He removed his reading glasses and put them in another pocket.

He looked to be in his late fifties or perhaps early sixties. Although he had some dark hair left, mainly on the sides, he was mostly bald. His skin had a florid appearance, while his clothing made him look disheveled.

The brown jacket he wore appeared as though it had been pulled from beneath a pile of laundry; its wrinkles were visible even across the room. He wore dark corduroy pants that looked no better than his coat, but his kind expression put me at ease, despite my reservations about this unexpected intruder.

“Visiting hours are over,” I said. “Besides, I think you have the wrong room.”

Ignoring my comments, he glanced at the windows.

“I see it is snowing,” he said. It was an understatement—we were having a blizzard. “I always liked snow, but it can’t go on forever. Now then,” he continued, turning his attention back to me, “what is that you are reading?” I glanced over to my right at the paperback on the food tray.

Slightly embarrassed, I replied, “*Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Are you familiar with it?”

“I dare say I am!” He chuckled. “In fact, I wrote it. Well, actually I first spoke most of it on the radio, then later polished it up a bit for print.”

I quickly looked for the call button to summon a nurse. Clearly I was in the presence of a lunatic, or at least a liar. The button was on a cord, though, which had fallen to the floor. Since there did not appear to be any immediate danger, I decided to chat with this eccentric man for a bit. It would, I reasoned, make for a nice diversion other than television. Besides, considering the seriousness of my condition, I was eager to take my mind off things.

“You wrote it?” I said cautiously. “But C. S. Lewis wrote it and he’s . . . well, he’s dead.”

“Yes, I know. But surely you don’t think death means ceasing to exist?”

“Actually, I do.”

“I see. I’ll make a note to discuss that with you later. Nevertheless, I wrote that book. Where did you get it, by the way?”

“It was a gift from . . . someone I used to be close to. But, Mr., uh, Lewis,” I said, deciding to play along for the moment.

“Call me Jack.”

“Excuse me? I thought you said you were C. S. Lewis.”

I reached over to the book and began reading the short biography on the back. “Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was professor of medieval and renaissance literature at Cambridge University . . .”

“Oh, yes, I know all about that. Still, if you had a name like Clive Staples, wouldn’t you rather people call you Jack?” He said this with a certain amount of seriousness, yet his eyes were sparkling, as if with a hidden, or perhaps not so hidden, delight and playfulness. “My friends call me Jack, and you may call me Jack as well.”

“All right, Jack. My name is Clerk—Thomas Clerk. But you can call me Tom.”

“Very well, Tom. Let us move on to other issues, shall we? You are familiar with *A Christmas Carol* by Dickens?”

“Yes, I’ve seen the movie.”

“A cinema? Oh my, you really do need some work. Read the book sometime. I think you will find it more stimulating. At any rate, you do recall that Scrooge is visited by three spirits in the story?” He looked up, thoughtfully. “Well, four if one counts Marley, I suppose.”

“Yes, I know the story. The spirits of Christmas past, present and future visit him, right? But I don’t believe in the supernatural.”

“Then let me add that to the growing list of topics we need to cover. At any rate, for lack of a better word, you could say that I am a spirit, though that word doesn’t really suit me.”

Now I began to wish that I could reach the call button and summon a nurse. Maybe this man had escaped from the mental health ward. Still, he didn’t seem particularly dangerous.

“So, Mr. Lewis—”

“Jack, if you please.”

“So, Jack, what you are saying is that you are C. S. Lewis and somehow your presence here is similar to the presence of the spirits in *A Christmas Carol*.” It sounded ridiculous. Was I being set up? Maybe a practical joke?

“Yes, that about sums it up, Tom. However, I am not here to show you your life, but mine.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Over the course of the next several hours,” said the man, “we will travel together to a number of places of significance in my life. It is my hope that we will cover a lot of ground including theology, philosophy, literature, morality and so forth. You will even meet some friends of mine along the way—both real and imaginary.”

Who was this confident stranger? He seemed nice enough, but no doubt he must be mentally unstable. I began to suspect that I was dreaming, but it was certainly unlike any dream I’d ever had. Perhaps my chemo treatments had broken down my ability to think clearly.

“What do you mean by ‘both real and imaginary?’” I asked.

“Simply that you will meet people in my life who really lived, as well as people and creatures that I made up for some of my stories. You know, in addition to that book you have there, I also wrote a number of works of creative fiction.” He did not come across as proud, but as merely and plainly factual.

“You mean like *The Screwtape Letters*?”

“You’ve read it?” The man smiled.

“Well, no,” I answered, feeling foolish, “but it’s mentioned in this biography.” I gestured to the paperback, which I had set back on the table.

“So you plan to introduce me to imaginary characters?” I asked.

“Real and imaginary, yes—though I don’t know that you will find it

pleasant to meet a devil like Screwtape or even his nephew, Wormwood. When we get to that part, perhaps we can start with the Narnia stories, though I must warn you that not all the imaginary creatures of that world are pleasant either.”

