

Juin 2001

Chère Madame,

C'est la lettre la plus triste que je jamais avais du écrire. La lettre que je ne jamais aurais besoin d'écrire. Je m'excuse, mon Français est trop mauvais donc j'écriverais en Anglais.

The last time I saw your daughter was on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> of April. I sent a text message asking if she was free that night and the answer came back yes, so I arranged to pick her up around six o'clock. Ten minutes later we were back at my place and I poured her a glass of red wine before putting some music on, then I went to fetch a can of lager from the fridge.

We talked for a couple of hours and she was excited about the prospects of a new job, having met up with some people who were working for a local company which produced computer games. Earlier on that evening I had been invited into her flat to see the clay model she'd sculpted from some original pencil sketches, which was the first step in trying to design and animate a character for their next project. As expected, her artwork was highly imaginative and of excellent quality.

She had also completed the first part of her motorbike license and was going to borrow my seldom used, but newly serviced Honda 125 for the last half of the exam. Apparently she scored 97% on the theory test and that really is an incredible achievement in a second language. I must admit it scared me a little to learn that that she wanted to buy something a lot more powerful in the future and I wasted no time in telling her there was no way we would ever race. She loved speed and knew no fear, saying that riding a motorbike was the next best thing to skiing down a mountain.

Géraldine used to come over once a week, but never liked putting me to any trouble so when I offered to cook, it wasn't unusual for her to tell me she wasn't hungry and that night was no exception. I eventually talked her into some supper, which involved nothing more than heating up a garlic mushroom pasta dish and I couldn't finish mine, but she ate every last morsel. This certainly wasn't the first time I'd joked that I saw myself as a sort of surrogate mother and was only nagging for her own good.

She was always so appreciative of the little things and I loved to make her happy. Her weakness was desserts, so I knew the triple chocolate mousse could not be refused lightly and she had to sit quite still for a while afterwards, accusing me of making her eat too much. We would play video games on my big TV and she was very good at beat'em ups, due to many hours spent practicing with her sister before moving away from home. Her favourite though was anything that involved racing and she would excitedly

shout out "Hoopla" after completing a tricky manoeuvre, or just nudging past me at the finishing line. After loading up my new snowboarding game, you can imagine how we spent the rest of the evening as she was in her element and loving every moment of it.

I called a taxi around 12.30am, as she wanted to get up early to press on with her animation. She couldn't afford a PC at home, but working at the local college maintaining their computers had its benefits and the lab was guaranteed to be empty on Sunday mornings, as all of the students would still be in bed sleeping off hangovers. I would have preferred to carry on racing of course, but it proved impossible to dissuade her and I remember saying that one day we could well be playing a game which she had helped create. The cab arrived so we said goodbye with a kiss on either cheek then hugged briefly, promising to meet up soon and that I would let her know when I'd sorted out the insurance for the bike. She was so happy that night, healthy, laughing and looking forward to the future.

The next week passed quickly and I'd phoned a couple of companies, but they couldn't provide me with cover as I hadn't passed the compulsory training course, so I would have to find another way around this problem. Géraldine usually came over on a Monday after work, but as it was Easter bank holiday weekend she wouldn't have been expecting a call from me. I was busy on Tuesday night, but Wednesday morning I sent a text inviting her round for the evening, saying that a couple of mutual friends would be coming along as well. As I hadn't received a reply I tried again in the afternoon but still didn't get an answer, so I just assumed that she was concentrating on her artwork. Later on when my friends arrived, I explained why Géraldine was missing from our get-together and they told me that she had been acting strangely again, so I determined to see her the next day.

Thursday I texted and rang at intervals, but all calls went straight to answer phone. After work I drove round to her flat and luckily there were a couple of girls just leaving the building, so I was able to get into the communal hallway. I knocked at the door and waited a while, but there was no sign of anyone home so I drove to the hospital wing to find out whether she might have been staying there, although nobody had seen her. Friday I phoned several times during the day and that evening I tried her flat again. I thought that she must have reasons for not wanting any contact and I wasn't too worried, because during her last illness there had been a time when we didn't see each other for a few months.

On Tuesday I heard that she'd been found by her landlord and my initial disbelief soon gave way to this dreadful new reality. I have never been so utterly distraught in all my life, as now she was gone and nothing else mattered. I felt destroyed and if tears could bring her back, then I know I wouldn't be writing this letter. The days afterwards were spent in a place

too horrible to describe, but I accept that I will never actually know the true meaning of grief, compared with how a mother feels when she loses a daughter. I found out what I could about her last week, but still couldn't comprehend how she had plummeted so far and so fast.

We would spend hours on end just talking and it wasn't too long ago that she told me the voices in her head had never really gone away. Géraldine never saw these as either symptoms or problems, believing that they were part of a subtle process which if dealt with correctly would take her towards enlightenment. She could only see the positive side to her episode last year, but from my point of view that was something I found hard to agree with. Her one and only regret had been hurting those who she was closest to, without understanding the reasons behind such uncharacteristic behaviour. After all she was such a caring girl, considerate of others and incapable of acting so thoughtlessly in her normal state of mind. She would never speak badly of anyone and was one of the few individuals in this world who have taught me how to be a better person. I can't say that I am the best of pupils, but she lives on in my head as a shining example of someone who never judged people and always tried to see the good in them.

As you know, Géraldine's beliefs were deeply seated and I would always try to come up with rational counters to the strange ideas she held true, but I could never sway her, not in the slightest. She was convinced that existence is not ended by death and our souls would continue on their journeys. Of course there was me, a non-believer and total sceptic, constantly asking for proof but of course she was unable to provide it, although this had never been of any consequence to her. After one of our conversations about re-incarnation, I remember saying that if it was possible to look inside someone else's head, she'd be disappointed at how uniformly black and white mine would appear in comparison to the technicolour dream coat of her mind.

With the advances achieved by modern science we're lulled into thinking that a few pills will fix everything, but unfortunately you must keep on taking them to keep the brain's chemical balance in check and Géraldine didn't trust medicine. When she told me that the voices were still talking to her, I asked how bad it would have to get before going back on medication, but the response I received was negative in the extreme. She told me outright that the drugs never did her any good, so there was no reason to ever take them again. Nothing I could say would change her mind, but having witnessed far worse times, I knew that this was so very mild compared with how ill she had become last year. Everything about her demeanor indicated that she was fine, looking ahead to the future and no real cause for concern. She had been working hard at the college whilst maintaining a flat and there were new exciting things happening in her life, which all led me to believe that the situation was under control. I knew

Géraldine well and considered her to be my best friend, so I surely wouldn't have missed any signs of major trouble, but by the time I found out that she had been acting oddly again it was already too late.

I torture myself with "What if's" or "If only's", but I had learnt from the last time that my help on its own was never going to be enough to pull her through, as this cruel condition literally steals your personality and can only be alleviated by medical intervention. From previous experience I know it's impossible to reason with someone who is suffering acute mental health issues, as they will never admit that there's anything wrong with them. I couldn't do much more than simply being there when needed, making sure she had been eating and trying to calm the delusions, but regardless of my efforts I was being woven deeper into her conspiracies which just pushed me even further away from a position of trust.

I wanted to contact you at the time, but Géraldine wouldn't allow this and considered it a betrayal as she genuinely didn't believe that there was a problem. Her words were, "I am like a tiger in matters where my mother is concerned." All I knew was that she loved you dearly and didn't want me to cause any unnecessary upset in your life, so I abandoned the idea. She often spoke about her family and I feel that I got to know you all quite well, if only through our weekly chats, but due to the language barrier we were never going to be able to understand each other let alone exchange confidences.

When Géraldine invited me to meet you and your husband last year, I couldn't have been more delighted. I would have to say the girl you saw during your visit was the same one I said goodnight to as she walked towards the cab, smiling, happy and coping with everything that life was throwing at her. Obviously I know that the recent burglary must have been a huge blow, but it wasn't enough to stop her from coming round to spend the evening with me. We talked it through over a few glasses of wine, played some video games and by the end of the night things were already looking a lot rosier. This had only been a minor setback for her and within a week or so she was joking about it.

We mostly stayed in, but on the rare occasions the two of us went out for a drink together the amount of admiring glances and attention she attracted was astonishing. I remember one pub we dropped into, where a guy she knew suddenly leant in towards me and whispered that he would give his right arm to be her boyfriend. She took all of this in her stride of course, with modesty, elegance and self-effacing humour. In less than ten years she'd accumulated so many friends that I lost count and I've never heard a bad word said about her, which is rare in a small town. One evening after finishing our meal a taxicab arrived unexpectedly and telling her to trust me, we were whisked away to an unknown destination which turned out to be my shop. I had set up a large screen plasma TV in the demo room, complete

with surround sound and sipping chilled champagne from coffee mugs, we sat down to watch the newly re-mastered "Yellow Submarine" on DVD. We had so much fun together.

She touched me deeply and I will never forget her sweetness. When I look around this room, everything I see reminds me of her and it's hard to move on when so many parts of your life are missing, but now that she's gone there is no alternative. I'm sure that this was the only self-centred act she ever carried out, as Géraldine was one of the most thoughtful and kindest people I have known. Although it's impossible to imagine her state of mind at the time, the first thing she'd have wanted to apologise for was the terrible damage inflicted on the people who loved her.

There's one final development I need to share with you, as recently I have come to the conclusion that she was possibly right all along and death is not the end. Due to lack of evidence I have never personally believed in any form of afterlife, but I've had to change my mind as Géraldine has given me a little sign to say that she's still around. I hope this doesn't upset or offend you as it's the very last thing I would want to do, but I know she has sent a clear signal to tell me that everything's okay and we shouldn't be worrying about her. Throughout the darkest of days, this has been my only glimmer of hope and I pray that it may be of some small comfort to you too.

This is the saddest letter I have ever had to write. The letter I should never have needed to write. I miss your daughter more than I can say and the world feels empty without her. My thoughts are with you and your family.

All my love

Nick

This so easily could be the end of the story, but for its proper beginning we need to go back a couple of months. I remember being in the local department store looking for some cutlery to go with my new and to this day unused dinner service, when I got the call from Steve telling me that Géraldine had killed herself. After returning to work I briefly explained why I'd be going home early, before driving back in a daze and buying a large bottle of Scotch on the way. My life was in pieces and I couldn't think straight, as the feelings of raw grief had utterly overwhelmed me. Although death and what happens afterwards was a topic of conversation we frequently revisited, she never once mentioned suicide, so I hadn't considered by any stretch of the imagination that it could possibly be an option. Now that it was too late to help I felt overcome by the crushing finality of the situation and pacing round in circles of despair, I must have woken the neighbours with my primal wailings. Fortunately I have scant recollection of the following few days, but silly little things stand out like

getting a parking ticket by forgetting to display my permit for the first time in over five years. Despite still going into the shop every day I was only really there in the physical sense, even though I couldn't afford to be entirely detached from external distractions such as customers. Home time couldn't come soon enough, as my only temporary respite from this nightmare was hitting the bottle and staring blindly at the TV screen until I fell into a dreamless sleep on the sofa.

I was such a complete mess and so preoccupied that one morning, more than a little surprised to find myself sitting in unheated bath water, I remembered how the same thing had happened over the past couple of days yet it hadn't mattered or even registered at the time. It's impossible to see through the fog of abject misery, as I was bordering on catatonic and only brought back to my senses by repeated immersion in cold water. This was the first occasion when I had actually been confronted by any sort of purpose in life since losing her, so I decided to investigate.

Back then I used to have an immersion heater hidden away in an upstairs closet and having no reason to interfere with this reliable source of hot water, it was probably the least frequently opened door in my house. The appliance consisted of a lagged tank which was warmed by an electric element at the bottom and gravity fed from an unsightly cistern, tastefully concealed by a roughly varnished plywood box located in my converted attic. One thing stood out immediately, as I noticed that was the wall switch for the electricity supply had been left in the off position, so I flicked it back to on which cured my chilly bathtime problems for good. Even in my addled state of mind, why would I have tampered with anything up there when I had no reason to do so? The only other person who could have done it was the lovely Elsie, our part time cleaner at work for a number of years before I thought of asking whether she would be prepared to work her magic at my house on a monthly basis. When the opportunity presented itself I casually asked if she'd accidentally knocked the switch, but her answer turned out to be a perplexed though definite no. She explained that due to privacy issues and previous embarrassments, areas like these were strictly off limits unless individually specified, which I hadn't. So by a process of elimination, this must have been a sign from Géraldine to assure me that she was okay and as I couldn't think of a better explanation, why should I choose to believe otherwise?

The only connection I could think of was about two months ago, when the landlord hadn't been able to fix her boiler and she had pulled out a small towel, tentatively asking if it would be possible to take a bath at some point during the evening. How could I refuse and I even spent a good five or ten minutes of cleaning time before running it, as girls appreciate that sort of thing you know. This could be completely unrelated, but she would also occasionally need to use my washing machine when hers had broken down.

I can still remember the mortified look on her face one week, when I returned a skimpy pair of knickers that she had inadvertently left in the tumbler. Looking back my logic was as flimsy as her underwear, but I had nothing more to go on at the time. It took years before I finally realised that trying to tie this in with past events was both unnecessary and potentially misleading, as the key factor here had been the water not the washing.

Her funeral took place on May 1<sup>st</sup> at 1.00pm and it was a study of the surreal. With so many disparate groups of unconventional people being brought together under the same roof without their common denominator, I worried that there may be disruption, but thankfully the mood was always dignified and proper. I felt honoured that I had been asked to select the closing music for her cremation ceremony and my choice of "Cowgirl" by Underworld was almost perfect for the occasion. Knowing her love for the band, Géraldine would have appreciated my decision as the lyrics are bitter-sweet and fitting, but I just wished that they could turn up the volume as she always liked it played loud. It was heart-breaking to meet her mother and stepfather again under such grim circumstances, but with no ability to speak or understand more than basic French, everything I needed to say had to be squeezed into a quivering handshake. I knew I'd let them down as being a close friend it had been my job to protect her, so all that I can remember feeling was the collective guilt of the living and the involved.

As you can imagine I would catch myself thinking about her countless times a day, re-running endless recriminations in my head and trying to apportion blame, but it was somebody far wiser than me who said that there aren't enough hands to point all the fingers. Things deteriorated even further when I got behind the wheel, driving at speed with the CD player at full blast, as if the music was a eulogy to broadcast my woes and pay tribute to her passing. There were quite a few waved fists from some of the older folk by the side of the road, so out of politeness I always made sure to give them a wide berth as I raced past. I guessed that these caring individuals were punching the air by way of support or respect, so maybe it's a good job I can't lip read as I have always felt humbled and embarrassed in the presence of such unconditional love.

A long month went by before I began to write my letter of condolence explaining what had happened and how I felt, but it would be of little solace as nothing could change the fact that Géraldine was gone. This is why I risked finishing with the conclusion that in spite of the usual lack of feedback from the dead, I knew her daughter had devised a way to show me she was still around and doing fine. The next and last contact with her mum was a year later, when she sent me a small parcel containing some of the photos which were found when they cleared out the flat. There was a card too, telling me how much she was missed by everyone and that they had made a place for her ashes in the form of a small remembrance garden.

The part I found most touching was reading that she still spoke to Géraldine every day, although it didn't take the pain away. So either my letter hadn't been too upsetting or maybe it remained untranslated, but I didn't care as this proved that she was at peace enough with herself to extend such an unexpected gesture of kindness. Like mother, like daughter.

Strange complex mechanisms slot into place when you grieve and a good example of this is how much time can flow by without leaving any significant memories. It was early 2003 before I had been ready or willing to move on and my therapy would involve having the house gutted, in order to start afresh with a brand new interior design. This hadn't been my original intention as I am prone towards indolence, but I'd recently purchased a very tasteful print by an artist named Graham Illingworth, which now hung above the fireplace and only served to highlight its shabby surroundings. So I resolved to call in the decorators. I soon realised of course that one spruced-up room would make the others look dowdy, so my project grew to encompass the whole house, but at this stage it was still a purely logical escalation and unlikely to get out of hand. One of my favourite customers at the shop was a chap called Dave, who happened to be a builder by trade and worked in partnership with his dad. Together their combined proficiency covered more or less everything in home renovations that didn't require certification and I can still fondly remember the two of them coming round to price up the job. You wouldn't know it from the outside, as compared to neighbouring properties mine had a similar cottagey charm, but the inside was a diary which detailed two years of misuse and wanton abandon. Mould had taken hold and my living room carpet was now a canvas of join-the-dots cigarette burns, linked by projectile red wine spillages which criss-crossed an archipelago of dried Guinness stains. Dave asked me about the pellet holes in the walls, but I explained that they weren't recent and highly unlikely to be repeated. These tiny craters had been the result of entertaining various friends with my air pistol skills, but gunplay came to an abrupt halt on a Thursday night in 1995, after a less than enthralling performance by a watered-down version of "The Damned" at the local town hall.

