

Slogging the Slavs

A Paranormal Cricket Tour from
the Baltic to the Bosphorus

Angus Bell

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Extract

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“My grandfather used to say cricket is like sex. You wait in the pavilion all day for your chance, and when you finally step up to the crease you’re out for a duck.”

Lenny Henry

WHEN A PSYCHIC TELLS YOU YOU'RE GOING TO DO SOMETHING, YOU DO IT



The psychic expo building, Old Montreal

I was at a psychic exposition in old Montreal with my girlfriend Candy, whose family runs a chocolate factory. Around the hall were turbaned seers, crystal balls and workshops on travelling in the astral plane. Overseeing the most popular booth, according to her banner, was a 'TV-famous' psychic dwarf. She wore orange and black-striped stockings and pink, kids' sunglasses.

Candy and I pushed through a housewife scrum to the forum's rear, where a bearded man – a dead ringer for George Lucas – was winding down a stage demonstration.

"For the last few minutes, I'm going to do some clairvoyance," he announced by microphone, closing his eyes. Candy and I took seats.

"You there! Young man with your arms folded!" shouted the psychic, waving his free hand feverishly in my direction. "Can I give you a message?"

I looked down. My arms were folded. I was a young man. "Me?" I asked dumbly.

"Yes! Can I give you a message, from the spirit world?" There was great urgency in his voice. I shrugged and nodded.

"You have this big idea that's taking up all your time! At the moment you're putting it out there, and it's being thrown back in your face every time! It's some kind of media idea. You're *pretty much* at a final draft, but you have to look at doing it another way. It's very important for your career."

It was true; I so badly craved the life of a media slut, without the cocaine. Was this prophet talking about my four-year search for a book publisher? He was on to something, I decided. I sat still, not wishing to give away clues.

"You're beating yourself with a cat-of-nine tails!" he squealed. "And you're *not* doing everything you can do to get it out!"

And I thought consulting the dead was the end of the line.

The psychic looked to the ceiling and placed a palm on the wall. "I'm afraid to say your job here in Montreal is only temporary," he said, adopting a tender tone. "You're going to be finishing sooner than you think. You're going to be leaving North America and going back home."

This provoked mixed feelings. My job was a minimum wage, part time, Mafia money laundering operation under the guise of magazine publishing. My boss told investors he was selling 80,000 issues every quarter. In my first week alone this brought him \$1.5 million. Then I discovered the magazine hadn't sold an advert in four years, and had no readers. They printed 5,000 copies once a year and locked them in a garage. After a three-month job hunt, this was all I could find. I needed to stick it out.

"The way I see it, you're a man on a mission," said the psychic. "Your travelling is *not* over. In fact, you're going to be doing a *lot more* travelling. Pretty soon it's going to be your *job* to travel."

I had travel writing ambitions all right, but given the current career trend, this could mean I'd be a pizza delivery boy.

"I don't know what you do in life. I don't know if you're aware of it, but you're going to be putting together a book, or a movie... and this time it's going to get accepted. Your interest in the paranormal is not by coincidence either. This feels to me like an interview."

The psychic skipped across the stage.

"You have a contact...*Not* in the physical world, but in the *spirit* world. This would be someone from your mother's side of the family, like an uncle. He died an infant death, around the war. Every time you're sitting there and an idea pops into your head from nowhere – and you feel it's something you have to do – it's him putting it there. He's living his life *through* you. That alone is a good idea for a book, or a movie."

I would blame this infant ghost for every bad decision.

"He will come to you through meditation, if you choose."

The psychic placed another palm on the wall. "Someone else is going to help you in this project. I get the feeling his name is Jason, but that he *changed* his name. In other words, he dropped the kid's name and took up Jason. He's in media, and appearance is very, very important to him."

I had no idea who this Jason was.

"Lastly, you're going to be coming back here to Montreal. You're going to be seeing me again. I'm not an immigration officer, but you'll need to complete a lot of paperwork in order to work here

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again. Any questions?”

I drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The audience stared at me for verification. Candy looked rattled. What do you ask the man who can see the future? I wondered.

“Yes, there’s one burning question. Are there such things as Neanderthal ghosts?”

