

A DREAM THAT PAUL IS DEAD
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Henry, Warren, and I collaborated on the report. This being 1969, Miss Eke permitted us to present it to our English class.

We sat at a rectangular table, facing the ninth grade like a Senate subcommittee. Henry began. "Here are the clues to be found in the songs:

At the end of 'Strawberry Fields Forever,' a voice, probably John's, says: *I buried Paul.*

The muttering voice, probably John's, at the end of 'Blackbird,' played backwards, says: *Paul is dead – miss him, miss him.*

The many voices throughout the fadeout of 'I Am the Walrus' all speak of death: *Is he dead? Sit you down, father, rest you. Oh, untimely death!*

The walrus is an Icelandic death symbol. John declares, in the eponymous song: *I am the walrus.* However, the subtitle of the song is: 'No you're not! said Little Nicola'; and in his subsequent song, 'Glass Onion,' John forthrightly asserts: *The walrus was Paul.*

John's song, 'A Day in the Life,' refers to Paul's death in the car accident: *He blew his mind out in a car.* The orchestral crescendos depict a car spinning out of control and crashing.

Perhaps most importantly, the entire 'Revolution 9' track is a disguised musique-concrète recounting of Paul's death. You can hear the car wreck, the flames, the anguished whimpering. (Which Beatle took on the grisly task of imitating the dying Paul? We suspect John.) A voice speaks of going to a dentist for a new set of teeth. This is a reference to Paul's lookalike, who must be furnished with dentures so all medical records will match, preparatory to taking Paul's place. The repeated refrain, *Number 9, Number 9*, when played backwards, becomes: *Turn me on, dead man.* And in 'A Day in the Life,' John had sung: *I'd love to turn you on...*"

"Thank you," said Miss Eke. The ninth grade applauded gently. "Questions: Were you aware that the spoken lines at the end of 'I Am the Walrus' are quotations from Shakespeare's *King Lear*?"

"No, Miss Eke, I was not," Henry said, smudging his glasses determinedly. "The fact remains that they were carefully chosen to speak of death."

"Agreed," Miss Eke said. "What do you make of John's implication in so many of these clues?"

Henry said, "There is something in John that loves the grave, I think."

"Agreed," Miss Eke said. "Had it occurred to you that the phrase 'Blackbird played backwards' contains a very interesting and complex rhyme?"

"No, Miss Eke, it had not." Henry frowned. "It had occurred to me that the phrase is something of a tongue-twister."

"That too," Miss Eke said.

"The rhyming is accidental, though."

"Better to say, in this context, aleatoric. Congratulations." I saw pencils in motion as the ninth grade wrote the word *aleatoric* in their notebooks for later definition. "Lastly: Art and its interpretations are of course eternal, but depend on their physical substrates. Could you explain to the class how to play a

record backwards?”

Henry brightened. “Sure. There’s a way on just about every record player to turn the power on without bringing the arm over the record and starting the turntable. Do that, and then turn the turntable the wrong way with your finger. Get it going at what looks like about the right speed and then put the needle where you want it.” The ninth grade took notes. “Don’t tell your parents because I’m pretty sure it messes up the needle.”

“That was very succinct. Thank you. Please continue.” Miss Eke smiled her famous inverted smile. The corners of her mouth tugged down instead of up, creating an effect charming beyond the bounds of good taste, and we all smiled dewily back.

I spoke next, consulting a green spiral-bound notebook that resembled one I had lost in a snowbank the previous winter, shortly after the *White Album* was released. I had been keeping – until I encountered the snowbank – a kind of timetable of my parents’ separate comings and goings; various symbols designate departures with front door slammed versus eased shut, returns following nights spent entirely apart, etc. It seemed important to keep track. But the notebook before me was a new one, coincidentally green.

“Here are the clues to be found in the album covers:

The cover of *Abbey Road* is a little death tableau. We see Paul walking out of step with the others, dressed in black, barefoot. Being buried barefoot is an Italian custom. John is a holy man, dressed in white. Ringo is an undertaker, dressed in a nice suit. George is a gravedigger, dressed in denims. The license plate of the Volkswagen in the background says ‘28IF’; that is, Paul would be 28 IF he had lived.

The back cover of *Abbey Road* also offers clues. The holes near the word *Beatles* are another Icelandic death symbol. Paul’s face, contorted in his death throes, is depicted subliminally in a woman’s elbow.

A hand held over the head is another death symbol, not Icelandic. A hand is held over Paul’s head in several of the photos in the *Magical Mystery Tour* album.

Other clues from that album: the photo of Paul seated at a desk shows a nameplate on the desk which reads ‘I Was You.’ In the dress-up photos, the other three Beatles are wearing red carnations; Paul’s is black. Paul’s salute finds his arm cocked to his head at a strange angle; this is a death symbol.

The *Sgt. Pepper* cover depicts a funeral, obviously Paul’s. Paul’s pose resembles a corpse laid out for military burial, with his clarinet held like a rifle. A hand is reaching out from the crowd, directly above his head (cf. *Magical Mystery Tour* photos).

