

HEARING THE HEREAFTER:  
EXPLORATIONS INTO PARANORMAL REALMS  
by

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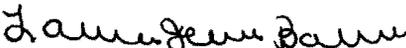
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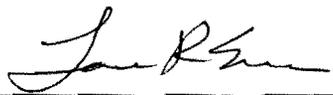
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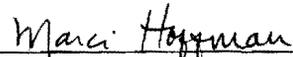
  
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“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”

*-Joan Didion, “The White Album”*

## **Introduction**

### **Finding Stories in the True / Finding the Truth in Stories**

*What is literary journalism?*

This is a question I fielded repeatedly while writing my graduate thesis. Many seemed to believe that I was somehow embellishing the name of my writing style to make it sound more highbrow—the same way that the person who hands out flyers in front of a deli becomes “Head of Sales and Marketing” on his résumé. Others thought that the very term “literary journalism” sounded like a contradiction in terms. A piece of writing cannot be both literature and journalism; nonfiction cannot be creative . . . can it?

In fact, literary journalism does draw from elements of both literature and journalism. Literary journalists use characterization, narrative, vivid detail, and multiple layers of meaning to give dramatic structure to stories about real people and events. In addition, literary journalists also rely on a great deal of research and immersion reporting to find the real people and events to write about. Probably the most sturdy, often-used definition for this type of writing is *a true story that reads like a novel*. However, as any scholar of literary journalism will tell you, the genre has more dimensions than any sturdy definition will grip; therefore, another word often used to describe literary journalism is *slippery*.

The range of expressions used by writers and theorists to describe literary journalism is testament to how much the genre resists defining itself. Authors have used a multitude of names to describe the genre: “Literary Journalism,” “Literary Nonfiction,” “Creative Nonfiction,” “New Journalism,” “Art of Fact,” “Immersion Journalism,” and so

forth. Part of this “slipperiness” comes from the form’s deep roots in both literature and journalism, and the fact that writers working within the form have often crossed from one side of the family tree to the other.

Norman Sims traces the beginnings of literary journalism to the early eighteenth century, with an upsurge of authors writing stories they claimed to be true. However, the “truth” of these stories was highly speculative. Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) is often used as an example to illustrate this point. As Sims writes, “Defoe’s *The Tempest* was long taken as fiction, and his *Journal of the Plague Year* as fact, but the reverse was closer to reality,” (*True Stories* 1). Theorist John C. Hartsock places *Journal of the Plague Year* among the forerunners of literary journalism, noting that the work reveals how flimsy the boundaries can be between fiction and nonfiction (114-115).

The commingling of fiction with nonfiction continued without much incident through much of the nineteenth century. A popular form of journalism during this time was the newspaper sketch, which offered sometimes factual, sometimes fictional anecdotes intended to entertain the reader. The sketch allowed newspapermen like Opie Read and Mark Twain to experiment with voice, perspective, and vernacular language while telling often humorous tales from ordinary life (Sims 42).

Twain was a master of the newspaper sketch but also one of the most successful muddlers of the fact/fiction divide, using his reporter status to play hoaxes on his readers and turn a critical eye on the newspaper business itself. His piece “A Bloody Massacre near Carson” (1863), originally published in the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, was meant to criticize both readers’ appetites for the macabre and the financial advice printed

in San Francisco newspapers. In it, Twain recounted a story of a Philip Hopkins, who had murdered his wife and six of his children, and then "dashed into Carson on horseback, with his throat cut from ear to ear, and bearing in his hand a reeking scalp from which the warm, smoking blood was still dripping, and fell in a dying condition in Front of the Magnolia saloon" (324). Twain reported that the likely catalyst for Hopkins's fit of rage was that, after taking financial advice from the editor of the San Francisco *Evening Bulletin*, he had bought bad stock in the Spring Valley Water Company of San Francisco (Twain 325).

As Twain unravels the gruesome tale, he uses vivid details to make the account seem real, but in truth the entire story was a fabrication. Local readers would have caught on to the hoax because of deliberate inconsistencies Twain included in the report; one being that the murderer, Philip Hopkins, was in reality a bachelor. However, the story was quickly picked up by several newspapers in the west, including the San Francisco *Evening Bulletin*, and it was not until Twain retracted his report that the other papers recognized it as false (Branch and Hirst 320-21).

As Sims notes, writers like Twain "challenged readers to get into the habit of being skeptical of *all* texts" (50), which in many ways is one of the functions of literary journalism. Creative nonfiction writers have long been questioned for their ethics in relaying "truths," and many have in response questioned the objectivity of "truths" in any piece of journalism. This point is worthy of note when reading about the influence of the Spiritualist Movement, as Spiritualist testimonies were widely published around the same time that Twain was pulling his hoaxes. For Twain, critical thinking was indeed the point,

though his use of pure fiction does not exactly align with literary journalism's cardinal rule of telling true stories. In fact, it was readers' increased skepticism of an author's trustworthiness that helped usher in the perceived divide between literature and journalism in the United States.

Scholars align the separation of literary journalism into a form of its own with the rise of mass-circulation magazines and urban newspapers of the 1890s. At this time, journalism in the U.S. began to develop in two diverging directions which Michael Schudson has described as the “information” model and the “story” model (89). Publications that adopted the information model saw objective, impersonal fact-gathering as the absolute ideal. As newspaper production became increasingly industrialized, news stories came to resemble factory work: standardized formulas with little room for creativity. Editors wanted their newspapers to be filled with accurate information that would merely describe events rather than interpret them. Sims emphasizes:

Facts consciousness changed the nature of the occupation and conflicted with ideas about writing held by many reporters. They had gone into journalism to tell stories with personal perspective and literary flair, but their editors were discouraging the sketch and eliminating these literary qualities. Modern mass-circulation newspapers were factories for gathering news and delivering it to the public, and within that world the reporter was a laborer. The rising professionalism within journalism helped standardize the product and rationalize the factory (58).

In contrast, the story model of journalism resisted this movement toward impersonal, standardized news. Writers such as George Ade and Finley Peter Dunne continued the tradition of the sketch; others such as Jack London, Stephen Crane, and Hutchins Hapgood incorporated new trends in literary realism and sociology that would become recognized traits of literary journalism.

Thomas B. Connery cites Hapgood as one of the earliest to consider the possibility of a form that combined literary technique with standard reporting methods. In his article, "A New Form of Literature" (1905) Hapgood argues for a type of writing in which the writer would "be both interviewer and literary artist" (qtd. in Connery 16). Hapgood's most important works of literary journalism consisted of writing about New York's East Side and specifically the Jewish ghetto. In "A Cynical Inventor," published in *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), Hapgood ("the American") speaks with Mr. Okun, an inventor who "might have been a millionaire" if he hadn't been "cheated by unscrupulous lawyers":

The "intellectuals" who gather in the Russian cafes delight in expressing the ideas for which they were persecuted abroad. Enthusiasm for progress and love of ideas is the characteristic tone of these gatherings and an entire lack of practical sense.

Very striking, therefore, was the attitude of a Russian-Jewish inventor, who took his lunch the other day at one of the most literary of these cafes. Near him were a trio of enthusiasts, gesticulating over their tea, but he sat aloof, alone. He listened with a cold, superior smile. He neither smoked nor drank, but sat, with his thin, shrewd face, chillily thinking.

...

An American, who sometimes visited the place for "color" and for the unpractical enthusiasm which he missed among his own people, sat down by the inventor, whose face interested him, and entered into conversation. He spoke of a Yiddish playwright whom he admired.

"I do not know much about him," said the inventor. "I am not a genius, like the others."

He sneered, but it was so nearly imperceptible that it did not seem ill-natured.

"But I am told," said the American, "that you are a great inventor. And that is a kind of genius."

"Yes, perhaps," he replied, carelessly. "It takes talent, too, to do what I have done. But I am not a genius, like these people."

Again he smiled, sarcastically. (279-80)

In pieces like this, Hapgood not only utilized extensive quotations and portions of conversations to develop tone, character, and theme, but he also practiced immersion reporting, in which he imbedded himself within the community of subjects (Connery 123). In using these techniques of both interviewer and literary artist, Hapgood was a predecessor to the New Journalism that would not appear for another half-century.

For most of the early twentieth century, literary journalism was overlooked and unfairly criticized. Objective "information" journalism became most prominent after World War I, which gave writers little outlet for creative nonfiction writing. Promising

literary journalists, including Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, instead turned to fiction writing (Sims 59).

Depression-era literary journalism was most frequently published in radical or alternative media that was widely ignored, while a successful piece of fiction promised more respect and better pay for the author. James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) was considered a major flop at the time of its publication; it was not until New Journalism took hold in later decades that the book was recognized as a bold and experimental "cult classic" of sorts.

Through the forties and fifties, a small group of writers found a place to develop what Sims calls "a coherent vision" of literary journalism at *The New Yorker* (22). It was there that John Hersey, Joseph Mitchell, A.J. Liebling, and Lillian Ross among others brought meticulously researched information, literary scenes, and extensive dialogue to their portraits of celebrities. However, literary journalism did not reach its peak until the 1960s and 70s. New, young reporters burst onto the pages of *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *Rolling Stone* writing about war, cultural change, and the complexity of the modern world. This new school of writers experimented heavily with language, structure, and style, and they were unapologetically subjective in their reporting.

Tom Wolfe, who is credited with giving New Journalism its name, suggested that the form required four devices: scene-by-scene construction, third-person point of view, detailing of the status lives of the subjects, and what he called "saturation reporting." Wolfe argued that this method of data collection, whereby writers shadowed and

unobtrusively observed their subjects over an extended period rather than relying on the traditional direct interview, more effectively captured people's genuine characters:

It seemed all-important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers always had to go to novels and short stories for namely, the subjective and emotional life of the characters. (21)

Wolfe's saturation reporting is reminiscent of Hutchins Hapgood's character "types" of the New York slums, and Wolfe himself admits that "New" Journalism is a bit of a misnomer. It should be noted, though, that Hapgood was an anarchist and advocate of free love, so perhaps it makes sense that ideas about a "New Form of Literature" resurfaced in the non-conformist 1960s.

Though Wolfe recommended a third-person voice in this saturation reporting, a number of New Journalists used first-person while still remaining unobtrusive. In "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" (1967) readers sense author Joan Didion as present in the San Francisco hippie scene, but more as a cool, brooding wallflower than an active participant:

I am looking for somebody called Deadeye and I hear he is on the Street this afternoon doing a little business, so I keep an eye out for him and pretend to read the signs in the Psychedelic Shop on Haight Street when a kid, sixteen, seventeen, comes in and sits on the floor beside me.

"What are you looking for," he says.

I say nothing much.

"I been out of my mind for three days," he says. He tells me he's been shooting crystal, which I already pretty much know because he does not bother to keep his sleeves rolled down over the needle tracks. He came up from Los Angeles some number of weeks ago, he doesn't remember what number, and now he'll take off for New York, if he can find a ride. I show him a sign offering a ride to Chicago. He wonders where Chicago is. I ask where he comes from. "Here," he says. I mean before here. "San Jose, Chula Vista, I dunno. My mother's in Chula Vista."

A few days later I run into him in Golden Gate Park when the Grateful Dead are playing. I ask if he found a ride to New York. "I hear New York's a bummer," he says. (86-87)

Hunter S. Thompson, on the other hand, is not a cool, unobtrusive observer in his writing. He instead marches directly into the action, and rather than simply reporting from the trenches, he has a knack for becoming entrenched. What started as a 1964 article on motorcycle gangs in *The Nation* resulted in Thompson spending over a year running with the Hell's Angels in California. In *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1965), Thompson writes that by summer of 1965, he "was no longer sure if he was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them":

I found myself spending two or three days each week in Angel bars, in their homes, and on runs and parties. In the beginning I kept them out of my own world

but after several months my friends grew accustomed to finding Hell's Angels in my apartment at any hour of the day or night. (46)

*Hell's Angels* is probably the best example of Thompson doing straight literary journalism; later works of his self-proclaimed "Gonzo" journalism seem to follow their own set of rules, where they are not quite journalism, not quite memoir, and not quite nonfiction.

As literary journalism moved into the 1980s and beyond, writers have continued to experiment within the form, continually blurring the lines of genre and stepping into neighbors' yards to borrow narrative patterns and approaches. As Mark Kramer writes:

Literary journalism has established an encampment ringed by overlapping cousin-genres—travel writing, memoir, ethnographic and historical essays, some fiction and even ambiguous semifiction stemming from real events—all tempting fields just beyond rickety fences. (22)

In "The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy" (2000), Michael Paterniti reconstructs the horror of a plane crash in gory detail, not by witnessing the crash itself, but by speaking with the families of the deceased and the coroner who had the task of identifying the remains. On the other end of the scope, Ted Conover takes immersion reporting to a new level of participant observation, wherein he has ridden the rails with hobos, crossed the border with illegal immigrants from Mexico, worked as a prison guard at Sing Sing, and traveled across Africa with truckers. The subject matter and approaches of contemporary literary journalists cast a wide net, which is perhaps what keeps readers coming back for more; the writing remains fresh and relevant.

Though current literary journalism continues to resist concrete boundaries, there are certain common practices that have come to characterize the form. In *The Literary Journalists* (1984), Norman Sims broadened Wolfe's set of New Journalism traits to include immersion reporting, voice, structure, responsibility, symbolic representation, and accuracy. In his introduction to *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction* (1995), Mark Kramer lists a similar set of traits he calls "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," recognizing that writers will continue to slip and dodge around any constraints put before them.

Nevertheless, most writers and critics will agree if writers are going to abide any rule of literary journalism, it is that the stories told must be true and accurate. But what is truth, really? Each journalist perceives reality subjectively and does not attempt to claim complete objectivity, so where is the boundary that separates one person's truth from another's fiction? Kramer writes in his "Breakable Rules" that literary journalists do have certain conventions of truth-telling that establish a bond of trust with readers, in which they agree to "get reality as straight as they can manage, and not make it up"(25):

Conventions literary journalists nowadays talk about following to keep things square with readers include: no composite scenes, no misstated chronology, no falsification of the discernible drift or proportion of events, no invention of quotes, no attribution of thoughts to sources unless the sources have said they'd had those very thoughts, and no unacknowledged deals with subjects involving payment or editorial control. Writers do occasionally pledge away use of actual names and identifying details in return for ongoing frank access, and notify readers they've

done so. These conventions all add up to keeping faith. The genre makes less sense otherwise. Sticking to these conventions turns out to be straightforward. (25)

In the essays included in "Hearing the Hereafter," I stayed faithful to getting reality as "straight" as I could manage: there are no composite scenes, no invented quotes, and I certainly didn't have any money to pay my subjects for access. The only way I bent reality to suit my creative purposes is that the arrangement of the essays does not follow the true chronology of my traveling. In reality, I traveled to Ireland in May 2011, to Wonewoc, Wisconsin in July 2011, to Kentucky in August 2011, and to the New Age shop in Appleton, Wisconsin a week after my return from Kentucky; the arrangement of my essays puts these events out of order. I believe the events I chose to include best describe my personal journey of understanding, and the way I chose to arrange them better embodies this journey and does not break my bond of trust with the reader. The chronologies within each essay are not rearranged, and nothing is "made up."

Though writing a true story seems to be the sacred rule of literary journalism, Kramer does list it among his breakable rules, and it has been broken or at least challenged several times in recent history. In *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction--from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between* (2012), author Lee Gutkind dedicates a whole section to what he calls "The Hall of Fame of Fakers" (15). Gutkind includes in this dubious hall of fame writers such as James Frey, who was exposed for fabricating the majority of events captured in his memoir *A Million Little Pieces*; John Berendt, who admitted to inventing dialogue and rearranging story chronology in *Midnight in the Garden of Good*

*and Evil*; and Clifford Irving, who wrote an entirely fake biography of Howard Hughes, was named “The 1972 Con Man of the Year” by *Time* magazine, and served time in prison for seventeen months because of his literary crime (Gutkind 14-16).

There are other “fakers” in Gutkind’s list and even more writers who are guilty of breaking the truth contract with readers, so perhaps the skepticism and scrutiny that literary journalists face is deserved. Still, there are plenty of writers who go to great lengths to ensure that what they write is accurate, factual, and true to reality as they perceive it; it is how they arrive at these truths that the other traits of literary journalism, such as immersion reporting, voice, structure, and style come into play.

The creative storytelling of literary journalists is largely based on their having spent enough time with their subjects to allow them to select from an array of details that work to create a narrative arc and develop meaning. For example, the events that inspired my selected essays in “Hearing the Hereafter” happened over the course of four months; however, my research and immersion with my subjects spanned more than a year. There were additional encounters with paranormal enthusiasts that happened before, after, and in between the events described in my essays; while these other encounters also contributed to my understanding of paranormal subcultures, not all inspired very meaningful writing, and they did not contribute anything to the story I wanted to tell.

Literary journalists have various techniques for immersing themselves: some attempt to ask as many questions as possible and write as many observations as possible, while others simply spend as much time on the scene as they feel is necessary to collect an adequate amount of information—what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls “deep

hanging out”— which can last anywhere from a few days to a several years. My approach generally began with "deep hanging out": trolling paranormal chat rooms on the internet, finding events, and making a lot of small talk. This type of immersion certainly took more time than a scheduled meeting, but ultimately worked toward building friendly access to my subjects. The few formal interviews I conducted were completely impromptu, which I found to be more natural than heading out on a mission with a script of questions in hand.

