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## *Twelve Times Backwards*

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Have you ever seen a ghost? Neither have I. Personally, I have no problem on this front, because I don't believe they exist. There are some people who swear the spirits of the long departed still wonder this earthly plane and you can speak to them. Famously Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believed in just such a spiritualist idea.

Doyle's first toyed with such beliefs after hiring Lily Loder Symonds as a nanny for his children. But the idea of spiritualism really took hold after the WWI death of his son, Kingsley, even though Doyle came out publicly in 1916, two years before his son's death.

Yet Doyle was friends with Harry Houdini, the celebrated magician who became a famous challenger of the Spiritualist movement as fraud, praying on people's losses. Houdini was just as captivated with the idea of social interaction with the departed as Doyle. Going so far as to create a secret code with his wife. He would communicate the message "Rosabelle believe", to authenticate his spirit communications, as the song Rosabelle being the couple's favorite. At one time, his wife Bess did claim to have contact, receiving the correct code, but later recanted. The result is that the world remains uncertain.

I, like Houdini, think that the idea of spirit communication is a fraud, perpetrated by tricksters and con men on the gullible. I even met one fellow who invented "Bone Yard," a social media site for talking with the dead. He employed a gaggle of teenagers to pretend to be the dearly departed.

But I was challenged to prove my assertions of fraudulent mediums by one Ms. Crandon of Princeton, Ontario. She informed me at one meeting, as if it was a matter of public record, I must attempt to raise a spirit myself before I could declare the practice completely without merit.

Not one to pass up a challenge, I agreed.

I consulted my local library and read up on the raising of ghosts and spirits. None of it was very enlightening. Most were collections of the activities of famous mediums. It became painfully clear no practical guide was available. In one of these books, I became acquainted with the existence of the Farley Special Collections Library in, of all places, Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. It seems, Old Man Farley was also secretly convinced in the validity of spiritualism.

I arrived at the central Pennsylvanian library to find, not the gothic building I was expecting, but a new modern structure, build in 1968 no less. The building even housed a computer lab. Inside no one claimed to have heard about any special collections, but they acted strangely when I questioned them, always cagily suggesting they had other duties to perform. At last, I found a student who might not have been as informed about the library's denial policy as the others. She agreed to take me to the collection.

We walked past a row of stacks until we came by a large white banner next to a window. In rather old-fashioned letters it read, "Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Fossils, Birds and Writing." She pushed the banner aside to reveal an aged and narrow door. Unlocking the door with a skeleton key, we passed

through this slender portal into a small room, slightly bigger than a walk-in closet. As if to keep the correct atmosphere, it appeared to not have been dusted in quite some time. The area was filled with ancient, heavy, leather-bound tomes from floor to ceiling resting on slightly warped wooden shelves.

She left me alone in this room and I poured over the contents of these archaic volumes. Every one of them was filled with instructions, incantations, spells and procedures. It took me quite some time to find one written in English. Most of the works were in Latin, German and even a few in Hungarian. None of which I pretend to be fluent in.

I read a few chapters and took some notes. The room hadn't been cleaned. The dust left dull gray marks all over my notebook pages. Tired, I decided to call it quits for the day. When I returned the next day, I had the same trouble I had before. No one wanted to help me. I explained where the room was and I had been in it only yesterday. They called the Head Librarian and she led me over to the Darwin banner. She pushed it aside to reveal a solid blank white wall. Then she knocked on the window next to it twice.

"See," she remarked in an exasperated tone, "Outside. No room for a room behind this wall. Now go away and stop pestering us."

I stood and stared at the banner for some time. I pushed it aside more than once. Yet every time I found the same thing ... a blank wall. Now, if I was prone to hallucinations or vivid, daydreams, I might have shrugged this off to an active imagination. But I'm not. I opened my notebook. There were the dust marks, plain as day. I couldn't imagine how my papers could have gotten so marked up in a library as clean as the one I was standing in. Unless the marks were from the missing room.

