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Paul Is Dead, and We're All Listening Rumor and Revelation, 1969

by Ned Balbo

When I first heard a Beatle died, I felt mostly disbelief; it wasn't true, it couldn't be. My mother Betty had licked her finger, turned a page of the *Daily News*, and remarked, with a note of triumph, "This article says that Paul McCartney's dead." It was late October of 1969; the next month I'd turn ten and, given the impending change from single digits to double, I'd hoped that on some technicality I could call myself a teen. Now I thought only of Paul, pale skin stubbled, large eyes looming—that sad, world-weary gaze from the *White Album*'s famous glossy—assassinated like President Kennedy or his brother Robert, gone—somehow—too suddenly, without a trace. Precocious enough, with Betty's push, to have begun guitar at five, I played the Beatles every day—not badly, sometimes fairly well—but always strummed too hard, crooning "Tell Me What You See" at the top end of my range, hacking away at a blonde Gibson ES-335 with f-holes, breaking strings more often than Betty or Mr. Amato, my teacher, liked. "Let me see that," I exclaimed, hardly listening as she spoke: albums and songs were filled with clues, the Beatles themselves had broken the news—not, of course, the way they should have, grieving openly to the world, but with sneaky indirection, half-admissions, morbid jokes—exactly what she'd expect of such drug-addled, guilty minds.

No former subject of the Crown hated the British more than my mother, a native Long Islander born of parents who'd immigrated from Poland—not an especially Anglophobic nation. In those post-British Invasion days, when being a rock star and being English often seemed synonymous, her prejudice seemed odd indeed. But Betty had led a hidden life to which she referred obliquely: vague years in Trinidad, surrounded by sugar cane and servants, herself and hired houseboys dressed immaculately in white. To British officers then active in colonial government, an American woman living abroad with an obvious New York accent hardly merited more notice than those they called "East Indians"—actually, north India's poorest—who'd emigrated to the island as cheap labor.

Paul McCartney's dead. My mind raced as I read: no one knew that Paul was dead; they only suspected it was true. Evidence was ambiguous, as hints from songs and album photos triggered a great debate: had Paul been dead since '66, replaced by some clever stand-in, clues scattered before our eyes and ears yet, somehow, overlooked? Why would the Beatles plant such clues or conceal McCartney's death? For fear their success was under threat, their perfect symmetry now broken? Or for some darker reason? Some questions require no answer; they feed on their own asking. Why would anyone take actions that virtually guarantee suspicion? From some indeterminate mix, perhaps, of arrogance and guilt, one

virtually guarantee suspicion: from some indeterminate mix, perhaps, of arrogance and guilt. One impulse wishes we'd catch him, another cries out that we can't, an uneasy balance the public follows with dismay and titillation. For the Beatles, many assumed, the arrogance was four times greater, and a conspiracy the only path unheard-of fame would take.

But in the closing months of 1969, a strange mood had taken hold. Only the previous summer, men had first walked on the moon—the great dream over in anticlimax—while a small town in the region that Long Islanders call "Upstate" gave its name to a music festival actually held a few miles off, the revelers of Woodstock pushing up against the stage (or wandering off in rainstorms, clothed or unclothed, drunk or high) to hear the great bands of the day—Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, and more—but not the Beatles, who hadn't played on stage for years. Why had they forsaken their public? Was Paul's imposter too inept on bass to fake a live performance? So the speculation churned, more myopic, more bizarre, as songs and photos yielded riches previously unsuspected: John's "I buried Paul" at the fade of "Strawberry Fields Forever" (the location of Paul's grave?), *Sergeant Pepper's* yellow hyacinths shaped like Paul's left-handed bass, the open hand above Paul's head a gesture of benediction: "May the Lord bless you and keep you, lift up His countenance upon you; may the good Lord give you peace"—or so explained a one-shot magazine published to cash in on the fad.