Most literary journalists make a good faith effort to get access to their subjects without falsifying their intentions. Like the covenant of truth pledged to their readers, literary journalists also try to establish a relationship of trust with their sources. On the one hand, literary journalism must be meticulously exact in order to have validity. On the other hand, the relationship built between writer and subject can lead to all kinds of ethical quandaries about what information should be revealed and how the story will impact the lives of the people who appear in it. It can be difficult to maintain a balance of companionship and professional distance that allows for continuing access while still telling the story as honestly as possible.

During my immersion research for "Hearing the Hereafter," I chose to make my intentions known to my subjects by telling them about my research. This way, I was able to be upfront about my plans for the information I was gathering, and it gave my subjects the ability to decide whether or not to welcome me into their worlds. For instance, there was one source in particular who was not comfortable with my subjective view of events, and it was clear that using any information that directly or indirectly involved this person

might cause a problem. This caused me to cut some of my research from this project and move in a different (and I think better) direction.

I admit that when meeting with the mediums who appear in “Spook Hill” and “For Novelty Purposes Only” I went about disclosing my intentions in a roundabout way. I rationalized my decision to keep my work initially hidden because I wanted them to know as little information about me as possible before participating in their readings and séances, but there was also part of me that worried about losing “real” access if they knew that I wanted to write about my encounters with them. After the fact, I was happy to explain my project in full and ask for their consent to use them in my writing, which I think helped maintain the integrity of my work and avoid any feelings that my subjects had been duped.

Another trait that most literary journalists agree upon is that it is important to immerse themselves in the culture, scene, or happening on which they are reporting, though there does not seem to be a consensus as to what extent the author should be present in the story. Some writers follow Tom Wolfe’s advice to maintain a fly-on-the-wall point of view, while writers like Hunter S. Thompson and Ted Conover appear as main characters whose stories are as much about themselves as they are about their subjects. Because the explorations I conducted to write *Hearing the Hereafter* were at their core a personal journey in which I tried to sort out what I truly believed about death and the afterlife, I thought it fitting to be a character in each essay. These stories are as much about me as they are about my subjects, and I won't try to convince readers otherwise.

Whether or not the writer chooses to appear as a character within the story, the literary journalist's presence should still be felt through his or her voice. In her introduction to *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction* (2012), Suzanne Paola suggests that voice not only builds interest, but it is another of the conventions literary journalists use to fortify the bond of trust they build with readers:

When you set about to write creative nonfiction about any subject, you bring to this endeavor a strong voice and a singular vision. This voice must be loud and interesting enough to be heard among the noise coming at us in everyday life. If you succeed, you and the reader will find yourself in a close, if not intimate relationship that demands honesty and a willingness to risk a kind of exposure you may never venture in face-to-face encounters. (xv)

Voice is the literary journalist's signature. The author's voice expresses personal style while at the same time adding vivid details that help bring the scene to life in the reader's mind. However, voice does more than add personality and detail; it is through a frank, reflective, yet authoritative voice, through the comments, asides, and digressions that punctuate scenes, that writing evolves from being a true story to a story with a meaningful truth.

In the collection of essays that follows, I experiment with the traits of literary journalism to tell a real story about a rather unreal topic. Through a variety of events that took place over the course of a summer, I explore a subculture of believers in the supernatural, or more specifically, those who believe in communicating with the dead. By using immersion reporting techniques, I reconstruct a scene-by-scene account of

actual events using extensive dialogue, multiple perspectives, and detailed description of elements that work to shape the lifestyles of my subjects. My purpose is neither to confirm nor deny the existence of ghosts or other mystical phenomenon, but to focus on the people who compose a somewhat unique subculture of believers in paranormal happenings, as well as on my own observations and interpretations of events while interacting with the subjects of my research. Within my efforts to understand the marginal and strange, I also reflect upon my own growth, comprehension, and challenges to my beliefs, which serves as the thread that binds the four essays together. In effect, the essays are a convergence of the public and the private, the exterior and the interior, story and truth.

## Prologue

In the heart of Krakow, Wisconsin there stood a haunted house— at least that’s what we kids tried to scare each other into believing. The house was once the rectory for the St. Casimir Catholic Parish, and it flanks the church cemetery. The house was allegedly haunted by a priest who died there in the seventies. At age ten I thought of myself as a tough kid and actively found ways to prove it: I cussed like it was no big deal, I played “Ghost in the Graveyard” in the real graveyard, and as an ultimate badge of honor, I entered the haunted house alone.

One summer evening a group of us kids grimy with sweat, dirt, and scabby mosquito bites, gathered before the dilapidated red brick monster looming in the dusk. Our parents warned us not to play in the abandoned house, citing its rotted wood floors, the menace of rusty nails, and the vermin that surely lurked inside. A few kids ruminated on these factors, but I felt that such obstacles could not interfere with proving my mettle, and the risk of broken bones, tetanus, or even rabies only added to one’s bravery.

“I’m not afraid to go in,” I boasted, “I’ll even go upstairs and wave through the window.”

Displaying every ounce of grit I could muster in my gangly frame, I strode forward into the overgrown weeds surrounding the house. The other kids watched from the edge of the property and goaded me on, but with each step the air grew heavier and drowned out their sounds. I looked to the house’s second story, where a chipping statue of the Virgin Mary stared down at me from a shrine built into the exterior brick. The

Virgin struck her Lady of Grace pose, with her head tilted slightly downward and arms outstretched. That moment in the statue's gaze was the stuff of movies: a pipe organ played melancholy music in my mind, and the Virgin appeared to suffer immeasurable pity for my soul. Determined not to crumble, I averted my eyes from her stare and marched onward to the back of the house, where a screen door hanging slightly askew served as my point of entry.

Carefully, I pushed my way past the back door and into the decrepit rectory. The interior smelled of mildew and dust, and the fading summer sunlight created a *mise en scène* of muted browns and grays. As I passed through what was once a kitchen and into the front room, I turned in a circle to take in my surroundings. Ragged remnants of curtains hung from the broken and boarded windows, the walls were stripped and gutted, and the stairway leading upward was a rickety, broken mess. Shit! There was no way I could wave from upstairs. Even worse, there was a jagged hole in the floorboards that revealed the dark abyss of basement below. Gazing into that blackness aroused my first sense of true unease: what if the floor breaks under my feet? What if some whacked-out animal shreds me to bits down there? Or worse yet, what if something *other* than an animal shreds me to bits?

I snapped myself out of my gaze and contemplated my mission. I couldn't get upstairs, but I would at least have to take my time traversing the entire area of the first floor to prove I wasn't scared. I cautiously tiptoed around the hole and continued my exploration. However, as I moved farther from my exit, I could not shake my sense of vulnerability; my back now faced the hole to the murky basement, and I had no idea

what—or who—was on the floor above me. My pulse throbbed hot in my ears and the musty air seemed too close. As I entered the room at the far front corner of the house I heard a noise behind me—a sort of shuffle that made my chest collapse. I spun around, eyes bulging with fear, but knew that I had to wave through a window or all would be lost. In three adrenaline-powered bounds I arrived at the room’s window, waved my hand frantically, and darted to the back door in mind-splitting panic.

As I dashed back to the street where my peers waited, I convinced my body to slow to a confident swagger. I answered eager questions with cool nonchalance, though my every muscle was still taut with alarm.

“Why didn’t you go upstairs?”

“The stairs were too rotten.”

“Did you see anything?”

“I thought I heard something, but it was probably just a rabbit or a squirrel.”

“Were you scared?”

“No, I wasn’t scared. I don’t believe in ghosts.”



I like to think of myself as a well-grounded person--someone who hitches her wagon to scientific evidence and is not easily persuaded by hokum. However, this self-perception is constantly thwarted by my runaway imagination, which attacks my rationality with all sorts of bizarre scenarios. At bedtime I have a ridiculous tendency to

make an Olympian leap from my bedroom doorway to land in an awkward tuck-and-roll on my bed because I imagine some ghoul lying in wait under my bed to slice my Achilles tendon (clearly, I was exposed to *Pet Sematary* at too young an age). As I conceal myself in a cocoon of covers, I laugh at my own absurdity. I don't *really* believe in Hollywood monsters, but what if, just this once, something really *was* under my bed?

“What if” scenarios are the driving force behind public interest in the paranormal. What if that noise I heard, that cold sensation I felt, that feeling I was being watched, was more than just a noise, a sensation, or a feeling? What if I just had an encounter with a ghost? Our willingness to consider the possibility of supernatural phenomena is governed by our curiosity about the unknown, and many purveyors of the paranormal and the spiritual are there to capitalize on this curiosity. We want desperately to believe that the truth behind the inexplicable moments of our lives is out there, and we will find it if only we find the correct method to seek it.

Many people find solace in mainstream religion, but this route has often failed to answer questions about the metaphysical world or unusual personal experiences. Others turn to mediums, psychics, and astral worlds to find answers to life's mysteries, often in attempts to contact those who have already passed to a spiritual plane of existence. However, in an age of cynicism, it's not enough to simply say a ghost is present; one has to prove it. Enter the paranormal investigator, armed to the teeth with techno-geek gadgets and gizmos aimed to provide conclusive evidence (or lack thereof) of a haunting. It's comforting to devote oneself to a belief in a world beyond, but is exciting, or even a

bit bad-ass, to stomp into an allegedly haunted territory force the world beyond to reveal itself.

Many of us, though, find ourselves somewhat adrift in what I think of as the land of *Meh*: we don't strictly adhere to any belief system in particular, nor do we spend much time or resources trying to prove or disprove paranormal phenomena. The citizens of *Meh* are a little skeptical of everything, because it is easier than defending a belief in anything. Sure, we have questions, but if we can't solve a mystery in a half-hour like the *Scooby-Doo* gang, we shrug our shoulders and move onto more practical investigations, like who put the empty ice cream carton back in the freezer. It's a pretty uneventful place to inhabit.

I found myself drawn to the world of paranormal phenomena because I was bored with the land of *Meh* and wanted to embark on a mission of understanding people's belief systems. My fascination with Spiritualists, psychics and ghost hunters is not an attempt to prove or disprove the existence of ghosts, but to study why people believe what they do about paranormal phenomena. In some ways, I wanted to reaffirm the skeptical viewpoint that I already held. However, a skeptic's life can be a very pessimistic one, so I also wanted to see what I could gain from a journey that validated my runaway imagination, trying on some mystical robes to see how they fit.

## Spook Hill

A number of my friends warned that it was naïve of me to think that traveling alone to some peculiar religious camp in some unknown village three hours away was a perfectly safe and reasonable plan. As a fan of classic slasher films, I understood their concerns and knew that the first kill of the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series was a girl named Annie, traveling to Camp Crystal Lake alone. Upon my arrival at the Historical Wonewoc Spiritualist Camp, I felt an unnerving twist in my gut that perhaps my friends were right. After two sharp left turns up a steep wooded bluff, I pulled into a camp that looked as if it was completely deserted. Mine was the only car in the gravel parking lot at the front of camp, and from there I could see no signs of human life. Granted, it was a stifling July afternoon in rural Wisconsin, which meant humidity that hung just below pine boughs and swarms of horseflies and mosquitoes looking to feed on sweaty flesh. There was no reason anyone would want to be outside in such irritating conditions, but this was a summer camp, and all my previous experiences of summer camp were action-packed from arrival to departure. To arrive at a camp so hushed was, well, creepy.

The Historic Wonewoc Spiritualist Camp had been running summer seasons at its current site since the Joint Stock Spiritualist Association purchased the land in 1893. The first Spiritualists arrived in Wonewoc in 1874, most of them from the “burned-over district” of upstate New York, so named because the area gave rise to a number of “fire-and-brimstone” religious revivals and nonconformist sects. In Hydesville, New York in 1848 sisters Margaret and Kate Fox were said to have communicated with a dead peddler

who presented himself by making rapping noises in their family's cottage. The young girls soon took their show on the road, spawning the Spiritualist movement that drew millions of followers around the world.

Among the core principles of Spiritualism are the beliefs that people live on after death, and communication with those who have “transitioned” after death is possible through mediumship. Spirits typically manifest themselves in a séance facilitated by a medium, who interprets communications that come in physical forms—such as rapping, movement of the medium's table (table-tipping), floating objects, or other audio or visual phenomena—or in psychic forms, such as clairvoyant visions, trance-speaking, or written messages dictated by spirits controlling the medium's hand (automatic writing).

Of course, the popular belief in such phenomena also made way for swindlers and frauds turning a pretty profit from parlor tricks. By the early twentieth century, Spiritualist testimonies were largely believed to be false; Margaret Fox herself confessed in her later years that the Hydesville Rappings were a hoax meant only to scare the girls' superstitious mother<sup>1</sup>.

By that time, however, the Spiritualist movement was much larger than the Fox sisters' public exhibitions. Societies like Wonenoc's Joint Stock Spiritualist Association had sprung up worldwide, fervently insisting upon the scientific factuality of “Infinite Intelligence” and spiritual communication.

As I walked to the front office, I saw a young dark-haired woman sitting in the screened porch at the front, staring at me. Her stare made me feel as though newcomers were not a

normal occurrence and that I didn't belong there. The woman rose from her spot on the porch and disappeared into the office. I had to suppress my urge to turn back to my car and drive home. I fidgeted as I continued to walk, nervously crossing, then uncrossing my arms and swiping at the mosquitoes that had already sniffed me out. Upon entering the office, my nervousness seemed a little foolish. The front desk area doubled as a gift shop, hawking an assortment of healing crystals and precious stones, handmade beaded jewelry, and bookmarks decorated with illustrated flower fairies. There was a mini-fridge advertising soda and bottled water for fifty cents. The walls were a warm pink and flowery, like an old spinster's parlor, and in this pink glow, the young woman who had stared at me seemed amiable and cheery. I checked in, and for the low, low price of ten dollars a night, I lodged in the modest cabin 36.

Many of the cabins were built in the camp's heyday by the mediums who resided there over the summer season. They varied in size and shape according to the mediums' resources and family sizes. Named the "Rosebud," my one-room cabin came with all the amenities one would imagine a Rosebud cabin to have: a window box of red impatiens, a diamond-shaped birdhouse attached to the front wall, one of those craft fair-type signs reading "Home is where the heart is." The Rosebud was the playhouse of my childhood dreams.

Twenty-nine other cabins lined the perimeter of the 37-acre camp, with a dining hall, bathrooms, chapel, children's play area, and a fire pit occupying the center grounds. A six-unit motel was built next to the camp's parking lot in 1988 for those who want a more lavish camp experience. Most of the camp's other buildings were built in the early

decades of the twentieth century and clearly showed their age. The octagonal chapel building was damaged in a storm some years back and no longer structurally sound. Window screens were patched and re-patched. Doors hung at crooked angles and didn't open fully. The screen door of my Rosebud cabin opened about eight inches and then halted abruptly. It felt like the whole door would rip off if I gave it a good yank. After failing to repair the door with my limited knowledge of screen door mechanics, I spent the rest of the weekend sliding in and out of the door like a cat burglar.

The interior of the Rosebud was as quaint as the exterior: lacy curtains, a small table where I could eat my peanut butter sandwiches, an old wooden desk, and a cot with fresh white sheets. On one of the wall beams there were towels and a few tiny bars of Cashmere Bouquet soap. I hadn't expected that there would be showers available for the cheapskate lodgers such as me, so this was a pleasant surprise. In the gable there was a screen window that once opened with a pulley, but the rope had long since rotted away. I propped it open with a plank and went to work sweeping away the dried bug corpses that had collected under the windows.



On most Friday nights, the camp conducted spirit message circles — generally known as séances, a term that now seems to be avoided because of its negative associations with evil spirits or, maybe worse, hokey velvet turbans. When I first arrived at camp I decided to keep to myself, lying low in my cabin and napping through the

afternoon heat. I wanted to arrive at the evening message circle a complete stranger, providing the mediums no prior information to work from as they transmitted messages from the great beyond. I was not out to expose the mediums as frauds; in fact, I wanted to be convinced of their authenticity. Because I hadn't yet met anyone but the girl at the front desk, I was still entertaining a vision of the mediums as heavily-rouged fortune tellers with fake Ukrainian accents. It could be much worse. They might be like the talk show psychics.

At seven o'clock I wandered over to the Spirit Lodge, holding the laminated ticket that proved that I paid for my place in the message circle. The lodge was a spacious, air-conditioned one-room cabin with an alcove at the back, but was furnished only with a small table holding a lamp and incense and several white plastic lawn chairs arranged into a wide circle. Judith Ulch, who was Secretary of the Board, Office Manager, and Ordained Minister of the camp, was also the resident medium and healer who would conduct the night's message circle. The sixty-five-year-old has the round, soft features of a grandmother, yet on the evening that I met her, she sported hot pink flip flops, purple nail polish, and a t-shirt with a neon image of Muppet drummer Animal spanning her chest. On her left forearm was a large tattoo of a flower, further hinting to a wild side. Once the thirteen of us gathering that night had all arrived, Judy locked the lodge door.

"It's like the Hotel California," she joked.

Judy introduced two other mediums, a mousy middle-aged woman named Paige, and a younger pony-tailed woman named Christina.

“You get three mediums,” Judy said, “or actually, one medium, an extra-large, and a small.”

