

John Lennon Slept Here (Or Was It Ringo?)

by Richard Melo

I show the ominous postcard — postmarked Chicago, Illinois — to my wife, Karen. As she reads, the few, sloppily scribbled words replay inside my mind: GOT YOUR ADDRESS FROM OUIJA BOARD. DRIVING CROSS COUNTRY TO SEE THE HOUSE AGAIN. MAN, I'VE MISSED IT ALL THESE YEARS. SEE YOU SOON. And it is signed, LOVE, LOVE, LOVE, G. ZILLAH. I find little humor in the card, but Karen breaks up laughing. All right, is this a joke? Is some Ouija-board-toting mystic coming to perform some weird ritual on our house? I hope not, because I like our house as it is. And who is this G. Zillah? Godzilla — coming down to burn down our house with his fiery breath? I hope not. The arrival of this postcard is driving me crazy, and Karen, she thinks it's funny.

Our house — one story with an attic — is beautiful this October. Fresh white paint. A new roof. Red, brown, and yellow leaves. Tall evergreen trees. Geese fly south overhead. Mist. First frost. The mornings grow colder, the days shorter. A perfect fall, and we love living in Oregon so far.

The newspaper ad that led us to look at this house in the first place said in bold letters, BRING A HAMMER. We brought one and have used it often since moving in this past July. We spend our weekends improving the place. We weatherproof the wood-frame windows; we insulate the walls in our spacious and sunny attic; we paint the kitchen and bathroom. From our tree outside, we pick green apples that are too hard to bite into. We listen to Beatles records in our living room and eat homemade applesauce.

The house looks great already, and we have not even done much yet. My only complaint is the creaking we hear sometimes at night.

.....

Call today crystal clear but cold. I am raking leaves in our front yard, hoping this G. Zillah never shows and thinking about the strawberries we will plant this winter. The ground below my feet is hard but not frozen. An old, broken-down car — a 50s model Studebaker painted in day-glo swirls — sits rusting in our doorless detached garage. I rake away the fallen leaves around the car and discover something I have not seen before. Written in our concrete walkway, some words: THIS IS NOT HERE. Well, it most certainly is.

The old car belonged to the house's previous owner and came with the place. I worked on it once only to find it's too fallen apart to run. Whoever lived here before us also left a stack of Beatles records in the attic that Karen and I enjoy listening to sometimes at night.

The Studebaker has a certain charm — more than anything I love its psychedelic paint job — but we may get rid of it soon. We can use the garage space for our own car.

I pick green apples, wish they were strawberries, and go inside the house. I remind Karen that sometime soon we need to change our car's California plates.

Into the bathroom, I walk and have a seat. As a joke, Karen and I sometimes leave messages to each other on the toilet paper, and we keep a Flair pen right there handy. I look at the roll and see a giant Z. I know it means Zillah and hear Karen laughing in the hall. She thinks she is really funny.

I love the three dimples in Karen's smile. Her skinny arms. The way she rolls her eyes when it is her turn to wash the dishes. Not to mention her kisses. I figure she would be unbearably sweet, if not for her weird sense of humor. The dumber I look, the harder she laughs, and I am always looking for ways to get her back, then never do. And she gets me again. I love her in spite of it all. Even more than this old house.

.....

Bread is baking in the oven and the house smells like heaven this morning. Karen is reading the Northwest Living section of the paper, and I hear something — from upstairs, in the attic. The house

creaking? Maybe not. An intruder? Not likely, especially on a bright Sunday morning, but I'll check anyway.