One Beatles fan in particular had combed their songs for clues, and his vision held no place for Paul's demise. With the Woodstock Festival in full swing, he, too, had made the news, though the *L.A. Times* of August 17th did not record his name: "Police Raid Ranch," one headline read, "Arrest 26 Suspects in Auto Theft Ring," while elsewhere on the same page a story not known to be related explored the "anatomy" of a case that would go unsolved for months; so noted Vincent Bugliosi in his bestselling *Helter Skelter*.

And into this vacuum between the slaying of Sharon Tate and her companions, and the arraignment of Charles Manson in December of '69, arrived the rumors of Paul's death, another mystery to solve, suspicions fanned to certainty beneath the ghost-glow of black light.

What generates our need to search out concealed truths, or to translate metaphor as oracular pronouncement? In the Marian Bible published in 1953, a leather-bound tome three inches thick, the Apocalypse of St. John (his Revelation, to Protestants) ends with a warning curse: If anyone "adds" to St. John's words, "God will add unto him the plagues" that the Apocalypse describes; from one who dares subtract, God will accordingly remove "his portion from the tree of life," with worse penalties to follow. For St. John, my mother was the perfect audience. An only child alone with her (my father Carmine, then the foreman for Panzarino Plumbing, worked six days a week), I heard about the Secret of Fatima, long withheld by successive Popes, which described the world's end in terms too vivid to endure.

As my mother dusted the house, moving calmly from room to room, she spoke of how the Blessed Mother had appeared in Portugal, visible only to three children despite the crowds that gathered; how the sun danced round the sky, proving she was really there; how if we didn't start to behave, we'd end up dead from war and hunger. It had all happened long ago, back in 1917, but Lucy, one of the children, wrote it all down in a letter that the Pope had locked away for fear its contents were so awful that those who heard what lay ahead would kill themselves. Mary's message was "for our century"—the twentieth century, that is—a warning across the decades sent out to the present moment. Betty's version of the story wasn't verifiable—you couldn't just call the Vatican—so I turned over my mother's words, imagining the letter's text: what secret could be so terrible that no one dared utter it? Until Pope Paul changed his mind, all we could do was wonder, not think about nuclear holocaust, and pray each night for "Russia's conversion"—so our relatives in Poland could finally move to the United States and, also, so the world wouldn't end. I didn't fully understand. "They just can't leave," my mother repeated, "they're behind the Iron Curtain," as if saying the same words twice made them make sense.

Into this mind-set rushed the rumors that Paul was dead. The gatefold sleeve of *Magical Mystery Tour* offered a book of photos. In one, McCartney in soldier's uniform sits at the recruiter's desk. The sign below him states, "I Was," as if the Beatle no longer is. Elsewhere, the four men line up in homage to Busby Berkeley, perfectly matched in white tuxedos, except for one important difference: three Beatles sport red carnations, while McCartney's boutonniere is black. What a college newspaper in Des Moines had first reported in September had spread, by early October, to regional radio. Soon after, the rumors Detroit's Russ Gibb had first heard from an on-air caller rippled outward from the Midwest to New York's WABC. That station's powerful signal reached over forty states; and though DJ Robey Younge had laughed out loud at the first callers, Midwestern kids—panicked? elated?—who sent him to the troubling clues, the news was out, unstoppable, and the race to break the code was on. By now it was late October. Was it the nearness of Halloween that turned so many thoughts toward death? Or the unsolved murders reported in California?

October 1st brought the release of *Abbey Road* and still more clues: the album cover's Volkswagen with the license plate 28IF (Paul's age, if he had lived? No matter that he was twenty-seven), or the Beatles' crosswalk procession, with George's denim like a gravedigger's, Ringo's suit an undertaker's, John's white clothes a doctor's garb, and Paul himself, the barefoot corpse. But despite more clues than most

could track or reliably interpret, who knew if the Beatles (three or four?) were truly authors of a hoax? A statistician might say no. Their albums bearing a stream of photos that froze and multiplied their image, shot singly or together in any number of permutations, the Beatles faced more scrutiny than any band before or since. By 1967, with music more complex, dense with sounds and new effects, instruments blurred, remarks half-heard, the sheer amount of new material had increased exponentially. So much to hear, so much to see—and with so many people watching, the odds of finding bits and pieces to suggest some narrative—even one as absurd as this—were actually quite good.