The three of us came back for a pre after show party before they'd even finished their set and soon I was engaged in my favourite drunken pastime of shooting beer cans, but on this occasion it would be off the open palm of Steve's obliging hand. This was the first time I'd introduced them to my parlour trick and with safety in mind, I'd advised him to keep it flat as if feeding a horse. Géraldine strongly registered her disapproval from the start and redoubled all efforts at dissuasion when after a few hits, I asked if he wanted to swap places. Guys always know best of course so we didn't listen and I can still recall hearing the pistol go off whilst feeling a curious jolt in the fleshy mound below my little finger, then noticing that the can was still in place. It didn't hurt at all as I had a compensatory amount of alcohol in



my system, but not enough to stop me from realising that there may be some stinging in the morning. I could tell that Steve was hardly overwrought with remorse as we were both laughing our heads off and to her credit, nobody said I told you so. He did apologise for his poor aim though, but I countered by reminding him that it was my fault, as I should have been more aware of the dangers of combining copious quantities of lager with an unfamiliar firearm.

I used to enjoy going out clubbing on a Saturday night and would regularly invite a bunch of people back in the early hours of Sunday morning. Often as not at some point in the proceedings, there would be half a dozen or more wrecked revellers gathered round to watch me shoot a can off my wingman's raised chin, with only his hard palate tough enough to prevent the slug piercing something important if I hit him in the throat. Although there was a fundamental law of nature I'd been forgetting, which is while the drink definitely makes you invulnerable, it doesn't automatically mean that's the case for anyone else in the vicinity, especially when there's weaponry involved. I never missed of course and in fairness nobody at the time advised me of the potential risks, but after a small taste of my own medicine it was more than enough of a reason to stop this ridiculous behaviour. Steve convinced me of this with his first and final shot, as I had started to drip too much to allow him another. I hastened to the bathroom before calling both of them in to see how perfectly the colour and quantity of blood contrasted against the blandness of my avocado basin. With good hygiene in mind, I picked up a sock from the clean pile before pulling it over my wound, as five hands and a woollen stump scoured the floor for the missing pellet. However their cab arrived almost before we had started, so this would have to wait until tomorrow.

Alcohol is a wonderful over-the-counter anaesthetic, as I slept soundly until being thoroughly woken up by the twin alarms of my clock radio and seeing blood-caked footwear protruding from an unusual position beneath the covers. After a quick search I failed to find any sign of spent ammunition, which suggested one obvious conclusion even though I couldn't feel a lump, so I did what any sensible fellow would do and headed towards the nearest hardware store. Knowing exactly what I was looking for, I picked up a handy tool which could detect metal in walls and prevent inadvertently drilling through mains wiring or something equally problematic. The lads at work were in mild hysterics as the gadget beeped like crazy when hovered over my hand and it was a group decision that I should proceed directly to casualty. It proved moderately embarrassing telling the nurse that my injury had been sustained due to a boring concert and maybe the reason she gave me particularly short shrift was down to being a fan of the band. The X-ray showed that having punctured my skin, the slug had glanced off a bone before ending up a good inch from the point of entry. I thought they were made of lead, so I was surprised to find out that it could safely be left in

there without the risk of blood poisoning, but having been given the choice I opted for extraction. Within two hours of arrival I was under the surgeon's knife and on coming to, I refused all painkillers in order to focus my mind on the valuable lesson that I had every desire to learn. Maybe I've been watching too much TV, but I thought standard operating procedure involved showing me the pellet as proof of removal, so after discharging myself in the morning I couldn't resist getting a second opinion and felt distinctly relieved when the machine indicated that it was safe to drill. As a bonus, having "Gunshot wound" on my medical record is rather cool and what's more, I was the unexpected centre of attention at Steve's party that night.

Anyway back to the squalid mess I called home where clutter and rubbish had gathered unchecked, although this was far more appealing than the unsanitary crispiness of my bathroom carpet. I was especially self-conscious of the kitchen as my daily washing up regime hadn't kicked in by then, so at any given moment there may have been up to a week's worth of festering dishes piled in the sink. After showing the two of them around I confessed to feeling more than a little ashamed by the state of the dilapidations and general untidiness, "But if everything was perfect" said Dave, "then we'd be out of a job." We had originally settled on a fresh coat of paint throughout, some new carpets and a white replacement bathroom suite, but I think it was Ted's clever sales technique that really stirred up my creative juices. Whenever we moved onto the next room during my guided tour, he would almost always tell me that it could turn out to be the best one in the house. Having already fallen for his well-rehearsed patter I wanted each of them to be equally outstanding, which would require a darn sight more than minor refurbishments and a slap of emulsion. It was around this point in time that things inevitably went off the rails as my imagination started to run riot, which would be bound to result in a detrimental and inflationary impact on their initial costings.

I must admit that the process of putting my ideas onto paper was a lot of fun, as now the professionals were on board I knew they would soon be plucked off the page and put into production. However I was about to take them on a challenging journey far beyond the original brief, but they did their utmost to pander to and accommodate my flights of fancy, even when I came up with a radical change of plans from one day to the next. Lacking the necessary talent I've never really enjoyed drawing, so spending whole evenings happily sketching away at designs was a bit of a surprise, although discovering that I actually looked forward to my DIY centre visits had been the biggest shock to the system. The ugly pipe-work in the bathroom was my greatest headache, but I decided that it would be hidden away behind a false wall, which left just enough clearance for a rolled-top tub with an inch and a half clearance at either end. I was pleased when they finally plumbed it in, as I no longer had to wash by standing in a bucket next to the kitchen sink and filling up a pint glass to rinse myself. The entire project had taken

many months to complete, but it was well worth the wait as now my house looked more like a show home.

Time passed and I was too busy living the life of luxury to remember when it first occurred, but the hand basin in my bathroom had developed a sporadic leak. I could see that this was due to a malfunctioning join between the flexible pipe which fed my hot water tap and the nozzle poking through the wall. This was easily addressed by smothering it with some quick drying putty, but the puddle returned a few weeks later, completely oblivious to my best countermeasures. The next and final attempt to at least slow the flow had involved cable ties, useful for so much more than the name suggests, but unsurprisingly they were equally unsuccessful although a far cheaper alternative. After exhausting all of my options I conceded defeat, giving up on any further attempts to remedy the situation and just hoped that it wouldn't deteriorate. This was really nothing more than a minor inconvenience at the time and didn't trouble me too much, but after a month or two I could definitely see a pattern emerging. Curiously it only happened when I had friends staying and I wondered whether my guests could possibly be causing the leakage. The only explanation I could think of, was if they were using the pipe as a handhold to assist in getting up off the toilet, but no one admitted to even touching let alone grabbing it.

These odd yet vaguely predictable puddles continued in the same manner but remained a mystery, they were invariably the same size around four or five inches in diameter and always guaranteed to be bone dry within a few hours of splashdown. After a while I narrowed it down to only happening when certain people stayed for the night and not others, which ruled out changes in water pressure due to higher demand. My knowledge of these matters is rudimentary, but from experience I have found that once a section of plumbing springs a leak it tends to stay the same or gets worse, rather than fixing itself for long intervals between selected visitors. Besides which, when I purposefully wiggled the pipe myself I couldn't summon a single drop and this lead me to consider that there might be other factors at play.

It wasn't long before I had company again and after a frivolous night of serious drinking, I left my old mate John downstairs while I went to turn on the bedside lights, which would welcome him to the top room where he'd be sleeping. I'd told him about the periodic puddles and my best guess for who, rather than what was causing them, but let's just say that he remained somewhat unconvinced. In fact his attitude was downright dismissive, but to be fair to him if you should choose to believe in any of this then the ramifications are far-reaching and can lead to conclusions which may be impossible to prove, or difficult to justify quite yet. The temporary bed I'd provided was butted up against a metal wall that concealed a pair of matching wardrobes, located in the dead space either side of a prominent

chimney breast. Two large wooden alcoves with mirrored backs had been constructed and these could be swung forwards in order to gain access to the storage areas behind. Each one has three small spotlights built in, with a single on off push button which also acted as a dimmer control and it looked absolutely stunning when lit up, even if I do say so myself. These light switches consisted of plastic stems which protruded through little holes drilled in the metalwork and they had been capped by classy chrome knobs. The one to the left was tightly secured and hadn't given me any trouble, but its identical twin would occasionally spring off as soon as I took my finger away.

So of course in my typically lax and procrastinatory manner, every time this happened I'd simply push it back into place as a short term fix, having not yet discovered the permanent solution which would eventually turn out to be a pea-sized blob of Blu-Tack. I try to be an attentive host so earlier in the evening I'd disappeared upstairs to change the bed linen, or at least give it a quick shake and brush down, but now there was a different problem with the right hand switch. Maybe I'd been too heavy-handed as it no longer clicked when pressed, but now resulted in an unsatisfyingly spongy feeling and whatever technique I employed the lights weren't lighting. I reluctantly decided to remove the very shiny and purely cosmetic component, which I placed on the shelf below as the exposed shaft behind it still worked flawlessly. This was rather disappointing for me as when I prepare the room I want it to look perfect for my guests, even though I hadn't installed a proper bed yet and they would have to make do with an inflatable mattress. So just before we called it a night I left John to finish the last dregs of his beer, while I quickly nipped upstairs and turned on the centrally hung sixty watt bulb. I always make sure to switch this one off again as I still haven't found a suitable lamp shade, but it's useful when negotiating the protruding timber beams which imply severe head trauma for the unwary and the unlit. It was originally connected to the mains via a thick power cable which ran down one of the beams, so when I had my loft re-plastered I thought that burying this unattractive feature in the ceiling would be a wise decision. However as the wire used to provide a discernibly white line against a painted black background, it drew attention to the hazard and without additional illumination I could look forward to being asleep before my head hit the pillow, with only a mild dose of concussion by morning.

After lighting up the left hand alcove and adjusting it for brightness, I'd swiftly moved round to the other side but I could instantly see that something had changed. To my immense surprise the chrome button was back on the shaft, which certainly wasn't where I'd left it a couple of hours ago. Sitting down on the carpet, all I could do was stare in disbelief while hopelessly trying to make sense out of the impossible. I still couldn't believe my eyes, so I pressed it a dozen or more times and the lights worked faultlessly with healthy clicks instead of the previous sponginess. This was

beyond inexplicable, but all the same I would have no qualms in stating under oath that everything happened exactly as I've described it. Turning off the bare bulb I made my way downstairs, shaking with amazement and shock to the point that I was almost unable to pour myself a stiff drink. I hadn't forgotten my manners though, so of course I asked John to join me and with pantomime reluctance he accepted. After calming down a little I tried to recount precisely and meticulously what had happened, although I felt like I'd been wasting my breath as he couldn't accept that it was anything more than a simple memory lapse. In a last-ditch attempt to restore rationality, he pointed at the candle burning on the fireplace saying "If Géraldine's really here I'll bet she can't blow it out." You may find this hard to believe, but as if on cue the flame faltered and died around ten seconds later.

His response was unabashedly mundane, as he just said that the wick must have been at the end of its useful life and about to go out anyway. Seeing that this explanation was based purely on wild coincidence, I'm slightly disappointed he didn't have a closer look before throwing down such a risky and unambiguous challenge, but considering the lateness of the hour we'll let him off. His suggestion was improbable, but not totally implausible so in reality I couldn't rule it out. Maybe all I had witnessed was just an instance of remarkably poor timing on his behalf, so I can't count this as irrefutable evidence of her intervention, though it will still serve to prove that there's nothing wrong with my powers of recollection. When I brought up the matter again during one of his subsequent visits, John couldn't remember anything about the candle, but interestingly he didn't even attempt to dispute that it had happened and he's a contrary old Hector at the best of times. The only concrete fact I can extract from this, is that it would have been her last chance to play with fire as candles were on the verge of being banned due to health and safety reasons. I would soon be picking up a pair of Bengal kittens, so they were no longer a suitable choice of mood lighting as the attraction of a flickering flame may prove hazardous to their curious and furry nature. We stayed up until half past four in the morning discussing life, the universe and everything but sport before I felt tired enough to get some sleep, it had been an exciting day you know.

The next time John came over was in late November 2003 with his young daughter Lucy in tow and here's a photo of her playing with Jasper while Bunny looks on. (1-PIC) Well in a change from the norm, the pipe had been leaking solidly for a couple of days before they were due to arrive, so I'd put a largish saucepan underneath to catch the spillage. Luckily the dripping stopped about six hours before they turned up, so even though there had been no evidence on this occasion for little Lucy to think of me as an irresponsible water waster, I determined that next week the boys would be called in to sort it out once and for all. I rang Dave and accompanied by his dad, they both kindly stopped round to assess the problem one morning

while I was at work. He phoned me later on saying that they could find nothing wrong as even with my hot tap steaming and streaming on full flow, no amount of pulling or prodding caused any water to escape, which meant the proof of the pudding was not in the heating. In addition they inspected the rest of the bathroom plumbing with a fine tooth comb and gave it a clean bill of health, although I doubted whether this included under the rim of my toilet bowl, but that was of no real concern to a single guy like me.

Well despite their best efforts the seepage soon reverted back to its normal pattern and continued for the next few years, not often varying in size or circumstance, although the first time I decided to record it for posterity was in February 2009. In the meantime technology had advanced and online gaming now allowed me to keep in regular contact with friends in other parts of the country. Having bored them for so long with tales of my leaky pipe on Skype, I thought it was about time to share a picture. I don't know why I hadn't considered taking any photos before, but after all it was just another puddle and not a very photogenic one at that as I'm sure you will agree. [\(2-PIC\)](#) They enjoyed double clicking the attachment, but there again doesn't everyone as it's just like opening a little mystery gift, which on this occasion turned out to be totally unremarkable in every way so we quickly moved on to more interesting topics of conversation. These friends, who have been shadowy nameless figures waiting in the wings, now come into their own and riotously assume centre stage. I can so clearly remember the evening when the massive row occurred as if it were yesterday and not Friday 24<sup>th</sup> of April, which was one of our bi-weekly games sessions before we added Sundays as the third. Six months from now I'll ask them if they had any ghost stories to share with the group and as there are no spoilers involved, I don't see why any of you should have to wait that long to find out this potentially significant background information.

Firstly there's Markie who keeps sheep, pigs and chickens in Wales, but his main jobs are running an upmarket self-restored holiday-let barn while either producing or editing magazine articles on in-car entertainment. More importantly he is over halfway through building a wooden bed which will replace the blow-up mattress in my top room. He told us about two experiences, which both occurred while staying at historic National Trust properties he'd booked for a mini break with his beloved partner Polly. The first was when they both woke up to see a flaming inferno on the ceiling above their bed, although it wasn't actually ablaze of course. This fiery vision vanished a few seconds later and neither of them had the slightest inkling about what could have caused it. The second instance also happened at night and it was in a converted lighthouse that they had rented for the weekend. As neither of them could get to sleep they decided that Markie should move to the bedroom upstairs, so if either one drifted off they wouldn't be disturbed by the tossing and turning of the other. The plan worked like a dream and the two of them were soon slumbering peacefully,

but not for long as they were simultaneously awoken by a deathly scream. Markie thought it was Polly while Polly thought it was Markie, so they rushed headlong towards each other with him going down clockwise and her going up anticlockwise. They all but feverishly collided on the stairs and breathlessly assured one another that everything was okay. There was no rational explanation for the bloodcurdling howl and as they were both more than a little shaken up, I think it's fair to say that neither of them got much sleep before morning.

He also mentioned another occasion which may not immediately appear to be particularly relevant, but nevertheless I'll tell you about his strange encounter with a mouse. The rural location and lack of a cat meant that his cottage had a minor vermin problem, but despite being the least squeamish person I know, for some commendable reason he'd chosen to use non-lethal traps. One day his morning inspection revealed the rodent in question and recognising its distinctive colouring, Markie was positive he'd captured the very same one a short while back before setting the pesky little varmint free in a nearby field. In order to test out his theory he opened the box, carefully marking the creature's back with Tipp-Ex and then drove a couple of miles away to release it into a suitable mousy habitat before returning. I'm sure that everyone can guess what was miraculously waiting for him when he got home to check the trap again, but if I can save a few words here by not actually having to state the obvious, this will help you finish the book faster so you can re-read it sooner.