I climb the stairs. Sunlight from the attic bleeds beneath the shut door. I listen closely for another sound. My ear is to the door. Then I hear a guitar. A voice follows: HEARTBEAT, WHY DO YOU MISS WHEN MY BABY KISSES ME? I recognize the song. Buddy Holly. Sounds like a real singer in my attic doing a Buddy Holly song. Why? HEARTBEAT, WHY DO YOU MISS WHEN MY BABY KISSES ME? There it is again. An off-key voice, whiny and fragile, its rhythm shaky. Sounds just like the Beatles. Like John Lennon singing a Buddy Holly song in our attic. Lennon alone. For sure, this is one of Karen's jokes. A weird and clever one, too. I hear a phone ring in the attic, knowing well there is no phone in there. The voice answers. HULLO. A low English murmur and the word YOKO. Too funny! I gently push the door open and poke my head inside, expecting to see a tape recorder or some setup designed to fool me — maybe a stuffed bear wearing a mop-top wig. I see nothing. The attic is as empty as always. Then as if from air, the guitar and voice. HEARTBEAT, WHY DO YOU MISS WHEN MY BABY KISSES ME? Positively Beatle John, eerie as anything. Karen has outdone herself this time. She had me.

The joke over, and again playing the ass, I call downstairs for her to come see. She stomps up the stairs, wondering what the heck I want. Listen. The voice sings the same line almost in a whisper: HEARTBEAT, WHY DO YOU MISS WHEN MY BABY KISSES ME? Karen does not laugh. The attic is not cold this morning, but I watch as a wave of goose bumps cover her arms. Then my arms, too. The thought occurs to me that maybe the voice is not a joke.

I felt sad the night John Lennon died in 1980. I felt bad for his wife, Yoko. To think, I was fifteen at the time, Karen was fourteen, and another year would pass before we would meet each other. Everything seems like yesterday. Neither of us ever met John or Yoko or anyone famous, even though we did live for a time in sunny California. We have always liked the Beatles — I remember impersonating Ringo once in a high school skit. I got an 'ole in me

pocket. That was my one line, and I had the Merry Olde Liddypool accent down. Karen and I love the Beatles, but our favorite strawberry fields are not the ones Lennon sang about in Liverpool, England; our favorites are lying in our backyard right now, under a blanket of Oregon frost. It's funny to us that Beatle John is singing in our attic — why here?

One last thing: our favorite Beatle was always Ringo, not John.

.

When the rain comes, I am eating apples in the living room. I hear someone pull a car into our driveway. Out the window, I see the car. Illinois plates. I call Karen to come join me. Together, we watch out the window. A small man — not much older than us but with much less hair and wearing round, wire-frame glasses like the ones you see on John Lennon in pictures — steps out of the car and gets wet in the rain. No doubt, this is the mysterious G. Zillah. We answer his knock on the door. I'M HERE! DID MY POSTCARD ARRIVE? Yes, it did. CAN'T BEAT THOSE OUIJA BOARDS FOR DIRECTORY ASSISTANCE, CAN YA, EH? Our joyously delirious guest laughs at himself, making a sound so awful that I check to make sure the paint on the walls is not peeling. I'M ZILLAH, GORDON ZILLAH. We never would have guessed.

We invite him inside. He walks past us and drips rainwater on the hardwood of our living room floor. He hands us a book, a photo album. He looks around the room. THIS IS THE HOUSE, ALL RIGHT. Karen and I turn through the pages of the photo album.

We see pictures of our house taken some time ago and pictures taken of the Beatles. Then pictures of the Beatles — taken at our house. Standing next to our apple tree, it's Ringo. John driving the psychedelic Studebaker out front. I was not aware the Beatles had ever visited Oregon, let alone our house. LOOK AT THE LAST PAGE. We do as Zillah says. A photograph of Beatle John — sideburned, mustachioed, and bespectacled — sitting cross-legged in our living room in the same spot where Zillah now stands. THAT'S ME WHEN I WAS TWO. We notice a small child seated beside Lennon in the picture. It indeed resembles our guest in a younger version.

IMAGINE THE GREATEST MOMENT IN YOUR LIFE HAPPENING TO YOU WHEN YOU ARE TOO YOUNG TO APPRECIATE IT. OR EVEN REMEMBER IT.

