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SÃO MIGUEL IN STOCKWELL, THE DEAD WERE THERE, BUT THEY DIDN'T SMELL



To Nancy, still watching, and to Jemina, who re-introduced us.

Two ladies are sharing a railway compartment. “I don’t believe in ghosts,” says one to the other. “Oh really?” the other replies, and vanishes.¹³⁷

Jorge Luis Borges

My first Spiritualist experience began the year I left Japan with a wait outside a run-down church in Stockwell. As we waited for the guy with the keys to arrive, an old lady who had been a regular for forty-three years reminisced about the good old days of “proper mediums”, psychometry sessions, and a church packed out with Spiritualists. “It’s not what it used to be”, she complained. Old people feel this way about all manner of things, from the taste of vegetables to the quality of programs on the wireless, and a twenty minute wait is enough to make anyone negative, so I didn’t take her too seriously. She was considering going home to watch cricket. My friend Jem was making her debut appearance as the platform medium, and I wanted her session to be well attended, so I explained that cricket was a boring game.

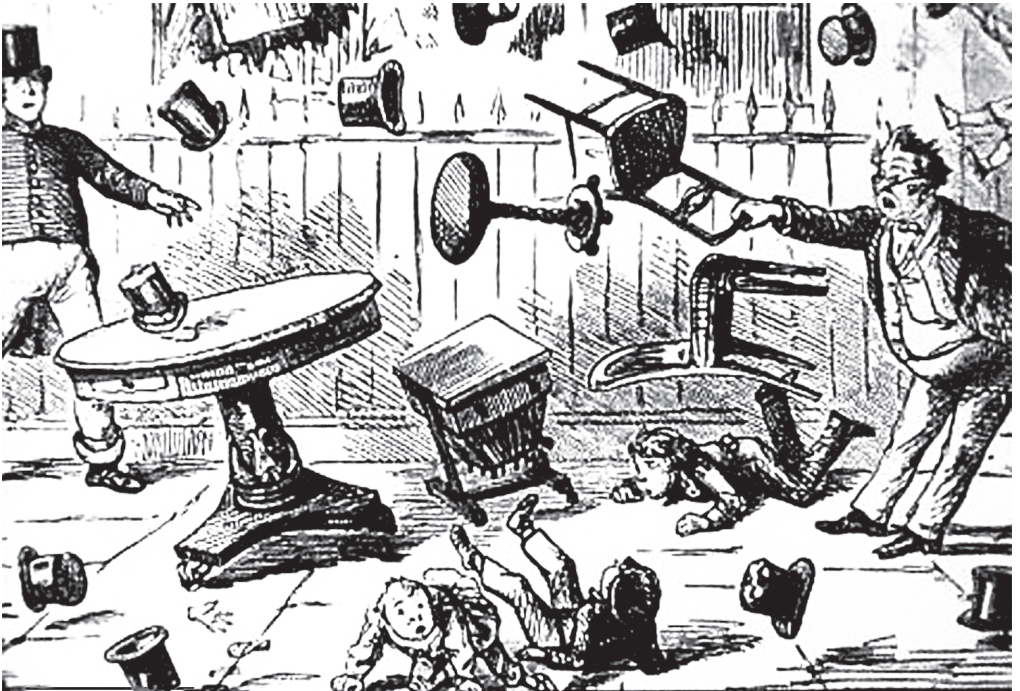
“I could watch cricket all day,” she told me, scanning the street for the caretaker.

“Have you ever seen ectoplasm?” I asked, thinking about *Ghost Busters*.

“You have to go to a private sitting for that,” she said with a nostalgic smile.

Ectoplasm, the physical manifestation of spirit, is rarely seen these days. Spiritualism is apparently not what it used to be, because mobile phones and other electromagnetic technologies disrupt the channels. The unionised churches have also made the practice less dramatic. Swooning, possession, paralytically drunk mediums, and messages from celebrity spirits are just not cricket anymore. Jem and the other medium Janet were sensibly dressed and well behaved. The service began with some proper old-skool churchly staples, including a sermon about the importance of community and some high-pitched hymn singing to a tape-recorded organ. Singing together is an integral part of the ceremony, perhaps to bring the group into harmony, but any tune will do, including *Any Dream Will Do*, the Jason Donovan version, a rousing favourite at the Fulham Spiritualist Church. During one Victorian séance, the only song everybody knew was *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*, so that is what they jolly well sang.¹³⁸

Janet stood up to begin her address and scanned the crowd until her eyes came to rest upon a young woman. "*I'm getting an old lady, an auntie on your mother's side... a big family, she was one of five sisters... Her name was Lillian... There were twins in the generation above.*"* The young woman could neither confirm nor deny the name, as she knew very little about her family, but she knew there were five sisters. Janet asked if she had moved recently, and she replied that she came to London a few months ago. The auntie was happy that she had left behind the unpleasant situation in her hometown, and also that she was making friends quickly. The



* Like all mediums in this chapter, Janet speaks in *italics*.

young woman nodded in affirmation, and the medium continued. *"You are studying something, something which will allow you to travel..."* She was indeed. *"Somewhere far away, maybe Australia. Are you going to Australia?"* "That would be nice!" replied the young woman. She had decided to go a long way away, but had not yet decided where. The medium closed with a *"God bless"*, and left the first punter smiling. So far so good, but a bit vague; mediums making medium strength statements.