We began the message circle with a relaxation meditation, surrounding ourselves with the white light of God and inviting Spirit to enter. “Spirit” is essentially any entity in the spirit realm with whom the medium communicates, whether it be God, angels, special guides, or relatives of camp visitors. During a message circle, Judy said she doesn’t go into a trance, but enters an altered state of mind she calls “off in the ethers.”

“I don’t hear the distractions outside. I’m listening to the messages that Spirit sends me.”

Most of the participants that night were middle-aged women who regularly visit the camp. They appeared to be middle-class artsy types: women who, with their beaded crystals and magnetic bracelets, seemed to be open to all sorts of New Age ideas and practices. There were a few younger people in attendance who seemed to have come to camp for a wacky adventure, a fun story to tell at parties, rather than from legitimate spiritual interest. Then there was me, the researcher, who came partially out of sincere curiosity, partially to tell an interesting story, floating somewhere among and between the other groups.

Rounding out the circle was a woman who seemed to be a loner, tall and angular with leathery skin and a mouth that looked incapable of smiling. She was the confrontational one, the negative vibe in the room. For example, as the mediums received information from Spirit, they first asked participants “May I come to you” to obtain permission to deliver personal messages. When Paige asked permission of the

loner, this woman crossed her arms, leaned back in her chair, and, after an uncomfortable pause, finally grumbled, “Sure, I guess so.” Paige told her that she saw an image of a man in a sportscar, to which the loner gruffly demanded to know the color and model of the sportscar and what the man looked like—all reasonable questions, but delivered almost as an assault on the medium. Paige tried her best to describe what she saw, and Judy tried to diffuse the situation with explanations that images are not always clear and not necessarily literal, but eventually both decided to move on.

After a while, Christina asked if she could come to me. With her heavy fringe of strawberry blonde bangs, heavily-lined eyes, and scrolling tattoos, Christina was either a woman who looked young for her age or a girl who was a bit too streetwise for her years. She claimed to have a spirit guide named Alexis, which to me sounded a bit like a name a little girl would pick for an imaginary friend. Christina’s messages to the other campers up to that point seemed pretty vague—images that could be applicable in anyone’s life, so I was skeptical of her abilities.

She told me that she got the sense that I had been doing a lot of learning lately and was seeing the world with new eyes. Sort of an umbrella statement, but given that I was a graduate student and had recently returned from my first travels abroad, one that was one hundred percent accurate. Christina went on to suggest that I might find it useful to enroll in a class—maybe something in psychology or sociology—where I could observe people, because there might be some “odd ducks” of interest for me to see. At that point, the irony made it hard for me to keep my composure, but more importantly, I was not as doubtful of Christina’s intuition anymore.

For the next hour or so, the mediums continued to deliver messages. Sometimes they missed the mark, and other times they provided details so concise that they seemed to poke a finger into those tender spots of our grief. One of the women, a high school teacher, broke down suddenly when Judy delivered a message from a former student named Jeremy. The message was one of thanks, and the woman apologized through her tears for falling apart the way she had, though no apologies were really needed.

Toward the end of the message circle, Judy encouraged all of the participants to try to focus our own energy into delivering messages.

“Whatever images that pop into your head, no matter how ridiculous they seem to you, may have meaning to someone else in the circle.”

Some of the participants volunteered some images and others attempted to interpret them, but none seemed to have the same poignancy as those delivered by the mediums. Judy told us not to give up, that mediumship is like a muscle that takes time and exercise before it gets really lean. She encouraged me specifically to say something.

“You just have this light that’s pulsing around you,” she assured me. “You have more psychic ability than you know, and you have got to trust yourself.”

I tried to flex my psychic muscles as hard as I could, but I didn’t see anything. The writer in me wanted to make something up, anything at all, because it was a lot easier than trying to hear a spirit. Who knows, maybe I’d strike a chord with someone. I wondered if the skill that the mediums have honed is not one of reading images, but reading people and what might affect them. I made assumptions about the other campers as soon as I sat down in the lodge. Would I have been right if I told the loner that I

sensed a profound loneliness in her soul? Was this my psychic ability, or my ability to tell stories?

Later that night there was a campfire. Only Judy, her partner Harvey, Paige, and Christina occupied the lawn chairs that circled the large fire pit. I assumed all the other campers had either turned in early or, because no alcohol was permitted on the premises, went looking for some action downtown. When I sat down at the fire, Judy was telling Paige—who was a new medium at camp—about some of the camp’s history. In its early decades, the camp was known as Unity Park, and it was the social hub of Wonewoc. Spiritualist teacher and camp founder John L. Potter gave weekly lectures, and the camp hosted dances, concerts, and potluck dinners that were popular among the townspeople. Judy had even uncovered old newspaper articles that suggest that Mary Todd Lincoln, who had an interest in Spiritualism and was known to conduct séances in the White House, may have visited the camp sometime after her husband’s assassination. It was hard to imagine the grounds in their current state of disrepair ever being a social hotspot, but the camp had had a rough couple of decades in recent times, and the community had since turned its back on the camp once named “Unity.”

I asked Judy if the camp had earned a negative reputation with the locals, and whether it had to do with the general conception of mediums being grifters and fakes.

“Oh, without a doubt.” Judy said. “And people should be skeptical, because there are a lot of fakes out there looking to take advantage.”

According to Judy, the camp’s previous managers went for some time conducting underhanded activities unnoticed by The National Spiritualist Association of Churches

(NSAC), based in Lily Dale, New York. Mediums performed psychic readings on infants, sold cures for cancer, and staged the theatrical illusions that many associate with fortune tellers and séances.

“When we were renovating the Spirit Lodge, we found eye-hooks up in the beams,” Judy said. “Somebody was running fishing line to the back alcove, and back there it would be easy to make it look like things are floating around.”

Besides running scams like this, the previous managers were also suspected of allowing squatters to use the camp as a sort of drug haven. Once these people were reported, the NSAC worked toward removing the acting managers, but they did not leave without a fight. In fact, they apparently still live near the camp, and Judy suspects that they are among the troublemakers that vandalize the grounds in the offseason.

“Last year, some people decided to have a big bonfire and burn all our picnic tables. People in town think we’re all a bunch of weirdoes up here. They call us ‘Spook Hill.’ So trying to keep up with the repairs, plus all the damage done when we’re not around, it’s a constant battle.”



On Saturday morning, I decided to trek into the village of Wonewoc to see the sights, which turned out to be a short trip. What began as an upstart industrial town powered by the Baraboo River is now little more than a ghost town, with nothing to show but a sign commemorating the sawmills and flour mills that no longer exist. With just

over eight hundred residents, there is no draw for an entertainment district or even a franchise restaurant; instead, the main drag boasts establishments such as J&S Grocery, Possum Hardware, and a couple of resale shops that deal less in antiques and collectibles than in leftovers from estate sales. A night out on the town might consist of catching a bite to eat at Old Blue's Pizzeria followed by downing a few tappers at Ernie's Wooden Shoe.

As I walked down the main drag, I tried to be friendly to passers-by, but my cheery "hellos" were repeatedly greeted with subdued nods and averted eyes. Perhaps they knew that I came down from Spook Hill and did not want me to feel welcome. My trip into one of the resale shops was a major disappointment; a second-hand store seemed like a good place to chew the fat with a local, but the shopkeeper seemed annoyed that I had disrupted her otherwise empty store and barely acknowledged my entrance. As I strolled past shelf after shelf of musty bodice-ripper romance novels, the woman kept her back turned to me, her slight build and bony shoulder blades making her look like a praying mantis hunched in front of a computer screen. I thought that maybe she hoped I would steal something, just to clear out some of the useless junk that no one would ever buy. Feeling that I had browsed for a polite amount of time, I approached the front counter, eager to strike up a conversation. Instead, the woman gave me a flat "Thanks for stopping in," that really translated to "I'd like it if you left now." Not wanting to disturb what I am sure was a rousing game of computer solitaire, I decided to look for conversation elsewhere.

I circled the block once before the sweat began to make my shirt cling to my lower back, and I decided I needed to find somewhere cool to hang out for a while. I didn't have the funds to buy a meal or slap money down at the bar, so I walked to the Amoco station to buy a cold drink. Like most of the businesses in Wonewoc, the gas station was also empty, but unlike the shopkeeper, the gas station attendant kept a keen eye on me as I made a lap around the store. After loitering long enough to cool off, I finally plunked a bottle of iced tea down on the counter.

"Town sure is quiet on a Saturday," I said.

The attendant smiled and pushed her frizzy hair behind her shoulder. "It's quiet here every day," she said. "Where are you from?"

"I live in Green Bay."

"Yeah, I suppose it's a lot different than Green Bay," she laughed, acting as though Green Bay were New York City. "What brought you here?"

"I'm spending the weekend at the Spiritualist Camp," I answered.

The woman raised her eyebrows. "Oh."

"Does everyone really call it Spook Hill?"

"Yeah, most people do," the woman chuckled weakly.

By that point I felt the need to explain myself; I didn't want the woman to think I was one of *those* weirdoes. Instead of sticking up for the camp and telling the attendant how nicely I had been treated, I explained that I didn't really believe in that stuff, and that I just came to check the place out and write about it.

"Oh," the woman replied.

She probably thought that a writer hanging around town was no less peculiar than the other freaks on the hill. I grabbed my iced tea, wished her a good day, and walked back up to camp.



Saturday night's activity was past-life regression. Judy once again led the group, joined by Christina, Paige, and a new medium named Bob. Bob was middle-aged, with a thick swoop of dark hair and eyes that squinted as though he was constantly looking into the sun. He kind of reminded me of Bob Denver, TV's Gilligan. Five more participants other than me joined in, three of whom were new faces. The young tourists had apparently left first thing in the morning, telling the girl at the front desk that the camp wasn't for them. To everyone's relief, I think, the loner had also left earlier that day.

Judy began the session by stating that she has been leading past-life regressions for about thirty-five years and explaining what we should expect.

"I will take you through a series of relaxation exercises, and it is *not* hypnosis. You are not being hypnotized, you're in control."

Judy repeatedly stressed that we were in complete control of our experience. I am not sure if this was to part of her method to relax us or if it was a legal disclaimer—maybe there is a special license one must obtain in order to call oneself a hypnotist, or maybe hypnotism is frowned upon by the NSAC. I was a little disappointed, though; I

have never been hypnotized, and suspect that I am one of those that cannot be hypnotized. Once again, I wanted to be proven wrong.

Judy explained that we would start by going back to a memory from when we were about fifteen years old, then to age four, picking up details to remember and save for later. Sounded easy enough.

“Then we will go to the time just before you were born,” Judy said. Well, maybe this is possible.

“Then we will go backwards even further to the ‘Blue Mist’.” Judy explained that the Blue Mist is the place between lives, “a healing place of infinity.” After the Blue Mist, we were to travel to a past life, and Judy warned us not to qualify any images.

“Don’t say, ‘Oh, I saw that on TV the other night.’ Maybe, you did, but what you’re getting right now is from a past life.”

I was getting pretty skeptical by then. I felt like Judy was creating a failsafe, that even if we retold *The Wizard of Oz* scene for scene in our heads, it must somehow be connected to a past life. Still, I was trying my best to withhold prejudice, and I didn’t want a negative attitude to interfere with the session. I settled into my chair and prepared to swing my doors of perception wide open.

We started with some breathing exercises, inhaling the healing energy of the camp and exhaling any negative energy from within. Judy counted backward from ten, and then led us through a progressive relaxation exercise, allowing waves of relaxation to course through our bodies from our eyelids to our toes. Then Judy counted down from ten again and told us that we were then at our natural levels of relaxation. Apparently,

my natural level of relaxation was one that still nagged about the plastic chair digging into the middle of my back.

Judy then led us through some imagination exercises, telling us to picture a smooth surface of a pond, or imagine daydreaming like we did as children looking through the classroom window. Again, she reminded us that we were in complete control.

I imagined a time when I was fifteen. My mom caught me skipping school and walked right into the house of the neighbor boy whose bedroom I was in. Then I remembered a time when I was five. My first day of kindergarten, and I was so proud when all the children turned to ooh and ahh at my dad in his dress Navy whites. Those were funny, happy memories, and they did make me feel all warm and fuzzy. So far, the regression was working.

Next, we were to go back to the time before we were born. I imagined dark reds and purples and hearing a heartbeat like a sonogram. This was what I imagined in utero would be like, but I didn't think I was really experiencing a memory. Judy warned us not to qualify the images we saw, but I couldn't help it. I was certain that the sensations I imagined were inspired by videos I had seen in Sex Ed and Biology.

Next up was the Blue Mist. I imagined diving into a turquoise swimming pool and swimming to touch the bottom. I remembered my swimming lessons, and that whoever brought the lead brick up from the deep-end won a free soda. I worried that I was doing this regression stuff wrong, because I was only associating each level of

regression with familiar things that I already knew. Still, I did feel relaxed and was thinking of things that I probably hadn't thought of in years. Maybe that was the point.

Finally, we were in our past lives. Judy directed us to step onto the earth of this past life and look down at ourselves, starting at our feet and moving upward and outward to the world around us. When I looked down at my imagined body, I wasn't sure if I was male or female—just a child with brown skin, bare feet, and cutoff shorts. It was bright daylight in a desert climate, where the dust clung to my hair and caked in my elbow creases. Judy prompted us to gather details of things we perceived: people we recognized, what our home looked like, other places where people gathered. I didn't see anyone, and could not picture my home, but a few sun-bleached buildings stood a few yards away. I walked over to one building—possibly a small tavern or a lunch counter—and pulled open the screen door. My line of vision saw only beer guts and belt buckles, no faces. I didn't get the sense that any of those torsos were related to me, so I walked back to my starting point and just stood, swinging my arms the way bored children do.

Judy prompted us to gather more sensory details and remember important events, but I never saw anyone's face, never had any conversations, and it seemed that the only important event I could see was riding a banana-seat bicycle in a circle. Judy then directed us to envision the events surrounding our death, and then the death experience itself. I imagined an old pickup truck kicking up a cloud of dust as it drove away. I never saw the actual death—maybe I was run over by the truck, or maybe the person in the truck abandoned me and I died from neglect and starvation. It felt that I was used to being all alone, so abandonment wouldn't have come as a surprise.

Eventually, Judy brought us out of our relaxation and back to our present lives. We went around the circle and volunteered any details that we wanted to share with each other.

“And what soldier were you this time, Bob?” Judy asked.

Apparently, Bob was a war buff, a Civil War re-enactor, and was nearly always a soldier in his past lives. Bob told us that he was indeed a soldier, probably in the Civil War, and he was at the front lines servicing a cannon.

Christina said that in one of the lives she saw she was also a soldier and was absolutely terrified of airplanes flying overhead. Paige was the daughter of a sheep farmer in Scotland in 1464, and her village was raided and burnt to the ground.

I began to notice a pattern of past lives that seemed rather quixotic, too heroic, like something one would read in a good adventure book or one of the romance novels for sale in the secondhand store. In a way, my past life was literary, too. The small desert town, the impoverished landscape, the abandoned child—I was certain that my regression was heavily influenced by Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko, whose works I had studied the previous semester. I wasn't experiencing a past life. I was writing a story.

One of the participants admitted that she didn't really feel anything but a big void, and she didn't see anything but explosions of color.

“What color did you see?” Bob asked.

The woman said she saw bursts of purple-blue, and Bob assured her that purples and indigos were very spiritual colors.

“You don’t accept your mind’s-eye yet, but the colors are a great place to start.”

“Your subconscious was listening whether you realized it or not,” Judy said, “so you might not think you did anything, but you did.”

Again I felt that that the mediums were setting up more failsafe justifications, that even the colors and shapes people see when they close their eyes were a link to the past life and had meaning.

Judy wanted us to think about the details that we saw, and what meaning they might carry in our present lives. At first, I sarcastically thought to myself that I need to read less Silko, because she’s a real drag. But then I wondered if it was possible that Silko’s works stuck with me because the themes of emptiness, despair, and alienation in the lives of her characters somehow reflected my own fears of being alone, or maybe that on some level I actually isolated myself too much from others. These weren’t truths that gave me comfort or made me feel better about myself; these were truths that gave me a sinking feeling, like an anchor tied to my tailbone. I wished that I had instead been a war hero or a medieval milk maid.



The early hours of Sunday morning brought rain down in buckets. The rain created some sanctuary from the bloodthirsty horseflies that had tormented me all weekend. I spent the morning sipping rotten instant coffee and writing in my journal, enjoying the break in humidity and the fresh green smell of the morning air. At ten

o'clock there would be a worship and healing service in the chapel, which was really the old dining hall.

The dining hall-turned-chapel would be recognizable to anyone who has spent time at summer camp: exposed rafters and joists, double-hung windows with white cotton valances, photographs from seasons long past, and, of course, the boorish arts-and-crafts tribute to Native American culture. In the chapel, this tribute came as a wall dedicated to badly drawn Indian portraits—mostly done in oil pastels—that I assumed were either the handiwork of past campers or found at one of the resale shops downtown. All the usual characters were accounted for: the stoic elder with deeply furrowed face and single feather in his hair; the muscular bronze warrior with a maiden kneeling at his feet and gazing up in wonder, the little girl with eyes like black pearls, and my personal favorite, a velvet profile that I like to call “Chief Pompadour.”