Next there's Geoff and he's a high flying audio visual engineer who works in the City. He's in charge of a department within BP responsible for providing worldwide video conferencing facilities and his clients have ranged from politicians to pop stars. Life at home is equally demanding, being the father of three boys and a husband to his lovely, though Hungarian wife Edina. Here's his story that dates back to when he was about fifteen. After having eaten supper in the kitchen with his family, young Geoffrey had left the table and was walking towards the passageway which led to their garden. Turning the corner he had the fright of his life as there was a man outside, peeping in through the open back door which couldn't have been more than two or three yards away. Only the intruder's upper half, dressed in a non-descript black jacket could be seen leaning around the doorframe, but with his dark thinning hair and sharp features he had a face that Geoff would recognise to this day. He shrieked like a little girl and involuntarily shut his eyes, but on opening them a moment or two later there was no sign at all of the prowler. Rushing straight outdoors he stopped dead in his tracks, looked and listened but there was nobody there. Why would someone try to sneak into a house full of people and when discovered, how could they make their way out of a high-fenced garden without being spotted or heard? If it was a burglar then he wouldn't have risked the former and if it was a raving madman then he couldn't have avoided the latter.

Even though Geoff had no answers to these questions, he has never been a believer in the supernatural and refuses point blank to consider it as a serious option for anything other than a chance to poke fun. You already know that this whole conversation won't happen for another six months and here's the reason why I will bring up the subject. I'm only trying to soften his scepticism for the revelations in store when I could fill him in on the unfolding details of my ghost story, as I had just found out that he'd be visiting me in November. For better or for worse I had taken the decision not to tell him about any further developments, as he'd already mocked me mercilessly about my puddle theory. He has enough complications in his life to deal with and presenting another of this order of magnitude should be handled with utmost care, note to self.

Justin is the latest member of our online gaming circle. He's a former carpet salesman, mixed martial arts trainer, flower deliveryman, street warden and photo print shop factotum, but this list is around three times too short to be considered anywhere near definitive. However his most impressive talent by far is being a brilliant drummer, but having played in more bands than even he can remember, none of them achieved or more annoyingly for him went on to achieve any degree of commercial success. His gigs have ranged from pubs where the audience has been outnumbered by the bar staff, to festivals in front of thousands and he's still considered a rock god in some parts of Germany.

Here's a story which takes us back to 1983 when he was returning from a night out with his bandmates and around halfway home, they had pulled over before getting out of the car to gawp at what could only be described as a UFO in the sky above them. A huge triangular object with lights flashing at its points hovered silently overhead for what seemed like a few minutes, before speeding suddenly and noiselessly away into the heavens. Whilst this must have been a truly remarkable experience, it is clearly off-topic so let's not waste too much time before we move on. He concluded by telling us that the following weekend they had been cornered by a friend training to be a journalist, who recorded their individual recollections as witness statements for an article which would sadly never see the light of day. In a cruel twist of fate the guy changed his career path and went on to make a fortune in the music business by becoming a successful record producer, so maybe I was being rather insensitive by asking Justin to re-establish contact just to discover whether the tape survived. He has kindly agreed to take on the task of finding out if it still exists, as I would love to be able to describe the incident from different perspectives while they were fresh in people's minds. Although knowing the fickle world of rock and roll, I don't think you should be holding out any hope whatsoever on this one, as it has all the trappings of a red herring dangling from a sky hook.



However his ghost story was far more along the lines of what I wanted to hear. It was during his boarding school days when he and a friend were larking about late one night in the music department, which had formerly been an old rectory. The two of them were just hanging around and having a laugh, but all joviality was put on hold when they both heard this wistful melody coming from a gifted flute player somewhere upstairs. Nobody was supposed to be up there as the classrooms and practice areas were strictly out of bounds after hours, so Justin covered the bottom of the staircase to see if anyone came down while his pal went off to investigate. Although the playing stopped well before its source could be located, a thorough search revealed absolutely nothing so neither of them were ever able to solve this musical mystery.

I've already introduced you to Steve, an early member of our group, but unfortunately he'd opted out of games night before I had the chance to ask him the same question and that's a pity as I'm sure his reply would have been a complete hoot. His day job of programming computers pays the bills, but he's been a Tarot-reading font of arcane knowledge, a coven-leading high priest and a routinely naked jumper of bonfires at outdoor rituals, so I'm sure he'd have some stories to tell. I once remember quizzing him about why anyone of sound mind would want to do the nude flame leaping thing and his answer was a disarming yet misconstrued, "Well of course we go sky-clad as you don't want your clothes to catch alight", which is a valid point I suppose. He was Géraldine's boyfriend for a period of time, but they broke up soon after he'd met up with someone called Julia. Being the self-proclaimed master of the seamless transition between partners meant that he was rarely if ever single. After another casual liaison he ended up with a delightful girl named Kate and the puddles tended to occur most frequently whenever the two of them came round, but oddly nothing happened when Steve visited on his own. Kate and as much as I adore her, is one of the most charming yet delusional characters I've ever had the pleasure to meet as she's full of these wacky new age beliefs, but there again with my recent change of heart on a matter which isn't entirely unrelated, who am I to pass judgement.

April 2009

Anyway let's get back to that infamous Friday night session which happened on April 24<sup>th</sup> and it was one I'd been looking forward to, as Justin would be joining us online for the very first time. Our game of choice back then was golf, but the major issue I'd tried to resolve earlier had been how to play with five people, as you can only have a maximum of four in a match. Initially I thought of splitting into teams, one of two and the other of three playing the same course simultaneously. I soon discounted this impractical strategy, as it was clear that an inflexible sixty second shot clock meant the pair couldn't wait for the threesome to finish a hole before being moved on to the next. Our respective games would quickly get out of sync and we'd have different conversations going on at once, but my main concern was boredom setting in when the round ended a lot sooner for the twosome. The only logical solution was that the four of them should have a game together whilst I selected single player and since there's no time limit, I'd be able to slow down my pace to match theirs. I couldn't think of any better working scenario and as long as they trusted me to report my score, we'd still know who was in the lead. The problem had been sorted out or so I thought, though I tend to find that reality has a habit of confounding even my best laid plans, but I wasn't expecting Word War Three to suddenly break out on such a peaceful sounding golf course as Pebble Beach. It soon became apparent that Justin was a little self-conscious and uncomfortable talking to the rest of us through his brand new headset. I remember my first conference call and I know exactly how he felt as telephones are usually one to one, so having a multi-way conversation is an unsettling experience until you get used to it. We loaded up the game while debating which way to play, but my sensible suggestion was outvoted and as I'd predicted it turned into a disharmonious mess. One team finished three holes before the other and people were talking at cross purposes, although the thing which really spoiled it for me was the endless litany of bitchy comments.

It wasn't the way I'd wanted Justin's first session to go and even though everyone agreed that this setup didn't work at all well, I had a hard time getting them to try my idea of four versus one for the back nine. I even went as far as promising that I would e-mail a screenshot to verify my score in the unlikely event of winning, which was a thinly veiled way of saying they could trust me not to cheat. In retrospect, I now realise that the negativity coming from the old-school contingent meant I probably should have made an excuse of a headache, or tiredness and left them to play on their own. Although I doubt this would have worked either, as there was something in the air that night and if I wasn't around to calm the guys down, it might only make matters worse. I knew soon after starting that they were determined not to enjoy playing by my rules and consequently Justin would think it was his fault for joining us. Geoff was as obstreperous as Steve and they sparked contentiously off each other while Markie merely

sniped from the sidelines. Justin had been an innocent bystander until finding himself being unwittingly swept along by the mob baying for my blood and when we finished the game, there was so much ill will around that nobody even noticed the scores.

When the trouble-making trio signed off I spent a good hour talking with Justin, trying to repair the damage and assuring him that this wasn't their normal behaviour. After saying goodnight I shut down my computer and visited the loo for the drinker's obligatory leak before bedtime. Turning the light on, I was confronted by a gargantuan puddle on the floor and although they had mostly been of approximately equal size for the last five years, this must have measured at least ten times larger. The pipe may have stopped dripping but it was still wet, that's strange I thought and promptly went to bed.

So things had progressed somehow and now it was evident that my guests didn't have to be visiting in the physical sense, as an online presence would work just as well. This seemed a reasonable assumption, as the dead surely can't be totally dismissive of technological advancements, but maybe like the Amish they're choosy about how much of it they want to adopt. I must add that unlike most other girls I knew back then, Géraldine was always into the latest gadgets, games and gizmos, so I wasn't surprised to see her taking advantage of Skype. When close friends are separated by death, the worst part is the inability to share new experiences with them, but you never know they may be thinking exactly the same thing. This would imply that the living are the ones who are currently at a disadvantage, as she appears to know what's going on in my world, but there's no chance I'll ever get an advanced preview of hers. I woke up the next day feeling rather peevisish and still more than a little upset that there couldn't have been a less welcoming committee for our newest recruit. If these nights aren't enjoyable then what's the point of taking part, so I strategically spat out my dummy and e-mailed the three of them saying that I'd be taking a rest from playing for a while. This had just been a shot across the bows and my retirement only lasted a couple of days as I was easily talked round, but within a month we would have a deserter in our ranks so all in all I'd achieved nothing.

It was soon after 8.00pm on Tuesday the 28<sup>th</sup> when I joined Steve and Markie online, as the other two would be unavoidably late back from work. We played an agreeable round of golf, which was so refreshing compared to the last one and I wished that Justin could have been there to savour the experience. As we were finishing I happened to mention that during our last toxic encounter, my psychic bathroom went completely off the scale. After a few moments' hesitation, Steve came back with the insightful observation that this had roughly coincided with the same time of Géraldine's passing. Having a poor memory for dates and not wanting to disturb the fragile peace, I took him at his word but decided to look into the matter more

closely. I can't believe I didn't bother to photograph the residual watermark for another couple of days, but after finding that the steam from my bath could rehydrate it, I took this one to show the excessive amount of leakage which hasn't happened since John's visit with Lucy. [\(3-PIC\)](#)

On Wednesday morning using my work diary from 2001, it was easy to pinpoint the bank holiday weekend during which she most likely did the deed and I calculated that I took Steve's call just over a week later on April 24<sup>th</sup>. Straight away I texted him to say that the super-sized puddle was on the same day we heard the news of her death and his reply confirmed my findings. I thought about the timing and reasoned that if this had been an attempt at communication, then it made sense as the most important date wouldn't be the one on which she'd chosen to forfeit her life. You see Géraldine who was the epitome of discretion, would always want to protect her privacy and dignity at all costs.

Later the same day Steve sent me a text message to find out whether I still had the long-tailed wooden cat on my bathroom cabinet and I replied with "Yes, but why would that be of interest?" [\(4-PIC\)](#) He reminded me that a good few years ago it had been my birthday present from Géraldine and asked if I wanted to conduct a little experiment on May Day, which would be the anniversary of her funeral. Seeing that I was interested to take things further I readily agreed. He sent me his instructions, which were to move the cat to somewhere else in the house at the weekend and leave it there with a small amount of cannabis placed nearby. However this was an example of rather poor timing as the penalties for possession had just been stiffened, but why would a recently reclassified narcotic be required I can hear you asking. When Géraldine took the decision to end her life in that tiny rented flat, she left no note or any explanation other than an envelope containing a modest lump of hash and a lock of hair. I'm annoyed I didn't think of snipping off a few strands of my own as an accompaniment, but you just know that's bound to happen sooner or later.

May and June 2009

Friday night May 1<sup>st</sup> and knowing that I had a small amount of emergency weed at the back of one of the kitchen drawers, I set about my mission. The cat was relocated to the right hand alcove in the top room and I carefully placed my herbal offering on its head. There's no picture to show you, as I honestly didn't believe that anything was going to happen and I wasn't disappointed. When I went upstairs on Monday morning, everything was in the same position of course and nothing had changed, so I tidied up before leaving for work thinking oh well you can't win them all.

I'm almost ready to introduce another character into the narrative, one that I got to know around the same time as Géraldine, but firstly I need to add a quick note concerning pronunciation. Having been tired of being addressed by an anglicised hard G version of her name, she had encouraged the usage of J or Jay as an acceptable abbreviation, which leads us without further ado to the second best joke of the book. We were coming back from a pub supper, which must have been sometime in the late Nineties and Steve was showing off the superb handling of his new Toyota Celica in the rain. Kate was well strapped in up front, but the two of us on the back seat were all over the place. When we had safely parked up, I took a moment to steady myself before getting out and then complimented him on his ability to roll a J while driving.

Here's a fond welcome to a good friend named Andy, who now lives with his newly acquired partner Mel and for the last few years he's been coming round of a Monday night to play computer games, chat or be subjected to my eclectic taste in music. He has two full-sized pinball tables at home which stand alongside a monster cinema setup, but his primary interests are programming computers and building knobbly plastic models out of a well-known children's toy. In addition to running his own car damage assessment company, he also has two cats so despite the Lego obsession we're still talking about a pretty cool guy. Anyway he was round that evening and I took it as an opportunity to tell him about my whimsical weekend pursuits. Now is probably the time to let you know his viewpoint on the whole scenario from day one and it wasn't dissimilar to John's. Even though they had both implicitly trusted my judgement up until then, neither of them were prepared to give any credence to the supernatural and wouldn't budge an inch. I ran through Steve's recommendations and how I'd followed his advice, but added that unfortunately nothing had happened. Andy's response to this was certainly not what I would have expected and he proceeded to tell me that over the weekend he'd started to tidy up his collection of digital photographs. There was a stray directory in one of the data dumps from his old dead PC, which would have been easy to ignore, but for some unknown reason he decided to check whether it contained anything of importance. He found some photos which had been lost for

years and a few of them included Géraldine, but thought no more of it until I mentioned my lack of success with garnishing the cat.

Of course I was excited at the thought of seeing new pictures of her after so long, but when he e-mailed the folder over I knew I'd already seen them before and had my own copies, though it's always nice having an excuse to reminisce. They were taken one hot summer evening in 1997 when Andy came round to let us have a play with his new toy and this was the first time that I had ever come across a digital camera. Looking at them again, I noticed that Géraldine had taken one of Andy, Steve and I sitting in my living room with the long-tailed cat by the fireside, which is where it used to live before the house renovations. Most of my nick-nacks were stored away during the upheaval and precious few made it back, but I decided that this would make the perfect adornment for the new bathroom cabinet. I was neither surprised nor deterred when Andy put his discovery down to plain coincidence, but at least he acknowledged that the chances of finding them then and there had been reasonably remote. So it's just possible that the experiment may have been a success after all, but to be honest the results were far from conclusive.

I was no longer in regular contact with Steve, as he'd stopped playing with us online and I put this down to the pressures of work together with the pleasures of a new girlfriend. However it's also possible he felt a little redundant when Justin signed up for a broadband connection and was summarily invited by Geoff to join us. I didn't hear a peep out of him for almost a month, so I texted to see if everything was okay and asked whether anything had happened on May 1<sup>st</sup>. On June 4<sup>th</sup> I received a reply telling me that something which obviously belonged to Géraldine had unexpectedly come to light, but strangely he'd never seen it before. His next message said he'd be sending me two photos which were 4Mb each, as high resolution was needed to show the detail and he added that I should be prepared for oddness. After work I couldn't wait to get home as I had no way of guessing what he'd found and although my mind was racing, my driving was measured. I fired up the computer before pouring myself a large glass of cider from the fridge and a minute or so later I was able to open his e-mail.

<When I came back from my trip to Glastonbury, I go every year arriving a few days before May 1<sup>st</sup> and return a few days after, I discovered that the cats had knocked a ceramic duck off the shelf.

This had been a present from Jay and I always thought that it was solid, but in fact turned out to be hollow with a tightly wedged or glued down lid.

I found the following amongst the remains and noticed that one page had deliberately been creased, which was untypical of her.

Given what this is I am in no doubt that it was hers as she liked tiny things.

Does this have any meaning, well I don't know but it has certainly weirded me out a lot.

Regards

Steve>

His first photo showed the cover of a miniature French to English dictionary. [\(5-PIC\)](#) Now the majority of the time I knew Géraldine, her English was so fluent that I'd completely forgotten she had ever needed one. Memories came flooding back of getting to know her and when struggling for a word, she would always look it up in a bijou little red book which seemed to appear out of nowhere. Being so small it was easily palmed and she would playfully try to conceal her occasional lapses of vocabulary, but couldn't hide the guilty smile when I pretended not to have noticed. She was lovely in so many ways and that's my real reason for writing this down, as I don't want to forget any more of them. It was probably printed in the Fifties or Sixties and although well worn, you could tell that this precious possession had been looked after. However one single page was clearly marked by having the top left corner folded back on itself. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they treat books and there are many different levels of abuse that include reading in the bath, or even worse on the toilet, so it's no wonder in these days of health consciousness why lending libraries have become less popular. Some people think it's okay to make copious notes in margins while others feel compelled to underline key words or phrases, but my personal bugbear is the spine breaker who will bend back the covers until the leaves fan out to 360 degrees. Géraldine was hugely respectful and mutilating a page with a paper fold wasn't the sort of thing she would have done lightly or without sufficient provocation.