Mathematicians know the Law of Large Numbers which also accounts for the coincidences between Kennedy and Lincoln: that two murdered Presidents were elected one hundred years apart; that both successors were named Johnson; that Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth fled Ford's Theater for a warehouse, while Oswald took aim from a warehouse only to hide out in a theater (actually, a cinema); and endlessly on and on, for as journalist Lisa Belkin states, "There have always been rumors based on skewed historical fact." In a system large enough, in a world large enough, the probability of coincidence is far greater than we imagine.

Charles Manson didn't believe in coincidence. That, precisely, was the problem. In the waning days of freedom before his October 10th arrest (for auto theft, not murder), Manson wouldn't have been persuaded by the McCartney rumors; he'd devoted careful study to a different set of clues. With the force of the four horsemen at the breaking of the seals, the Beatles shook the world's pop culture. Now, Manson became convinced, they'd written prophecy, not songs, the White Album was their Apocalypse, and, as Christ required St. John, so the Beatles required him.

Over many months, Manson had gathered in the lost—mostly middle-class kids without close ties or clear direction—and settled with them in a bus that stalled on the outskirts of Death Valley where he preached his own racism and pent-up rage. A great war was coming soon—a familiar theme of prophecy—in which black would rise against white and strike down "the establishment," carnage Manson himself would trigger, having hit upon a plan. First, he'd stockpile stolen Volkswagens and hide them in the desert, converting them into dune buggies to be mounted with machine guns; then, by night, he and his "family" would speed through wealthy suburbs, gunning down the privileged who'd blame black people for the crimes. The war he foresaw was "Helter Skelter," a vision born of misreading McCartney's lines about an amusement ride, while the word that supposedly signaled the charge to violent revolution was "rise," from McCartney's "Blackbird," a ballad laced with bird-calls.

Manson was no prophet; he'd stolen the Beatles' text, the corrupt reading he imposed "adding" to what they played and wrote. He'd forsaken envisioning chaos for the chance to bring it about, the murders he planned or undertook disguised as Apocalypse that excused them. Manson had deceived himself. Born "no name" Maddox in Ohio in November, 1934, the son of a troubled, promiscuous teenager and no father he ever knew, the murderer claimed to be Jesus Christ: was he prophesier, or prophesied? Years later, I felt unnerved to think he'd watched black vinyl spin, the Capitol label's spectrum-border blurring from red to yellow to blue, whole green Apple, or clean, white half?—each song igniting images as fast as imagination fired. How many of us had listened—across the country, across the world—to the same songs and yet heard our own dark secrets?

"I know what it's like to be dead," sings John Lennon on *Revolver*. Could that be possible? I wondered in our split-level's downstairs den, trying to mimic Lennon's vocals over an amplifier's hum. I read later that he'd quoted an acid-tripping Peter Fonda, but, even so, he'd raised the question: what was it like to be dead? Beyond the "she" of whom John sang in the signature line of "She Said She Said," Paul, perhaps, already knew, though no one had yet accused him of returning with word of it. Both Beatles had known grief: Paul and John had lost their mothers, while Lennon had suffered further losses: the death of his uncle George who'd raised him, and Stu Sutcliffe, friend and bandmate. By *Revolver*, Lennon and Harrison looked to what lay beyond the veil, a curiosity fanned by Timothy Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience*, the so-called "manual" based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Faced with only one prophecy past doubt—that each of us will die—religion and speculation seek to fill the blank page that comes after. We wonder what we'll find, or fear what might find us, and take comfort in ideas of heaven or a spirit world.