These portraits are not just summer camp Americana, though; they are also evidence of the Spiritualists' nineteenth-century nostalgia. Spiritualists generally view Native Americans in very James Fenimore Cooper-esque terms: proud, wise, natural, and largely dead. Mediums often channel Native American spirit guides for their perceived ancient wisdom and methods of natural healing, and the word “shaman” seems to be thrown around frequently by a number of Spiritualist healers. While viewing this wall of bad taste, I was reminded of the past life regressions of the previous night, in which a number of participants channeled personas that were a bit more noble, romantic, and tragic than the average human existence. There seems to be a sympathetic admiration for the Chingachooks and Uncases who die sentimental and heroic deaths, and perhaps

also an empathetic connection if one considers actively practicing Spiritualists to be the last of a dying breed.

Aside from the slightly generic and prejudiced décor, the space was designed like a small country church, with a pulpit, a pair of candles, and three rows of wooden-slatted park benches serving as pews. Bouquets of artificial sunflowers covered the pulpit and nearly every table surface. Sunflowers are the official symbol of the Spiritualist Church, with the motto, “As the sunflower turns its face to the Light of the Sun, So, Spiritualism turns the face of humanity to the Light of Truth.” Behind the pulpit hung several watercolor landscapes of the camp, flanked by a Victorian angel print on the left and an amateur watercolor of Spiritualist forefather Andrew Jackson Davis on the right. Though the camp no longer served meals for its visitors, the back of the hall remained set up as a dining area. It became a sort of narthex for the chapel, where post-service cookies and coffee could be shared among parishioners.

I took a seat in one of the extra wooden chairs set up behind the pews, next to the wall of Indian portraits. The service drew in a crowd of about twenty, with some familiar faces and some new ones. Most were middle-aged to elderly, but there were also two tween-age girls with their respective parental units. Judy’s two sons and their partners, who happened to be visiting that weekend, were also in attendance. Two young women that evidently revel in their outcast status—appearing in black garb, copious facial jewelry, and deliberately torn stockings—created a gloom cloud in the back corner opposite mine. Judy, Christina, and Bob stood at the front of the hall by the pulpit. At the rear of the center aisle, Paige was set up to give Reiki healing services. Reiki is a sort

of spiritual massage, intended to stimulate life force energy and harmonize the body and soul.

Judy began the worship service with an invocation and words of welcome. She introduced Bob and Christina as mediums that would help her deliver messages at the end of the service. She added that during the service, anyone was welcome to get up and walk back to Paige for a healing session. Judy gave a rundown of upcoming events at the camp and also put in a plug for the Summerland Spiritualist Church in Madison, where Bob is actively involved.

After the initial greetings we were invited to stand in order to recite the Declaration of Principles<sup>2</sup>, which were pasted in the fronts of our hymnals:

1. We believe in Infinite Intelligence.
2. We believe that the phenomena of nature, both physical & Spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
3. We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance there with, constitute true religion.
4. We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.
5. We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of spiritualism.
6. We believe that the highest morality is contained by the Golden Rule, "What so ever ye would that others should do unto you, do ye also unto them."

7. We affirm the moral responsibility of the individual, and that he makes his own happiness or unhappiness as he obeys or disobeys Nature's Physical and Spiritual laws.
8. We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any human soul here or here after.
9. We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing contained in the Bible are divine attributes proven through mediumship.

The Declaration was followed by singing "Amazing Grace," which I soon realized was a very appropriate selection. The topic of Judy's sermon was overcoming addiction. You see, Judy revealed that she is a recovering alcoholic, and that week she had celebrated the anniversary of her sobriety. Judy took us back to her younger days, when life was touch-and-go and she tried to ignore her intuitive abilities. She talked about getting in a car wreck that nearly ended her life—her mortal life, at least—and how that was not her rock bottom. She talked of calling her boys in sick to school because she was too hung over to get them ready in the morning. But that was not her rock bottom, either. Finally, she talked of when her boys really were too sick for school, and of being happy that she could dose them with medicine and put them back to bed while she slept off her hangover. This, she said, was when she finally realized that she was harming more than just herself, and she began her road to recovery.

Judy's revelation was raw and tearful and struck a chord with the congregation, most severely for her sons. One of her sons sat directly in front of me, and I watched his shoulders shake with sobs. His wife squeezed his knee and dabbed at her face with a

tissue. Judy's next revelation was that both this son and his wife were also recovering alcoholics, and the congregation applauded their sobriety.

Judy then called for a healing circle and welcomed anyone who has battled or is currently struggling with addiction to join hands with her at the front of the chapel. To my surprise, more than half of the congregation rose to their feet and shuffled toward the pulpit. At that moment, I realized how appealing the Spiritualist religion is to addicts—the rejection of the Christian concept of damnation, the belief that one can continue to reform even after death, the message circles that allow communication and closure with those who have passed on, the past-life regressions that allow for an existence different from the one we know. This religion allows those fighting demons in their current life to create a better story for themselves, a more respectable past and a brighter future. Spiritualists may be slightly off the beaten path in terms of their beliefs, but really their message is not different from the ones at the foundation of many faiths: things will someday be better; maybe not here, but surely in the hereafter. The members of the healing circle held hands tightly, hugged each other, and offered tear-soaked smiles.

We finished out the service with the passing of the offering plate and more nostalgic hymns. We sang “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which initially seemed like an odd choice, but not in light of the Spiritualists' yearning for a valiant past and these addicts' apparent role as soldiers in a war against themselves. Every new day is a victory. *Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Our God is marching on.*

### **For Novelty Purposes Only**

For much of the American public, the only exposure to mediumship is psychics on TV, giving readings to talk show audiences or enticing us to call them on their telephone hotlines. They're usually women, dressed in flowy fabrics and adorned with stacks of bracelets, dangling earrings, and rings on every finger. They make promises to answer our most burning questions about love and wealth, and reveal messages from the dead that will help us solve all of life's mysteries. These psychics amass huge amounts of wealth through television appearances, cross-country tours, and book sales, though the information they provide in their readings is often proved hazy, inaccurate, or flat out wrong. So-called psychics have every opportunity to capitalize on our desperation, our fears of the unknown, and our desire to seek answers, and the public has the right to be skeptical.

Take TV psychic Sylvia Browne. Browne was a weekly guest for years on *The Montel Williams Show*, where she took questions from audience members asking for love, health, and money advice, as well as information about deceased or missing loved ones. In 2003 Pam and Craig Akers appeared on *Montel* to ask Browne for information on their abducted son, Shawn Hornby<sup>1</sup>. Browne told the desperate parents that Shawn was dead, and gave a detailed description of his killer and where to search for his body. In 2007, however, Shawn Hornby was found very much alive, having escaped from his abductor after four years of imprisonment. Despite egregious errors in her psychic predictions such as this, Browne continues to charge in the neighborhood of \$850 for a personal

phone reading, and tickets for her lecture tours and Las Vegas appearances range anywhere from \$50 to \$100 per ticket.

I have a very low opinion of Sylvia Browne and others of her ilk. However, I don't want to situate all people who profit from the paranormal in this category of greed and negligence. I want to believe that some who call themselves psychic truly have intuitive abilities that are beneficial in some way. I want to believe that not every medium, ghost-hunter, and spoon-bender is out simply to run a grift. I don't think of myself as gullible, maybe just optimistic that not everyone out there is a complete slimeball. The only way to skim off the slime, however, is to go out and look for that uncontaminated, altruistic steward of the supernatural myself.

My first private psychic reading occurred at a New Age shop in Appleton, Wisconsin. The New Age Movement gained momentum with the American counterculture of the 1960s—the youth who had become disillusioned by institutions of government, marriage, and mainstream religion. By the 1970s the movement was in full swing, helped along by the metaphysical book and gift shops popping up in towns all over the nation. The New Age encompasses a massive range of world religions, occult-based practices, psychologies, medicines, and philosophies, essentially creating a market for any interest in spiritual realms, holistic living, or pseudo-sciences. If the healing crystals don't cure what ails you, try feng shui. If you don't receive answers from a palm reading, try tarot cards.

The shop I chose to visit advertised on its website that it offered “everything from Angels to Zen,” including psychic readings by appointment. I called to schedule a reading, and the woman with whom I spoke cheerily informed me that to set an appointment I must pay in advance, which I could do over the phone using my Discover, Visa, American Express, or MasterCard. I suppose all enlightenment comes at a price, and in this case the price was twenty bucks for fifteen minutes.

Upon entering the shop, I quickly realized that it wasn't fooling about offering everything from Angels to Zen. At the front of the store were big ticket items like statues, altars, and wood carvings. Glass counters lined the store's left side, filled with jewelry arranged by color, creating a rainbow sparkling under glass. Placed on each shelf were cards that designated the name of each crystal and precious stone, accompanied by their healing properties and Zodiac significance. The right side of the shop featured an aromatherapy center filled with incense, essential oils, sage and sweetgrass bundles, and a CD selection included everything from Celtic singers to didgeridoos. Toward the back of the store were display cases of fairy statues and a large selection of books covering astrology, grief counseling, organic gardening, and Wisconsin's haunted locations. Atop the bookshelves were large geodes and crystal cathedrals, priced upwards of \$600. Racks of bohemian-style clothing and small gifts like wooden flutes, wind chimes and dream catchers ran down the center of the shop. As I browsed, a woman with oddly drawn-on eyebrows paced back and forth behind the jewelry counters, keeping in line with my position in the store and watching me like a hawk. Apparently, those who seek transcendence are not above shoplifting.

At the very back of the store was a small room screened by a beaded curtain. This is where Jamyi, the medium on duty, conducts tarot readings. Jamyi had blond hair she wore in a pile on top of her head. Her eyes were round, deep-set and accentuated with lilac shadow. She wore a loose-fitting tunic with a large star pendant pinned at the collar. As she talked to me, I noticed she had a stud in her tongue, and what looked like a henna tattoo of the Eye of Horus on her left palm. Everything about her look was very Age of Aquarius, and I realized that she reminded me very much of an ex-boyfriend's mother, who incidentally was a practicing Wiccan.

I'm not entirely sure why this is the agreed-upon dress code of most mystic-type women I have met; as with most social groups, fashion distinguishes the insiders from the outsiders, but maybe there is more to it than that. Maybe psychic energy flows more freely through bell sleeves and ankle-length skirts. Or perhaps mediums adopt this style because that's what we expect a psychic to look like, thereby creating a more authentic experience for paying customers.

Jamyi began my reading by warning against the predatory behaviors of some readers, which indicated that fraud is a rather pervasive problem in the psychic community.

"It's absolutely normal to feel nervous, excited, and even that fun-scared when you go see a reader. But a reader should never, ever say or do anything that makes you feel afraid. You should never hear that you're cursed, or there's a dark cloud, or 'only I can help,' or 'I need more money.' I tell people that if you feel afraid, take a deep breath,

stand up, and walk out of there. Don't ask for your money back, it's gone. If you start speaking to them again, they will make you afraid again."

Jamvi grabbed her deck of large tarot cards and began to shuffle nonchalantly as she assured me of her credentials.

"Now, me. I've been reading cards for thirty-some years. You can ask me any question at any time. If I don't know the answer, I'll tell you, because I can't get everything and I won't guess or pretend.

Jamvi's spiel did put me at ease, because at least I knew that she wasn't going to tell me I was cursed or try to sell me magic beans. At the same time, the digital timer she set as soon as she started to shuffle her tarot deck reminded me that I only paid for fifteen minutes of wisdom, and if I still had questions I would have to insert more coins.

Jamvi asked me to shuffle the deck three times, which proved tricky because the tarot cards are larger than a regular playing deck. After three clumsy shuffles, Jamvi took the deck back and began to lay out a latticework of cards facing in different directions.

"Do you have something specific on your mind?" she asked.

I really didn't have much on my mind, other than being kind of doubtful about tarot readings. I didn't want to give her any prompts to build upon, but I also didn't want her to think I was uncooperative. I decided to set my cynicism aside and told her I was anxious about finishing grad school. It was the truth; the looming threat of writing my graduate thesis was stressful, so hey, why not take advice from a psychic? At that point, I would have considered animal sacrifices if I thought it would cure writer's block.

Jamvi pointed to a card at the center of the table.

“Now we have the Queen of Wands, and this is a woman of influence in your life. She is almost like Mother Earth. I mean, she’s the kind of mom that everyone hangs around with, everybody loves her. She feeds them, your friends would come to her for advice. Does that sound like your mother?”

My mom always was “the cool mom” with my friends, so yeah, she could be the Queen of Wands. I nodded my head, but I didn’t really know how that information was helpful.

“Now, the Seven of Cups. Here’s where you’re kind of standing right now; see, this person is looking at all the great mysteries in the universe, and there’s one he can’t see because it’s the Great Unseen. So there’s that confusion, but the nice thing is that you have the world in front of you. You have *all* these choices in front of you. They can feel overwhelming, but it’s beautiful to have all these choices in front of you. So really think of it as a spiritual thing.”

This surely made sense. I was on the verge of leaving the warm and cozy bubble of student loan deferral and would need to find a career that would justify my substantial college debt. At another level, I interpreted the card to mean the spiritual tourism I had been conducting in recent months, searching out people that believe in ghosts and trying to understand their philosophies. I did have a number of choices, and admittedly, I was still confused.

The next card Jamyi picked up was the Nine of Swords. The illustration on the card is one of a woman sitting up in bed with her head in her hands as a column of nine swords passes behind her.

“Are you having trouble sleeping?”

I told her yes, though I’ve never been a sound sleeper, and certainly the bottomless cups of coffee I consume are no help.

“I think that’s nerves. I think that’s the thought over and over of ‘What am I gonna do? Who am I gonna be?’ You’re gonna be yourself, and you’re gonna do very well. That’s what’s gonna happen.”

Jamyi held up another card feature a figure standing before a yellow desert.

“Now, we have the Three of Wands. You’ve already crossed that hot sand. That’s the schooling. You’ve crossed the hot sand, you’ve made it through. So you’re already to the other side where there’s a city and a stream.”

Jamyi paused and looked directly into my eyes. Her face had a soft, sympathetic look.

“You need to give yourself more credit for your schooling. There were some things that were really hard for you, really hard, and you did them. So, you really did cross a desert; be proud. It’s not bragging, it’s not egotistical. Be proud.”

That comment struck a chord with me. I come from a working class background, and a number of my closest friends did not take the college route. I was afraid of climbing to an elitist rung on the social ladder, and avoided discussing school in certain circles for fear of sounding hoity-toity. Was there something in the way I looked that clued Jamyi into my discomfort with pride? My plain blue hoodie and ratty sneakers might have announced that fact. In any case, Jamyi’s advice was sound, and I appreciated it.

“Now, we have a woman of influence in your life, but I’m thinking this might be you. This is the Queen of Cups, and she’s kind of that ‘still waters run deep’ kind of person. It’s gonna take a lot to make her mad, but when she’s mad, watch out.”

I laughed at this, because as a little girl my stormy temper earned me the nickname Princess Thundercloud. Watch out, indeed.

“But she’s very lovely,” Jamyi continued. “She’s more emotional than physical, you know, she’s more of an emotional being. Nothing wrong with that. You know, emotional beings rather than physical beings really can navigate waters much better if they trust their emotions. So, you know, this comes to your future, and I see this strength in you because of that. You really are observant, you soak it all in. It’s a good place to be.”

Jamyi then moved to another Queen card.

“Now, this is kind of a future thing for you, too. The Queen of Pentacles upside down talks about your future. The pentacles talks about two things. It talks about money or it talks about blessings and spirituality. This journey you’re on is more than just ‘Where am I gonna work?’ or ‘What am I gonna do?’ This really is a spiritual journey for you. It’s about learning to trust yourself. You have a lot of issues with that. Trust yourself, honey. Trust yourself.”

As Jamyi moved through the other cards on the table, I noticed a definite theme building. The Seven of Wands told me to overcome my fears of failure. The Fool card told me to be more confident in my own merit. The Death card indicated the end of my life as a student and being reborn into a woman who feels truly grown. Each card zoned

in on my anxieties about being wrong, my inability to trust my gut instincts, and my constant questioning of my own self-worth. Over and over again, Jamyi urged me to have faith in myself and let my instincts guide me. On the one hand, I felt that she had me pegged, and was really soothed by her optimistic outlook for me.

“And this, the last card, The Page of Pentacles, he’s here to give you a message,” Jamyi smiled. “And that message isn’t spirit, it’s money, and that’s held up high. He’s got plenty of money. So you didn’t waste your years, you didn’t waste what you went to school for. You’re going to do all right, you’re going to make good money with it.”

On the other hand, I have yet to meet a graduate student who doesn’t question his intellect, second-guess her self-worth, or hope to God, Gaia, and Great Spirit that there’s a payoff at the end of the line. I wondered if telling Jamyi that I was nervous about finishing school was all she needed to make all my deepest uncertainties so transparent. Then again, it’s just as possible that we are all that transparent—we all carry the same doubts and fears, only packaged in different forms—and the tarot reading was just as much generic as it was insightful.

I thanked Jamyi for her time and exited through the beaded curtain, where another customer waited for her reading. I wasn’t convinced that my reading was anything more than a manipulation, but I left the store with a buoyant feeling. Jamyi had made me feel better about myself and my situation and gave me an encouraging outlook for my future. People are willing to buy a self-help book, join a gym, watch a life-affirming movie, or drop money in a collection plate for that same uplifting effect, so I guess I don’t see the

harm. We're not really seeking the truth; we are seeking the reassurance that everything is going to be okay.