Only two of the transcriptions that I made the first day was for raising the spirits. The first suggested playing a piece of music the deceased enjoyed in life at the grave site. Which seemed to allow for too much interpretation. Mediums would just claim I sang the wrong piece if the procedure failed to produce any results. The second recommended walking around a grave twelve times backward, and the ghost would rise and ask you what you want.

Resolving on the second method, I became determined to end this foolish charade. After sundown, I went to nearby Hollenback Cemetery. I suppose I could have gone during the day, but somehow, going at night seemed more apt. At first, I wandered around, undecided. That is until I found the grave of George Valiantine (1874 – 1947). The stone was one of those seven-foot-tall obelisks with a slightly wider base. It sat on a plain stone base with the deceased's name inscribed on it. For some reason this felt like the appropriate place.

I made my walk, in reverse, around George's gravestone. I stood for a bit. All was silent, except for the wind and the buzzing of one of the nearby streetlamps. I felt relieved. I had completed Ms. Crandon's challenge and nothing had happened. Now I could go home.

I turned around and there, standing about three or four paces behind me, was a man wearing a dark suit and a hat. He was wearing one of those glasses without the temples. The ones which sit on your nose. He was staring at me as if I had just been doing something foolish ... which, of course, I had been. I felt embarrassed.

"Just settling a bet," I said.

“Aren’t you going to ask a question?” he suggested.

Great, I thought to myself. Even the locals know this technique. Now I felt categorically stupid. I had to drive all the way out to central Pennsylvania to learn what an idiot I was. I felt like a jerk. Well the good side of the coin was that I didn’t know this fellow and he didn’t know me, so my embarrassment only extended as far as Hollenback Cemetery in a town I would never be coming back to anyway.

He kept looking at me. I had the sinking feeling that I had run into the night watchman.

“I think I better be getting going,” I said and walked off in the opposite direction.

I’d gone maybe 20 paces, keeping my eyes mostly on the ground, when I practically ran into him again. I glanced around and saw that there was no one standing by George’s tombstone. I couldn’t imagine why he wanted to cut me off, but I wasn’t interested in engaging in a conversation with the cemetery help.

“Excuse me,” I said, walking past him.

I found my car and drove back to the motel. He appeared in the passenger seat. I slammed on the brakes in the middle of the street. Lucky for me this is a small town or I’d have caused an accident.

“What the f...,” I exclaimed.

“You should really watch where you are driving,” he remarked, “sometimes these streets can be a bit slippery.”

I had no idea how this nutcase got in my car, but I went from embarrassed to pissed in a heartbeat.

“I should think we need an introduction,” he announced, “My name is George.” He held out his hand like he wanted to shake mine.

“Get out of my car ... I don’t care who you are, I ...” I stopped in mid-sentence. “George who?” I asked.

“Why, George Valiantine,” he answered calmly, “I thought you knew.”

Ok, so this clown had read the gravestone and decided to tease me. I calmed down a bit, but I was still pissed.

“You know,” he said, not responding to my anger, “I used to own a button factory in Williamsport. I wonder if it’s still there.”

I was all ready to reach across in front of him and open the side door. I prepared myself to tell him to get out of my car, button factory or no button factory. But before I could move, I heard the unmistakable sound of a Mack truck horn. When I looked out the windshield I was on the left side of the road. The truck’s headlights barreling away toward me at maybe 50MPH, perhaps only 50 yards in front of my stopped car.

Instinctively, I put my head in my lap and covered it with my arms, like I was about to go through a plane crash or something. I waited to be crushed inside my car, but nothing happened. Intrigued, I looked up.

There I was, back on the right side of an empty road. My passenger was gone. I looked at the door carefully. Not only was it closed, but it was locked. This was one of those cheap rentals too. You know

the type, the kind with no sound insulation and is impossible to correctly close any door without slamming it.

What do you do in a situation like this? Go to the hospital and have yourself testing to determine if someone had slipped you some drugs during dinner? What do you say to the attending physician when he wants to know why you want to be tested? No, I wasn't answering that question. Not on your life. Automatic behavior took over. I drove back to the motel, slowly, like a nervous old lady with bad eyesight.