I believe that by acting out of character, she was drawing attention to her feelings regarding Steve's inability to stay faithful and let's see if you agree, but please understand this is purely hypothetical as we'll never know what really happened between the two of them. My best guess is Géraldine had chanced on this one page which summed up her situation so perfectly, that she chose to mark it and secretly squirrel away a time bomb of guilt for him to find in the future. Unfortunately her secure hiding place was too well chosen to be discovered unless by accident, so she had to help him out by creating one. Ten entries out of thirteen seem to tell a story and there's no better place for starting than from the top. [\(6-PIC\)](#)

Traducteur = a translator, which must refer to Géraldine herself.

Traduction = a translation, which must refer to the dictionary itself.

Traduire = the verb to translate, some meanings might not be obvious and will need researching rather than just reading.

Trafic, trafiquer = traffic, this didn't make sense so I investigated further and a second definition was to tamper with, which may have been referring to concealing the book within the duck.

Tragédie = a Bee Gees hit sung in French.

Tragédien = someone to whom the tragedy befalls.

Tragique = tragic, which could relate to the ending of their relationship.

Trahir = the verb to betray.

Trahison = the noun for betrayal, just to rub it in and I'm fairly certain that the next three words are irrelevant, but then at the bottom.

Trainée = a smear, but it's also slang for whore which I know sounds a mite harsh, but I'm sure the alternative meaning must have brought a wry smile to her face.

Steve like any sensible person would probably disagree with my hypothesis, but he'd have to admit that given his self-confessed history of womanising, it should at least be open to speculation. I don't know when Géraldine put her elegant plan into action, but it must have been after he'd met Julia and before they finally split up. From then onwards the duck would have sat undisturbed on various shelves in different houses for almost twenty years, until the weekend of the experiment. After all this time I find it more than mildly ironic that he was the one who had suggested moving the cat out of my bathroom, which inadvertently triggered the unexpected destruction of another of her gifts in order to finally reveal its long hidden contents. Here's his photo taken after a structurally sound, but far from invisible repair job. [\(7-PIC\)](#)

Gambling your reputation on evidence gathered from a third party is always risky and it should be thoroughly scrutinised before inclusion, but after careful deliberation I rated my rookie efforts as an undeniable success. The only disappointment was that nothing whatsoever had happened here, but maybe I just didn't look hard enough. I was keen to have another go and had already decided on employing exactly the same formula as before, but this time I needed to add a personal touch to see if that would produce more reliable results. There was no reason for me to disbelieve that timing wasn't unimportant, but now I wanted to celebrate a happier occasion and what could be better than her birthday on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, only a few weeks away.



This was easy to confirm as many years ago she'd asked me for help with compiling and printing out a CV on our computer at work, which is where I looked to check her date of birth. Taking a minute to read through a life laid out in bullet points, I couldn't help but smile at her purpose and spirit, although the tears weren't far behind so I had to go for a walk to compose myself. As there had been an absence of leakages in the bathroom to divert my concentration since April, I was free to think about what sort of birthday present would be most suitable under these unusual circumstances and it surely couldn't be anything practical like a new scarf or a Scalectrix set. I remembered seeing a history programme on TV about giving offerings to the dead, but that didn't help me at all as the old customs would probably have fallen out of favour with the more recently deceased. My gift would have to be carefully chosen and targeted specifically towards its recipient if I wanted to make a good impression, so I decided to search for something more appropriate, but as usual left things to the last moment.

July 2009

I had overlooked the fact that looking for inspiration is never going to be quite as straightforward as looking for your car keys and it was already early evening on Thursday the 2<sup>nd</sup> before I started my quest. After an hour of scouring the house for ideas, I came across a pile of books stashed at the back of a kitchen cupboard. Loosely holding each of them in turn with the pages facing upwards, one readily opened at exactly the right point exposing a poem I hadn't seen since the night she gave it to me, which seemed a lifetime ago. Its title was "On a hill top", but the rest had been written in French. Casting my mind back, I remembered it was during one of her weekly visits when completely off the cuff and without introduction or precedent, she had said something like "Neek I have a poem for you." Not knowing what to say apart from a cautious thank you, my subdued response must have sounded hesitant at best and insincere at worst. I'll admit to being taken by surprise as she had never mentioned her poetic inclinations before, but relieved to hear that it hadn't been written specifically for me.

Unfortunately poetry has always left me cold, with the possible exception of a few of Wilfred Owen's more poignant compositions and that timeless classic, "I eat my peas with honey". However many people including myself have suffered from this irksome affliction at some stage in life, but like bed wetting or the mumps, most of us were able to move on and abandon it to our distant pasts. Now I'm not suggesting for one moment that what others may class as a highly revered art form is a waste of paper, but don't forget how only using half the page means felling twice the number of trees. Neither am I saying you shouldn't write poems, just keep them for your eyes only and if they are discovered posthumously, then that's always the best way to avoid boring or even losing friends.

So it was with some unease that I unfolded the sheet of paper she'd just handed me and stared at the title, then the veritable mountain of French I had to climb, made even less decipherable by being handwritten instead of typed. Translating a few lines here and there was the best I could manage so she had to help me with the rest, but after all this time I can't remember any of her valuable inside information. After she had gone home I put it away somewhere safe and never brought the subject up again, which in retrospect seems quite ungrateful, but at least I wasn't tempted to retaliate by digging out one of my own from early adulthood. "It's late at night the lights are low, some music drifts in stereo", well I'll go no further but you can see what I mean. This was the one and only poem she ever gave me, which means it must have been particularly significant to her, but of course I failed to realise that at the time. I find it strange how the simple and unproductive act of dying lends gravitas to a person's work, as now that unloved sheet of A4 had turned into treasure which would become the perfect centre piece for my big event. Looking closely with the aid of a

magnifying glass I could tell that her pen had left no indentations on the paper, so this must have been a photocopy of the presumably lost original and I hope she won't mind me sharing it with you. [\(8-PIC\)](#)

In a belated attempt to express my appreciation I had decided to start work on an English version and with a liberal amount of help from the Internet, I began to cobble together what I thought was a pretty reasonable effort. This chance discovery was a rare window into the past as without any memory of the contents, to all intents and purposes I would be reading it for the first time. Although thanks to Justin's rusty but impressive grasp of the language I would later discover that I'd missed out a couple of lines completely, when during a routine visit he graciously agreed to cast his eyes over my translation with a view to helping me refine it. This has since been rectified so apologies for letting my attention waver, but the task was harder than I'd expected and I wanted to finish on time. I kept strictly to her usage of punctuation and capitals, as a faithful rendition of the original text was my primary concern, which meant altering the meaning of a single word in order to make a phrase read better would not be acceptable. So what if it turned out to be a bit clunky and inelegant, as I was happy enough just to preserve her heartfelt sentiments. However since we had already discovered one major error, I couldn't help thinking that in places I may have accidentally misunderstood what she was trying to say, so I'll probably decide to get it checked out by a native speaker before you can point out any more.

On a hill top,

Turned towards the stars of the East,

at the summit of a high mountain,

enveloped by a divine mist,

cradled by the wind of our countryside.

Eyelids lowered, but with an open soul,

the little girl inspires all this beauty,

that she was offered at birth,

from the goodness of divine hands.

Rising from the ashes,

a plaintive music in the valley,

lend an ear to listen better,  
to the melody with its hidden words.  
From the children that cry, with their bellies starving,  
to the people that deceive themselves and lie continuously,  
selling their love, faith and dignity,  
in this world where everyone is isolated.  
Both freedom and virtue,  
are gone, they don't exist anymore,  
from politician to parishioner,  
in the end I don't believe in anyone.  
Mediocrity destroys mother Nature,  
which will also perish one day,  
under the spell of impure ideas,  
by which the human race destroys.  
Too hard to talk about it,  
when you are gagged.  
Lift your eyes instead towards the sky,  
where goodness is eternal,  
the sun and the moon entwined,  
Be as light as a feather  
just like the angels behind the mist  
Where only the laws of the heart prevail.  
Life, isn't it extraordinary,

even so, you can't help trying to escape if you can,

I will come back if there's a second chance

as I have a summit close to the Gods.

Okay so it probably loses a lot in translation and if you think that I'm about to launch into a detailed analysis, then you've got another think coming as I need to make something very clear before we can continue. Even when Géraldine was alive I never made any headway towards understanding her complicated belief system, but of course that didn't stop me from trying. Throughout our long conversations over the years I felt like I was peeling layers off an onion and used this metaphor as a running joke which made her laugh, but ironically the process is also associated with tears, although I didn't realise just how soon they would catch up with me. Everyone is entitled to their own point of view and in matters of faith we rarely saw eye to eye, but it was always fascinating slowly getting to know more about what made her tick. Sadly I ran out of time on that one, as nobody told me I was working against the clock. Remembering the evening when she gave me the poem, it's incredible to think that something I had previously seen as a temporary impediment to us playing video games, is now my closest insight into her innermost thoughts. Who would have imagined that I could be left with so little, when I once had so much.

This all happened long before she displayed any signs of illness, but I was hoping that there may be clues which would shed light on her mindset at the time and eventually I found what I'd been looking for. The "Rising from the ashes" section is beautifully constructed and struck an instant chord with her funerary arrangements, but arguably that was down to sheer coincidence whereas the last four lines seem like a clear statement of intent. Perhaps if I'd quizzed her about them in sufficient detail I may have been able to delay the unforeseeable future, but there are insurmountable doubts in my head that I had the tools to prevent it.

The only thing left is a quick appraisal of her handwriting and as I'm no calligraphy expert, you'll need to find one of your own if you want to know more. I can see that it's perfectly spaced, while being enviously vertical with a gentle slope to the right, which is generally supposed to be an indication of a well-balanced individual. She had a measured though artistic style that betrayed little of the emotions behind her words and like all good poets, gave absolutely nothing away by underlining, capitalising or double inking. There are no crossings out, which suggests she must have transcribed it from an earlier copy after completing her modifications and although I'd spotted several errors of punctuation, surely none of us are petty enough to mark anyone down for that. I remember saying that I may get the translation checked so my thanks go out to a lady called Frances, whose

very name might provide a subtle clue to her nationality, for giving it a final polishing and doing better justice to the original.

So back to Thursday July 2<sup>nd</sup>, the date of her would-be fortieth birthday and I had spent the remainder of the evening struggling with my economical, but labour intensive choice of present. The Internet is a wonderful resource and I would have been totally lost without a speedy connection, so I really must congratulate her for waiting until the introduction of broadband. I finished just before midnight and took it straight upstairs to the top room, then carefully positioned my wooden cat in the right hand alcove with a portion of the recycled cannabis perched between its ears. This seemed to have worked before, so I didn't see any reason not to follow Steve's advice again and I put my plucky but flawed translation next to Géraldine's poem on the duvet cover. Having signed it with a single X on the bottom right hand corner of the page I placed the remaining lump close by, which was my special way of blowing a kiss. The last addition would be the biro I'd been using and the scene was set. Why did I leave the pen, well perhaps some sort of written communication from her would have been too much to hope for, but as a fundamental element of the writing process I felt that it deserved to be included.

I left the top room undisturbed for almost a day and a half. Reason being it was games night on Friday and there wouldn't be enough time to ponder any wonders that I may, or on the other hand, may not have found. I'd purposely mentioned this to no one, as the whole exercise had a pervasive air of lunacy and delusion about it which I would find hard to dispel. It could be deemed as beyond sad to spend so much time on a girl who's been dead for eight years, as I'd well and truly missed the boat, but don't forget that this was a big birthday after all. By keeping quiet I would be able to maintain my dignity if nothing occurred, but in the unlikely event of a positive result I could tell the guys all about it on Sunday. What did I expect would happen, well I simply had no idea as this was my first solo flight into the unknown, but you can see how confident of success I wasn't.

I'd set the alarm to wake me up early on Saturday morning and after putting on my dressing gown, I opened the attic door then nervously climbed the carpeted staircase. Just in case you're wondering, the heavy wooden door is secured by a substantial latch and there is absolutely no way the cats could gain access unless I left it open. Seeing that my inflatable mattress is particularly vulnerable to the predations of their sharp little claws, they are never allowed up there unsupervised, which makes them all the more determined to get in. So with that in mind I swiftly closed it behind me, as I can't imagine how any experiment of this nature would benefit from two unruly cats romping around. Sadly my expectations withered in the face of hard-nosed reality, as I soon found that nothing had changed and all of the components were uneventfully in the same places I'd left them. In fact the

only item which really should have been fiddled with, was my first rough draft of the poem shown in the photo I'd take about twenty minutes later. [\(9-PIC\)](#) If I'd allowed even one lone cat to squirm past and race me to the top then there might have been more to see, but reporting any findings after such an admission would be of no value to you or science. Please understand that if I let my standards slip, then reading on is pretty pointless unless you prefer fiction over factual and should anyone offer to wire me up to a lie detector, this is the perfect time to say I'd pass without breaking a sweat. You've doubtless noticed how I'm playing up to the part of being an honest and dutiful scientist, so with this in mind it might help to picture me dressed accordingly, as you can either hang on to my lab coat tails right now or risk getting left behind.

Feeling rather disappointed I went downstairs to have a pee and run a bath, but after opening the door I forgot about both in an instant. I couldn't believe my eyes as it definitely hadn't been there the night before, but a small sprig of cannabis was now sitting on the shelf where the long-tailed cat normally stood. Without a mouthful of expletives I can't even begin to describe my downright amazement on seeing it as I was witnessing the impossible, so surely there had to be some rational explanation. The fact that I was the only variable involved in the equation made me question my actions and motivation for any clues. Let's eliminate the chance that the item had been deposited unintentionally after becoming attached to my clothing, as it was a hot day and a cotton shirt would never have the adhesive properties of a woolly cardigan. Furthermore, I would also have to be leaning over at some ridiculous angle to drop it so tightly into the corner and I'm not as supple as I once was. The only answer I could come up with was maybe I popped it up there before going to bed last night, in order to hedge my bets and have both rooms covered. However I can tell you categorically that this was undertaken as a carefully planned and rigorous experiment, so after the initial setup why would I have chosen to sabotage myself by changing the parameters at such a late stage. I can hand-on-heartedly swear that I hadn't put it there on purpose or by accident and prepare yourselves for some corroborating evidence to back me up.

My second surprise was noticing that a curious design had inexplicably been scrawled in the dust on the shelf and there were an assortment of other marks to accompany it. After fetching my camera I decided that in light of these discoveries, it would also be prudent to take a few shots upstairs just in case I'd missed anything. Unfortunately time was running out which meant I wouldn't be able to look at my photos before I got back from work around six o'clock, but there's no reason why you should have to wait until then. [\(10-PIC\)](#) Taken without flash, this is exactly what I saw on entering the room and you can tell where the cat had been standing as its four paw prints are clearly visible. I can be confident in saying that Elsie was the last person to clean the shelf, bless her dear departed soul as she is no longer in

a position to provide home help and I have never been able to bring myself to look for a stand-in. Originally there was a piece of glass which used to cover the metalised surface and about a year ago she confessed to breaking it, but I respectfully declined her kind offer to pay for a replacement as this would just be another accident waiting to happen. Around two months earlier, Bunny cat had naughtily clawed his way to bringing the same glassy overlay crashing down into the basin although without mishap, but Elsie succeeded where he'd failed and I was glad that neither of them would ever have to risk dismemberment again in my bathroom.

You might get the feeling that I've been staring at this photo for far too long to be healthy, but before we switch into analytical mode there's an optional illusion I would like to draw to your attention if I may. It can either be used as a precursory limbering-up exercise to stretch your powers of perception, or an amusing diversion when I start to bore you. Using whatever digital technology you have to hand, centre the green object in the middle of your screen, then zoom in a fraction and stare until it looks like some sort of woodland creature. You should be able to make out a face consisting of two black eyes and a cute button-shaped muzzle above a pair of paws, which are holding something it could well be nibbling on. Still with me he asks optimistically. Next try scrolling right into the picture, then very slowly out and you may find that now it appears to be a man whose head is tilted to the right, just look out for his red tipped nose overhanging a rosebud mouth. Both hands are locked in prayer and I don't know whether this is frowned upon or not as I haven't tried it since Sunday school, but he may be sucking his thumb at the same time. What used to be the snout now becomes his new right eye and the old one has turned into a darkish hairline, but don't worry if you can't see him immediately as sooner or later you'll have plenty of time to practice. Admittedly it's a touch out of focus, but I think that just adds to the ambiguity and charm, although from now on I'll use my camera's flash setting as much as possible for clearer shots so you won't be able to accuse me of fudging the evidence.