The profit-making aspect of any belief system is what makes me most suspicious of its credibility, so I decided to explore the paranormal in one of its most commercial forms: the fan convention. The Mid-South Paranormal Convention in Louisville, Kentucky is an annual summer shindig where paranormal enthusiasts of all ages converge to learn from experts, meet famous personalities, buy the latest ghost hunting gadgets and New Age paraphernalia, and generally party down.

Though billed as “the granddaddy of paranormal conventions,” the 2011 convention was held in a dumpy hotel off of I-96 and attracted only a few hundred attendees. However, the small draw meant that most of the casual looky-loos were filtered out of the mix, leaving a distillation of devoted fans and believers to greet the featured guests with open hearts and open wallets.

The hub of the convention was the vendor’s room, a narrow ballroom packed with tables running two-by-two down the center, end-to-end around the perimeter, and spilling out into the hallway. There were vendors of all supernatural stripes, from the flower-child mediums, healers, and jewelry makers to the techies with the latest digital equipment and recorded paranormal footage. Customers could schedule a private psychic reading, have

their auras photographed with a biofeedback camera, or even visit the Evil Ink Tattoo booth to get a permanent souvenir to commemorate the occasion.

The most prevalent vendors were those selling jewelry: beaded jewelry, crystal amulets and precious stones, silver pendants and magnetic bracelets. I stopped at one table with the usual assortment of jewelry but was more interested in the baskets containing large rods of quartz crystal. I picked up one of the obelisk-shaped wands and was turning it my hands when I heard a voice over my shoulder.

“That’s selenite. It’s used to clear negative energy from the heart chakra, the crown chakra, and the soul star chakra, above your head.” The woman speaking to me was middle-aged, dressed in a velvety top that revealed a generous amount of cleavage. She informed me that selenite is known for its high vibrational quality. “Can’t you just feel its energy vibrating in your hands?”

I couldn’t, and I told her so.

The woman explained that sometimes people need to focus to feel vibrations for the first time, but she guaranteed that I would feel a positive change over time. She told me how she keeps selenite in every room of her house to keep it clear of negative energy and that she carries a small piece with her at all times.

“I even keep a small piece in my bra, but, you know, selenite melts if it comes in contact with moisture, so the piece gets smaller and smaller ‘til it’s gone.”

The woman continued to tell me about the wonders of selenite until she watched me place the wand back in its basket, at which point she told me to let her know if I had any more questions.

I moved on to another table at the center of the room occupied by a large blond woman with heavy makeup and a beaky nose. The large banner across the front of her table announced that she was "Robyne Marie ~ Spiritual Medium." Atop her table were some plastic storage totes filled with plastic pouches of herbs, crystals, and colorful powders.

"Do you practice witchcraft?" she asked as I fingered through the neat rows of powders. I told her no, and asked if she did.

"Well, I do a little bit of everything. Tarot cards, numerology, palmistry. I do photo scrying, which means I see spirits in photographs and can communicate with them. I'm a medium by trade. I've been doing readings since I was four years old."

Robyne Marie had a voice that sounded like a slightly more nasal Barbara Streisand, which for some reason made me think she was desperate for fame. I questioned how she could possibly have given readings at age four, unless her parents believed that she was a cash cow.

"Your parents must have been very supportive of your talents," I said weakly.

"Oh, yes. And that's so important. I've worked with police detectives to solve cases, and I've done counseling, mental health counseling. I have a background in behavioral psychology, and I approach everything using my abilities to help people."

I ran my fingers across the plastic packets and asked if she used any of the stuff she was selling. Many of her herbs were ground into fine powders, like the last few shakes from a bottle of Mrs. Dash. I didn't know if they were supposed to be smoked, boiled, or sprinkled on my mashed potatoes.

"Well, I do some work in Strega Magick, which is Italian witchcraft, and you can use the herbs and crystals to make potions and spells. But I also use these things for healing and spiritual cleansing. I went to Mexico and studied under a Native shaman to learn healing and, you know, house cleansings and holistic medicine."

"Oh, what tribe did the shaman belong to?" I asked. I didn't mean this to be a hardball question; I was just making conversation. But suddenly Robyne Marie backpeddled on her story.

"Well, I started in Arizona actually, on um, a Hopi reservation and did some workshops there. . ."

Robyne Marie continued to talk. I turned my attention to one of her full-color glossy brochures. The front featured a picture of the medium with candles, rosaries, and a small vile of holy water arranged in front of her. As an extra mystical touch, the image was inverted with a Photoshop effect to make it appear reflected back in ripply water. The inner flap of the brochure highlighted Robyne Marie's appearances on an MTV reality show and a self-directed and produced paranormal documentary. I wasn't far off in my assumption that she was a fame-chaser. Maybe I have some psychic abilities, too.

The reverse side of the flap advertised party bookings:

Your guests will be entertained in an informal party-like setting, as they're given a blend of mini-readings in various styles. Robyne also meets privately with guests to pass on messages from beyond.

Four hours with up to ten guests cost \$450. Large and corporate parties by quote. I looked for a disclaimer reading *for novelty purposes only*, but only saw *Travel and lodging may be additional*.

As I continued my lap around the tables, I noticed a number of people wore black T-shirts with the words *I GOT SPOOKED* printed across the front in large white letters. The shirts were for Spooked TV, the production company responsible for a number of horror documentaries featured on the SyFy Channel. I was aware of the popularity of paranormal-themed dramas, documentaries, and reality shows on the cable TV airwaves, but not being a subscriber myself, I was not intimately familiar with any particular show or the television personalities that were guests of the convention. I always thought of paranormal programming as junk food TV, the type of stuff I watched when I spent an entire Sunday on the couch in the throes of a brain-beating hangover. It hadn't really dawned on me until I saw the buzz of activity that formed around two men at the Spooked TV table that I was among a crowd of devoted fans. They fawned over the stars of those kitschy shows like groupies at a rock concert.

The two men were Philip Adrian Booth and Christopher Saint Booth, the twin filmmakers behind Spooked TV. This pair fully embraced the role of rock stars. Christopher Saint was decked to the nines in a snow leopard print topcoat, large glittering belt buckle, and a white top hat complete with flossy ostrich plume. His black satin shirt was unbuttoned to his navel, and a large beaded cross filled the space on his bare chest. Philip was slightly less flamboyant in an oxblood leather jacket, a black bandana set low

on his forehead, and a straw cowboy hat with silver skull-and-crossbone studs on its leather band.

I imagined the twins spending their morning in a shared hotel room, hair wrapped in towels, trying on an assortment of gaudy accessories to complete their outfits and each asking the other if his eyeliner looked even. They looked like a couple of Bret Michaels impersonators, and I didn't know why anyone would take them seriously. They were showmen, snake-oil peddlers, carnival barkers. *Come one, come all, to see the most terrifying ghosts from coast to coast.* But the crowd gobbled it up, buying DVDs and T-shirts for them to autograph.

I noticed that most of the people at the convention dressed one of two ways: there were the New Agers in their relaxed-fit, good energy attire, but those who lingered around the tables selling ghost-hunting tech, low-budget horror DVDs, or vampire novels wore more of a rocker look that incorporated lots of leather, grommets, gothic crosses, and black—everything black. Most of the people I saw did not dress to the extreme—though there was one goth couple dressed in pancake makeup and full bondage gear—or they combined elements from both looks, but I quickly became aware that in my plain capri pants and blue tank top free of any embellishments, I did not adhere to the dress code of either of the distinct paranormal cliques. Maybe it was me who wouldn't be taken seriously.

I read the backs of some of the DVDs on display in an attempt to familiarize myself with the Booth Brothers' work and found little to challenge my initial assessment of them. The subjects of their documentaries followed some of the most notorious ghost

stories and urban legends of the U.S., investigating orphanages, sanitoriums, mass graves, and houses of the possessed. The DVD cover of their 2007 release *Children of the Grave* displayed a pallid little girl wearing a prosthetic hook and kneeling next to a tombstone. Graveyards, creepy children, hook hands—was there any cliché missing? Next to the stack of DVDs was the very prosthesis from the picture. Unable to resist, I picked it up and played with it for a while. The apparatus had leather cuffs that fastened with buckles, steel braces that hinged at the elbow, and a severe hook spotted with rust. It looked like a torture device, made even more horrendous because it was child-sized. I didn't know if the hook was just a prop or an actual artifact, but it was definitely an effective marketing tool.

The host and head ghost hunter of the Booth Brother's documentaries was Keith Age, founder of the Louisville Ghost Hunter Society (LGHS) and chief coordinator of the Mid-South Paranormal Convention. Age's skills as a bass guitarist earned him the reputation as the "Rock and Roll Ghost Hunter," and like the Booth Brothers, he looked the part. From what I saw on the DVD playing at the Booths' promotional table, Age had a menacing presence on film: a heavy-set man dressed in a black leather vest and matching bush hat, with a tendency to lean to the right when he stood. His personal assistant was a well-tanned blonde woman named Jennifer, which only enhanced Age's rock star status. Jennifer was a petite woman, who I gathered maintained her trim figure through the speed in which she flitted about crowds on her high wedge heels. She was the type who struck up conversations easily and called everybody "honey." Through her prompting, not my journalistic abilities, I was able to meet with Age privately.

Though I do not smoke cigarettes, a large percentage of convention-goers congregated outside the lobby as they quelled their nicotine cravings, which created a perfect atmosphere for small talk. There, I thought I would wheedle my way into meeting some genuine paranormal fans and getting a feel for what drove their interests. Instead, I met Jennifer on a smoke break and haphazardly landed an interview with the head honcho of the convention.

“I am Keith Age’s personal assistant,” she announced with wide eyes. “If you want an interview with Keith, I can make it happen.”

The authoritative tone of Jennifer’s voice indicated that this was a first-class favor, so I enthusiastically thanked her for the offer.

“Wait right here and I’ll set it up, hon,” she said before disappearing back into the hotel.

After about five minutes Jennifer returned in a bustling stride, moving her short, tan legs as quickly as possible atop those platform wedges.

“Keith has agreed to give you half an hour, if you are ready to go right now.”

The truth was that I wasn’t really ready. I knew almost nothing about the man, apart from what I had gathered from the convention’s promotional materials. I feared that he was the type who kept his rock star status in tact by grunting and sneering his way through public appearances. As I followed Jennifer to the V.I.P suite, I racked my brain for interesting questions and tried to pull together a persona that appeared poised but not snobby, cordial but still cool.

Upon entering the suite, the grizzly bear of a man that I anticipated was not the person who greeted me. The signature leather pieces were there, but inside them was a Keith Age who had dropped a significant amount of weight, his eyes sunken and fatigued, his shoulder-length shag of brown curls replaced by a thin layer of gray signet fuzz. In the past year Age had undergone brain surgery and combatted a series of heart attacks, which explained his fragile appearance.

“I can give you about thirty minutes,” Age said as he motioned me to a seat. “I’d like to give you more, I have to get back out to my table in a little bit.” Age would spend most of his day signing autographs, posing for pictures, and generally doing his part to move product. I felt a little guilty imposing on the downtime of someone who already looked so physically drained, but Age was a gracious host. His rock-n-roll persona wasn’t one of the insufferable cur, but the charismatic nice guy. My interview panic began to subside and I straightened my shoulders to look as though I knew what the hell I was doing.

“Well, I’ve been doing this ghost stuff for over thirty years,” Keith began. “I’m a musician by trade, and I started out playing bass when I was sixteen years old out on the road. So I went on the road, came back one year, met this girl and we started dating, and she wouldn’t take me over to meet mom and dad. I figured it was because of the rock n’ roll, the long hair, the beard. I mean, I wouldn’t let my daughter date me.” At least I wasn’t the only one who wrongly assumed he was an intimidating figure.

“Come to find out,” Age continued, “it was because they had a ghost in their house, it wasn’t because of the rock n’ roll look. So we went there for once for her

birthday, and all night long we were sitting where we could see down the hallway. There was a mirror and we could see our reflections. And something kept moving in front of it, and we'd go down there and the room would be torn apart and there was nothing there. They kept saying ghost, and I was like, 'yeah right, sure' you know."

I did know, because it was exactly what I was thinking as he spoke to me. This sounded like every story I had heard from people who believed their houses were haunted, or at least liked to tell people they were.

"At the end of the night I went to kiss my girlfriend goodbye at the front door, and something grabbed me by the arm and threw me through the front door." Now I was in complete disbelief, but this was Age's story and he was stickin' to it.

"I landed about six feet out in the front yard, and kinda went, you know, fingers, toes, what's broke, what's moving, and I went, 'That was so cool.' And, uh, I had a handprint from my wrist to my elbow, you know, bruised. And I went, 'Cool!'"

"So you believe ghosts are real?" I asked.

"I've never seen a ghost, never. I've seen a lot of weird things, a lot of strange things that we can't tell what it is. There are those people that put their hand over their eyes and say 'Ooh, there's one!' Prove it. How do you prove it?"

For several years Age worked as a tour guide at the former Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Louisville, which is famous for its allegedly high amount of spiritual activity. Waverly Hills was an early twentieth century tuberculosis hospital known for using experimental and often brutal treatment methods on patients. From the sixties until 1982, the building served as a geriatric facility, after which it became a dilapidated

landmark for kids to sneak into and perform various teenage rites of passage. The property was purchased again in 2001, with its new owners turning its spooky allure into a commercial venture, booking paranormal investigations and offering haunted ghost tours. While Age won't commit to calling anything a ghost per se, there are numerous things he witnessed at Waverly Hills that he classifies as unexplainable.

“I took meteorologists up there with me, because there were cold spots, winds that were blowing that shouldn't be blowing, and they're going, ‘What is this? What's going on?’ I was like, ‘You're the scientists, y'all tell me. I'm just, you know, a layperson here.’ And they were like, ‘We can't tell you. We have no reason this should be happening.’ People call it ghosts, spirits, whatever, but that's what they wanna call it. We don't know what it is. It could be little men from Mars somewhere. We don't know. A lot of people say I'm anti-psychic. I'm not anti-psychic, it's just, how do you quantify a feeling? You can't. I want something hard and tangible. I want evidence. So, I think it's going to take the ghost hunter, the psychic, and the scientist to converge, and then maybe we will find an answer, because right now it's an anomaly.”

Though Age is not totally opposed to having psychics on site during an investigation, his society of ghost hunters collect data in a “non-metaphysical manner,” meaning they do not rely on psychics or mediums as sources of evidence. Instead, LGHS members utilize a variety of audio and video recording devices, electromagnetic testing, and thorough background research to collect data.

“I shoot with a lot of thermal imaging,” Age said. “And you got the EMF fields, you know, everyone says you gotta use EMF.” Electromagnetic Field (EMF) meters

were originally designed to locate man-made sources of electric and magnetic radiation and calculate the strength of the source's EM field. However, it has been suggested that spirits may cause fluctuations in the EMF within a location or even emit their own EMF. There is no scientific evidence to support these claims, but EMF meters have nevertheless become an essential in the ghost hunter's toolbox.

"But there's some new things coming out, new equipment," Age continued. "The equipment that we've used for years, it was all made for something else. Nothing was made for ghost hunting, now it is."

I wondered how Age felt about paranormal investigation becoming commercialized. Certainly, hosting television specials was a great way for him to keep food on the table, but there also seems to be a fear—especially among rock n' roll types like Age—of losing one's street cred once one becomes a media darling.

"Yeah, it's a double-edged sword," Age sighed. "It's in the mainstream now, and it's because of the TV shows, and I'm one of problems or reasons or whatever you want to call it. Because I do have my own TV show, and um, it's not everything you see. I mean, we don't fake anything on our show. There are some out there that are scripted."

Earlier in the day I had attended a lecture on the problems with current methods of paranormal investigation given by Rob Johnson, a full-time photographer and part-time investigator. Johnson has worked with a number of investigative teams that have appeared in ghost hunting programs. He confirmed the artificial means some shows use to create good television, right down to blocking where the on-air talent should turn and say "Whoa! What was that!?" Johnson didn't mention any names, but it seemed that

those in the audience more familiar with ghost hunting TV than I knew who he was talking about.

Johnson seemed rather frustrated with the way that many of the television programs were edited, condensing a seven-day, relatively uneventful shoot into a one-hour investigation with thrills and chills around every corner. I asked Age how he felt about editing, and how much creative leverage he had in the programs in which he has appeared.

“The Booth Brothers do all that,” Age said, “but I pretty much pick where we go. But to them it’s all story.”

I wanted to know more about how Age became involved with TV ghost hunting. Age founded LGHS in 1996 and began his working relationship with the Booth Brothers in 2003, which proved to be a lucrative career move. Age quickly became one of the most prominent paranormal investigators in the U.S., and LGHS grew to over 4,000 dues-paying members. Because LGHS predated any real Hollywood spotlight on ghost hunting, it didn’t appear that Age had cunningly used his investigation team as an avenue into the big time, but I wondered if he had any inclination that paranormal investigation was on the verge of a pop culture craze when he decided to found his own paranormal organization.

“In 1996 I put the Louisville Ghost Hunters on the internet, and there were only thirty-nine ghost hunting groups on the internet. That was all. Now there’s over a million. This stuff comes in waves, but I didn’t know there would be a big wave. I wasn’t trying to be on TV,” Age chuckled.