Sometimes, though, it's hard to tell if we believe in both, or neither. Betty had raised me a good Catholic who prayed every day and scrupulously examined his own conscience; nonetheless, I'd still obsess over seeming contradictions, trying to reconcile each paradox of dogma I was taught. On Confraternity Saturdays, I'd ask about what troubled me: what about the Holy Ghost? Why did we now say Holy Spirit? The novice would shift uncomfortably, saying the new term made more sense. But what about guardian angels—didn't the dead turn into angels after they went up to heaven? Was it the dead who guarded us? Well, yes and no: some angels were ghosts, but others were never born, which only confused me more and introduced a note of dread.

Dismissed, we'd ascend the stairwell, a tangle of schoolbags and New York Mets caps in that World Series year. Departing the parking lot, riding in my mother's Buick, I'd glance back at St. Anne's Church,

its low triangular roof and sky-blue welcome—facade of stars—or was it a field of tiny crosses? I'd watched the building rise for months, its girders gathering concrete, brick, broad windows in metal frames, finally a roof, the whole thing taking shape too slowly for my taste. Yet, here it was, finished at last, the new church promised for so long: prediction fulfilled by architecture that, for someone close to ten, looked not generic or colorless, but futuristic, cutting edge.

Prayer, my mother taught me, was both a way to talk to God and a way to talk to the dead: Heaven held both, and those we'd lost were listening, too, with constant interest. But the conversation was one-sided, as others had noticed long before. Upstate in Hydesville, New York, in 1848, sisters Kate and Margaret Fox had presided at Spiritualism's birth when they managed to contact a peddler's ghost. Soon, everyone, it seemed, was paying calls to "mediums," those who'd mediate between the living and the dead. Making a request was easy—the living retain the gift of speech—but receiving a message back often proved an obstacle. Some mediums called out letters—ghosts who'd known the alphabet would presumably set the table knocking, trying to spell out a response—while other adepts used the "planchette," originally a tiny basket to which a pencil was attached and which obeyed a spirit's promptings, guiding the medium's hand. But it took too long for table-knocks to spell out anything compelling, while mediums deep in trance wrote little that was legible. Even believers couldn't ignore the opening such methods gave for charlatans to take advantage of the grieving.

In "Cry Baby Cry," Lennon's White Album fairy tale, the charlatans are royal children: the seance in the dark begins, appropriately, at midnight, the king and queen of Marigold, the duke and duchess of Kircaldy seated at the table (hands held tightly, we presume) while ghost voices (really the children) call from "out of nowhere." I'd never seen a ghost, but my mother Betty had—"when I was young," she said, though not as young as the Fatima kids, not even as young as I—when, changing into her nightdress, she'd jumped back, startled, from the mirror, having glimpsed her mother's mother sitting quietly on the bed. What happened next? "She disappeared," Betty answered solemnly, as I recalled the names of ghosts that always haunted our conversations: her father Watts and sister Vera, like Kennedy dead in '63, whom Betty invoked in failing efforts to preserve their memory. A child had died as well, black mark on the family ledger: Larry Brown, Vera's son, in old photos the white-haired boy smiling beside my cousin Eddie. He'd fallen off a Florida dock while he and his elder brother fished, the rising tide turned heavy, unforgiving. A slender boy, frail, "simple"—what did the euphemism hide?—Larry's flawed life hadn't lasted very long.

What stories did they hold, these family members who'd departed? How could I find out what they knew? I hadn't heard of the "talking board," its earliest designs in wood, that split the English alphabet into a double arc of letters, a row of numerals below, the answers Yes and No above, the final banner of Good-Bye along the bottom. First patented in Baltimore in 1891 (though instructions for homemade versions had circulated for years), the Ouija Board took its name from a legendary Moroccan city, not from the fusion of "Oui" and "Ja" as some would claim. By use of the pre-made board and a new, windowed planchette that participants gently nudged to rest on letter, word, or number, would-be mediums gained a new ease in contacting the Great Beyond, without risk of waking the neighbors or contracting writer's cramp. Further, its new guise as a game domesticated occult belief, the ritual of the seance repackaged as a fun diversion, mass-produced by several firms and sold next to Monopoly. By the 1950s, cardboard had replaced the original wood, with some Ouija boards' reverse suitable for chess or checkers.