Okay playtime is over and there's work to do, as we haven't yet investigated any of the peculiar dust marks which had also appeared at some point during the night. If we have a look in greater detail, you can see an inverted capital J which is fairly accurately aligned to the plant material in the corner, now robbed of its anthropomorphic qualities by a simple change of angle and engaging auto flash. [\(11-PIC\)](#) I'll grant you there's an unnecessary flourish at the top and it was only after flipping the image 180 degrees, that I discovered the J could possibly form part of a ninety percent completed lower case g. Forensically speaking, what I had here until this morning was a pristine wilderness of encrusted dust and I found myself looking for any small clues amongst the disturbances. It's rather like opening the front door after heavy snowfall and spotting the postman's tracks, interspersed with those of a dog which had cornered him in your garden. Unfortunately in my



scaled down scenario, there was no equivalent of torn off trouser or a blood trail to give me the precise details of what had transpired, but I could be wrong about that.

The character is actually made up of three individual strokes and to avoid any unnecessary confusion, I'm hoping that you still have the picture upside down. Firstly let's study the thin one on the left which isn't touching the others. Any object pushing through dust reacts like a mini glacier, which is to say that the debris field is found towards the limit of its travel and not the beginning. You can tell that it was inscribed from bottom left to top right, as there is a small white build-up at the end. I'm only leaving one stone unturned here and that's the strange blob at its starting point, although there's often a blot where you first put pen to paper. However as the line isn't conjoined, it really doesn't add anything more tangible to my understanding of the sequence of events. Looking at the other two, I can confidently say that the one which was made first starts in the middle of your screen, then goes right and does a hairpin before swooping down until it becomes roughly parallel to itself. Interestingly it passes beneath a couple of tiny white fibres, but I suppose they could have wafted in on a gust of air when I opened the door. The final one meanders downwards and then performs a wiggly U turn before thrusting up to form the tail of the g. You can see that this mark was made afterwards as the deposits clearly cut into the other line, yet it stops halfway through without overshooting.

Here's a close-up of the others which are less spectacular, although equally relevant as I had also signed my gift with a kiss, but if something looks too good to be true then it probably is, so perhaps I'm reading too much into this mutual appreciation malarkey. [\(12-PIC\)](#) Mistakes are easy to make so don't be overly hard on me, as you too may have been briefly fooled by some faint and strange looking hieroglyphs below the last line of my translation, but that's only because I'd written it on the back of a vet's letter confirming an appointment for Jasper's yearly health check. Coming to my own defence again here as someone has to, see how it's touching one of the paw prints rather than being in a random position, though I can promise there was absolutely no way I could have done that accidentally by simply picking up and removing the cat. So had she copied another element of my experiment upstairs, as now the two rooms weren't only linked by cannabis, but also with a kiss and her initial inscribed as further proof. I don't know precisely how these marks were made, but I'm sure that her tool of choice wasn't the ball point pen I'd optimistically left behind on the top floor, just in case she felt like sending me a message. To sum up then we have the unexplained remains of the reverent green in the bathroom, but I've yet to figure out what instrument was used and if this were a game of Cluedo, I wouldn't hazard a guess until I had more information to go on. You will have to make up your own mind about all of this, but I would be inclined to give me the benefit of the doubt at such an early stage of the proceedings.

Arriving at work just before nine thirty still buzzing with excitement, I found it almost impossible to keep focussed on the job as I felt like I'd been given all of my Christmas and birthday presents at once, while also being awarded a gold medal at the paranormal Olympics. This left me in no doubt that Géraldine had indeed worked her death defying magic during the night and you never know, some of it may have rubbed off in my direction. Around lunchtime I went out for a break and stumbled upon a charity shop where I found the best-selling historical novel that I'd been trying to track down for months on end, which somewhat arrogantly proclaimed itself to be a masterpiece on the jacket. This was a lot to live up to, but they say you should never judge a book by its cover so I handed the money to the cashier without further consideration and left, hoping that I wouldn't end up with a case of overhyped buyer's remorse.

Soon after arriving home I'd transferred the pictures over to my computer and although you've seen them before, I have purposely kept quiet about one important detail as I wanted to save the best until last. Congratulations are in order to anyone who has already spotted it and this will be the closest you'll get to sharing the thrill of discovery I felt at the time, but whereas your helpline was only temporarily down, don't forget that mine is permanently unavailable. If you're not sure what I'm talking about, don't worry as here's a later shot of the inverted g and at the bottom where its tail begins to curl, there's a less distinct shape which looks like some kind of chalice or fruit bowl. [\(13-PIC\)](#) You have to admire the precision involved to ensure that the rim and base are not only parallel to each other, but also in almost perfect alignment with the back wall of my cabinet. Sitting next to it is a round object which overlaps one side of the thick stem and if you can't see anything, then try turning up the brightness. Maybe it could represent a piece of fruit like an orange with a portion sliced off, but your guess is as good as mine and in order to give you a sense of its tiny dimensions, the metal clip which holds the mirror in place is only half an inch wide.

It's worth noting that this was also drawn upside down from my point of view and apart from the offset sphere, what we can see appears to be symmetrical, though one side of the bowl has been partially wiped out by the later line which plainly cuts straight through it. So we can say with absolute certainty which one was made first and this is reinforced by the fact that the earlier design had already started to crust over as fresh dust settled on the shelf. My first experiment had been over eight weeks ago, so there was ample opportunity for enough of it to land on and slightly obscure the image. This suggests there is every possibility that its arrival was concurrent with the other two finding their bits and pieces, while myopic old me found nothing. Although to put things in perspective, why should I spend my time staring at an empty shelf, as it's never held any fascination for me up until now and there was no chance of seeing anything at all after I'd replaced the wooden cat.

I'm prepared to lose a little credibility here, but I can tentatively say that I may have found her first attempt or practice run, which is also partially covered by dust so it fits perfectly into my timescale. This only looks like a rough sketch by comparison and isn't even finished, but I can see similarities once again as its base is very nearly aligned to the cabinet wall, with a prototype for a circular feature on the same side of the stem. [\(14-PIC\)](#) We were golfing that evening due to a last minute postponement of Friday's session and I still had enough of the miraculous about me to win by getting my first all birdie round, although I'm sure you won't insist on seeing the shot I took of the scorecard. To be honest I never expected to work out the significance of these strange drawings and it was a fair while later before I finally hit upon a possible answer. I had resigned myself to thinking that this was just random artwork, but taking the subject matter of fruit and tableware into account you would have to classify it as still life. Perhaps it was a hidden message, as I had been looking for some kind of response and I can't think of any more elegant way than this of reaffirming that there is still life after death.

Of course by morning the glamour had worn off, everything was back to normal and my mastery of golf would never again reach such lofty heights. Andy came round on Monday night and when I shared my latest news with him it wasn't as rapturously received as I'd hoped for, but after a short discussion we decided that attempting to recreate the marks might prove interesting. Naturally this was my idea, but his suggestion that they could have been made by a piece of weed being dragged across the shelf seemed like our best starting point. They say wonders never cease and despite being far from sympathetic to the cause, it's a worthy testament to his generous nature that he was prepared to indulge me by taking part at all. This involved a swift detour to my kitchen cabinet and I returned with the larger sprig I'd used upstairs, as I didn't want to risk damaging the one that had turned up so unexpectedly. I'd already determined that it would soon be afforded permanent protection against the ravages of domestic drug abuse like this, by being sealed within a small and airtight screw-topped glass jar. Andy tried first and it was a bit of a shock to find out that he'd made no visible impression whatsoever. We quickly realised that it took a lot more downward pressure than either of us would have predicted to produce any sort of result, as the dust had become impacted over time in a mixture of neglect and foresight. I couldn't resist having a go at it myself and I was surprised at how firmly you needed to push to achieve the desired effect. [\(15-PIC\)](#) You can see from my photo that there are very definite similarities in the striations, but our efforts looked positively crude by comparison as neither of us possessed enough dexterity or artistic talent to replicate the original.

This is a good time to share something I discovered soon after my house renovations were finished, which shows how you can find curiosities in the

strangest of places, but also demonstrates that it would be overly naive and statistically unsound to put all of them down to the supernatural. Dave wanted to replace my interior doors, including the rustic ones on the first floor which I'd earmarked for restoration, but I soon went off the idea when he told me it looked like they had been cobbled together out of old wardrobes and that a sandblaster would tear them apart. Sadly I was in no position to disagree because a while back, Justin had knocked a few planks loose by taking a drunken tumble down the top stairs as if he were trying to gatecrash a party in Narnia. I'd been allocated the easier task of choosing the four for my ground floor from B&Q, whilst they elected to construct the others out of slices of raw tree from a builders' yard, but Ted had just acquired a new router with multiple cutting blades so we were forced to rein in his eagerness to over-embellish. Needless to say they took over the job of banging and hanging, but it was only when I forgot to turn off the bathroom light one night that I noticed this fine fellow looking back at me from out of the woodwork. [\(16-PIC\)](#) Wearing a surgical mask and sporting a fashionable pair of shades, he comes over as rather intimidating for a small translucent knot in a door, but as none of the others had anything similar, could it be an important portent or was this instance coincidence?

Thanks to the bright sunshine coming through the skylight on Wednesday morning, I noticed something new which turned out to be the most intricate design so far and I can't ever foresee her surpassing this miniature marvel. [\(17-PIC\)](#) Despite being less than a centimetre across, here's an example of quality versus quantity and what makes this one particularly special was the fact that it hadn't only been scratched through the dust, but actually into the metal itself. I love the way that it had been so beautifully crafted and without a doubt this has become one of my all-time favourite pieces by any artist, either living or dead. Analysing untitled work is always difficult and everyone will have their own interpretations about what is being depicted, so it's highly unlikely that we'll ever reach a consensus of opinion. I thought it was supposed to be a vintage motor boat and you can just glimpse the driver's head poking out above the windscreen, but on his next visit, all that Andy would acknowledge were a few random lines. We have already seen that there's a kink in the tail of the g and it's almost as if a moment's hesitation had resulted in a small deviation before part of the bowl was obliterated. What really amazed me though, was in a remarkable feat of scrupulously planned positioning, my engraver from beyond the grave had also chosen that very same spot to ply her trade. Indeed if you look closely at the shape of its waterline and stern, they seem to be a conscious attempt at rectifying her previous mistake by retracing the missing section.

Then all of a sudden it came to me and I could see a whale rising up above the surface of the ocean, while swimming close to the shoreline of a small island. There's a white dot which could easily be his eye and you can clearly identify a pectoral fin sweeping down towards the water. The semblance

of movement is enhanced by an upward splash off the snout and the downward streams from his flipper. I believe that an artist's skill can often be judged on how few strokes they need to portray their subject and I'm really impressed by the way the creature's back arches against the sea, before making a perfect return to be joined so precisely with a line that completes its head. Now there's just the nagging question of explaining the one single solitary diagonal which seems out of place, unless you are prepared to accept that it could possibly be a searchlight being carried by someone who's making her way to a hill top. Here's another taken with a different camera setting and zooming in you can see a part of his tail, but it's definitely at the wrong angle which could be a sign of deformity, so maybe he's a humpback. [\(18-PIC\)](#)

It goes without saying that I had no inclination to even consider attempting a recreation of this one. For starters my naked eyes are no longer up to the task and trying to establish which implement had been used would be pure guesswork. The only item sharp enough was a safety pin I keep in the cabinet for the occasional spot which needs lancing, but I strongly doubt that Géraldine would have been comfortable with giving me tetanus. By the way I'm trying to delay the onset of wearing glasses for as long as possible, because I believe that they make your eyes lazy and this will cause them to deteriorate even faster. I assure you that this is not out of vanity, as I currently carry a cheap magnifying lens in my pocket to look at the miniscule margins we can achieve on the increasingly illegible price lists sent from head office. Of course there's always the option of expensive laser surgery but this has never really appealed to me, especially when I think about the image of the creepy guy wearing sunglasses and a mask, as I wouldn't fancy paying someone like that to burn away at my eyeballs.

The only other picture from the first batch that I haven't shown you yet is this one, because I really don't know if it's relevant or not and try to ignore the somewhat distracting reflection. [\(19-PIC\)](#) I remember thinking at the time that these markings were unusual, which is why I took a close-up as they look like some sort of paw print, only it's twice the size of those my cats could leave. There are also a few dashes which I hadn't spotted before, but they're far too small for us to worry about so we should treat them as background noise and move along, although I would rather report ten unrelated observations than risk missing a single valid one. However I'm a bit disappointed in myself already and feel that you are owed an apology, as going against my own advice I fully intended to gloss over the next discovery. It was certainly not my intention to short change you, but fresh information from developments which are yet to happen suggests that I would be imprudent to leave out this slightly unsightly item. Please don't go all panicky on me and think I must be raving mad if I'm getting messages from the future, as the explanation is far less exciting but would that it weren't. I am currently writing this about four months ahead of where you

are in the story and as events are unfolding around me, I can include insights which would otherwise be lacking if I'd been up to date. The fact is that there has recently been an odd occurrence which adds relevance to the image I had previously decided to omit and you will understand why I'd chosen to do so in a moment.

Although it showcases deficiencies in my standards of cleanliness, this isn't necessarily a bad thing under certain circumstances in the same way that it's not a great idea to boil wash the Shroud of Turin, even if you're the Pope and your mum's coming for a visit. Here's an extreme close-up shot of my basin taken on Sunday afternoon July 12<sup>th</sup> and at first glance there seems to be nothing unusual, as I'm sure that you've seen discolouration like this before. [\(20-PIC\)](#) The broken circle is around two centimetres in diameter and you would imagine that this type of mark must have been made by a slow leak from the cold tap, only it happened to be a good couple of inches to the left instead of directly underneath. There's a further problem here as my taps don't drip, so we need to consider alternative theories and I can narrow down the options by saying that yesterday there was absolutely nothing at all worth photographing, or I would have done so. The relevance of this particular feature, rather than an explanation, will become apparent in November and you'll just have to trust me on that until you catch up. One last matter which may be causing you concern is the haphazard way I can casually switch from metric to imperial, but this is me showing my age so I'll try not to do it in the same paragraph and certainly never again in the same sentence. I know how confusing that can be, ever since a customer told me he wanted a length of speaker wire three metres, six inches long, which is only slightly more helpful than asking to pay for it with a ten pound note and some leftover holiday Euros.

August 2009

We skip ahead to Saturday the 1<sup>st</sup>, games night as people weren't free to play on the Friday. It had been raining most of the day, which was hardly encouraging for the barbecue summer we were promised by the Met Office. This was another case of the "Don't worry, there will be no hurricane" forecast in terms of inaccuracy, but fell short of its devastating effects unless you had acted on their advice and invested heavily in a patio supply company. Sevenoaks in Kent was badly affected by the Great Storm of 1987 and although I slept through it, I can still remember waking up the following morning. There had obviously been a power cut as the display on my radio alarm clock was flashing, but I thought nothing of it and readied myself for work as per usual. On leaving the flat I was rather shocked to find that the industrially sturdy fence bordering my driveway had fallen over into next door's car park, with the thick fixing posts which held it in place uprooted and plucked from their concrete foundations. Despite living a mere fifty yards away, I was accustomed to always being the last one in and finding Paul my employer conspicuous by his absence, I realised that the weather conditions must have been worse than I'd originally suspected. As the phone lines were down he was uncontactable, so I decided to drive round and offer him a lift. In sharp contrast to his gleaming red Ferrari I had a matte yellow Triumph Spitfire at the time, which hadn't only been rolled by the previous owner but hand painted by roller afterwards, so I wasn't overly afraid of getting it scuffed. With its roof down, my car proved low enough to be able to drive underneath the occasional obstacle lying across the road and I managed to get a fair way there, but I was stumped by the formerly spectacular tree-lined avenue which led to his house. Predictably the shop didn't take any money that day, but being a born entrepreneur I'm sure he would have taken full advantage of the situation, by powering up his chainsaw and collecting some free firewood.

