

The mentalist's show was going badly even before the man from the third row tried to stab him.

The Majestic, a ruin of a once-magnificent theater, slouched in the outskirts of the city's long-defunct arts district, deteriorating like an abandoned wedding cake left out for the ants (though in the Majestic's case, even the ants had moved on to more successful establishments).

Inside was decaying opulence. Enormous, non-functioning, crystal chandeliers hung from its cavernous ceilings, and ancient paint peeled from its towering walls. Shifting economies within the city, as well as a multi-story megaplex in a neighboring town, had helped ensure the sad decline of the theater, which had once seen jazz greats such as Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington grace its stage, but now served as a last-chance venue for bottom-tier talents like this one: Mentalist Joe Cerebellum (not his real name, one presumed).

I sat at the back of the hall — though I didn't have to, with dozens of vacant seats in front of me — and even I could tell the performer was quite drunk, loose on his feet and slurring his slick patter. I was there that evening only because Twitch had alerted us that there were whispers online, chatter on obscure, conspiracy-cultivating message boards, that beneath his dubious exterior, Joe Cerebellum just might be the real thing. And Dr. Xivray was urgently interested in finding the real thing, had assured us that the fate of the world might eventually depend upon it.

Dr. Xivray is not one to exaggerate.

My seat cushion was torn, and someone had scratched the initials CMD on the back of the seat in front of me. I traced the letters with my index finger as I watched the show, somewhat indifferently.

"I'm seeing the letter J," said Joe Cerebellum, holding his fingertips to his temples, his eyes closed. He was a large man, shaggy and unkempt, his body wedged into an ill-fitting

tuxedo, apparently against its will. "Jennifer," he continued, "or maybe Jenny." Is there a Jennifer or Jenny out there? In the tenth or eleventh or twelfth row maybe?"

This is a classic phony psychic dodge, repeatedly exposed by experienced debunkers (including Dr. Xivray, as it happens). The alleged mystic perpetuates the illusion of picking up an audience member's name via telepathy, but chooses a name so common he's almost guaranteed a "hit." He follows that up with a few simple cold reading techniques and educated guesswork and he's well on his way to establishing his ESP bona fides to a gullible crowd.

A woman in the tenth row stood up and made her way down the aisle. (Given the ubiquity of the name Jennifer, I was mildly surprised not to see four or five women converge upon the stage.) "Let's give Jennifer a hand," boomed Joe Cerebellum, and the crowd quarter-heartedly obliged. "Jennifer," he said, taking the woman's hand. "Have we met before?"

"No," she said.

"Jennifer, you blew it," said Joe Cerebellum. "It would have been so much funnier if you had said, 'Yeah, we're cousins.'" He paused for audience laughter, but no laughter forthcame.

Undaunted, he pressed on, handing Jennifer a large sheet of posterboard and a black pen.

"Jennifer," he said, "I want you to write a three-digit number on this posterboard. Nice and big, so everyone can see it. Except me, Jennifer! Don't let me see it. Wait until I turn around, so you can be sure I can't peek."

He turned around, and Jennifer began writing something on the posterboard.

"When you're done, show it to the audience," said Joe Cerebellum, his back still turned.

Jennifer turned the posterboard towards the audience to reveal the number 312 written in a large, swooping hand.

"Okay, Jennifer," said Joe Cerebellum. "Now I want you to place the posterboard on the floor face down so the numbers aren't showing."

Jennifer complied, and Joe Cerebellum turned back towards the audience. "Now, I'm betting that some of you out there in the crowd have already forgotten the number Jennifer wrote down, am I right? Don't be embarrassed. Numbers are hard." His words had a polished smarm, worn smooth by repetition. He may have been used to getting laughs with these jokes, I suppose, but the silence in Majestic was complete, bordering on hostile, as in a courtroom just before the guilty verdict is read against a particularly heinous defendant. He coughed, and the sound echoed through the hall. "Jennifer, you remember the number you wrote down, don't you?"

Jennifer nodded.

"Was there a one in it? In the middle position?"

Jennifer nodded.

"Speak up, Jennifer!" said Joe Cerebellum. "Shout it out so the visually impaired can enjoy the show too."

"There's a one in the middle," Jennifer agreed.

"And in the first position... three, and in the third position...two? Three hundred and twelve?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yes," she added.

"Go ahead and pick up the posterboard, Jennifer," said Joe Cerebellum. "Just in case these fine folks in the audience forgot what you showed 'em."

Jennifer picked up the posterboard and held it up for all to see. Sure enough, it still read "312," just as it had moments earlier.

"And the three twelve, that's a date, isn't it?" said Joe Cerebellum. "March 12th. That's your birthday, right?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yes," she said.

"Okay, Jennifer, try to contain your astonishment," Joe Cerebellum joked, unsuccessfully.

Jennifer said nothing. In truth, it was a decent enough trick, especially with the added birthday detail, but it was still a trick, variations of which I'd seen performed by countless stage magicians using any number of techniques. It certainly didn't constitute iron-clad proof of a genuine psychic phenomenon.

"Thank you, Jennifer. You've been just swell," said Joe Cerebellum. "Give Jennifer a hand, everybody."

The applause the audience served up could only very generously be described as a smattering, dying out well before Jennifer got back to her seat.

"Okay then," said Joe Cerebellum, sensing perhaps for the first time that his show was not going particularly well. "Next, let's get Paul up here. I'm seeing a Paul out there. Last name begins with M or N. Paul, are you out there?" He drew his hand over his eyes to shade the spotlight.