It was Jem's turn next, and she addressed an old lady in the pew behind me. *"I'm seeing a tall man in a brown suit. He was very strict, perhaps too strict. Was your father strict?"* He was, and he was also tall and always wore a suit. *"You have a brother, but he was much stricter with you than with your bother."* She agreed again. *"He felt it was his duty to be strict, but now he regrets it... He says you work very hard."* She replied that she had always worked hard, and that since she had retired, she had been busy with voluntary work. *"He suggests you take it easy."* She was surprised at such advice coming from her father, and Jem explained a little about life after death. *"The spirits see the world differently from their new perspective, and sometimes the things they thought were important cease to be. He's sorry about being so strict. He's trying to make amends."*

Spiritualists are like other people, they often wish that things had gone differently, and they miss their dead loved ones (though unlike most other people, they are still talking to them). These very human feelings have made the field profitable for con artists. In the occult sciences, as in mainstream science, practitioners often follow dollars rather than scruples, whether they are flogging a tarot reading before every decision or a pill after every meal. Bad mediumship ranges from deliberate fraud to infuriating vagueness. Whether the latter are fooling themselves, or simply beginners in a discipline that takes years to develop, the result is horrible. A good medium pinpoints a member of the congregation, (or at the very least an area), and gives specifics such as name, height, character, mode of dress, occupation, year and cause of death, and anniversaries. I have seen a medium address a full church asking if anyone recognises an old man, perhaps a grandfather, with white hair and a walking stick. This kind of thing can make an elderly cricket fan see red.

Indeed, up until this point, the information Jem had passed on could have applied to many women of a certain generation, but this was about to change. *"There is a dog as well."* "Oh yes, we had lots of dogs." *"This one is a terrier, brown and white. He lived for a long time, into his twenties."* I stifled a giggle. I had never heard of a dog living beyond his teens, and thought that my friend had blown it, but the old lady affirmed the colours, the breed and the age. I researched it later and found that though it is rare, some dogs, especially small dogs, do occasionally live into their twenties. Funny, you

learn something new every day. But not usually from dead dogs. *“There’s no message from the dog, but he wants you to know that he’s there. God bless.”*

Janet addressed a tattooed man, describing two aunts on his mother’s side who were very close and did everything together, who shopped together, cooked together, and were now speaking to the medium together in stereo. He recognised them immediately. *“They were very family orientated, liked to get everyone together for a meal, strong but generous... The kind of ladies who would get the family albums out on a Sunday with a cup of tea.”* “Yeah, then you’d be stuck for four an’ a ‘arf days!” he said laughing. *“People would behave themselves around them, you’d become a good boy.”* He smiled nostalgically. *“You have been working a lot recently.”* He agreed. *“And you haven’t been spending much time with your children.”* “S’pose so, yeah,” he said, looking a bit sheepish. *“They want you to spend more time with your family.”* He looked exactly like a man who had been chastised by a pair of aunts. “I will,” he said quietly. “Thank you.” “God bless.”

The “God bless”, the courtesy, the sermon, and the whole service including the advice of the spirits was a touching display of Victorian family values, something which seemed out of place in South London. Many of the churchgoers were involved with voluntary work or community projects, including the next one. The spirit began by noting that her relative had been very busy recently. “Oh yes, it’s been all go for the last three months.” *“Some kind of official events which you are organising.”* She was not the main organiser, but had been taking on many of the responsibilities. *“There’s something about decorating... Are you decorating your house?”* asked Jem. “No, but I’ve been meaning to, my house really needs it.” *“That’s the message. She wants you to take time for yourself, to sort out your house... then worry about other people.”* “Get your own house in order, you mean?” she asked, smiling. *“Yes, exactly. God bless.”*

Janet turned to a black man in his twenties, introducing the spirit of a tall relative. He didn’t know anyone beyond his immediate family, and it struck me again how Spiritualist values jar with modern urban lives. *“You are considering a course of study, but you don’t know if it is a good time.”* He was indeed. *“Something to do with computers?”* I.T. was part of the syllabus, and the man did not elaborate further. *“This spirit, he’s trying to tell me where he is from...”* She paused and her brow wrinkled. *“I’m having trouble catching it... maybe Ghana?”* No. There was no connection to Ghana, and again the subject offered no additional information. *“The spirit recommends you go for it and start the course. It will help with your business... Do you run a business?”* He did. *“A family business?”* He was in business with his brother. *“I’m getting a message that you are good at languages. You speak other languages, and pick them up quickly. French, do you speak French?”* He did, and he affirmed that he spoke other languages too, but did not go into what they were.