“I was at Waverly Hills, I gave all the tours back then. The Booth Brothers came to film a movie called *Death Tunnel*. While they were filming, crazy things started happening, and they said, ‘Here’s another story.’ So we shot *Spooked: The Ghosts of Waverly Hills*. Well *Death Tunnel* went kinda *meh* with Sony, and *Spooked* went to SyFy and went *blam*. At that point the only thing ghost hunting on TV was *Ghost Hunters*, and us, and Patrick Burns. And it just exploded. We’ve made seven movies since then.”

I tried to think of a way to address the investigation sites of the Spooked TV movies without calling them cliché. At the time of my interview with Age, I hadn’t actually seen any of the Booth Brothers’ work, but I got the sense that they liked to rehash the settings and characters already used in big budget horror films to tap into the public’s familiarity with those storylines. For example, the movie they were promoting at the convention was *The Haunted Boy: The Secret Diary of The Exorcist*. The film investigates people, locations, and artifacts connected to the 1949 possession case of Robbie Mannheim, the inspiration behind Richard Blatty’s 1971 novel *The Exorcist* and its wildly popular 1973 film adaptation. Since seeing *The Haunted Boy*, I won’t deny that it was interesting to watch, but it still felt a little like Spooked TV piggybacked on the success of an already popular story to cash in. In a roundabout way, I asked why it seemed that so many allegedly haunted places seem to have superlatively dramatic events connected to their backstories, as opposed to something as run-of-the mill as Grandpa dying peacefully surrounded by loved ones.

“The bride who fell down the elevator shaft,” Age rolled his eyes. “A lot of those are just urban tales. Every town has a Resurrection Mary or a Crybaby Bridge.”

“So do you feel like you’re exploiting those urban tales with places you and the Booth Brothers film?”

“Well, hospitals, schools, and churches are the three most allegedly haunted places, and a lot of that we think is because there is so much emotion there. You know, at hospitals there’s dying and all that emotion there. With schools there’s kids’ hormones, especially high schools, and with churches there’s the laying on of the hands and, you know, so much faith there.”

There was symbiotic relationship between the sites Age chose to investigate and the urban legends that surrounded them. Because the sites are infamous, they generate popular urban legends. Because urban legends spark curiosity, the sites become movie-worthy subjects. The media attention adds to the mystique of the site, and around we go.

“But there are some people out there that are gonna believe no matter what that something is either haunted or it’s not.” Age said. “And not everything is paranormal. Fear, adrenaline, and paranoia go a long way to make a ghost appear. Like I said, for the Booth Brothers, story is everything. More important than saying, ‘here’s your ghost.’ You gotta remember that a lot of this stuff is entertainment, or else it wouldn’t be on TV. It’s there to *enjoy*.

### **Hearing the Hereafter**

As a main attraction of the 2011 MidSouth Paranormal Convention, the Louisville Ghost Hunters Society hosted an overnight investigation in Elizabethtown, or E-town to native Kentuckians. Paying participants had the opportunity to accompany experienced paranormal investigators as they explored three adjacent buildings: the Morrison Lodge, the Riasok Shriner's Club, and the Brown-Pusey house, each with its own bit of Southern history that made it a place of paranormal interest. This was my chance to be a part of a real ghost hunt and see it in its unadulterated form. No editing, no script, no spooky soundtracks.

Our initial meeting point was the Morrison Lodge, a three-story Masonic temple with a distinctly geriatric feel to it. The air smelled stale, somewhere between mothballs and saltine crackers, and the first thing I noticed upon entering was the white vinyl chair of an electric stair lift. This was a place where old fogies gathered, where the death of a brother Mason is not so much a tragedy as it is an inevitable probability.

The cheery yellow kitchen at the back of the lodge, however, was not stale or sleepy. It was abuzz with commotion as roughly thirty excited ghost hunters chatted, fanned themselves with their hands, and shifted weight from foot to foot. We all paid an admission fee to join in the investigation, but when I surveyed those gathered in the kitchen, it was easy to separate the casual sightseer from the hardcore investigator. The spectator types seemed for the most part to be heavysset women, tugging uncomfortably at their clothing and complaining about the lack of air conditioning. These people petered

out relatively quickly, lacking the dedication or the stamina to stay longer than an hour or two. The diligent paranormal enthusiasts were mostly clad in tee shirts bearing abbreviations of their respective investigation groups: P.A.S.T. was Paranormal Active Scientific Team, C.H.I.P.S. stood for Certified Hunters in Paranormal, and so on. I guess these groups think of a catchy acronym first and then build their organization's name around it. These teams busied themselves checking the power supplies of their various gadgets and doohickies. I came equipped with a headlamp, a camera, a digital audio recorder, and a notebook, which I thought made me look like someone who knew what she was doing, but not next to those who had whole cases of high-end cameras, EMF meters, air ion detectors, thermometers, and night vision glasses. I sidled up next a guy sporting the LGHS logo of the Louisville Ghost Hunters Society—the sponsor of the investigation—figuring that my best chances for a fruitful investigation were with him.

We split into three groups that would alternate around the three sites, with most of the heavily-armed investigators sticking together in their own little clique. This disappointed me a bit, partly because I was marked as a newbie and partly because I wanted to see their instruments in action, but my group wasn't without its experts. Rich and Fred of LGHS led my band of misfits, which gave us the advantage of being with members of a reputable organization with knowledge of local history.

My group's first stop was the Riasok Shrine Club, which was actually a little white church complete with steeple and stained glass windows. It had originally been the site of the Severns Valley Baptist Church, “the oldest continuing Baptist Congregation west of the Allegheny Mts.,” according to its historical marker. The church also served

as a field hospital during the Civil War. The building certainly seemed like a place where tortured souls might dwell, but perhaps the Shriners' renovations had chased them away. The old stained glass windows were hidden by long velvet draperies, church pews were removed in favor of a parquet dance floor, and a disco ball hung from the ceiling.

Someone in the group asked what place in the building had the highest activity.

"Well, it's never been investigated, so you'll have to tell us," Fred replied.

Fred, a Mr. Potato Head-looking man with receding gray hair, had been a member of LGHS for four years, acting as a lead investigator for three. Fred was adept in the role of social director, planning the itinerary of the evening and telling stories from previous investigations in our down time. He told us that we could choose to settle in either the upstairs or downstairs, and then we would shut off the lights to do some EVP sessions.

EVP stands for *electric voice phenomenon*, which is a seemingly unexplainable noise caught on an audio recorder that might be evidence of a supernatural presence. There are different classes of EVP according to the clarity of the sound: Class A EVPs can be heard clearly and do not require cleaning or editing, Class B EVPs are audible but not always clear, and Class C is an EVP that is repeatedly cleaned and edited but is still undecipherable. An EVP session basically consists of sitting as still as possible in the dark as participants take turns asking questions into the air and waiting for a response. Sometimes noises are heard at the moment of the session, but more often EVPs aren't detected until investigators review their recordings.

I decided to hang back with Fred and Rich in the meeting hall, along with a young couple and a woman with a long, side-swept ponytail. The couple hung close to the back

door and appeared as though they would rather have hid under a table than speak to anyone outside of each other. I hadn't seen them at the convention in Louisville, but they may have been edging along the walls there as well. The male spoke for both of them in a mutter so low I only caught the words "Indiana" and "helicopter."

The other woman, in contrast, was as bold as her fire-red hair. Kat was a self-described paranormal author from Indiana. Though she was probably in her late twenties or early thirties, Kat looked like a girl in eighth-grade detention: shredded jeans, black tank top, and everything fitting about one size too snug. As she sat unpacking her gear, I half expected her to start carving her name into the table with the pointy end of a compass.

Kat had an unusual device with her that she called the "Talker," which was essentially a circuit board hooked up to a 9-volt battery. Paranormal investigators use a wide array of tech gear that has been appropriated for the task of ghost detection and are generally encouraged to try new devices that might prove useful. She explained that the Talker used phonemes to string together messages. She was experimenting with the device to see if it would create any meaningful spirit messages during the EVP sessions. Kat gave the impression that she had read the how-to books on ghost hunting, maybe even had written one, and was quick to inform others of investigation etiquette. For example, people should "tag" any noise they make, such as clearing their throats or shuffling their feet, so that it is not confused with a spirit communication.

Once the lights were hit and recorders were set, Rich began our EVP session.

“We know there’s a lot of history that’s gone in this building. We know it was the first black church in Kentucky. Are there any spirits here that are from that era that belonged to this church that may be still here, would you like to tell us something about yourself?”

Rich, with his gray mustache and warm Kentucky twang, had a paternal quality to him, which may be why I gravitated toward him when I first arrived. He was a security guard for UPS by day and had been a LGHS member for five years. Rich continued his initial line of questioning for members of the church for a short while but then moved on to Civil War soldiers, which seemed to be his main fixation.

“Could you walk up to us and touch us? Don’t be afraid,” Fred said.

Fred’s interests were in making physical contact with spirits, asking them to touch us and tap on the walls. Fred usually began asking questions in a gentle manner, but would become increasingly aggressive, almost sounding annoyed.

“Could you knock something over? Touch one of us. Knock on the wall.”

Many investigators and mediums frown on provoking spirits because it's a bit rude. If I were a ghost, I don’t know that I would cooperate with someone so pushy. Maybe a Civil War soldier would respond differently, and maybe Fred looked forward to a ghost giving him a knuckle sandwich.

When Fred's commands went unanswered, Kat tried to lighten the mood by asking corny questions like "Do you like broccoli?" and "Do you know where the gold is buried?" At first it was funny but after a number of sessions it got old. Kat was basically

doing what my dad calls "talking to hear her head roar," filling the dead air with nothing important to say.

Toward the end of our EVP session, Kat's Talker started going berserk, not making any words or phonemes, but a stream of beeps, blurps, and squees that sounded like a frantic R2-D2.

"It's not supposed to make those sounds . . . at all," Kat said.

We asked some more questions, wondering if someone tried to communicate through the Talker, but there was only more random electronic jabber until Kat eventually unplugged the battery. The malfunction might have been the work of supernatural forces, or the experimental device just wasn't very trustworthy. The problem with our understanding of the paranormal is that nothing is ever certain.

We decided that the meeting hall was probably not the place with the highest activity, so we packed up and moved downstairs. The basement of the Riasok Temple was converted into a recreation den with a kitchen, full bar, and a big screen TV for watching the Kentucky Derby.

"Ooh, a bar." Kat said. "We know there's spirits there."

Our group gained a few members in the basement. There was a teen with flat hair, dowdy glasses, and a tee shirt with glow-in-the-dark stars stretched across her shapeless frame. It wasn't likely that she had won any popularity contests in her life, and that she was accompanied by her equally nerdy parents only confirmed that thought. The girl was friendly enough, so I smiled and said hello to show her I was friendly, too. Not friendly

enough to allow her to sit as near to me as she and her parents did, though. I pushed my chair farther toward the dark kitchen in the back corner.

"Alright folks, go ahead and get settled," Fred said. "What I'd like to do if we can is try maybe the first ten minutes in complete silence. If you hear something, unless you made the sound, don't do anything."

When the lights went out, we sat in silence. I held my finger over the red power light on my recorder and let the pitch blackness of my corner suck me into obscurity. I liked my temporary invisibility and the heightened sense of hearing that came with it. If ghosts really could talk, I'm sure they had plenty to say; I just had to be a good listener.

A few minutes in, I heard a heavy sighing noise. I remained quiet as Fred instructed, but no one else tagged the sound. I perked my ears and strained to hear more. I heard the sigh again, off to my right. The sound was distinct. It came from the area where the dweeb family sat, but no one claimed the noise. I later found out that it was indeed the girl who had been sighing.

"I'm breathing to channel positive energy," she explained.

I knew that deep breathing is used in all sorts of meditation and relaxation exercises and might indeed be useful in channeling good vibes, but I still wanted her to knock it off. I was annoyed that she disrupted the silence and made me think for a moment I had heard something of interest, but I was even more annoyed that she explained herself so meekly that I couldn't really get mad. I lied when I smiled to her. I am not, in fact, a friendly person.

"Hello. My name is Fred, and these are my friends," Fred announced at the end of our ten-minute silence. "I'm here to communicate with you."

No sooner had he said that than the compressor for the commercial beer cooler roared to life at a startling volume. It was difficult to hear Fred's voice over the rattle and whir, let alone any whispering ghosts.

"If there is any other device you would like to turn on, go ahead and do so," Fred said to any potential spirits in the room. Well, if this was the way the spirit greeted us, it probably meant it didn't feel like playing party host.

"If you want us to leave, please come touch my hand," Fred urged. But what if the ghost did not have the ability to touch? Can all spirits make physical contact? This directive seemed unfair, like asking a person with no eyelids to blink once for yes. No entity touched Fred's hand, but not being told to leave isn't the same thing as an invitation.

Rich, who had been behind the bar, announced that he was getting up to move his recorder, because he couldn't hear anything over the compressor. This session was falling apart fast.

"Something has been playing with my piece of paper." Kat sat alone at a table near the center of the den, directly in front of the bar. "I've been over here, making sure not to touch it, and something has been playing with it."

Rich held his hand near the ceiling above Kat's table, checking for any sort of air circulation. "No there's no air at all coming through here." Rich started up again with his Civil War questions, and Fred followed his lead.

"You Confederates in here, are you pissed off the Union won?"

Kentucky was a border state in the Civil War, on the side of the Union but with a large number of Southern sympathizers. Kentucky battlegrounds most truly pitted brother against brother. I noticed throughout the evening that many of the Civil War-themed questions posed by Rich and Fred contained a mixture of guilt and resentment.

"How well did the Union soldiers treat you while you were in the hospital?"

"Did you know Abraham Lincoln was born near here?"

E-town was my first experience in a town thick with Civil War history, and it was unusual to observe locals so preoccupied with the war, as if it happened within their own lifetimes. Being from the North, for me it was even more unusual to hear people speak with a sympathy or even reverence for Confederate soldiers. This may have been in part a method to persuade the spirits to communicate with us, but I think it was also part of the general Kentuckian attitude about the war.

"Is anyone sitting near the couches?" Kat asked us. No one was.

"Somebody is. Somebody just walked from there to there," Kat said, motioning to two points near the couch area.

"Did you see him?" Fred asked.

"Yeah," Kat said, "It was, um, it was a humanoid shadow."

Fred did some more provoking, asking the spirit to throw something or push one of us. I did not want to be pushed and I didn't care for Fred's tendency toward aggression, so I decided to momentarily break my silence.

"Do you feel safe here?" I asked. If there were any spirits, I didn't want them to be threatened by my trespassing. I just wanted to sit in the corner and be a polite guest.

"We got some Yankees in here," Fred chimed in. Thanks, Fred.

Kat alerted everyone that she saw another shadow moving behind the bar. Why was Kat the only one seeing things? I strained my eyes to stare into the pitch blackness of the kitchen area behind me. After a while of staring, I started to see inky shapes floating across my vision, like the shapes that appear when one closes one's eyes. This wasn't anything paranormal, and I wondered if what Kat saw was just the work of her optic nerves.

When the cricket chirp of Fred's digital timer went off, Kat explained how the shadow that she saw behind the bar moved to the back corner where I sat. I told her I thought I saw shapes but was certain it was just my eyes playing tricks on me. I proposed my theory about optic nerve sensitivity in the dark.

"No, there was something there," Kat said. "I wanna say almost six feet tall. I think it moved over there and did a turn around you. Even saying it gives me chills."

I didn't think I was so inobservant that I would have missed a shadow promenading around me. I sat quietly. I watched intently and turned on my listening ears. I never saw or heard or felt anything.



Our final investigation took place in the main hall of the Morrison Lodge. This was supposed to be the area with the highest amount of activity, and I was more than ready for it. Our EVP sessions at the Brown-Pusey house were a bust as far as I could tell.

Individuals had splintered off from their groups and lingered in the Georgian mansion, more than likely because it was the only location with central air. Any attempts to gather evidence were thwarted by the multitude of people creaking across the hardwood floors, chit-chatting amongst themselves and flashing pictures with no regard for the investigation at hand.

Ours was the last group to cycle through the lodge, so I hoped that much of the human interference had receded. Now was the time to shake off all the disappointments of the evening and really get down to business. The history of the Morrison Lodge certainly had all the grisly ingredients for a good haunting. The original Masonic temple was erected sometime around 1844 and rebuilt after a 1911 fire. Throughout its history, the building has accommodated Masons as well as a school for girls, doctors' and dentists' offices, and for a short period in 1862, it was used by the Confederates to hold captured Union soldiers. In the 1940s there were three reported deaths within the building: two women died in the dentist's chair, apparently from adverse effects to anesthetics, and one lodge member died of a heart attack, allegedly while kneeling before the altar during a ceremony.

From the outside, the building appears to have three floors and a smaller fourth story attic, but the high-ceiling hall actually occupies the entire second and third story, with a balcony located at the east end. With its white tin ceilings and gilded molding, I imagined the lodge was at one point in its life very lavish. However, the wall-to-wall avocado carpeting and window sills suffocating under several layers of paint gave it the

dry, mothy air of Grandma's attic. The room didn't give the impression of being haunted, just *old*.