I didn't sleep well. I keep dreaming of the nutcase in the cemetery. His glasses had a dark string on one side. Sort of like a monocle with two lenses. Nobody wears those anymore. Completely and totally out of fashion. It would make you look like a weird version of Col. Klink or a demented Mr. Moto. Each time I had this dream, I woke up, drenched in sweat. Fortunately, the room was empty.

I woke up early the next morning and packed to go home. It took me quite a while to pay my bill at the front desk. No one was about before daybreak. I had to call the chain's head office on my cell phone. The manager was none too happy, I can tell you. I'm sure he over charged me, but I didn't care. All I wanted to do was get home. Maybe I could talk my doctor into giving me a prescription for Zoloft. I was about to throw my suitcases in the car trunk when I changed my mind. I opened the side door and plied them on the front seat. No extra company on this trip, thank you very much.

I don't think I drove under the speed limit for the entire trip back. How I made it without getting twenty speeding tickets I'll never know.

Funny how once you get home, everything seems to return to normal. Who knows, maybe the drugs had worn off. I slept undisturbed and went back to work the next day.

I sulked passed the others in the outer office, praying that no one would ask me what I had done this weekend. Reaching my paper cluttered office, I snuck in, hoping no one would notice that I looked like hell. I locked the door, to keep everyone out and sank into my office chair. Once I calmed myself down, I figured I had passed the time of the dreaded weekend question and I started concentrating on work.

From behind me, I heard a voice, "This is what you do?" it asked, "It doesn't seem very inspiring."

Yes, I fell out of my chair ... literally. I glanced at the door. Yep, still locked. No windows, so no other way into the room. At first, I didn't want to do it. But in these situations, it's impossible to resist. I looked up. All my nightmares had just come true, there he was, Mr. Weird Glasses, standing next to my office chair.

"That looks uncomfortable," he remarked.

"I managed to stand up and brush myself off. "Do you mind explaining to me why you are following me?"

"You summoned me," he replied.

"Still playing that game, are we? So, how do I get rid of your ass?" I asked.

"I don't think I care to answer that question."

"I thought that you had to answer my questions?" I demanded.

“If you had asked me a question in the cemetery,” he noted, “Yes, I would have been compelled to answer, but now that time is gone.”

“Ok,” I responded, “let me make this perfectly clear ... what I am about to say next is emphatically not a question. It’s a command ... get out.”

“I don’t think I shall,” George replied.

“I don’t think I made myself clear, jerk face, get out. Get out right now.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” George commended. He walked toward me. Now most people stop when they get right in your face, but George didn’t stop. He kept right on coming. I couldn’t see him anymore, but I had the oddest feeling, so I turned around. There was George, his back to my back. He’d walked right through me. I didn’t feel a thing. No feeling of a cold chill, no tingle, nothing at all. We both turned around to face each other.

“Look, George ... George ...”

“Valiantine,” he completed my sentence, “George Valiantine.”

“Yea,” I responded, “whatever. Get out or I’ll ...”

“Call the police?” he stated, “Please do. They can’t see me. Only you can see me. I’m insubstantial. I’d love to be there when you tell them that a disembodied spirit, that they cannot see, is harassing you. That won’t go over very well with the authorities you know. They might even lock you up. Which is fine by me.”

“You yourself said what I was doing wasn’t interesting, so why hang around?”

“Actually, I said it was uninspiring, not uninteresting ... but I promise you things are about to get more interesting. I assure you.” George said in a menacing tone.

“Why me?”

“You’re an unbeliever. I’m not fond of unbelievers.” George snapped angrily.

“OK, you win. I’m convinced. You’ve made me a believer. I’ll donate this week’s salary to the Spiritualist Church. Happy now?”

“Not at all. You’ve been a skeptic for what? Ten years? I think I’ll stick around for eleven. That way I can be sure that there will be no recanting.”