The congregation is instructed only to confirm or deny, and give no further information. They were open-minded, but concise with their responses, looking for clear evidence that the messages were genuine. Spiritualism took shape in the Enlightenment era, as science was striding forth courageously into the unknown, so testable evidence is of paramount importance. In this way it is in stark contrast to much of the New Age movement, where seekers tend to seek evidence not of spirit or magick, but confirmation that everything is fine, and that they are special in some way, indigo children, old souls, or urban shamans. At the church, talking to dead people is not seen as particularly special. The mediums were down-to-earth, more Dot Cotton than Mystic Meg. Janet is an accountant from Essex, and Jem is a no-nonsense Aussie sound engineer.

A light-hearted vibe permeated the service, though other emotions can arise. Mediums deal with dead children missing their parents and suicide victims looking back on what they have left behind, so it can be an emotional business, especially as some mediums experience the emotions the spirit is trying to convey, but becoming emotional is considered unprofessional. Jem was once criticised for crying during a demonstration. Theatrical or emotional displays are frowned upon in modern Spiritualism as it tries to distance itself from stage magic, though allegations of fraud still plague it. History, however, calls into question the honesty of the sceptics as well as the occultists.

In the case of Helen Duncan, fraud was desperately sought but never found.¹³⁹ During World War II she became famous for her ectoplasmic materialisations of loved ones killed in action, one of many being a man wearing an HMS Barham cap at a séance three months before the Home Office released news that HMS Barham had been sunk. The police sent moles to a séance, who arrested her for vagrancy. She was tried, but contrary to normal jurisprudence, she was neither sentenced nor released. She was held for another four days, and then charged under the Witchcraft Act of 1735, and accused of larceny (“falsely pretending that [she was] in a position to bring about the appearances of the spirits of deceased people”¹⁴⁰). The Law Societies of England and Scotland expressed their shock at the trial, and Winston Churchill sent an indignant memo demanding to know why this archaic law had been exhumed.

Over forty witnesses including academics and a magistrate testified that she had provided proof of the enduring spirits of their relatives, materialising intimate details including knobbly knuckles, moles, bald spots, a chin dimple, children’s voices, a Greek nose, a broken nose, a fine ginger moustache, characteristic turns of phrase, postures, and nicknames. She also materialised one spirit who had died just hours before the séance, surprising the witness who had not yet learned of the death. No evidence of untruth was found under cross-examination.

The policemen claimed it was done using a sheet, which one claimed to have grabbed, only to have it snatched away in the confusion. It could not have gone very far as the house was surrounded, but the police did not look very hard; they refused to search willing attendees.¹⁴¹ Helen offered to produce ectoplasm in court for doctors to examine, but she was denied the opportunity. The moles contradicted each other in their evidence, and Lieutenant Worth even admitted lying in court,¹⁴² but though Helen was found innocent of larceny, she was prosecuted under the Witchcraft Act. Spiritualists claim she was imprisoned for reasons of national security, as it was feared that she might reveal details of the D-day landings, which occurred during the nine months of her incarceration. The Witchcraft Act was repealed shortly after the case, but the harassment of Helen Duncan continued. In 1956, another séance was raided, during which Helen was manhandled, despite being nearly sixty years old and in frail health. She died five weeks later.¹⁴³

Janet turned to the cricket fan and began describing her mother, a strong woman who was always preparing food for needy people. The medium coughed, and asked if the spirit had died from a chest complaint. Some mediums receive information with their bodies, mimicking the complaints or postures of the deceased, and I once witnessed a medium suffering as a man who had hanged himself grabbed him by the throat. The old lady affirmed both her mother's nature and her cause of death, and Janet continued. *"You remained with her at the end of her life."* True. *"She is very grateful for that... There is something to do with East London... Was she from East London?"* False.

The mediums made occasional errors, and Janet's mistakes were both place names. She continued, unconcerned by her dodgy geography. *"You are often going away..."* "Ooh yes, I'm always going away, me," said the lady. *"Perhaps you should go to the seaside. Your mother is worried you might suffer from the same chest complaint, and she thinks that the sea air will do you good. She loved the sea."* Indeed she did. *"She suggests a trip to Eastbourne."* The cricket fan was quicker than the dead; she had already planned a trip to Eastbourne for the following week. It seems that the line is not always perfect, which might explain how Eastbourne became East London. When Janet suggested Ghana, she appeared to be straining to hear. Most mediums do not have instant access to the Akashic records, so they have to piece together a story from bits of information. A spirit might have a distinct outfit and a paternal ambiance, but it may not be clear whether it was a father, a grandfather, or a friendly uncle. They were close, but not perfect. *"Your mother thinks the sea will be good for you. She will be with you at the sea. God bless."* The old lady was satisfied. I was amazed, both at the messages, and at the fact that she had nearly gone to watch cricket instead. The cosmology an individual embraces becomes so day-to-

day, as normal as cricket on telly, even when it is as bizarre as talking to dead people.