But the Ouija Board wasn't the only supernatural game. On the black-and-white T.V.s that were then our family sets, screens flickering blue and gray while I sprawled on the den's cold tile, one commercial had commanded, its voice-over an eerie echo, "Turn out all the lights—it's time to play Green Ghost." I had the Ghost but not the game: a plastic, glow-in-the-dark figure large for a child's hands, arm extended, pointing a finger, its round, sad eyes raised heavenward; I'd bought it for a quarter from Enrico Imperiale, a neighbor kid who, with his brother Alex, destroyed all that they owned. But by the fall of '69, the game's principal figure—more like a melted, fluorescent mass than any terrifying spirit—lay idle in the basket of our wicker coffee table, piled with other toys I was reluctant to discard, aware that, once I did, something important would change forever.

The Green Ghost was the spinner: fixed to his base on the game board, he'd emit appalling sounds (or so the ads implied), directing each player's mascot (buzzard, rat, black cat, or bat) in its search for Green Ghost's son, lost in the gameboard's Spookyville. The youngest player took the first turn, and each would choose a key; these unlocked the doors of crypts that held in their darkness tiny ghosts, one of them the son for whom the quest was undertaken. You had to stay alert not to be stuck with the Misfit Key useless to open any door, valuable only to trade away.

Few who played the game probably thought about its object: the quest for a dead child, initiated by someone also dead. Even in the afterlife, parental ties would bind; Green Ghost would rescue the son that chance had sealed away in darkness. To what existence would he restore him? As befitted its name, Spookyville was desolate, certainly not the afterlife conveyed in Confraternity. And though each child-ghost had been named after a shade of green-Olive, Emerald, Lime, and so forth—only one was Kelly, the prize all players sought.

For others, the quarry would be different: Larry, the boy drowned at the pier (where was his mother Vera now?), or, for unlucky Sharon Tate, the infant murdered along with her, a child never to be born, neither ghost nor guardian angel, soul condemned to float eternally in limbo. Every time I sang John Lennon's words into the mic's shrill feedback, I wondered also what it was like not to have been born at all.

To play the game of Paul Is Dead, you didn't need a board. You only needed the Beatles' albums, a turntable that worked, and a willingness to listen with dread and exhilaration—dread at Paul's sad fate, exhilaration you'd helped expose it. Oddly, the Beatles' seamlessness—that blending of identity first crucial to their success, later an outmoded burden—encouraged the spread of rumor. The Lennon-McCartney partnership wasn't fully understood, not in 1969, nor were the studio techniques that had shaped each Beatles track, which instruments had been overdubbed, whose voice transformed, stretched to its limit. For listeners who wondered which lines were written by John or Paul, who marveled at how each track was layered, it was not that far a leap to suppose Paul wasn't involved at all, or to believe the surviving Beatles could devise some elaborate hoax that relied on studio trickery and their collective authorship. With a young President reduced to the decade's presiding ghost, with the murders of his brother and Martin Luther King, to name only a few, who, we wondered, would be next? The Beatles were an obvious target; though they'd withdrawn from the concert stage that had placed them most at risk, anything could happen in a world turned treacherous, where our leaders were shot down, riots broke out in the cities, and strangers entered a Hollywood home to ritually murder all within, merciless, even, to a woman eight months pregnant. It seemed less reasonable to ask, "Why hadn't someone killed a Beatle?" than to assume some tragedy already had.

My tenth birthday came and went with Manson still unknown to the public, though the L.A. police that same day had embarked upon a search for .22 caliber casings on the grounds of the Spahn ranch; by December 2nd, Manson would finally make headlines as leader of a "hippie cult" built on hate, not love, and as the criminal who'd planned the brutal murders. None in my fifth-grade class enjoyed current events, but we all knew what had happened—our parents had railed against hippies, warned us not to answer the door—and so, we felt relieved to know the maniacs had been captured, storing away unwelcome knowledge of what the worst of us could do. I'd noticed other news, framed on the supermarket rack: trying to quell the rumors just days after Halloween, "Paul is still with us," *Life* had belatedly proclaimed, its cover photo depicting Paul, unshaven, hugging new wife Linda, her daughter Heather standing with them, baby Mary on Paul's arm. But was it really Paul McCartney? Could I have used a Ouija Board to call upon his spirit, and would the absence of an answer have confirmed he was alive?