Not born of Masonic stock, my knowledge of freemasonry rituals is cursory at best, and the esoteric paraphernalia in the lodge confounded me. There were high-backed wooden thrones, decorative tapestries. At the center of the room sat a squat altar painted baby blue and white, and a short wooden lamppost with three bare bulbs. Stretched along the front of the balcony above were 8x12 portraits of all the past Masters of the Morrison Lodge, roughly 100 in all, lined up like yearbook photos. Generally, I like to snoop, especially in places where I don't belong, but something about the eyes of all the Masters looking down at me from their balcony view made me feel that I should be respectful. I settled into one of the green vinyl theater seats that lined either side of the room and hoped that my good behavior would please the spirits.

Another LGHS member joined us in the lodge. I didn't catch his name, but he was a lanky man with long brown hair and a leather pork pie hat. He had an instrument called a laser grid. The laser grid filters green laser light through a lens to create a pattern of dots. This makes it easy to see any movement that interferes with the grid pattern, which investigators find useful in detecting moving shadow forms. The lanky fellow had trained his laser on the west end of the room, where there was the balcony and alcoves in which ghosts might shuffle around. The scattered dots of green light were pretty, and in our first quiet minutes of the EVP session I was reminded of a junior high dance where the boys and girls hung tight against the walls.

I focused my attention at the balcony, where a little spirit girl named Abby was rumored to dwell. Abby is believed to be a prankster who likes to move objects around the room. Numerous paranormal groups claim to have EVP evidence they attribute to Abby, and some regulars at the lodge believe they have heard her running on the balcony and have seen her peeking from behind curtains.

"Do you want to come out and play tonight?" Fred asked. "We're not here to harm you, we just want to talk a little bit." Fred was trying to sound non-threatening, but he came off sounding like a child predator.

Kat took over. "Is Abby here with us?" Seconds later, we heard a sort of crunching noise, like squeezing an empty plastic water bottle.

"Did y'all do that up there?" Fred asked the Dweeb family, who were seated near the balcony steps. No one responded, I guess because they thought Fred was still talking to the spirits. Fred asked once more if they had made the noise, and they still didn't answer. "If y'all make a noise," Fred tried again, "speak up and tell us, that way we'll know."

After a few seconds, the lanky man inquired about the noise. "Was that y'all makin' that sound up there?"

"What was the sound?" Dweeb Dad finally responded. This nonsense pissed me off. The sound came from their corner of the room, and everyone heard it but them. We were wasting all our time trying to find out whether or not they made the damn noise, and they sat there oblivious. Dweeb Mom finally confirmed that they did not make the noise,

but all three of them were so clueless that I didn't trust her answer. If Abby was playing a trick, it was working.

Fred called upon soldiers and Masons, asked them to tap on the wall or knock a picture off the balcony, and continued his efforts to get a ghost to touch one of us. Rich tried speaking directly to Abby, inviting her to come near the lights on his K2 EMF meter, but she wasn't inclined to oblige. Somewhere in the room a clock ticked, making the ordeal all the more monotonous.

Eventually Kat asked if anyone else had seen the short shadow at the back of the room. As with all of her other shadows, no one saw it but her. I found it increasingly hard to believe any of Kat's claims. All night she had been drawing attention to herself: her instructions for the newcomers, the silly questions she asked during the EVP sessions, her Talker and the dowsing rods, and now all the activity that only she saw. It seemed as though she was staging her own ghost hunting reality show, with herself in the starring role.

The thing that really made me suspicious of Kat—the one thing that made me certain that she was lying—was that she was so much like me. I too like to pull the strings, pepper conversations with smart-alecky humor, and act like a show-off. I detected Kat's every maneuver because I worked from the same playbook. I knew that in dull situations, I liked to make up stories. Kat said she was a writer, so I was certain she did the same. That night I had to fight every urge to knock on a table, crack a knuckle, or stealthily launch an object across the room, especially when Fred was so keen on having something touch him.

"Should we try the Talker?" Kat asked. Having no luck with any other devices, we agreed it was worth a shot. The Talker surged to life with its electronic chatter, and we waited for it to calm.

"Abby, are you here?" Kat asked. "Can you say your name?" The Talker blipped a little, but with no intelligible response. "If anyone else is here, can you say your name?"

The Talker's feedback began to arrange into something that sounded like an answer. Two syllables repeated themselves: *ab-bee, ab-bee*.

"Are you here to play?" Kat in her best kid-friendly voice. "Do you like playing with us?" The Talker gave some more sporadic beeps.

Kat asked, "How old are you?" and the Talker sputtered some noises that sounded like *up, at*. "Can you say it again?" Kat encouraged.

This time the Talker croaked what sounded very clearly like *eight, eight*.

"What is your name? Could you say it again, I couldn't hear you," Fred prompted. The Talker babbled a bit, but again I heard *ab-bee*. Fred asked, "How old are you?" but this time the Talker murmured what sounded like *seven*. Fred and Kat alternated asking more questions, but the Talker's responses became less and less distinct.

When Fred's timer went off, we discussed what we had heard. Kat believed she heard "Abby" or "Addy," while Lanky thought it sounded like it was saying "Daddy." I thought I heard "Abby," but I was seated farther from the Talker than the others, and the power of suggestion may have influenced what I heard.

"Um, I heard what could be construed as 'eight,'" Fred added, which everyone agreed. "Then we asked 'are you a little girl?' I was hopin to get a 'yeah' or a 'yes' but I

got 'eight' again. So it's really hard to say that it's a definite response, because it's the same thing.” Though it was fun to entertain the possibility that Abby spoke to us, I was glad that Fred pointed out the problems with using the Talker. It gave the investigation a little more credibility than I had felt before, like we were finally doing something worthwhile.

“Do y'all wanna stay here for the next half-hour?” Fred asked. “Does somebody wanna go on the balcony?”

I quite literally leaped at the chance, springing up from my seat to volunteer. If I was going to suspend my disbelief, I wanted to do it from the best seat in the house. On the balcony rail, someone had created a little shrine of trinkets a little girl would treasure: a teddy bear, several coins, two pink plastic beads, a peppermint LifeSaver, and a Hershey bar. On the floor was a small inflatable bouncy ball decorated with blue and green swirls. Fred informed me that Abby liked to push the ball around, and suggested that I invite her to play. He also asked me to let down my ponytail, because prankster Abby was prone to hair-pulling. I shook out my hair and took a seat on a metal folding chair facing the little ball.

“Abby, if you wanna come up here, there's the ball up here. I'm willing to play, we can play together if you want.” I felt like I was delivering child predator lines like Fred had before. I tried to think of a way to let Abby know that she was in charge and that I didn't want to harm her.

“Abby, you're welcome to come up to the balcony. This is your place to play.” This sounded better, but I still felt a little foolish.

“Abby, did you watch your dad from the balcony?” Kat asked. Though many people believe in Abby’s existence, her relationship to the lodge is unknown. She might have been a student at the girl’s school or the daughter of someone affiliated with the building in one way or another.

I thought about something Kat said about her own dad earlier that night. One of the stories Kat told to affirm the usefulness of the Talker involved her dead father. According to Kat, the Talker had once uttered “Katie, Katie, Katie, Dad, Dad, Dad” which she interpreted as a communication from her dad, the only person who ever called her Katie. Though I still questioned the reliability of all her shadow sightings, I considered that maybe I had been too hard on Kat. I am very close to my own father, and I dread the inevitable day when I can’t sit with him for a cup of coffee, swap good books we’ve read, or call him up just because I need a laugh. If these were the things Kat missed, I understood why she would want desperately to believe in ghosts.

Kat asked a number of dad-themed questions in a row.

“Does your dad wear fancy clothes?”

“Did he wear an apron?”

“Did he wear a hat?”

“Did he use a hammer?”

After the last question, I heard a noise from the corner by the balcony steps. It sounded like a female saying “mmmm,” starting high and falling like a gentle sigh.

“What was that noise?” I said, somewhat startled.

The dweeby girl sat at the bottom of the steps, so I thought it might have been her doing her deep breathing again. Rich asked if anyone made the noise, and she said that it wasn't her. I strained my eyes to see into the corner where I thought the noise occurred but saw nothing. I looked down to the ball and half expected it to roll, but it remained motionless.

For the remainder of the session, Fred and Rich tried to cajole Abby into making a move, while Kat seemed to move in a different direction entirely, asking questions like "Did you wear a gold necklace?" and "Did you have a role in the bubonic plague?" None of their attempts seemed to be going anywhere, so I tried to block them out and send some cerebral messages of my own.

*Okay, whoever you are. If you're really here, push this ball. I won't even tell anyone else you're here. Just push the ball and I won't bother you anymore.*

I stared at the ball, first waiting for it to move, and then trying to move it with telekinesis. But the longer I stared, the more I thought that I didn't want the ball to move. The thought of a little girl doomed to push a ball around a stuffy old lodge for the rest of eternity seemed pretty bleak. She was as bad off as poor Sisyphus pushing his rock uphill, and I'd prefer my soulless body to rot in the dirt than to suffer that fate. My frame of mind shifted, and internally I pleaded with the ball to stay put.

*Don't move! I don't believe in ghosts!*

The session ended without incident, and I packed up and headed back to my hotel room. On the drive home, I debated whether or not I even wanted to listen to the hours of audio I had recorded that night. I did, eventually, but I found nothing to convince me that

I had a paranormal encounter. I wasn't disappointed that I came up empty-handed. Either I have a soul or I don't—I don't claim to have any answers. I only know for certain what I have experienced; everything else is what I believe to be true. With no evidence to prove an afterlife awaits, I feel comfortable believing that this life is all there is. No editing, no scripts, no spooky soundtrack.

### What Then?

As a student of literature, I have long been fascinated by William Butler Yeats's personal life and his association to the occult. Yeats was a man of his time, and many artists and intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century dabbled in Spiritualism, witchcraft, and other paranormal phenomena, though Yeats seemed more consumed by the mystical world than most. Being of a more cynical persuasion, I often wondered how a brilliant man like Yeats—a distinguished, venerated, Nobel Prize-winning poet—could believe so passionately in mediums, ghosts, and magic. Perhaps there was some reality he saw in it all that I could not.

While visiting the National Library of Ireland, I viewed a display of notebooks belonging to Georgie Hyde-Lees Yeats, wife of William Butler Yeats. Her penmanship was large and sloppy, sometimes with one word running into another. The words “Waters bound into a ring / truth like the peacock/ [the word here looks like “Cooky,” but that doesn’t seem right; perhaps “Cooing”] at his own image” filled the top of one page. Below that were some unintelligible words and scribbles and below that a badly drawn hand. The hand faced horizontally with the palm at the left and fingers pointed to the right, and from the thumb ran the words “lifeless hand” in a contiguous scrawl. A scribble that to me resembled a fire, a lotus flower, or maybe that peacock from before sat below the hand, followed underneath with the word “Yes.” The facing page featured a large sketch of a house adjoined to a large vertical rectangle. Above the house-and-rectangle floated an oval that I saw as a cloud. To the right of the oval sat some unusual creature with pointed

ears and a long tail that made it look sort of like a cat. A series of wavy lines that might have indicated water filled the bottom of the sketch, and the whole picture was covered in vertical and horizontal streaks, like a rainstorm.

Mrs. Yeats was a practitioner of automatic writing. This supernatural artform is the process of channeling messages, allegedly from the spirit world, into written form. The text does not come from the conscious thoughts of the writer but is written while in a trance state where the writer seemingly is not in control of her own hand.

While in Ireland, I looked for a way of thinking about the paranormal that was different than the TV reality show spectacle it has become in recent years. I wanted to see something more mature, or dignified, or spiritual. I was partly hoping that being in Yeats's homeland and seeing his things would somehow offer a sensible perspective of the paranormal to me.

In Georgie's notebooks, I found something not only different, but intimidating in its complexity. The content delivered during Georgie's trances outlined a system of mystical thought centered on the concept of spiral gyres and the phases of the sun and moon. From this, Yeats developed a philosophical model of interlocking conical gyres that he found useful in outlining the rise and fall of historical eras, human development from birth to death, and the evolution of the soul—all of which became persistent themes in both his poetry and his critical writings. After the pages of script I viewed, with the ambiguous shapes, cryptic messages, and the lifeless hand, I wondered how Yeats's mind worked out the enigmas recorded there, and decided that he clearly saw something that I did not.

The exhibit I toured, *Yeats: The Life and Writings of William Butler Yeats*, contained material donated by Yeats's family as well as the library's own collection of the poet's manuscripts, all of which gave observers a glimpse into the life of a man who was as curious, mystical, and otherworldly as his writing. The exhibition was divided chronologically into seventeen sections spanning from Yeats's boyhood and early writing, his relationship with Irish actress and political revolutionary Maud Gonne, his interest in the occult, the founding of the Irish National Theatre Society based at the Abbey Theatre, his life as a celebrated public figure, politician, and Nobel Prize recipient, through to last years and death in France. The hushed passages of the sprawling exhibition had a certain somber quality, while the dim lamps seemed to give each manuscript, notebook, and personal memento its own ambient glow. Seeing items like passports, family albums, and a scribbled rough draft of "The Wild Swans at Coole" in Yeats's nearly illegible handwriting made a man who had elevated to nearly mythical status himself seem human . . . yet immortal. I think that was exactly the tension he spent much of his life trying to negotiate.

Yeats became deeply interested in Theosophy in his early twenties after reading A.P. Sinnet's book *Esoteric Buddhism*, lent to him by his aunt, Isabella Pollexfen. According to Theosophical teachings, every world religion is based upon one universal ancient wisdom that became corrupted over time by human selfishness, superstition, and ignorance. One of the aims of the Theosophical Society is to encourage its members to investigate and discover the eternal truths that run through different religions, philosophies, and sciences. The notion of an ancient wisdom harmonized well with

Yeats's interest in Irish mythology and folklore, from which he drew extensively in his early writings. Yeats formed the Dublin Lodge of the Hermetic Society and assumed the mystical name *Daemon est Deus Inversus*, meaning "A demon is God reflected." In the 1880s Yeats met Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and joined the inner group of the Theosophical Society's Esoteric Section, then later turned his focus to ritual magic as a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn was a secret society founded on writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, which include abstract theology and mysticism along with magical and astrological texts. The Golden Dawn employed an elaborate hierarchy that one tends to associate with secret societies—prospective followers had to be sponsored for membership, and members underwent examinations to achieve different levels of expertise and power.

The display dedicated to Yeats's participation in the Order was one of the most vibrant spectacles of the National Library's exhibit. Inside the glass case sat notebooks filled with carefully detailed color illustrations of symbols and regalia accompanied by explanations copied in the filigree penmanship of Yeats's uncle George Pollexfen, a fellow member of the Order. Handmade tarot cards featuring The Hanged Man, The Fool, and The Tower occupied the bottom right-hand corner. Next to those was a set of Twatta cards—which closely resemble flashcards made to teach preschoolers their shapes and colors—made by Yeats himself. The top row of the case featured a complex multicolor drawing of the Tree of Life system derived from Jewish Cabbala; talismans featuring stars painted in contrast pairs red and green, purple and yellow, blue and orange; and a rose cross with rainbow petals. Silken sashes embroidered with enigmatic numbers,

symbols, and stripes of various colors—worn by Yeats to display his mastery of all grades of the Outer Order and his achievement in the higher levels of the Inner Order—completed the collection of magical paraphernalia. The case as a whole was delightfully garish to look at and demonstrated Yeats's belief in combining ancient magical systems with what were at the time very modern ways of understanding the intersections of various world religions.

I tried to imagine what a secret meeting of the Order of the Golden Dawn would have been like. I've never belonged to a club more exclusive than the Girl Scouts of America, so I wasn't sure about the level of propriety that would have been observed while members congregated in hooded robes, addressed each other by secret names, and attempted spirit evocations using ritual magic. I imagined Yeats gleefully embroidering a new stripe onto his Philosophus sash the same way I sewed on my swimming merit badge.

In his book *A Vision*, Yeats uses his extensive research of mystical teachings to lay out a complex structured belief system, using symbols, charts, diagrams, and their connection to historical and mythological events. His devotion to creating works that reified his vision resulted in some of the most personally expressive and universally resonant poetry of the twentieth century. This was far more distinguished than selling boxes of cookies.

As Yeats became increasingly involved in the Order of the Golden Dawn, he also became increasingly involved with the Celtic Revival, a movement that sought to advocate the spirit of Ireland's native heritage over the cultural influences of English rule. Yeats, along with fellow writers and friends George Russell (who used the mystical

pseudonym AE), J.M. Synge, Lady Augusta Gregory and Sean O'Casey wrote many poems, plays, and articles that combined Irish history and legend with nationalist commentary.

Combining mystical interests with his politics, Yeats began to construct his own occult symbolic system for a proposed Celtic Mystical Order. Yeats's occult philosophy was set forth in his 1901 essay "Magic"<sup>1</sup>:

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:--

- (1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
- (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

The beliefs Yeats laid out for the Celtic Mystical Order closely mirror those found in the Vedanta teachings of the ancient scriptures of India, the Vedas. The

Vedanta emphasizes a collective Self who exists in the past, present, and future.

All humankind and all existence are one.

In many ways, the Celtic Revival writers, painters, and actors who joined Yeats in many of the same esoteric activities, mythological studies, and nationalist pursuits seemed to subscribe to the idea of a single energy flowing among their creative minds. They collaborated with one another to create art that was at once devoted to Irish tradition and modern innovation. They gave to Ireland a rich art scene that ushered in the twentieth century in energetic and exciting ways, augmenting free thinking with native rhythms, shifting and blurring borders between old and new. Yeats's doctrines of collective consciousness were ones that made room for both legacy and revolution.