Then as if one cue, another voice — guess whose — wafts down from upstairs. The voice: I'M JUST SITTING HERE WATCHING THE WHEELS GO ROUND AND ROUND. We show Zillah to the bottom of the stairs. Beatle John sings, I REALLY LOVE TO WATCH THEM ROLL. Zillah hears the voice but does not yet understand what it is. NO LONGER RIDING ON THE MERRY-GO-ROUND. Zillah climbs the stairs to the attic, not knowing what to expect. Karen and I stand below. I JUST HAD TO LET IT GO. Zillah opens the door and peaks inside the attic, then topples, and falls down the stairs, crashing at our feet. Karen laughs. Lying on the floor, Zillah yelps, YOU HAVE JOHN LENNON? HE'S UP THERE IN YOUR ATTIC, ISN'T HE? Yeah, Gordon. His voice is up there, at least. HEY, JOHN. IT'S ME, GORDON ZILLAH. YOU MET ME WHEN I WAS TWO. I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED YOUR WORK!

The voice upstairs ignores the voice downstairs and sings gently, I JUST HAD TO LET IT GO.

.....

Imagine there's no heaven. Karen and I have had none since Zillah decided to move in nine days ago.

Life with Beatle John in the attic is fine. We hear the Voice singing sometimes. Other times, the Voice talks on the invisible attic phone. Beatle John is a pleasant addition to our home, like a houseplant that sings to you and never needs water.

Now Zillah is Beatle John's disfigured little brother — Godzilla outta Chicago, as Karen has called him. We both wish he would leave. He sleeps all day and plays Beatles records in our living room all night. He limps around — he bruised his hip when he fell down the stairs — plinking away Beatles songs on his wretched, out-of-tune banjo that he brought in from his car and singing Beatles songs in his awful singing voice: HEY JUDE — LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED — THEY GONNA CRUCIFY ME! Songs I like, Zillah has ruined. He plays with his Ouija board. At his most pathetic, he pleads to the

empty attic. SPEAK TO ME, JOHN. IT'S ME, GORDON ZILLAH. MY PARENTS KNEW YOU. MY FRIENDS CALL ME THE WALRUS BECAUSE I AM SUCH A BIG FAN OF YOURS. ALWAYS HAVE BEEN YOUR FAN, SINCE I MET YOU WHEN I WAS LITTLE. YOU MUST REMEMBER ME. I MEAN, YOU CALLED ME HERE ALL THE WAY FROM CHICAGO OVER THE OUIJA BOARD. The smart Beatle gives Zillah no reply.

At one point, Karen politely asked Zillah to leave. WHAT, LEAVE? I CAN'T LEAVE NOW. I AM VERY CLOSE TO MAKING CONTACT WITH LENNON. But Gordon, this is our house, we live here, and we think you should leave. YOU HAVE NO IDEA THE MAGNITUDE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING. I'M SORRY, BUT I HAVE TO STAY. UNLESS LENNON GOES, I HAVE TO STAY. I MEAN, HE CALLED ME HERE.

I should mention that Zillah uses far more toilet paper than Karen and I combined, and I am often following his tracks into the bathroom with a plunger.

.....

More leaves have fallen than we know what to do with. While raking, I find Zillah seated behind the steering wheel of the psychedelic Studebaker, the driver's window rolled down. THIS CAR IS SOMETHING ELSE! CAN I TAKE IT FOR A SPIN? Sure, Zillah. One little thing, though: it does not run.

An hour later, Zillah miraculously has started the car. He drives up and down the block, the car sputtering along. Each time he passes me, he honks, and I can hear the car's a.m. radio playing — what else? — a Beatles song: I READ THE NEWS TODAY, OH, BOY. ABOUT A LUCKY MAN WHO MADE THE GRADE —

Clearly, Zillah is in heaven here. He has what he wants and is unbearably happy — at our expense. With the Studebaker out of the garage, the words in the cement stand out even more. THIS IS NOT HERE.

Maybe I am dreaming and these past two weeks have not been real — indeed it all seems like a dream. Like the strawberry fields song says, NOTHING IS REAL, AND NOTHING TO GET HUNG

ABOUT. If this is a dream, I hope Karen pinches me soon and snaps me out of it. Because I am sure I do not like this dream.