Sure enough, from the third row, up went a hand, presumably belonging to a man named Paul M or N. "Step right up on stage, sir," said Joe Cerebellum, and the man trudged up the aisle to join him. He was fortyish and balding, an air of defeat evident in his posture and countenance. He looked as if he'd been selected for a tax audit rather than a demonstration of allegedly entertaining mentalism. I checked the time on my Q-phone, having seen nothing so far to snag my interest.

"So, you're Paul," said Joe Cerebellum, draping his arm over the man's shoulders, more to steady himself, it seemed, than as a gesture of camaraderie.

"Yes," said the man, sourly, as if his name were the source of his deepest despair. His face was a sad triangle pointed towards the floor.

"Paul," said Joe Cerebellum, stroking the side of his head dramatically. "You live in the city, am I right?"

"Yes," said Paul, clearly not impressed. And why would he be? No one would have traveled from out of town to see this show. Absently, I accorded my program, a cheap half-page photocopy, carelessly cropped.

"And your wife's name is... Sarah. Is that right?"

"How did you know that?" said Paul. I did not look up. Phony psychics routinely plant confederates in the crowd before and during a show, gleaning crucial biographical details from eavesdropped conversations.

"And Sarah's here with you tonight, isn't she?" said Joe Cerebellum.

"Yes," said Paul, his voice a dull rasp.

Joe Cerebellum hiccuped. "And does Sarah know about your... let's call them extracurricular activities, why don't we, with... let's see... Felicia, am I right? Hey, Felicia's supposed to be Sarah's best friend, isn't she?"

Now I did look up.

"Wait a minute," said Paul, looking alarmed. "Now, wait a minute. Just wait a minute."

Joe Cerebellum barreled on, seemingly oblivious. "Does Sarah know that when she was at her grandmother's funeral, for god's sake, you and Felicia—"

"Wait a minute," shouted Paul once again, lobbing a flailing haymaker at Joe Cerebellum, who ducked it with ease. Paul hopped up and down in spastic rage, shouting more and more incoherent protestations, as Joe Cerebellum slurredly soliloquized the sordid details of Paul's indiscretions with the aforementioned Felicia. Paul produced a large, chunky Swiss Army knife keychain from his pants pocket and unfurled the largest blade. He plunged the knife at the back of of Joe Cerebellum's head. Cerebellum, despite his diverted gaze and obvious drunkenness, evaded the thrust with a graceful step to the left. Paul fell to the floor, face-first. A woman in the third row, who even non-psychics in attendance could deduce was Paul's wife, stood up and began screaming vulgar epithets at her husband.

The already bad-tempered crowd erupted. Petty grievances that had been festering over shared arm rests and kicked seat backs metastasized into hostile shouts and rancorous shoves. Violence spread through the theater like a fast-moving virus. In the aisle, a fist fight broke out among several of the surlier audience members, and an usher, attempting to break up the melee, was knocked to the ground. As the chaos blossomed, I engaged my Q-phone to call a trusted local cab company, giving the dispatcher very specific instructions, with a promise of an extra one hundred dollars to the driver if those instructions were carried out to the letter.

They were.

Transcript of Velvet Derrick's interview with Nadif Dalmar, driver for the Riverside Cab Company:

VD: Can you please state your name?

ND: Nadif Dalmar.

VD: You are currently employed by the Riverside Cab Company, is that correct?

ND: I do not want to be in trouble.

VD: You're not in trouble.

ND: I only do what my dispatcher asks.

VD: Of course. Can you tell me about this evening's fare?

ND: This is not typical call, I understand right away.

VD: What made this particular call unusual?

ND: Lydia, this is my dispatcher, she tells me to go to Majestic. To go inside and retrieve performer who I will find there. She says performer might be fighting and also might not want to come with me me. She says I am to take him to Xivray Institute, no matter where he may say he wants to go. She says one hundred dollars extra if I can accomplish this. I say yes, I will try.

VD: What happened when you got to the theater?

ND: It is craziness, yes? Everywhere, people fighting and screaming. I can tell right away which is man because he is dressed very fancy. Up on stage, being chased by another man. Other man has knife. I can see this clearly. I am very afraid, but I need money badly. I approach stage, as close as I dare to get. I shout to man in tuxedo, "Come with me!" He looks at me and he nods, jumps off stage, and runs up aisle, far ahead of me. I have no choice but to follow. When I get outside, he is already sitting in back of my cab.

VD: How did he know that was your cab?

ND: This I cannot say. But I have my instructions. I get behind wheel and I drive away from theater as quickly as I can. The man in back seat has slumped over onto his side. I think he has passed out, but then he speaks. "I'm sorry about Amal," he says. He is mumbling some, under his breath, hard to hear, but I hear this one thing very clearly. "I'm sorry about Amal." And then he does pass out, for sure this time.

VD: Did that mean anything to you?

ND: Amal is my wife in Somalia. She is killed by bandits one week before we are to come to America. Never have I spoken of her since setting foot in this country. I almost stop cab right then and make man get out. But I think of the hundred dollars and I continue. I am very afraid. This man makes me afraid. I take him to Xivray Institute as Lydia instructs me, and once inside gates, two people come and take man away. A third comes out and pays me, exact fare plus one hundred dollars. I leave as quickly as I can.

End of interview.