

DAVID LIGARE

Still Life With Gold Sphere, 2015
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in



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and draymen hauling loads across the estuary bridge, as well as hoboes and other assorted down-and-outers. A few of them happened into the place while we were there, and I saw Johnny slip a dollar into more than one hand.

I asked after his life, and he told a few stories, but he was modest about it, leaving out the perils and escapades. He'd been an able seaman in the Japan Sea, had been a hobo for a while, had gone up to the Klondike with the rest of the gold diggers, that was all he said. Well, he was a big celebrity by '06, and in the stories I'd read, he'd saved a crewman who went overboard in a typhoon out of Yokohama. He'd been jailed and beaten up when he was marching to Washington with General Kelly's hobo army. He'd climbed through the Chilkoot Pass under a heavy load and then hiked from Deep Lake to Lake Linderman three or four times a day carrying 150 pounds of gear each time. Survived on scant rations through a bitter winter in the Klondike and canoed out through the roughest water any man had ever paddled.

When he asked after my life, I told him, "I'm a taxidermist with a wife and five children, that's the short story. The only adventure I ever had was palling around with you." I guess he could see that my shoes and trousers had known better days.

We went on drinking into the night and then he walked me back to the ferry landing. We leaned on the railing along the harbor front, smoking stogies and looking out at the dark water, and after a while he said, "You remember that night we snuck the planchette into my room?"

I remembered it. "The planchette told you the truth and you took it hard."

He gave me a look and shook his head. "Hell, Frank, it wasn't the planchette. I was moving the pen so it'd write something close to what I wanted. My cousin had told me the truth, and I just couldn't work up the nerve to confront my mother. I figured I'd get the planchette to bring it up. I don't know what the hell the pen would have written if I hadn't been moving it around."

"But I hadn't figured on my mother blowing her stack like that, I thought she'd cry and beg me to forgive her." He slid me a half smile. "I never planned it, but it sure gave her a good scare, me rising up from the dead like a drowned ghost, and when I said it was Plume who saved me, that

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did the job. She couldn't quit wailing and asking pardon for lying to me all those years."

I wasn't sure what to make of this. "You always said it was Plume who took over your body and kept you alive."

He looked at me sidelong. "She claimed the Chief never conversed with anybody but her. That's the whole reason I said it was Plume. To shake her."

I don't know if he had started out that night planning to tell me the truth, but once he got started he just went ahead. He said when he went overboard he wasn't thinking he might die nor wishing to, he was too drunk out of his wits to hold that kind of a thought. He said he just drifted on the cold current and after a short while washed up on the north shore. Nothing of strange dreams and never a word from Plume. When the sun came up, he swam out from the beach far enough to fake the need of rescue.

I guess it should have burned me up, hearing all this about the planchette and the night he went overboard in the bay. But I just felt myself becoming someone old and feeble, bent under a weight of years.

Nobody in my own family had ever put much faith in spiritism. My mother was firm in her Methodist beliefs, firm in the knowledge that souls abided after death, but equally sure that spiritism might open a channel to the devil. I had come into Johnny's house unacquainted