The middle photo shows Paul wearing a badge with the letters O.P.D. This stands for Officially Pronounced Dead.

On the back cover, Paul alone stands with his back to the camera.”

“Thank you,” said Miss Eke. A few members of the ninth grade applauded very gently. “Questions: In what year was Paul born?”

“1942,” I replied. “On June 16th.”

“Bloomsday. If you say so,” said Miss Eke. “Therefore, how do you account for the fact that Paul would be only 27, not 28, if he had lived?”

I was prepared for this. Did she take us for simpletons? “It’s easily explained, Miss Eke. The original plan called for the Beatles to release an *entirely different* album in the fall of this year. It was to be entitled *Get Back, Don’t Let Me Down, and 12 Others*. *Abbey Road*’s release was planned for the summer of 1970 – when Paul would have been 28. However, as you may know from hearing various bootlegged tracks on

the radio, *Get Back, Don't Let Me Down, and 12 Others* is by no means ready for the public, whereas *Abbey Road* was finished more quickly than expected, and very successfully. Thus the decision was made to substitute the one for the other, despite the resulting damage to the 28IF clue."

"I see," said Miss Eke. "And why did they not save the album jacket with the 28IF clue for their 1970 release, *Get Back, Don't Let, etc.*?"

"Because," I replied, "that jacket shows the Beatles crossing Abbey Road. It has to enclose the record called *Abbey Road*."

"Agreed," said Miss Eke. "But why not call the 1969 release something else, and save the title *Abbey Road* for the 1970 release, so that the Abbey Road jacket could enclose it, rendering the 28IF clue accurate?"

"Miss Eke," I said, "I admit this is conjectural, but I strongly believe that, for the Beatles, the names of these records are not merely 'labels stuck on and tapped with the side of the fist.' The title *Abbey Road* 'shines through the record like a watermark.' It is inextricably a part of what the music offers."

I heard someone in the back row of the class yawn heavily. Miss Eke tugged her lips down. "Excellent. I trust that your report includes the source of those, ah, transparent quotes." I nodded, somewhat in shock, my mind racing to decide if her adjective was coincidental or intentional. My quotes were taken from a novel not yet written by Vivian Bloodmark entitled *Transparent Things* (McGraw-Hill, 1972). Miss Eke went on, "Has it occurred to you that Paul may be walking out of step with the others because he alone is left-handed? Let us imagine" (intentional, I decided, and was able to refocus) "that the photograph was posed by asking each Beatle to take one step forward from a standing position. Each would lead with his strongest foot, and, as you may know, footedness is correlated with handedness."

"But," I pounced, "you have not examined the text carefully enough. Here's the flaw in your interpretation: Paul is out of step to the tune of a *right* foot, not a left."

"Ah," breathed Miss Eke. "Thank you for pointing that out to me." But her look told me that she had known it all along; it had been a trick question. I was certain to get an A for this report. "Haven't you mistaken an English horn for a clarinet?"

Here was an unexpected poser. "I'm not sure, Miss Eke," I mumbled. "I'd need to research it." Well, an A minus.

"Do so. Lastly, a matter of terminology: oughtn't you to have made clear, perhaps in a prefatory disclaimer, that your use of the name Paul is actually a sort of shorthand, which, expanded, means the putative Paul, or the Paul so-called, or Paul's double, or whoever is in fact the subject of those various allegedly post-mortem photographs?"

"Yes, Miss Eke," I said. "I took that to be understood."

"Very well," said Miss Eke. "I know you did. And that leads us nicely into your presentation, doesn't it, Warren?"

Pale Warren nodded. Softly he began. "I will present two theories. One describes how Paul's death has been covered up through the employment of a double. The other suggests that Paul has indeed disappeared, but is not dead. Rather, he is hidden from us, but poised to return."

The ninth grade writhed in exasperation. Warren's report was murmurous, measured. It began to put me to sleep. My earlier tension was gone. I felt drowsy, and this class, these theories, even the Beatles themselves, all seemed like a languorous dream. I had stayed up too late the night before, although I'd been very tired; circumstances had demanded it. . . . I could not attend to each sentence, but in any case I knew the drift. Warren's first theory argued that one of the "lookalike/soundalike" winners from the various contests held in 1964 and 1965 had been located and persuaded to impersonate Paul after the car crash. I found his supporting evidence thin, although I accepted that some sort of impersonation must be taking place. The lookalike-contest explanation seemed plausible, but hardly necessitated.