The psychic looked at me incredulously. “No! They’ve all reincarnated into higher beings.”

* * * * *

Back in Candy’s apartment, the psychic’s words played heavily on my mind. There were enormous consequences if what he was saying were true, and not just about Neanderthal ghosts. People go on about nature versus nurture, but could it be an infant ghost was deciding my fate? Was it his fault I disliked Marmite, yet found fascination in my own earwax? Were my travel manuscripts his works, also? Did *he* bring me here to Montreal, in -40 °C, to live with Candy and play French Canadian cricket? Where training started at eleven on a weeknight, with a coke bottle as stumps? Where, out of forty-six teams, I was the only white guy?

I phoned my mum in the Scottish Borders.

“There’s only been one infant death in the family,” she said. “Your great-uncle Ivor from Wales. He died of measles, aged two, before World War I. Why?”

This phantom now had a name. *Ivor* would come to me through meditation, if I chose.

The following week, my money laundering job came to an abrupt end when I was made redundant, along with the entire staff, after just six weeks. “Go try get a job at McDonald’s,” they told me. I said I couldn’t. I was a vegetarian.

Back in the apartment, I scoured newspapers and websites for jobs. Openings in the travelling media/pizza delivery industries looked thin this week, like every other. Montreal papers only advertised six jobs: all telesales.

“LIKE TRAVELLING?” screamed the classifieds. “Call centre staff needed now!!!”

I sighed. I'd been topping up my earnings by participating in psychological experiments for cash at a university. Now these were drying up.

As the days went by, I branched out to PHD ice cream flavour surveys at \$10 a pop. But my bank balance continued to whittle away as fast as my chances of serious employment. Either I used my experience from Candy's family's chocolate factory, and baked cakes to sell on the street, or...

Damn it, the psychic was right. This wasn't the time to be in Canada. I almost laughed at the idea now. Heck, my visa would be expiring shortly.

When Candy returned from the chocolate factory one evening, we discussed moving to Scotland. The next day, I brought my return flight forward three months. Candy, with her Belgian citizenship, would come with me. We'd make a success of it in Glasgow. Just for a year, and see how it went. Would I be doing this if it weren't for the psychic? Sometimes you just need that little shove, don't you?

* * * * *

A fortnight later, I was propped up at the computer in my dressing gown, unshaven, a bowl of Cheerios on my lap. As I slouched in my chair, drifting through cyberspace, two words popped into my head: cricket and Ukraine.

What the hell does 'cricket and Ukraine' mean? I wondered, sitting upright. I typed them into the Google box and clicked 'search'.

The first results appeared incoherent and silly, most of them being about species of insects. But with little better to do, I ploughed through every search page, sensing there was something I had to find.

On the sixteenth page, I spotted a link that made me stand up and spill my Cheerios. Here was a website about a cricket league at the

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Odesa State Medical University. Students had formed sixteen teams. *Sixteen teams*. A psychic talking to the dead about my future, I could understand, but sixteen teams at a former USSR university?

I searched again for cricket in Bulgaria. Yes, they had a team, in the capital, Sofia. I tried Romania, and stumbled onto the European Cricket Council website. In their contacts section they listed cricket clubs across central and eastern Europe, from Belarus to former Yugoslavia. Estonia, they announced, was developing cricket on ice.

I could hardly draw breath. How had these Slavs, Latinos, and Finno-Ugrics, never colonised by British, come to play the Englishman's game? In private schools? Was it cloaked behind the Iron Curtain? Did they spend their winters watching Sky Sports? Where did they buy their whites? Were they ever beaten up on the street and called gay for wearing them? This, I believed, merited serious investigation.

Every time you're sitting there and an idea pops into your head from nowhere – and you feel it's something you have to do – it's him putting it there.

There was no doubt in my mind what I had to do. My decision was made in a flash. My mission, as the psychic foretold, and the ghost of my great-uncle Ivor was making clear in that moment, was to travel around the former Bloc, playing cricket. I would uncover the story of the Slavic game, and put it in a book. Could I, a keen Scottish player with a fetish for eastern Europe, succeed on this level? Where better to boost my batting average and score that elusive first century?