I didn't know what to believe. Prophecy contains our fears in the garb of metaphor; it offers denouement, release, a chance to start over again, the world as we once knew it transfigured or wiped away. Reward, of course, is welcome, but even punishment, for some, is better than uncertainty: hence, the Fatima revelations, St. John's Apocalypse, even Manson's twisted vision of a nation plunged in chaos. That summer, something called Chappaquiddick had ensnared Ted Kennedy and, much worse, drowned a woman, all beyond my understanding; each night, the latest footage of the never-ending war, a war preceding memory, showed where my future lay; and, on December 6th, the Manson grand jury underway, Altamont, the anti-Woodstock, took place outside San Francisco. With the Rolling Stones on stage, Mick Jagger begging the crowd for order, Hell's Angels working as security guards had battered several fans, stabbing one to death, another murder caught on film.

"Hell's Angels," I thought then—I'd never heard the phrase before—instinctively afraid not of bikers in leather jackets but of fiery angels unleashed on the world.

One day, I went outside to smash Green Ghost against the street, the wooded lot that faced our house hiding me from any witness. Without the game, the figure was useless, it was junk, that's all it was, Betty's words still in my ears as I watched the fragments scatter. What was left, I hurled again, till only tiny shards remained; some I threw into the woods so that I'd one day run across them, as I still did the following summer and, more rarely, afterward. What was a ghost if not our memory reluctant to let go? Later, walking to the bus stop or running out to get the mail, I'd glimpse fluorescent pieces sifted into the shoulder's gravel, frozen against cold dirt, or just emerged from melting snow. In a few months, it was strange to even recall what they'd comprised: the cartoon figure I'd valued, even kept in my own house, so remote from its lost fragments, fewer still as more time passed.

My mother never did retract her low opinion of the Beatles: they "lacked harmony," she said, deaf to "Because" or "Yes It Is," but she was more right than she knew in another sense entirely: they were finished as a group, though none of them could yet admit it. Soon, the rumors of Paul's death passed from the media radar, eclipsed by news of Manson and the coming holidays, while under Mr. Troise's direction, with Mr. Belinsky as pianist, the Northeast Elementary Chorus struggled through "The First Noel." In a choir of only two parts, all the boys were altos, so as I sang I'd sneak a glance away from Mr. Troise's fingers to certain sopranos standing in ascending rows upon the risers: Gerri Carlsen, blonde hair gleaming gold beneath the school gym's light, or Evelyn Madsen, taller because she'd started school a

full year late, a "cousin," Betty insisted, though on further questioning, she could never quite explain exactly how we were related.

For all the clues that Paul was dead to which I'd paid such close attention, I overlooked many others—my parents' middle age, the scar below my mother's waist, the three times that we'd moved though Carmine's job had never changed, and Evelyn, about whom I was interrogated weekly, Betty trying, casually, to gauge my interest or intent, always tense to find out if we'd talked together. Had I noticed then how much we looked alike, I'd have understood much more about the motive of Betty's interest, about how families can be divided and identities concealed, about the confrontations and conflicts swirling secretly around us. More than cousin or classmate, Evelyn was my older sister—our birth parents had given us away—though years would pass before either of us knew.

I knew the world held secrets about the living and the dead, of what they'd hidden away or kept locked up in memory, whether the fate of those now lost or else a warning of all to come. But as I stood in silence, Mr. Troise shaking his head, both sides waiting to resume the line that always gave us trouble, I'd never have believed I was the object of a game—not one conceived in malice but out of fear and grief; that Evelyn, too, had been locked away, waiting in darkness for a sound, a latch-click—not the Misfit Key—to let us out.

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