I think it would be safe to say that I wasn’t happy with his pronouncement, not happy at all. I hadn’t been this angry since I someone rear ended me at a stop sign. I picked up a cup full of pencils and threw it at him. Of course, as you might expect, it went right through him and smashed to bits on the far side of the office. The noise, and I hope you are not surprised by this, aroused some attention in the outer office. There was soon some knocking at my office door. I unlocked it to find half the staff looking at me sympathetically.

“Sorry,” I said, “I seemed to have accidently knocked a cup of pencils off my desk. I’ll try to keep the noise down.”

I closed the door and went back to addressing George, but he wasn't there. Breathing a sigh of relief, I sat back in my chair. It appeared that throwing the pencil cup was the right move after all.

I sat for a while and recovered my wits, returning to work. I was going over a few lines when I heard a voice announce, "You misspelled that word."

Spinning around, there he was, George, large as ... well in his case, unlife. "Why don't you just bugger off?"

"I thought I had explained that," George replied, "I'm not done with you yet."

The rest of the day went on like that. My desperately trying to get on with my life and George doing his level best to be annoying. He rapidly devolved into something akin to the character of a nagging Sitcom wife. Only in George's case, it didn't look like a divorce was going to be an option. I could feel my blood pressure rising, the sound of my own heart pumping loudly echoed in my ears. I made some excuse to my office mates and went home early.

No one even suggested that my leaving early was unwarranted. In fact, more than a few expressed the wish that I recover soon. The ride home was painful. Think about the worst backseat driver you've ever been with and then double it. That was George. George ... augh, screw it, I still can remember his last name.

Looking back on it, that was one of my better days. Yes, things got worse. I did con my doctor into a prescription for Zoloft, but that only made things worse. George's appearances were not only annoying, but accompanied by this unshakable feeling of dread. Sleep became a memory. You know they torture people by making them sleep deprived. I explained this to George, but that only made him laugh. It was the only time I heard George laugh. At all other times he was quite grim. Which didn't make him good company.

I picked up a twitch; right eyelid, which I just couldn't shake. I lost my job. I lost my driver's license after multiple accidents, the result of riding with an unwanted passenger. I lost weight ... a lot of weight. People started avoiding me. Even my social media accounts were suspended. I did spend some time in a Psych Ward at the local hospital after I broke down and started telling everyone in sight about an invisible guy named George. But there was something about being trapped in a single room with George that made him more terrifying. A nightmare times ten. I managed to get just enough of a grip on myself to convince the doctors that I wasn't a danger to myself or others.

I should have gotten some kind of award for that. It was the ultimate sales job. A prize for convincing other people about something that you have absolutely no belief in yourself. I *was* a danger to myself and others. In fact, I was a danger to everyone else except George.

I lost track of time. I started seeing things. Things that would make your worst nightmares look like pleasant vacations. If I was talking to someone, their faces seemed to melt like Butterscotch candy left out in the sun too long. I heard sounds. Sounds of things which can't possibly exist. I might have hung around, tormented by George, for a few days or maybe even a few years, I could no longer tell the passage of time.

I was about ready to do almost anything to end this, when George announced calmly, “Well, you could kill yourself.”

I felt ... well, resolved. I went into the study. I have no idea why I did this. I opened my desk drawer. Inside was a gun. How did it get there? I don’t own a gun. But I wasn’t in any state of mind to answer this question. I simply picked up the gun, put the barrel to my temple and pulled the trigger.

You know you really can’t hear the bullet that gets you. I looked down at my body, slumped over the desk, blood pouring out of my head. I felt released, freed.

“Nice work,” George announced.

There he was, still there. He must have guessed my question from the look on my face.

“I said you *could* kill yourself. I didn’t say it would help. You never really listen, do you?”

My mind wavered.

“You know, if you had just said my full name, you could have made me go away.”

At that point I went from partly sane to completely insane. I ran, mindlessly screaming towards the next room ... and bounced off the doorway, as if it was covered in a thick sheet of glass. And It hurt too.

“You can’t leave,” George announced, “at least not until someone summons you.”