I was even less in sympathy with his *Töd und Verklärung* theory, as I privately thought of it. Warren believed, or maintained that he believed, that either 1) Paul's "death" was faked, and he is actually alive and well on an uncharted island, along with other not-dead stars like Brian Jones and Jimi Hendrix, there to await the millennium? a better world? the revolution? – it was unclear to me; or 2) Paul did "die," in

some sense, but has been transported? resurrected? transfigured? sent on holiday? to an uncharted island, along with . . . etc. (Mindful of Miss Eke's comment on my use of the name Paul, Warren was careful to explain that, in the light of his second theory, such terms as "car crash," "death," "dead," etc., were to be bracketed, so to speak. "Put in putation marks," offered Miss Eke with a smile. "Thank you," said Warren. A girl in the second row named Marcia Kleks said, "Can't we just listen to the records?") The photos on pages 5, 10, and 12-13 of the *Magical Mystery Tour* album show a desolate landscape with rather uncanny architectural features. These photos were supposedly taken on the Island of the Undead Rock Stars.

Warren ended his report and I sat up straight. Miss Eke thanked him. No one failed not to applaud. "I have no questions for you, Warren. This level of theory does not admit of questions, any more than a dream can be asked to justify itself, but I sense you know that, and are comfortable with it."

Warren nodded once. "I am." He stared palely out at the ninth grade, who were doodling, whispering, and snoozing.

"Very well," said Miss Eke. "Our time is almost up, but I would like to ask each of you this: based on your examination of the materials available to you – the records, the jackets, your lives – are you in fact convinced that Paul is dead? (This term to include island residency, Warren.) Can other explanations be offered?"

Henry said, "Miss Eke, I don't actually believe that Paul is dead, or that any of these clues, in putation marks, really exist. No one put them there, either as signposts to a real event, or as a hoax. The entire affair is an example of what can be read into a text, once a particular conclusion is *a priori* decided upon. One could just as easily declare that Ringo was dead, and find the clues to support it."

"Well put," said Miss Eke. "For next week, please report on the evidence of Ringo's death." Henry groaned, and took off his glasses.

Warren said, "Poor Henry. He looks but doesn't see. Paul is taken from us, gone, dead, it doesn't matter how you phrase it. But this is transitory. His true meaning, and ultimate return, we still await."

"Why," asked Miss Eke, "did the other Beatles choose to present us with clues to these events, rather than simply keeping silent altogether about Paul's transformation (will that word do?)"

"(It will, nicely.) Benevolence. It's done for us, their audience. We need to know, but gently. We need to re-enact a similar movement in our lives: to live, to die, to appear to live on, to transcend, to be more than alive. The clues are love, speaking to us in the Beatles' history."

"Intricate, but not unfamiliar," remarked Miss Eke. There was a silence as she looked at me.

"I disagree with Henry," I said, "and agree with Warren to the extent that I believe the clues were deliberately placed, and refer to an actual event. Beyond that, however, lies meaningless mysticism. The event is unambiguous: Paul is dead. He is not transformed, and he is not coming back. He was killed in a car accident."

"Same question, then, to you," said Miss Eke. "Why were the clues placed? Why would the Beatles flirt with the undoing of their own cover-up?"

"The imp of the perverse," I replied, feeling my spine shiver. "Horrible knowledge that insists on voicing itself."

"Then why cover up Paul's death in the first place?"

"They feared for their future as Beatles if the public knew they were minus a member. These three famous, frightened children" (ripples spiraling up and down the vertebrae) "believed they had the power to cover up death. No doubt it was John's idea. But they hadn't reckoned with the imp."

Miss Eke looked at me solemnly, then at the clock. "We have a minute. May I give you *my* interpretation?"

We all nodded. The ninth grade came to attention, pencils at the ready.

Miss Eke said, "All the clues were deliberately placed, to lead strongly to the supposition that Paul is dead, and less strongly to your lookalike-contest and mysterious-island theories, Warren. In short, we have indeed uncovered intentionality. But I think Paul is really alive, that these events we've been clued in to never happened. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that Paul himself authored the whole thing."

“Why?” Henry and I both asked her. Warren seemed in the grip of a trance.

“Art,” said Miss Eke. Thirty pencils wrote, “Art,” producing a light buzzing sound, ending abruptly on the crossbar of the T. “Class dismissed. And thank you again, boys.”

I walked out into the rustling autumn afternoon. The dream was over, and now my feet dragged through the leaves as I headed slowly home. “Paul is dead, Paul is dead!” Marcia Kleks taunted me, and dumped my books as she raced by on her Schwinn.

My mother and father were ominously silent over dinner, but later, as I lay in bed almost asleep, I heard their voices, short taps of anger at first, and then more sustained volleys. I came wide awake, my stomach in knots. I listened but as usual couldn’t make out what they were arguing about. I tiptoed out of my room until I came to the bend in the hall. Around the corner was the corridor to the living room, where they sat, or perhaps were standing now, facing each other’s accusations and defenses. I crouched down, slowly made myself comfortable on the carpet (though I was chilly in my pajamas), and began to listen. Gradually I was able to put together enough clues and a story emerged, new in its details this time, yet always essentially the same. It was going to be another long night. Art, I thought. Fat chance. It’s all real.

Oh J let me up out of this

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