Anyway I apologise if I'm boring you with trivialities, as that is a writer's cardinal sin. I definitely need to focus my thoughts, or I'll be wasting even more of your valuable time on the planet that would have been better spent doing something productive and worthwhile instead. To illustrate the full extent of the problem, let's be bold with projected sales and say that a thousand people have spent a couple of hours reading through some of my more superfluous waffle, which is the same as robbing you of over three months of your collective lives. Although if I ever reached a readership of three hundred thousand then mathematically this could be equated to manslaughter, which however you look at it is no laughing matter. You'll remember the novel I'd been searching for, the one that was waiting for me on a shelf in a charity shop only a few weeks ago and by the way I had resisted buying it new, as saving money whilst helping a good cause makes perfect sense. Well maybe I approached it with exaggerated expectations, but issues with insufficient characterisation and the suspension of disbelief

necessary to follow the storyline reminded me of my book, which could have suffered similarly if I'd decided to leave out the pictures. I kept on thinking that it was bound to get better and a great ending would compensate for having to endure page after dreary page, but no such luck. So would the author of that weighty tome, you know who you are, go and sit in a darkened room for a while to silently reflect on your crime against humanity. I of course had a plan to make amends around the same time I started writing and hopefully it would prove to be the solution to this tricky dilemma.

Let me tell you how I became the unsung hero of my local car park. As far back as I can remember, you could always walk straight out towards the main road through a thin strip of land which belonged to the property next door, until a new company moved in and decided to deny us access to the shortcut. Posts were erected one yard apart and connected by stout looking metal chains, so that everybody would now be forced into taking the far slower, but no more scenic route. All I can say is that I wasn't alone in being unhappy with this territorial demarcation and restriction of personal liberty. Before too long, somebody had re-established our thoroughfare by teasing out the fixing which was loosely attached to the adjoining wall, but they quickly countered by having it cemented back in position. I don't know how, but within a week the newly restored piece of chain had been broken in two and this foiled them for a couple of days until they tied it together with a short length of twine. Something like a heavy boot soon exploited this classic example of a weak link, which would almost certainly have failed at the first kick and trespassing was back in fashion as I watched people wandering through the gap. I was feeling public spirited when I returned to my car that evening, so to save anyone from tripping I wound the longer end which had been lying spooled on the ground, back around the section still hanging to its left. Come morning I saw that the chain had been tied together again, although this optimistic re-repair didn't even last until home time, so I resolved to take charge of the situation and escalate it to the next level.

The following day after work, I found myself approaching the car park with a plan in my head and a padlock in my pocket. I neatly rewound the chain as I'd done before, but this time fastened it with the lock that I had removed from one of the grilles in my shop window. Please don't worry that I may have breached security in one location to compromise it in another, as I'd identified one of the rare occasions where a large nail will do exactly the same job. I can't guess why my fix has been allowed to survive for so long, unless they mistakenly thought that it was the work of the local council reclaiming public right of way over private land and didn't want to interfere. Well getting back to my time wastage neutrality footprint, I reckon that this must have saved people at least a minute twice a day. Now say a thousand motorists, not to mention their passengers use the car park on a weekly



basis, then over a period of a few years I can pretty much guarantee that I will have successfully atoned for most, if not all of my wordy transgressions.

Anyway back to Saturday August 1<sup>st</sup>, an atypical but routine online gaming session. For the life of me I can't remember exactly who was around, but we were certainly short on the Steve front by one as he had opted out by then. An explanation is needed here as a few months ago, relations had been strained when we were chatting before play commenced. He e-mailed me photos of his new girlfriend, accompanied by a strongly worded caveat that I wasn't to share them with the other guys, which seemed a little unfair and I couldn't resist making a witty but ill-advised comment. Steve, who didn't see the funny side soon registered his displeasure by boycotting games night and it was only through Markie's remarkable skills in diplomacy that things were back on track. From then on I made every effort to behave myself, but it only turned out to be a temporary armistice as before long he'd stopped playing for good. On balance I really can't be expected to shoulder all of the blame as this happened after Justin had been invited to join in and you've already seen a telling example of how having five players doesn't work nearly as well as four, so it wasn't only down to my wilfully offensive sense of humour. All I'd said was she looked like Amy Winehouse but damaged, although none of us had even the slightest inkling at the time that my description would prove to be quite so poorly chosen, tasteless and unfounded.

We had just finished our last game for the night, so I exited Skype then shut down the computer and put my headset away, before visiting the bathroom around 11.15 pm for a long overdue pee. You may be thinking that there was another puddle in progress, but you'd be wrong as all I found were the remains of one. I could see that a large volume of water had dripped, albeit further away from the back wall than normal, so apart from its position, size, shape and dried out nature, this was really nothing out of the ordinary. [\(21-PIC\)](#) All previous leaks had flowed from where the hot pipe connects to the wall, but I could tell that this must have come from the metal trap which still felt moist when I ran my fingers over it. As most of you will already know, a basin trap forms part of the drainage system and is unaffected by water pressure, so it could only ever leak while the taps are running. I believe that one of its main tasks is to catch any small valuables, like diamond earrings or delicate gold chains which may accidentally have been dropped down the plughole and save them from being washed away. In theory it can easily be unscrewed and emptied, but for some reason this one is stuck fast so it's lucky I don't have posh friends who wear expensive jewellery. I can assure you there was no possibility whatsoever that it could have occurred when I last washed my hands, as I didn't notice anything unusual and damp socks are always a bit of a giveaway. So it must have started after my bathroom break around an hour ago and stopped quite quickly, or there would be more to see than just an outline on the floor.

Andy came round on Monday the 3<sup>rd</sup> and I excitedly explained what had happened whilst showing him the photos. I wasn't expecting that he would be instantly converted to the cause you understand, but equally I wasn't expecting his reaction of being quite so unilaterally unimpressed by my discovery. His verdict of defective plumbing brought the matter to an unsatisfactory conclusion, as apparently any other explanation would be utterly absurd, but rather than just bringing me down to earth I had the impression he was trying to bury me beneath it. I had a sneaking suspicion that he wasn't interested in further investigation, so in order to find out what could turn my trap into a refreshing foot spa I set about trying to recreate it the following evening. My first course of action was running the hot tap on full for a minute or two, but this produced no sign of dripping below so I turned on the other one which also failed to produce a result. In fact my only successful strategy was popping the plug in and leaving both taps on until water gushed through the overflow hole at the top. This was more than sufficient to make the trap start leaking again, but as you would imagine that's not the way I normally wash my hands. My amateurish reconstruction looked a complete shambles and nothing like the original, but I was now aware that a surplus of water could be the cause, although this didn't really get me any closer to solving the puzzle of where it came from.

Due to Justin and Geoff's work commitments, our games night had been temporarily moved to Wednesday so we played some golf then finished the session with a spot of racing. I said goodnight before settling down to watch TV, nipping out to the bathroom during the adverts only to find another trap puddle which was already in the process of drying. [\(22-PIC\)](#) There had been no residual sign of my overspill experiment when I checked that morning, so this was definitely fresh leakage and the beads of moisture around the connection with the waste pipe confirmed it. This had been an approximate recreation of the previous one, as if to show a slow learner like me how to do the job properly and I thought it was odd that my last two pictures were taken exactly four days apart, with only two minutes separating them. There would have been a simple explanation for this if I was watching recorded TV instead of a commercial channel off air, then I could put it down to my regular toileting habits rather than a lucky example of programme scheduling.

I was eagerly looking forward to the next instalment, but didn't expect such a long wait before it finally happened and this is where you have a distinct advantage over me as you'll find out in a minute or two, unless you're reading in real-time. You may be unaware of the concept so allow me to explain. This little known technique is the best way of embracing my full experience, but admittedly it's not for everyone as it requires synchronising your calendar with mine and making sure you never read ahead of the current date. There are obvious drawbacks, as after purchasing the book it

might take you months to progress any further than page seventeen, which is when my story starts to resemble a diary and if this practice catches on we may find retailers introducing a temporary price hike around mid-April. It's the opposite of speed reading and if I've caught you skimming superficially across the surface of my text like one of those odd insects that walks on water, then slow down a bit as you'll be missing out on the finer details, which may well have included this helpful piece of advice for all I know. You wouldn't listen to an LP at 78 rpm or watch a DVD on fast forwards, so why subject the written word to the same level of abuse as it's not a race to the finishing line and there are penalties rather than prizes for speeding. This brings to mind a wise old German proverb that states, "It's not healthy to swallow books without chewing", which probably predated and was doubtless unrelated to the invention of the Heimlich manoeuvre.

September 2009

It was Thursday the 10<sup>th</sup> before I had anything new to report and welcome back to my real-time readers. I hope the days didn't drag during your self-inflicted exile of just over a month, but now you've joined us again we can all relax, put our feet up and get ready to hear about the most potentially traumatic event in my life so far. First I need a moment to compose myself, so here's a short pictorial interlude and I was debating whether to show you this one or not, but now I have the perfect opportunity to slip it in. [\(23-PIC\)](#) Earlier this morning I was briefly intrigued by the way that steam from my bath also revealed the puddles which must have formed and dried before I noticed them, as it had rehydrated their long lost outlines on the stone floor like seeing hidden messages written in invisible ink. There were circular ones as you would expect, but also a strange looking rectangular pattern which was rather unusual. The markings to the lower left are worth a mention too, but to make sense of them you have to have to flip the photo upside down, as who amongst us would ever believe that a monkey could find itself staring at an inverted wolf. However you look at it, this is purely circumstantial evidence and as such I would encourage a moderate amount of scepticism, seeing that my mind holds the long jump record for leaping to conclusions. I'm using this as a sort of Rorschach test though I don't know what it betrays of my inner thoughts and maybe as Andy says, I am just seeing Jesus in the snow, or Buddha in a baguette. You decide, or decide not to decide at this decidedly early juncture.

It's time for three new characters to enter our storyline and since one of them is dead, let's be respectful by according him the honour of the first introduction. However before I forget, I'd like to thank the inventor of the digital camera who has made life a lot easier for me in so many ways. I am of an age where I still think it's marvellous that you can see pictures displayed on a screen within seconds of taking them. What's more with the scroll of a mouse wheel or a quick pinch of the fingers, you can zoom way beyond the limitations of any magnifying glass and I count myself lucky that these innovations have come to market, as I'd be presenting a far less convincing case without them. When I was a young whippersnapper you'd have to drop the film off at Boots the Chemist for processing, or send it away by post for a week or so before your shots came back and only then would you be able to check to see if any of them had come out. My dad didn't care for this lengthy rigmarole at all and had constructed his very own darkroom, which he'd artfully located in a hitherto unused part of our converted attic. This hadn't only been a way of saving money by developing and printing his own pictures, but it was also the closest thing to instant photography in the mid-Sixties without the poor quality result you would have achieved with a Polaroid. Even after all these years, I can still recall the scent of his aftershave mingling with that sharp tang from the chemical baths which filled the air. I used to adore spending time up there with

him, the infrared light providing a temporary rosy hue to the images as affordable technology back then could only produce black and white, which suited me fine because that was just how things looked on TV.

Hold the front page as there's an event happening in my bathroom right now while I'm writing and you don't have to be a genius to guess what it is. This will require further explanation to avoid confusion, as I'm currently beaver away at the keyboard on a Thursday evening in November and it is safe to say that I've had an interesting couple of weeks, which is all I can tell you at the moment without polluting the timeline. I don't think I will be leaking too much information by disclosing that the pipe variety has just started as I'm typing these words. Perhaps it's a sign that somebody up there appreciates my efforts and this is her way of letting me know, but firstly we'll need to see it in context so let's try not to get ahead of ourselves. If the dripping continues, I'll have to choose whether it merits a pint glass or a bucket and I promise to let you know the outcome in the fullness of time.

It's been an ever-increasing number of years since my dad died and I know that he would have liked to have lived longer, but cancer cruelly overruled his plans for longevity. After the final prognosis he likened it to living on death row, knowing that the worst would happen at some point, but what would be would be. He survived in that place with courage and without complaint, sporting a uniquely British insouciance towards the inescapable which still fills me with admiration. The only time the two of us ever really spoke of it was after I nearly killed him, when we went out for a spin in my shiny new red Mitsubishi twin turbo-charged street racer. I misjudged the power of the vehicle as I pulled out from a side road in front of a speeding truck and learnt that four wheel drive wasn't the get out of jail free card which had been hinted at in its glossy brochure. Having put my foot down far too early before straightening up, I could see the cab with its huge trailer gaining on me in the rear view mirror, as I snaked one way and then veered wildly towards the other. Knowing that I'd been showing off, I feathered the throttle for a moment or two and when all four tyres bit tarmac we were catapulted down the carriageway at warp speed, but probably still within legal limits as I was too busy thinking about being rear-ended to worry about the speedometer. On the way back home he said it wouldn't be a good idea to tell mum about how fast my car could go and I've kept that a secret from her until now. I asked him whether, given his current condition he felt less concerned about life threatening situations and the answer I received was wholly negative, so I made a mental note to chauffeur more sedately in future. It was obvious that he wanted to hang on for as long as possible, but wouldn't shy away from the inevitable and neither did my mother. He even printed out and clearly labelled copious instructions concerning the previously male dominated responsibilities of tasks such as how to use the hi-fi, or operate the computer. Household technology had

always been his domain, so this was an efficient way of passing on precious knowledge which would prepare her for the hazards ahead, like wrongly programming the video recorder and missing "Last of the Summer Wine". As it had already been discussed, he knew that she couldn't face the thought of living alone and would eventually look for a new partner, so being a practical man in more ways than one he'd given her his blessing.

Growing up it seemed that nothing was too much of a challenge for him to master, as he could turn his hand to anything and produce amazing results. His finest creation was a four person trailer tent that he built from scratch in our back garden. Unlike our old bagged version which seemed to take only marginally less time to construct than the pyramids, this was up and habitable within minutes due to the cunning introduction of hinged sections that unfolded, providing a rigid structure to support the canvas roof. I remember he assigned me the job of making two little wooden stepped chocks, which would allow the swing-down legs to stand level if the ground was uneven. This was a big deal for me as up until then, my only real contribution had been sitting on assorted lengths of timber and keeping them steady while he did the sawing. Although my scrappy attempts at carpentry were crude and inexact by his standards, he still generously signed them off to be part of the build. Of course mum would always gamely help out wherever possible, as she was fully supportive in her role as hardworking and dutiful wife cum part-time skivvy. I've one more vital piece of information to impart before we continue and I've given you sufficient reason to doubt me on many occasions, but this is beyond reproach. A lot of people may think they have the best mother in the world, well I know for a fact they're wrong as I can tell you in no uncertain terms that mine's better.

It was Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> of September when mum accompanied by Ron, who I still think of as her new husband, were driving down to holiday on the coast and they had broken their journey with a stop-over to meet up with me. After work I jumped in the car and made my way to a charming country inn where they had booked a room for a couple of nights. We had a good chat over a great meal and I gave her a loving, but guilt-ridden hug before heading home, thinking about the bombshell I was going to have to drop the very next day. Just to clarify an important point, when I described him as her new husband I meant it in terms of recent and not replacement. They've been married for a few years so this description isn't entirely accurate, but the two of them are just as much in love with each other now as when they first met and it still looks brand new to me. Despite being an avid Norwich City supporter, Ron was the most perfect find that either she or I could possibly have hoped for, but when I discovered he loved The Beatles this more than made up for his football addiction, an ailment which I'm pleased to say has almost completely cleared up.

They came round on Sunday morning to take me out for the day and I'd already warned mum that my house was in a bit of a state, but she told me not to worry as I obviously had more pressing obligations. The reality of course was that I had taken a rare afternoon off work and blitzed the areas they would see while totally ignoring the rest. It's like wearing a pullover in winter, why on earth would you bother to iron anything apart from the collar and cuffs of your shirt, as energy conservation not only saves time but also the planet. We had lunch at one of my favourite pubs then spent the afternoon mooching around the nearby historic dockyards, which were the subject of a massive refurbishment project. The magnificent tall ships were more than enough to justify a visit by themselves, but there was plenty else to see including museums, various maritime exhibits and one of the old warehouses which had been converted into an antique market. Here's an exquisite, but reasonably inexpensive item that caught my eye and I thought it looked worthy of a quick photo. [\(24-PIC\)](#) Stopping at a café for refreshments, we sat by the waterside innocently sipping our cappuccinos as a constant stream of people flowed past, all blissfully unaware that one of us was harbouring a guilty secret, so I drank up whilst avoiding too much eye contact and bided my time.