More recent inquiries into the existence of collective consciousness have produced some interesting findings in the discipline of neurocardiology that surely would have enthralled Yeats, who wrote so often about the heart. For example, we know through electrocardiogram (ECG) and electroencephalograms (EEG) data that our hearts and minds create energetic fields, and that these fields can be impacted by an individual's thoughts, attitudes, and emotions. The Institute of HeartMath, a leading organization in understanding the heart's role in physical, mental, and emotional health has compiled experimental evidence that supports the ability of the heart's electromagnetic waves to transmit information between individuals.<sup>2</sup> In *The Energetic Heart: Bioelectromagnetic Interactions Within and Between People* (2003), HeartMath's Director of Research Rollin McCraty discusses experiments in which the EMFs produced by the hearts of individuals

actually synchronized with the brainwaves of other human and non-human animals.<sup>3</sup> Further studies have found that exchanges of heart energy between individuals can occur, and that the heart rhythms of couples in long-term, stable and loving relationships can become aligned.

I wondered about Georgie's emotional state at the time of her writing sessions, and whether she was truly acting as a medium of unknown messages or simply trying to seize the attention of a husband preoccupied with supernatural realms and past loves. It would seem that Yeats's heart—or at least his libido—was never truly faithful to George, though she appeared to have been fully devoted to him. I can only speculate as to whether or not George was faking her trances, but I think that she was, mostly because of a female understanding of the lengths one will go to capture a lover's heart and of how difficult it is to love someone who is so steeped in other realities that do not include you. Love as a spiritual belief, an ascetic devotion, seems like a fitting understanding of Georgie's writing; the heart speaks an unquestionable truth that is more frank and ever-present in human existence than ancient voices or divine secrets.



Yeats met his dear friend, collaborator, and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre, Lady Augusta Gregory, for the first time in 1894. He visited her home, Coole Park, in Gort, County Galway in 1896 and became a regular guest at the house until Lady Gregory's death in 1932. Yeats once described Coole to fellow poet John Masefield as the most beautiful place in the world.

The day that I visited Coole, I was quick to agree with Yeats's assessment of its beauty. The sun shone for the first time in a week, and the wind carried the warm fragrance of the woods rather than the chilling damp. When first entering Coole, however, I did not yet sense the feeling of antiquity that would later overcome me. My tour group's bus dropped us off in a large parking lot by a visitor center, and the park's famous fallow deer grazed disinterestedly behind a chain link fence. It reminded me of a wildlife sanctuary across town from my home in Green Bay. The Gregorys' large manor had been torn down about a decade after Lady Gregory's death, with only its foundation and the wide stone entry stairs left to hint at its former greatness.

Coole is also famous for its autograph tree, with signatures of Yeats and his brother Jack, John Masefield, George W. Russell, Sean O'Casey, John Millington Synge, and many others carved into the trunk by their own hands. The tree is a massive copper beech, heavy with auburn leaves nearly reaching the ground. Its branches are so bushy and thick that walking to its trunk to view the carved initials felt something like ducking under a woman's petticoats. The signatures are hard to decipher, in part because of their age and in part because a tall fence has been placed around the trunk to deter others tempted to memorialize their visit to Coole. A numbered chart guides visitors in sorting the signatures of Lady Gregory's guests from those of other carvers. Yeats was the first to autograph the tree, and his simple WBY is not as flamboyant as the later carvings of Theodore Spicer Simson or George Bernard Shaw. Seeing the group of autographs together pointed to the importance of Coole in the Irish Literary Revival of the early 20th century, and I imagined the marvelous discussions that must have taken place there. I

imagined ladies with parasols and men in boater hats strolling along the garden wall perimeters, and though it seems a bit cheesy, I really believed I felt the time-distorting effect of Coole set in.

I moved on to explore the nature trails running through the woodland and entered at *Kyle-dortha*, or Dark Wood. The name was befitting; the daylight took on a green treatment as it filtered through the forest canopy, like a gel placed over a spotlight. Oak, ash, and birch clustered so densely in some areas that it was impossible to deviate from the path, and furry mosses and thick tangles of ivy covered every tree. Birdsongs of all kinds mingled to create a symphony in the trees, punctuated by the skittering noises of unseen critters in the groundcover underfoot. It was quite easy to imagine that, having stepped through a passageway in one of the old stone walls that run through the woods, I had entered into the mystical fairy realm of Irish folklore. There was something jubilant in fantasizing that it was elves and wood nymphs rather than squirrels and stoats tramping through the brambles and honeysuckle, and I realized why Yeats believed in the healing and rejuvenating qualities of his visits here.

I reached the west edge of the woods and came to a spot where a tree leaned at a sharp angle over the path. I ducked under the tree, and the woods seemed to part like theater curtains, opening up to a wide green meadow and sleepy river. Just across the water, a number of horses grazed and sunned themselves, apparently as grateful as I was for the good weather that day. I walked south along the river bank, sending telepathic greetings, and watching for any of them to respond; by this time in my immersion at Coole, it seemed perfectly natural to think that they might. About a quarter-mile later,

the grass gave way to flat limestone beach, and the river flowed into Coole Lough. The bright blue sky gave the lake a deep sapphire color, and rushes swayed softly along the water's edge. Out in the middle of the lake, a single swan bobbed and preened. I made myself comfortable on a large boulder and watched the bird; it was not the “nine-and-fifty” swans of Yeats's poem but a wonderful mental souvenir nonetheless.

Yeats meditates on aging in “The Wild Swans at Coole,”<sup>4</sup> and the park has surely changed much since the days he spent there. Still, from where I sat on my boulder, one could not tell if it were the twenty-first century or the nineteenth, or perhaps even earlier. Coole has a quality to it that permits time to move both forward and backward, blending ancient and modern into ambiguity.



The weather had not cooperated for the majority of my tour of Yeats country in County Sligo. The air was chilly damp, and the wind seemed to whip in every direction, turning umbrellas inside out and pelting faces with barbs of rain. The blustery air penetrated all my protective layers, and the wet soaked my blue jeans into an uncomfortably cold and constricting state. With each stop of the tour, it became increasingly hard to leave the warm nesting place I had created for myself at the back of the bus, but I hadn't come so far to hide from the elements or view the Irish countryside from a tinted window.

My morning began on the waters of Lough Gill on the Rose of Innisfree tourboat. The water was slate gray and choppy, and the fog obscured the mountaintops, blending them into the colorless sky. As the boat chugged along in the sluggish waters, however, the beauty of the land surrounding the lake penetrated the dreary atmosphere. Hills looked like soft shoulders draped in green velvet, with white houses sewn into the hillside like bugle beads. The central island, which inspired Yeats to write “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,”<sup>5</sup> seemed every bit as peaceful and secluded as the poet described it, with its thick covering of trees and waves lapping at its shore. It seemed that the mist and fog of the day only enhanced the isle’s beauty and mystery, and I stood at the head of the boat with my binoculars, wishing that despite the icy rain that splattered my cheeks and blurred my view, we could pull ashore to ramble through the isle’s tiny wilderness.

The final stanza of Yeats’s poem describes the rhythmic sound of the lake water lapping the island’s shore. Reflecting on the final line—“I hear it in the deep heart’s core”—reminded me again of the synchronization powers of the human heart. Yeats’s heartwaves become synchronized with the lake waves, creating a communication between his body and the natural world. For Yeats, the Irish landscape was deeply entwined with the “great memory” of collective consciousness, and the places Yeats most cherished throughout his life were essential landmarks in his spiritual journey.

On January 28, 1939, Yeats died at the age of seventy-three in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France. He was first buried there, but then reinterred in 1948 in a small churchyard in Drumcliff, Ireland, near the table mountain Ben Bulbin. In one of his last poems, “Under Ben Bulbin,”<sup>6</sup> Yeats actually wrote his burial wishes into the final stanza:

Under bare Ben Bulben's head  
 In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid,  
 An ancestor was rector there  
 Long Years ago; a church stands near,  
 By the road an ancient Cross.  
 No marble, no conventional phrase,  
 On limestone quarried near the spot  
 By his command these words are cut:

Cast a cold eye  
 On life, on death.  
 Horseman, pass by!

The churchyard now stands as a tribute to Yeats, with a memorial sculpture at the entrance to the cemetery. The memorial features a life-sized bronze sculpture of a man crouched over a bronze cloth, set in a marble base level with the ground. Inscribed in the marble and bronze is Yeats's poem, "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven"<sup>7</sup>:

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
 Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
 Of night and light and the half-light,  
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
 But I, being poor, have only my dreams;

I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.

It is a striking piece of art, made even more moving by the rain that dripped from the sculpted man's chin and cupped hands and glazed the engraved words that sprawled under my feet as I read it. I stood in silence for a long time, reflecting on the gravity of death and those in my life who are gone. I thought of my paternal grandmother, who I visited in the hospital just days before her death. I remembered the cold prickly feeling on the nape of my neck when she looked me straight in the eye and asked, "Where's Mick?" my great uncle who had passed years before. That question has often since echoed in my thoughts of her, and I ponder what had prompted her to ask that question—whether it had been her mind slipping out of the present or something she had dreamt—and what had made her think that I would know the answer.

I made my way through the graveyard to Yeats's resting place, picking up a handful of the rocks that covered the grave's surface and turning them in my hand. George's gravestone, even simpler than her husband's with only her name and dates, sat at the foot of Yeats's tomb—a wife faithfully devoted even in death. I wondered if she believed they would be reunited in the spirit realm. Yeats couldn't have thought that he would spend his eternity under a pile of cold rocks, but it seemed that in his later years he became less sure of what might wait on the other side of death. Yeats's poems took on a wistful tone, lamenting a lost youth and what seemed to him a life unfulfilled. In his poem, "What Then?"<sup>8</sup> Yeats chronicles his own life's successes, only to be haunted at the end of each stanza by Plato's ghost: "'What then?' sang Plato's ghost, 'what then?'"

Throughout his life and works, Yeats seemed to juxtapose permanence and impermanence, mortality and immortality. What then, does he say in his epitaph? What wisdom does he have to pass onto the ages about life, death, and what lies beyond?

Cast a cold Eye

On Life, on Death.

Horseman, pass by.

In casting a cold eye on life, Yeats is perhaps making a cynical remark on the passage of time and growing old. Yeats's mystical beliefs emphasized the hand of fate and historical determinism, so perhaps there was no use to clinging to life in a world where events are preordained, and the answers Yeats sought to questions about life and death were perhaps not his to know. However, in casting a cold eye on death, it seems he did believe in the perseverance of humanity in life, especially of the Irish. The horseman of his poem will continue on.

I questioned Yeats's impulse to write his last wishes into his poetry in order to ensure that they are carried out. Didn't this fly in the face of fate? On the other hand, writing his own epitaph confirmed the inevitability of his mortal demise, while at the same time cleverly creating an immortal presence. Yeats has lived an afterlife in the form of a literary legacy, a phantom of creativity that will continue to speak to readers for ages, urging the pens in the hands of future artists to move forward.



A few days after visiting Yeats's grave, I found myself in another cemetery on Inishmore Island, the largest of the Aran Islands located in the mouth of Galway Bay. *Na Seacht d'Teampaill*, meaning "The Seven Churches," was one of the most important monastic sites on the islands. The complex consisted of the roofless structures of two early Christian churches and the crumbling foundations of five smaller buildings, with every remaining inch of holy real estate occupied by high crosses, tombstones, and burial slabs. Some graves dated back to the Middle Ages, while others were only few years old. Just next to the site, a chestnut mare and her colt grazed in a pasture. The grass there was especially tall and lush, which I realized—somewhat morbidly—was likely due to centuries of corpses fertilizing the soil. Again, life overlapped death like layers of seaweed and sand.

I walked as gingerly as I could amongst the graves, trying my best not to stomp on anyone's ancestor. A string of oversized rosary beads slung over a Celtic cross caught my eye, and I moved in to take a picture. However, I made the mistake of watching through my camera's digital screen as I walked, stepped into a patch of long grass, and sunk into the earth up to my knee. My foot slipped into the ground easily, and it felt how I imagine stepping into a bucket of loosely-packed granola would feel.

It happened so quickly that I didn't even let out a yell, which I still find particularly disappointing. I have always imagined that at the moment of my demise I would utter some great last words, or at the very least, a very convincing Wilhelm Scream. Here I was, sinking into an ancient burial ground, and nothing—not a peep. Instead, I just sort of scrambled backward and bicycle-kicked until my leg was free.

Nobody noticed. After a moment of breathless panic, my voice came out loud and cartoonish: “Look out,” I said to no one in particular, “there’s a hole right there.”

Still, nobody noticed.

In hindsight, I realize that I may have stumbled into a small sinkhole in the karst, which was a common hazard on the limestone island. The danger of the situation was hardly extreme, and I came out of the whole ordeal without so much as an untied shoelace. For a few fleeting seconds, though, I was quite certain that a zombie hand had reached from the earth to pull me underground. The dead had come to life, and any rational explanation had ceased to exist. I regained my composure before anyone saw my ridiculous antics, and by the time I was on a plane back to the States two days later, the story had become a hilarious anecdote.

Nevertheless, every time I think of that instant of shock, I realize that no secular wisdom or scientific method could prevent me from hoping that I had an immortal soul. No matter how hard I try to make myself comfortable with the rationale that there is no afterlife, I am not ready to let my consciousness pop and fade like a burnt-out bulb. Just like that, my doubt in life after death was useless, and my acceptance of mortality was gone.

*‘What then?’ sang Plato’s ghost. ‘What then?’*

## Epilogue

I never personally owned a Ouija board, but the Parker Bros. toy was a favorite at most of the girlhood slumber parties I attended. Whenever we played Ouija, which we pronounced *wee-gee*, there were usually three or four girls eager to divine messages from the netherworld, one girl too scared to mess with the black arts, and one girl furtively pushing the heart-shaped planchette all over the board. That last girl was me.

It wasn't the occasional push, either. I concocted entire storylines. I delivered messages from little lost orphans, broken-hearted brides, and ghost princes looking for love. I anticipated every question and plotted every move. I never admitted to manipulating the board and sometimes even pretended I was too scared to continue just to throw the suspicion off of me. Devising ways to keep the ruse going was more fun than any game I had ever played. My brain crackled like it had been dipped in Pop Rocks. As soon as I felt the story going stale, I went for the grand finale. I brought in an evil hag or Satan-worshipping demon to threaten and curse us until someone pulled her fingers away and complained that the game wasn't fun anymore. If I could get someone to cry, all the better. It meant that my story was good.

There were a few times I remember feeling a force pushing against my own on the planchette, but I never once thought it was a supernatural energy; I always assumed it was another set of fifth-grade fingers, trying to contest my control of the board. Sometimes I let the opposing force take over, but the messages weren't as well-written as mine, so I'd usually think up another spirit to interrupt and reassume control.

There were other times when we all played by the rules and waited with our fingers still, but our questions went unanswered. There were no orphans, princes, or demons. It was boring, and I had no patience for it. If there were ghosts on the other side, they weren't nearly as fabulous, frightening, or remarkable as the ones I imagined in my own story.

## End Notes

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### 1. Spook Hill

<sup>1</sup> Margaret told her story of the origins of the mysterious "rappings" in a signed confession given to the press and published in *New York World*, October 21, 1888. However, financial hardships caused her to return to mediumship and she recanted her confession in 1889.

<sup>2</sup> National Spiritualist Association of Churches. "Declaration of Principles and Interpretations." Lily Dale, NY: The Stow Memorial Foundation, 2002. Print.

### 2. For Novelty Purposes Only

<sup>1</sup> The Akerses appeared on an episode of *The Montel Williams Show* entitled "Vanished with Sylvia Browne," first aired February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

### 3. What Then?

<sup>1</sup> Yeats, W. B. "From *Magic*." *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. By W. B. Yeats. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Revised ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002. 369-71. Print. "Magic" was first published in the *Monthly Review*, September 1901; later included in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903).

<sup>2</sup> For additional studies on neurocardiology and cardioelectromagnetic communication, see The Institute of HeartMath website, [www.heartmath.org](http://www.heartmath.org)

<sup>3</sup> McCraty, Rollin. *The Energetic Heart: Bioelectromagnetic Interactions within and between People*. Boulder Creek: Institute of Heartmath, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Yeats, W. B. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. By W. B. Yeats. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Revised ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002. 13-14. Print. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" was first published in *National Observer*, 13 December 1890; later included in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892) and *The Rose* (1895).

<sup>5</sup> Yeats, W. B. "The Wild Swans at Coole." *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. By W. B. Yeats. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Revised ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002. 56-57. Print. "The Wild Swans at Coole" was first published in *The Sphere*, 23 June 1917; later included the same year in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917).

<sup>6</sup> Yeats, W. B. "Under Ben Bulbin." *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. By W. B. Yeats. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Revised ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002. 141-44. Print. "Under Ben Bulbin" was first published in the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*, 3 February 1939; later included in *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939).

<sup>7</sup> Yeats, W. B. "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven." *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. By W. B. Yeats. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Revised ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002. 29. Print. "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" was first published in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

<sup>8</sup> Yeats, W. B. "What Then?" *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. By W. B. Yeats. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Revised ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002. 134-35. Print. "What Then?" first published in *The Erasmian* (Dublin), April 1937; later included in *New Poems* (1938).

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