“Okay,” I began slowly, still trying to make some sense out of the situation, “but why meet these people? Why not just stay here and have our discussions? I’m not really in a condition to travel, and my hospital gown leaves something to be desired.”

“Your condition won’t be a problem. As to why we can’t just stay here and have our discussions, I think it wise to meet the people who, for better or for worse, shaped important parts of my life and character,” replied the man. “You will find that your journey, though no doubt different from mine in key respects, has one important thing in common with mine.”

“What is that?”

“History,” he said. “History and the people in it. We are in many respects shaped by our times and by those who influence our lives, as well as those we in turn influence. In the end, Tom, it is you who will decide your fate, but my advice is that you realize you are not alone.”

“Assuming I agree to travel with you, then, where will you take me?”

“We will start, I think, with the home where I grew up. Then perhaps you can meet my tutor. After that, well . . . I’m going too fast and will spoil the ending if I tell you all about what we are to do, where we are to go, and who we are to meet.” He smiled broadly. “Are you ready, Tom?”

“Mr. Lewis, I mean, Jack . . . I’m dying.” I don’t know why I said this. There was something about this man that moved me to open up to him.

“Yes. Sometimes we must lose our life in order to find it. Everyone is dying, you know—or has died. Most people, if you think about it.”

“But in my case death appears to be happening sooner rather than later.”

“That changes nothing, Tom. You may be pleased to know, however, that when you are with me, you will feel healthy, though I do not guarantee that you will be free from weariness or other minor discomforts that come with a mortal body; I merely mean to say that for a time your illness will not interfere with your ability to travel with me.”

I paused a moment, checking myself—diagnosing myself, really. Maybe it was the nap or the medication, but this man, whoever he was, did seem to be speaking the truth about my health, I felt fine. More than fine—I felt wonderful. It was as though the disease that had been killing me was, at least for now, gone. If I had believed in miracles, I might have considered my current state of health to fall into such a category. But no, of course I felt fine. After all, this must be a dream or a hallucination, and this stranger the result of some undigested bit of beef. Whatever the case, I decided, primarily out of curiosity, to follow its course.

“You don’t believe in me?” asked the man.

“I believe that the brain is capable of playing tricks,” I said, “especially when one is ill.”

“What evidence would you have of my reality, then?”

It was a good question, but I didn’t have an answer. My skepticism left little room for belief in this man, but I couldn’t think of what would make the situation any more real to me.

“I’m not sure what evidence would convince me, Jack,” I said. “Maybe if you showed me something—out of the ordinary?” It was more question than statement. “Anyway, how do we get to where you want to go? If a nurse sees me leave this room, I’ll be brought back immediately.” *And, I thought, I probably won’t get dessert with my next meal.*

“That’s the fun part,” said Jack, smiling and turning his head to the right, toward the window, snow still falling outside.

Suddenly a large, ornately carved wardrobe appeared in the room,

blocking my view of the window. I hardly need remark at this point that I was certain I had either lost my mind or was experiencing a vivid, though interesting, hallucination. Yet, there it was—a wardrobe in my hospital room. I recalled the famous book by Lewis called *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. If memory served correctly, a little boy—or was it a little girl?—entered a fantasy world by stepping through a wardrobe. The child then met a mythical creature. Was it a faun or a dwarf? I couldn't remember.

As if he knew my thoughts, Jack said, "Of course in my story the little girl—Lucy—entered a fantasy world. We, however, will now enter the reality of my world—the reality of my past and its relevance to your present and future."

The man stood up and walked over to me. He stretched out his hand, beckoning me.

"The time has come," the stranger said, "to talk of many things."

It really was like something out of a fantasy story. I got out of bed and took a hesitant step toward Jack, as I quickly stepped into my cheap hospital slippers. They were pink—the only color they had left, or so the nurse had told me.

"It's all right," he said kindly, like a doctor speaking to child who was about to get an injection, I thought. "I wouldn't have been sent if it wouldn't be all right."

My thoughts were too jumbled to ask who or what "sent" him. The man—Jack—took my hand, walked to the wardrobe and opened the door. Inside I saw what looked like fur coats of many colors and sizes. Jack stepped in first, making a gap between the hanging coats, then I followed, making sure to leave the wardrobe door open. Everyone knows what a foolish thing it would be to get locked in a wardrobe.

As I pondered the utterly ridiculous situation I found myself in—

walking through a wardrobe with a lunatic, my body clothed in nothing but a hospital gown, my feet shod only with flimsy pink slippers—I suddenly realized that we were no longer in my room. We were out in the open, in broad daylight (where had the blizzard gone?), standing before a large Victorian-looking home.

“Welcome to Little Lea.” Jack smiled, gesturing to the home. “Ireland.”

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