Up until that weekend, I used to have this real and convincing reoccurring dream in which my parents had discovered I enjoyed the occasional puff of marijuana. It was so vivid that for a few moments after waking up, I couldn't be sure whether they actually knew or not in reality. Even in my worst nightmares I've never inhaled in their presence, let alone managed to light up as something would always go wrong and I'd be caught long before that happened. If my thinking is correct then dad already knows and hasn't chosen to manifest his displeasure, so all I had to worry about was telling mum as I suspected that Ron would be cool with it. This was the skeleton in the closet that I felt sure I would be taking with me to the grave, but my hand had been forced so now I couldn't see any alternative to professing a penchant for pot. I was determined that I needed to share my brushes with the supernatural as soon as possible, but you can see how the tale would become untellable if I left out any mention of this humble yet pivotal species of weed. My motivation was simple, everyone has a natural aversion to death which can surely be alleviated if you believe, or even choose not to outright disbelieve that there is something beyond the cessation of the body, almost like a footnote to our lives. In fact scratch that theory as I imagine it's the other way round and our time on Earth will turn out to be nothing more than a short but memorable teaser to the main attraction, which is waiting for every last one of us when we can no longer ignore a personalised invitation to eternity.

I thought my plan was good to go, but when I discussed it with Markie he shrewdly suggested that lumping the ganja and ghostly revelations together might be too much to stomach in one hit. So I resolved to split them into

two smaller semi-palatable pieces, it was drugs on the Sunday and the ghost would have to wait her turn. This wasn't a major setback as I knew that they would be down again in the New Year, which is no time at all especially when you're dead. Unfortunately for me this meant that my bathroom now required urgent attention, as I didn't want to leave them shelf-shocked due to the mess we'd made by our experimental doodling, but I wasn't willing to destroy any evidence. Drawing a diagonal line down the middle, I cleaned only the left half which contained nothing of interest and the overall effect looked quite artistic, so I was sure I'd be able to fend off any inquisitive comments.

As it was getting late we finished our coffees and headed back to the car park. It's an all too rare but magical occurrence if the fates choose to play their hand precisely in your favour, but that's exactly what happened when the three of us found ourselves walking down a narrow side street. Outside a terraced house I spotted something that could potentially go a long way towards softening them up. Hanging next to the front door was a ceramic plaque which said "Sun + Water + Seed = Weed" with a marijuana leaf above it, like a cannabis coat of arms but without the Latin. When I pointed it out my mum was completely perplexed as weeds, alongside the dreaded greenfly are her horticultural nemeses and as such shouldn't be celebrated in this fashion, or in any other that she could care to imagine. Ron as if on cue, immediately demonstrated his superior worldly wisdom by remarking that the sign was referring to pot and not the common or garden variety of weed. Although I had subconsciously laid the foundation for my revelation, I remember mentioning in passing that if you happened to be involved in an illegal pursuit such as this, then advertising it so blatantly was not an intelligent move. So it's rather ironic that by going public with an even more detailed admission of guilt, I was committing the same schoolboy error but this time writ large and often. Now I daresay that you've heard of medical marijuana, which has never attracted a great deal of negative press as those suffering from all kinds of complaints have reported its many benefits. In some enlightened countries it's even prescribed by doctors, so vulnerable members of society aren't forced into breaking the law when conventional medicine doesn't work. I however would like to argue that possession of ceremonial cannabis needn't be frowned on by the authorities, as after all I'm only using it to harness the awesome powers of the dead, so what could possibly go wrong?

My dalliance with dope started in the early Eighties and I have never felt tempted to move on to heroin or heavy metal, so I reckon the gateway theory is a little lame. Although there was one awkward incident which illustrates the inherent risks and this in itself may be enough to make the first time user think twice about experimenting with such a potentially ruinous substance. I remember I was staying with my parents over a Christmas break and it must have been many years ago, as I never rolled



one up in their house again after dad fell ill. We had all retired for the night so I'd neatly folded my clothes to act as a bedroom door draught excluder and under cover of total darkness with no street lamps to give me away, I was contentedly smoking a Yuletide spliff out of a window at the front of the bungalow. I'd been trying so hard not to drop it, that of course the inevitable happened and my suspicious looking cigarette tumbled to the ground before disappearing in a brief flurry of sparks. Now like a lot of parents, mine were early risers and keen gardeners, a dangerous combination as the thought of one of them discovering said item in the morning was beyond unthinkable. I couldn't reach down to retrieve it and I didn't dare use the double-bolted front door which would be far too noisy.

My only solution was the window so I opened it as far as I could and slowly lowered myself down onto the flowerbed, narrowly missing a clump of rose bushes. Crouched in the dark I began to scour the ground with my fingertips, when suddenly every single dog within earshot seemed to start barking at once, which made me feel more like a hunted criminal than a conscientious objector trying to escape from the war on drugs. All around me I could see house lights being turned on as the neighbours vacated their beds to investigate the canine commotion. When the sleeve of my dressing gown snagged against some thorns, I realised that I would have had a better chance of success by going naked, as now utter disgrace and total embarrassment were surely only moments away. Then to my good fortune, whoever the patron saint of cannabis might be I knew he was smiling on me as I chanced upon the damnable evidence, carefully stood up and neatly prised myself back through the window to safety. Brushing away all traces of what I hoped was just soil, I finished it off once the hue and cry had abated. However I used both hands to hold on tightly this time, which wasn't the most stylish method of smoking I've ever seen but when you're roughing it out in the sticks, common sense should always prevail over elegance.

We arrived back home by early evening and I disappeared into the kitchen to boil the kettle, leaving them sitting comfortably on my huge sofa in the living room, but not for long. Naturally I poured myself a large glass of cider and I did offer, but they were happy with caffeine their legal drug of choice. I put on some background music and waited for the sort of lull in the conversation which was approximately bombshell-sized. At this point I still had the option of chickening out and saying nothing, which was certainly the easiest way to preserve the quiet life I tend to prefer, but taking a long hard chug I decided to stick to my guns. "Err, I've got something to tell you", I blurted out to my mother, "You've always been completely honest with me and I think you ought to know that I've used cannabis." Those probably weren't my exact words as that precise moment in time is still a blur to me, though she will doubtless remember them forever. To Ron's eternal credit the stunned silence was broken by him saying that having tried it once in

the Seventies, not in his seventies you understand, he'd noticed no effects whatsoever and never felt the need to come back for a second helping.

Well there it was, out in the open like me in my dressing gown going commando style, two real life confessions she hadn't been expecting at all the poor dear and although I thought that his took the sting out of mine, you know how mothers can fret unnecessarily. I could tell that she was in turmoil, as her overwhelming belief had always been that illegal narcotics were bad things taken by misguided individuals. There had been no exceptions to this rule, but here were two of the most loved and trusted people in her life saying otherwise. It may have come as a bolt from the blue, but there again I had heard her story of when she'd been strafed on the school hockey pitch by a German fighter plane during the war, so I knew that mum could cope with far worse than this. I'd been feeling so anxious before my disclosure, but now I started to relax a little and found myself able to field her questions with rational answers to prove that at no stage was it ever likely to have turned me into a mindless addict, or deranged headbanger. Having explained its reputed medicinal properties I added that the effects were similar to alcohol, but it didn't give you a hangover in the morning. I went on to tell her the only punishment for a first offence would be confiscation and a warning or small fine, though when we said our goodbyes I could tell that she was still relatively ill at ease, but what else did I expect. As they were driving off, I shuddered at the anguish that I must have caused her in such an apparently cruel, random and unnecessary way. I was the only one who knew my actions hadn't been inconsiderate, quite the reverse in fact as now the path would be clear for rolling out phase two circa 2010 and I do so hope that it goes better than this.

Hang on to your hats as once more we leap ahead to present time. It's Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> of December, about half past two in the afternoon and I'm busily writing up the story when my thoughts turned to a small piece of plastic I'd stored away in the kitchen cupboard. There's no reason why it suddenly should have come to mind at this particular moment, but I realised I'd missed something which may prove important. I like to think that I'm quite a perceptive person by nature, but now I am literally cursing myself out loud for sloppy investigation and a lack of attention to detail. On balance there's no foreseeable advantage in mentioning this now over saving it for later, but I wanted to let you know as and when new developments start to happen around me, even though I haven't the faintest idea about how they will turn out. I really should try to curtail these interjections, as they must be confusing at best and downright irritating at worst. We all love a well-timed flashback when reading a book or watching a movie, but plot devices like these can easily be overused and that's why no other instances of flash-forwarding will be tolerated, so I'll have to think of a more elegant solution. However there's one literary gimmick I'm determined not to employ and this is when an author's frequently alliterative description of a character

becomes their nickname, which is then tediously revisited whenever they are mentioned. This lazy and unimaginative figure of speech has no place whatsoever within these pages, yet I can't promise that the more observant amongst you won't detect the merest hint of its usage, which may have slipped through my strict editing process.

So football fan drove worry woman back to their nearby accommodation and I stayed up watching TV until midnight. Feeling tired and emotionally drained, I switched everything off then headed for the loo before going to bed. I opened the door and turned the light on, only to be confronted by a cute little pipe puddle which I interpreted as a gesture of congratulations from the great beyond on a job well done. It was either that or some sort of apology for causing me to upset my mother, which had been a disturbing experience for both of us, so I sat down on the floor for a while in quiet contemplation. Her timing had been razor sharp, as this was my first toilet break since they left so I don't know exactly when the dripping started. Perhaps it was while they were still here and if either of them had needed to go before leaving, then my plan could really have come a cropper as I didn't want to be forced into inventing a false or misleading explanation. With my newly found message of support this meant that it was now a shade over two against one, as the chances of us being unable to mollify mum were shortening as the page numbers are increasing. I went to bed feeling a lot happier, but I was obliged to get up in the middle of the night as I had forgotten to pee.

The floor was dry by Monday morning and being slightly ahead of schedule, I had just enough time to transfer the pictures I'd taken from the night before onto my computer. [\(25-PIC\)](#) You'll notice what looks like a sphere emerging from the water, but after a quick check I couldn't see any visible indication of what could have caused this three dimensional fried egg effect on the slate. Running my hand over the area there was no sign of a bulge and I would have welcomed a second opinion, but when the opportunity arose I soon decided against asking for one. Andy came round that evening so I told him all about my stressful Sunday, but when I mentioned the puddle his eyes started to glaze over before pronouncing it a random occurrence and totally irrelevant, which was hardly the biggest surprise of the week. That will happen tomorrow, Tuesday the 15<sup>th</sup>.

It all started with a run of the mill games night and by 9.45pm I found that the sluices had already opened. [\(26-PIC\)](#) Looking closely you can also spot a solitary woodlouse, but I can't tell whether he's taking a bath, having a drink or just caught in the downpour. This next one shows where the drips were forming and you can see my optimistic but ineffectual repair job, which consisted of hardening putty together with a cable tie to tension the pipes. [\(27-PIC\)](#) There's a lot of hanging around during a round of golf, so I used these intervals to take a series of pictures throughout the evening and this

was the one I liked best. [\(28-PIC\)](#) I swear that I've done nothing to either stage or augment this image, which for some reason reminded me of the flowers from Monet's famous water lily paintings and when you zoom in, the detailing only becomes more delicate. We all know how digital cameras can sometimes produce anomalies and artefacts, but I am at a loss to explain this delightful watercolour, so I will just have to attribute it to that unlikely branch of art which is more postmortem than postmodern. Maybe she's bequeathing me her posthumous portfolio as a sort of pension plan and if that's the case, it would be rude not to consider marketing designs like these on a range of tee shirts or tea towels. Shortly before I retired for the night around 12.15am the puddle had grown to just over a foot wide, which was the largest I'd seen since our feud-fuelled foolishness in April.

The floor was dry again come morning so I dutifully recorded my findings, or rather lack of them, by taking a couple of photographs which on closer examination revealed a vague shape towards the left of this particular shot. Looking a bit like a ring doughnut or a half-used toilet roll, it could be a watermark of sorts as most of the drips land within the hole at the centre. [\(29-PIC\)](#) Before we move on there are two other areas of interest here and as I missed one myself, don't get too downhearted if you can't find either of them. First of all let me rule out the little balls of fluff which can safely be ignored, as they are only the result of my decision to avoid cleaning specific areas of the bathroom. Let's start with the one I failed to spot, which could possibly be nothing more than the product of someone else's overworked imagination this time and not mine for a change. I'd e-mailed the picture to John, asking if he could see a hidden word and this was the answer that I received, bless his cotton socks.

<Okay with a great deal of indulgence, I've looked long and hard. With a lot of enhancement I can possibly make out the word florida.>

I'd spent so much time focusing on the floor tiles that I hadn't paid enough attention to the periphery, which meant I would have to hone my powers of observation and try harder in future. It's around a quarter of an inch in length and located on the skirting board, sloping downwards from left to right. Personally I'm not entirely convinced that this would-be ghost graffiti spells florida, as I don't think she had ever been to America and we weren't golfing at TPC Sawgrass last night, although neat handwriting is probably no longer one of her strong points. On close inspection it really does look like an underlined string of lower case characters and there is deliberate purpose here which we can see in the old-fashioned f, but if this implies an applied intellect then why isn't the letter capitalised? Here's the picture he sent me with the word helpfully overlaid on top in case I couldn't spot it and let's find out what you think. [\(30-PIC\)](#) Looking back at the original I believe it's far more likely to read as fjord, however I shouldn't forget that this was John's discovery after all and I have to respect his interpretation, which isn't

necessarily correct but still appears to make no less sense than mine. That's unless we're talking about one which has a whale swimming in it.

Now we've got that out of the way, I wonder if you have managed to work out the answer I'd initially expected. For those of you who spotted the word JULY, your only reward is my silent applause and for the benefit of everyone else I've also outlined it in a paint program. [\(31-PIC\)](#) It doesn't matter that the first three letters overlap, as they are still sequential and although the last one may be back to front, it's clearly an unmistakable Y. I'd celebrated her birthday in July with a customised experiment and what better or more appropriate message could she have chosen to register approval. Taking this into consideration let's return for a moment to John's tentative analysis, as there's a possible if not entirely plausible connection between these two words when I think back to Géraldine's CV and her stated proficiency in speaking Spanish. Florida can be translated as flowery and the birth flower for someone born in July is a water lily, which brings us back to the Monet shot. Surely two tenuous links are better than one, but if there's anything we can learn from this, it would be the implicit dangers of an undisciplined mind with access to a fridge full of cider and a fast Internet browser.

My last job for the night involved carefully removing the twin tufts of fluff as I was trying to establish if they were of herbal origin, but sadly both of them turned out to be small blobs of wool. At this point in time I wouldn't worry too much about where they came from and I may be able to provide you with a possible answer, but I've decided to sit on it for a while longer until we get to know each other a little better. Having tasked myself to be more vigilant, I took some photos of the fluff-free floor and my diligence was rewarded when one of them revealed something which had previously been hidden. [\(32-PIC\)](#) If you zoom in above and just to the left of the faint JULY motif, there appears to be a depiction of a wizard-like figure whose lower half is merged with the three conjoined letters below. I'm allowing myself some artistic license here, but he seems to be wearing a fool's cap and is dressed in a robe with one voluminous sleeve stretched out horizontally, while the other points diagonally downwards. The strangest thing though, is when I look at his face on extreme magnification it looks a lot like me, which is exactly the kind of cheap stunt she'd pull to guarantee my attention.

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> of September and Andy was round for the evening as a work commitment meant that he couldn't make his regular Monday slot. I had to administer a healthy dose of strong cider before he capitulated, but I was eventually able to cajole him into a small water-based experiment. He had postulated that the three dimensional fried egg effect I'd photographed was just a reflection of the chrome trap, so we relocated to the bathroom and I filled up a plastic syringe from a running tap. I like to keep one handy, as pilling a Bengal cat is an unrewarding experience unless you are too lazy or squeamish to self-harm. At first I tried hiding the medication in food, but

they just ate around it so nowadays I crush the tablet into powder, then add water and squirt the mixture down their little throats before either of them have a chance to work out what's going on. I can't say this technique isn't without its thrills and spills but it does the job fairly efficiently, although if I ever had occasion to pill Andy, then I'm sure that the process would be a whole lot easier. We wrapped the trap with toilet tissue and I set about recreating an average-sized puddle, with my thumb exerting gentle pressure on the plunger from around two foot up. This was not as straightforward as I had expected, which you'll know if you have attempted it yourself and I clearly underestimated the patience required to simulate a dripping pipe. Needless to say my methods proved ineffective, so don't be surprised when I tell you the only matching features were the floor and the fact that it was wet. The shape was totally wrong and my spattering hopelessly bombastic, but the illusion of an emerging ball could still be seen in some of our follow-up photos, so at least we'd demonstrated that it had nothing to do with a reflection.