Zillah pulls into the driveway. The honking is real. This is not a dream. He yells over to me. I LOVE THIS CAR. IT'S ABSOLUTE PARADISE. Oh, really? You know, the car is all yours if you drive it away and keep driving. WHAT? I CAN HAVE THE CAR? THANK YOU SO MUCH! I WILL CHERISH IT FOREVER. LENNON DROVE IT ONCE, YOU KNOW.

He parks the car, goes inside, and sleeps the rest of the day. I roll up the car's windows in case it rains. The more I think, the more I contemplate murder.

God only knows how many rolls of toilet paper I have replaced in the bathroom these past two weeks. This time, as a joke, I unroll the paper, write a message midway through, and roll it back up again. I leave the loaded roll in the bathroom.

Later, Zillah approaches me and is holding a single square of toilet paper, the square with my writing. Zillah is ecstatic. LOOK! A SIGN FROM JOHN LENNON, JUST LIKE FROM THE OUIJA BOARD! I WOULD RECOGNIZE HIS HANDWRITING ANYWHERE. LOOK WHAT IT SAYS — this is not here — I WONDER WHAT THAT MEANS. DO YOU KNOW? No, I sure don't.

I am not sure why I wrote those words or even why I felt the need to pull a joke on Zillah, but when I tell Karen, she breaks up laughing.

.....

Our phone rings. Karen answers. Gordon, phone for you. HOW'S THAT? NO ONE KNOWS I'M HERE. I think it's —

Zillah takes the phone. HELLO? Hullo, Gordon. I got an 'ole in me pocket. WHAT? WHO IS THIS? I said, I got an 'ole in me pocket. (Actually, it's me, disguising my voice, trying to sound as Merry Olde Liddypool as possible.) JOHN, IT'S YOU! I WOULD KNOW YOUR VOICE ANYWHERE. Living is easy with eyes closed, Gordon. (Karen wrote down these things for me to say. I am sure she is laughing right now, somewhere in the house. I am calling from a nearby gas station payphone.) JOHN, I AM SO HAPPY YOU CALLED. I REALLY

LOVE YOUR WORK. Ah, now we know how many holes it takes to fill the Albert Hall. WHAT'S THAT?!? I DON'T UNDERSTAND!! Gordon, I am meeting Yoko in Liverpool. HUH?!? Yes, I am leaving that Oregon house and its strawberry fields forever. DON'T GO, JOHN!! I WANT TO STAY NEAR YOU!! Sorry, mate. I must go. You go, too. Leave those nice people alone. JOHN, PLEASE — Bye, bye, Gordon. We all shine on.

I hang up the phone and ask God to bless Karen. She thought up this joke, the way only she could. And it sounds like Zillah bought it. Or could he tell it was just me?

Five minutes later, I am home. The Studebaker is gone, and so is G. Zillah. Karen is standing in the front yard, tears rolling down her cheeks. I can see how hard she has been laughing. She describes our guest's last words before driving away the Studebaker in her own Zillah imitation: LIVERPOOL!! I HAVE TO GET TO LIVERPOOL — AND FAST! We go inside. With us, Zillah left his own car — the one with Illinois plates — along with his banjo, photo album, and Ouija board. I am sure he will come back eventually for his things. Who knows?

Standing in our living room, we hear music rolling down from the attic. Sounds like Beatle John has an imaginary piano up there now. Karen and I walk to the bottom of the stairs to hear the song more clearly. Lennon sings softly. I DON'T BELIEVE IN BEATLES. A long pause. I JUST BELIEVE IN ME. YOKO AND ME. THAT'S REALITY. Should we call Yoko and tell her? No, she would never believe it. THE DREAM IS OVER. WHAT CAN I SAY? I feel bad for sending Gordon away. We wanted him to leave. We did not mean to direct him toward Merry Olde Liddypool. THE DREAM IS OVER. YESTERDAY. Our favorite Beatle — it isn't Ringo — it's John without any doubt. I WAS THE WALRUS, BUT NOW I AM JOHN. We hope this old house never stops creaking. AND SO DEAR FRIENDS, YOU WILL HAVE TO CARRY ON. THE DREAM IS OVER.

The dream is over, but outside it is still October. Leaves and trees; geese and frost; our house and heaven above; Karen and me. That's reality.