It is fascinating, but what is it? Do the dead speak? Do they stay dead, or reincarnate? Can you do both? Is the collective unconscious integrating new memories, or is it all written somewhere? Do thoughts coagulate into clouds in the ether smelling of old dreams? Who knows? Like Spiritualism, the quest for the Truth with a capital T is beautifully Victorian. It brings to mind an intrepid and supremely confident Dr. Livingstone, armed with a compass, hacking his way towards the source of the Nile through jungles and crocodile infested waters, fighting tropical disease and hostile natives. He pushed on, though his wife died from dysentery, though he lost contact with the outside world for six years and was tricked by wily Arabs. He battled on, malarial and delirious, transfixed upon his goal, until eventually he died of dysentery.

He never found the source of the Nile, and the Victorians never discovered the Truth. Instead we got stuck with a profoundly boring half-truth, a mechanistic, rationalistic, bloody-minded cosmology, and we are still wandering around, hacking away, lost and delirious, unable to see the jungle for the trees. We have lost contact with the world outside, and we are steadily becoming sicker. Intrepid explorers are still pushing deeper into Rwanda today, still dodging crocodiles, arguing over the true source of the Nile.¹⁴⁴ Maybe they will never find it, and maybe we won't find the Truth, but we could at least enjoy our truths (with little t's) better in the meantime. We can talk to dead people! We can do it every Thursday and Sunday night, and we get tea and biscuits! All we need to do is come out of the jungle and face what lies outside our belief systems. There was nothing remotely scary or spooky in the Stockwell church, it was just a community church with a community stretching beyond this world. The spirits, the mediums and the punters were all friendly, enjoying the warmth and humour of family life on both sides of the grave.

The Spiritualist movement has survived for generations, despite ridicule and fraud allegations. If Stockwell was a fraud, it was an immensely complicated fraud involving the half of the congregation which received messages, perpetrated on the other half, for the sake of a pittance and a cup of tea, because that is all the mediums earn. The service was uplifting, mind-expanding and entertaining, and it encouraged me to check out the church by my housing estate, which I used to walk past every day. I would read the adverts for free services, but never thought to enter this quaint Victorian relic, so far removed from my normal life. When we get lost in our cosmological jungles, we miss all kinds of experiences, not because they are invalid or boring, but because they don't fit into the landscape. It is good to strike out into the unknown, like Dr. Livingstone, but every cosmology becomes local sooner or later, if we lose contact with the outside

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world. There are crocodiles in every jungle river, con-artists in every field, in the occult and the advertised, selling you comfort in a capsule, a cult, or a Happy Meal, but the most pernicious and pervasive fraud of all is that which practically forces us to believe in one version of reality.

We sang a few more hymns to close. One of the men piped up in a shocking tenor, out of key and way out of time; it was as if we were singing to scare the spirits away as a kind of banishing ritual. Ayahuasqueros are spoilt in our sessions, with beautiful singing and music on guitar, mandolin, accordion, violin, piano, hand-drum, flute, recorder, trumpet, and plenty of maracas. Singing is absolutely central to the session, and ayahuasqueros can forget that most British people are unaccustomed to it. At my first visit to the church round the corner, I cringed in disbelief and distress as we sang along to a Whitney Houston CD, but within a few weeks I was happily ah-a-ahing along with Jason Donovan, and when I took along my mum, they played her favourite Abba song.

Leaving the Stockwell church, I noticed that it was on St. Michael's Street, and I remembered São Miguel, the Brazilian version of the saint, who had appeared to me for the first time the night before in a very exciting dream, courageously fighting werewolves. In my ayahuasca group we call São Miguel for protection against the more confused spirits. Though I do not believe that spirits or anything else in the universe are fundamentally malevolent, some are certainly troublesome, and they bring their issues to work through in the session. Someone invariably goes mental, but we always manage to drag them back before the final prayers, with the help of São Miguel.

São Miguel is a mighty warrior and fearless adventurer, defending travellers in the astral, trampling demons underfoot. He charges onwards up the Nile, another stretch to conquer, another dogma to cut down, his shining sword wielded in the spirit of love. Forward and onward, my brothers and sisters, this is the adventure of a lifetime and beyond! Wake up, you living stones, wake up! Wake up to the call of your ancestors, wake up! Wake up and greet the dead! Wake up and wake the living dead slumbering around you! Wake up, wake up, wake up! WAKE UP!

...and God Bless.