On a not altogether unrelated matter, my kitchen sink had developed a minor blockage a while back, but that night it reached the point where the water was taking an eternity to empty away. It had slowly been getting worse, so for the past week I've avoided heating then eating any meals containing a Bolognese sauce, as the washing up produced a tomato tide mark which looked disgusting and took ages to remove. There's always a workaround for technical hitches of this nature, but either the thought of serving food still in its oven ready plastic dish contravened my principles of fine dining, or most likely it hadn't occurred to me yet. I don't know how pertinent this is to the story, but that's no reason to stop me telling you anyway as the last time it happened was a couple of years ago, shortly before Steve and Kate came over for Christmas. Kate had taken charge of the kitchen, but this was hampering progress and from the unfeigned pained expression on her face, I could see that she viewed my dysfunctional drain with a certain amount of disdain. I had just explained that I was disinclined to tinker with the plumbing, when Steve overheard and offered to help. He placed a saucepan beneath the plastic trap, then unscrewed it before emptying the gunk out into the garden and Kate was happy again. Now that the same problem had returned I was naturally still reluctant to intervene, but perhaps this proved to be the thinking man's choice as it fixed itself overnight. I noticed this the very next day when preparing my supper and however much water ran out of the taps, it just flowed freely down the plughole. In order to investigate I steeled myself and ventured into areas unknown by following Steve's lead, but all that I found for my troubles were two inches of water with a rusty old nail at the bottom. I'll admit the whole affair could have been a coincidence, but my personal opinion is what's the point of having a ghost around if she's not prepared to do a few bits and pieces around the house for you, after all it's no skin off her vestigial nose.

By the end of September I had bought myself some neodymium metal balls that I'd seen featured on a Sunday morning TV show in their weekly gadget round-up. These are remarkably strong little magnets which lock together to build complex geometric shapes, but my earliest examples didn't really show the full potential of the product. However I quickly integrated them into my experimental repertoire and this was a competent first attempt on the night of the 30<sup>th</sup>. [\(33-PIC\)](#) It's not a bad effort artistically speaking, but as part of any great scientific endeavour my living room hearth would be deemed an unsuitable test bed for reliable evidence, what with Bunny and Jasper at large. So in a turnaround of events, it was almost a relief when I found that nothing had changed by morning.

October 2009

Moving ahead to the evening of Friday the 9<sup>th</sup> and I was half-watching TV whilst playing with my new toy, as games night had been shifted to the day after. Feeling the need for a pee at about quarter past eleven I was greeted by a trap puddle, the rarest and most enigmatic of all precipitation. [\(34-PIC\)](#) It had started after my last bathroom break and stopped in the space of three quarters of an hour or thereabouts. The water pipe at the back was completely dry of course and although the trap still felt vaguely damp, there wasn't enough moisture to form a single droplet on my fingertip. One thing which I've always found strange is that both types of leakage have never happened at once, or indeed even on the same day to my knowledge and I didn't know why as escaping water isn't supposed to be choosy. I'd been trying to build a pyramid out of the magnets and I ended up with a structure which lacked any sign of talent or promise, but it was easily adapted to my new requirements with a small modification that I mounted on top. Just before midnight I placed my rather pathetic looking offering in front of where the puddle had all but dried out and this photo will show you why I needed to add the elevated platform! [\(35-PIC\)](#)

I can't explain the rules of this game that we play as they are still work in progress, but I can tell you it's largely turn based so one of us makes a move then the other replies, action and reaction. However it's more than just call and response, as I've noticed the old competitive edge coming through in her successful attempts to outmanoeuvre me, but there again she never used to hold back so I wouldn't expect anything less. It's always friendly and mostly well-mannered, although she does like having two goes in a row sometimes, but I'm guilty of that too so I'd be a fine one to complain. If this can be seen as a contest then it redefines the genre as there's no reliable method of scoring in place, or for that matter any agreed duration other than defaulting to my remaining time on Earth. All I know is I'm bound to lose and they say that death is the great leveller, so when my time is up I'll be very much looking forward to a rematch. Of course she could decide to opt out at any time, which is something I'm only too aware of, but I would still try to tempt her back for big birthdays and special occasions.

Even though there was nothing of interest to be seen when I woke up on Saturday morning, that didn't stop me taking a few pictures of the dry floor before going to work, but every one of them turned out to be heavy on the snow and non-existent on the Jesus. Ignoring my own advice, I'd been looking in the wrong place again and you'll need a little background information before I can explain what I meant by that. This may sound like me being overly picky, but after Dave and Ted had finished the renovations I wasn't entirely happy with the spacing of my new three piece bathroom suite. I'd planned it very carefully on graph paper so the toilet, basin and bath were equidistant, but I hadn't figured that the plumbing might not be



in the right place to allow for perfect symmetry. Rather disappointingly the gap between my lavatory and basin was twice what it should have been, but I'd easily solved this by purchasing a smart chrome plated toilet roll holder. They fixed it firmly to the wall precisely in the middle, which meant that equilibrium had once again been restored and all was well in my world, but nothing lasts forever. After a couple of years' usage, I noticed that it had a design flaw which caused a further imbalance to my desire for harmonious proportions. Now I can say fairly confidently that very few of us would actively choose to read about such a trivial household item, but it's important to stay with me, as if you skip ahead you'll miss out on something altogether inexplicable and totally off the wall. Please trust me when I say that I'm not blessed with the required level of imagination to be making this up and if necessary I can provide documentation to prove it. You see sometime in the early Nineties I tried to write a novel, but couldn't get past the first chapter which was so appallingly bad that I prematurely killed off the hero and gave up.

The normally horizontal bar which holds my loo roll is tightened at the back with a formidable looking screw, but after a while it would become loose and start to droop downwards, rendering the device useless for either aesthetic or practical purposes. What I had taken to doing in my typical passive-reactive approach, was a quick fix until both functions were lost completely and only then would I resort to a proper repair. I'd found that if I slanted the bar upwards, there was enough friction to make it hold at a forty five degree angle while still comfortably supporting the weight of the roll. [\(36-PIC\)](#) Sooner or later though my botch job would structurally fail, sending the tissue tumbling to the floor and one of these days it's bound to seriously compromise the formation of an important puddle. My toolkit is far from extensive and wasn't expensive as it consists of a small selection of screwdrivers, although most belong to the Lloyds bank 6 in 1 handy set which was a free gift at the time for opening a young savers account. In addition I have the syringe and a tape measure, but they weren't required for this kind of work. I had to prostrate myself on the cold stone floor, undeniably a task better suited to a hot summer's day, in order to reach a little grub screw at the bottom which held everything in place and only then could it be removed from the wall. Making sure the bar looked correctly aligned, it was only a matter of retightening the central screw before fixing the holder back into position. This minor annoyance couldn't have occurred more than three or four times in as many years, but here it was again, back to test me.

Last night I'd been forced into placing the toilet paper on top of the cistern, as the bar had become so loose that it was barely able to support its own weight. I knew that a repair was overdue, so after a quiet Saturday at the shop I entered my bathroom with tools in hand and successfully removed the faulty piece from the wall. My maintenance duties seemed to be going

smoothly until I suddenly realised that something was very awry indeed, as instead of moving freely the bar now remained stuck at the same angle I'd balanced it. This suggested that the screw had somehow been tightened while I slept, although I suppose it could have happened during the day, but a nine to five routine doesn't seem to be her sort of thing and being dead is the perfect excuse for a lie in. As I'd been concentrating my investigations solely on the floor, I couldn't find any relevant photos and the one you have already seen is when I briefly but accurately put it back in position, like replacing the cue ball if you've missed your shot after being snookered by a crafty opponent.

These next two pictures will hopefully make matters clearer, so here's the mounting bracket which is securely fastened to the wall and you can see from its shape that the grub screw can be located at either six or twelve o'clock. [\(37-PIC\)](#) Having it showing on top would be unsightly and if you look really closely, there's a tiny indentation at the bottom where the sharpened point has bitten into the metal. Here we can see the holder again, but this time viewed from the wall's perspective and just for a change it's now being supported by the toilet roll. [\(38-PIC\)](#) You'll notice that the grub screw is in a south-easterly position instead of a southerly one, which was where it needed to be for the bar to lie horizontally. I was unable to free it with bare hands, so I selected my largest screwdriver and tentatively attempted to loosen the central screw, but without success. Have at you I thought and tried again with all my strength, as now the gauntlet had been properly thrown down, but I just couldn't get it to budge. I even went to the lengths of wrapping an elastic band around the handle to increase purchase, like you do with a cork stuck in a bottle of champagne when your sabre is in the dishwasher.

On Sunday I e-mailed the photos to Markie and Justin, but they had no convincing explanation of how it could have happened so the conversation degenerated into a pointless though interesting debate about which was easier, tightening or untightening. Unfortunately none of this took me any further forward towards solving the mystery, so I determined to try a combination of brains and brute force called Colin. He's a big lad who has worked in a fair few physically demanding jobs in the past, which also required his wealth of technical expertise and for the last couple of years I've been lucky enough to employ him. Monday morning I pocketed the evidence before heading off to work and finally managed to corner my unsuspecting colleague in a quiet spot where I politely requested his assistance, while hoping he didn't think that I looked excessively pleased to see him in the trouser department. I'd concocted a valid, but uncomplicated pretence of inferring that one of my friends was playing some kind of practical joke, so I needed both his skill set and toolkit to help me ascertain how it had been achieved. When I handed him the item he peered at it intently from every angle, while his fingers slid purposefully over the

contours for a better understanding of measurement and mechanism. In less than thirty seconds he'd fully appraised its construction, then with an air of calm confidence and cool professionalism he carefully selected his screwdriver of choice. Before he had a chance to continue, I stopped him for a moment to emphasise that once unscrewed, nothing further could be gleaned from it. I asked him to concentrate on the amount of effort needed to complete the task and explained that by extrapolating from his information, I could take an educated guess at which one of my friends was most likely to have perpetrated the prank. Alright I may have chosen to withhold the fact that my main suspect was dead and the event had happened on a night without conventional visitors, but I deemed this acceptable in the crusade for scientific progress. Colin looked keen to get the matter sorted so I kept my duplicitous mouth tightly closed for a while, as I didn't want to add any pressure by letting him know that he was being challenged by a girl.

With an almost imperceptible nod of my head an unspoken invitation passed from me to him and he aligned the blade with the screw head, paused for a fraction of a second then tried with all his might to loosen it. However despite his best efforts it stubbornly stayed put, although he appeared relatively unruffled saying that he'd obviously been using the wrong tool for the job. Colin rummaged around in his bag before pulling out a beefier model, but again he strained in vain as it still wouldn't move. Unaccustomed to failure he took a deep breath and focused, making one last abortive attempt before delivering his verdict that without precisely the right-sized screwdriver, the head may shatter so it would be unwise to continue. I respected his decision by saying thanks for trying and asked him not to mention it to the others, which he acknowledged with a tight-lipped smile, but I can assure you that any preconceived thoughts I had about bad workmen never even crossed my mind.

You may already have guessed that I was secretly hoping his efforts would prove futile and I wasn't disappointed when it resisted every assault, but this happy outcome had always seemed so unlikely considering the size of the screw compared to the size of Colin. So I could now conclude without any shadow of doubt that external forces had been at work and with this in mind, we should go back to take another quick glance at the photo showing the toilet roll holder re-secured to the wall. I can't help thinking it looks a bit priapic and there is a very definite but kinky letter J above the knob. In addition to this one of my friends who will remain nameless, also remarked that if pushed he could see something shall we say ectoplasmic, emanating from the general vicinity. Of course these are only random decorations on the ceramic tiles, but there again all great tacticians will take full advantage of their surroundings.

Later that evening Andy was round as usual and apart from one lewd observation, he really had nothing constructive to add to the debate so I stopped pestering him for the rest of the night. We always have fun when I'm not banging on about the dead and before I knew it the time was 11.30pm so I rang for a cab. A short while later I spotted some headlamps outside so I opened the door to let Andy out into the porch, wishing him goodnight before closing it and pulling the curtain over. Settling back on the sofa to finish my cider, I watched TV for a quarter of an hour before removing all of the empties and visiting the bathroom. I was just about to switch off my living room lights and go to bed, but I couldn't help noticing Jasper sitting on the stairs, staring intently at the curtain covering the front door. It's not uncommon to find cats gazing into empty space, fascinated by something invisible to the human eye only to lose interest after a minute or two, but this was different. He was rooted to the spot, sitting very upright and given the lateness of the hour, not even remotely ready to curl up for a good night's sleep. Of course I'm aware of the theory that they can see ghosts, but we'll never know for sure without further research so I crouched quietly on the stairs and tried to get some idea of what he was looking at. As this wasn't getting me anywhere I decided to fetch my camera from the kitchen cabinet and sat a step down from him, taking photos of the area in question. The room was completely silent apart from one brief instance of a soft rustling sound, at which both ears suddenly pricked up and his eyes became as wide as saucers, but clearly he didn't think that it warranted closer inspection.

There were no further disturbances to report and looking at my watch I could see that it was almost midnight, so I decided to give up on this particular line of investigation. Firstly though I would have to draw back the curtain, if only to prove to Jasper that there was really nothing there to fixate on or obsess over. All the same I approached the door somewhat apprehensively and pulled it aside, only to find Bunny looking smugly back at me through the glass, as he must have sneaked out when Andy left. The original entrance to my living room used to open out directly into the front garden, but the property had been sympathetically modified with feline foresight in mind when somebody installed a porch and outer door. Consequently it's easy to prevent the cats getting out, as this arrangement has all the inbuilt security of an airlock, but without the need for expensive pumping equipment. Of course they have both been in there to have the occasional nose around, but never without my express permission or supervision. I've made every effort to ensure that visitors are conversant with this protocol and Bunny must have been in black belt ninja stealth mode to get past us, so I resolved to be more vigilant from then onwards.

In the past I've had streetwise moggies who have all been allowed free roam, but Bengals are less savvy and it was devastating when I lost my first to a main road almost half a mile away. She must have felt the call of the

wild from her grandfather many times removed, as he was an Asian leopard cat and this harsh lesson taught me that the best way forward for my choice of breed would involve incarceration. A few empty months later I was overjoyed to be driving home with two tiny, yet disproportionately loud kittens. Jasper was the easiest to name as he just looked and acted like a Jasper, but the other one would prove more difficult. I briefly dallied with calling him Jaffa because of the slightly orangey hue of his fur, but that could become confusing as it sounded too similar and they wouldn't know which one of them was getting a telling off. My other proposals were equally unsuitable and when the answer finally came to me after removing him from the kitchen for hogging the food bowl, I couldn't understand how I hadn't thought of it sooner. He has never enjoyed being picked up and would register his distaste by emitting a plaintive, but slightly menacing wailing noise, so of course I christened him Bunny after one of the founding members of Bob Marley's band. Even back then I'd realised that he was the naughty one and to have his name starting with a plosive could only help when it came to scolding the right cat.

My newly acquired housemates were adorably sweet and furry, but also fearless adventurers so I knew they wouldn't be safe exploring the great outdoors, although there had to be some way that I could still let them out of doors. Slowly a plan started to come together and it wasn't long before my germ of an idea reached epidemic status, as originally I was only going to devote a small part of the back garden to a modest cat run. However the longer I thought about it, the grander my vision became and I couldn't see any good reason why the entire area shouldn't be covered by secure netting, so that all of us would be on an equal footing. The very next day I was on the phone to my friendly builders and Dave came over with his dad to discuss construction. Their suggestion was to erect a wooden framework, which would be encased in the green plastic-coated metal mesh you find at garden centres and work started the following week. I'd asked for an elevated walkway that would run from one end to the other, terminating in a sun deck and they had followed my drawings perfectly, but found themselves under budget on materials so a length of rope was purchased to provide a scratching post. This was cleverly integrated into an improvised climbing tower they assembled using left-over timber, with twin basking platforms accessed by a little step ladder, as they'd noticed how Bunny would always commandeer theirs at every opportunity. I'm sure that after seeing such a sizeable discrepancy from the plans some clients would have had kittens, but all three of us were delighted with this new addition, which made Dave and Ted happy too. Their only mistake had been the order they chose to cover the top section and it was Ted who almost fell at the last hurdle. They had started from the side with free access and worked inwards towards the other, which was virtually butting up against the brick wall of one of my neighbours' properties. It was a more dangerous version of painting yourself into a corner and being considerably lighter than Dave, he

volunteered to fasten the final strip of netting by balancing precariously on scaffolding boards over six feet up in the air.

From the moment of its inauguration the cage turned out to be a huge success, apart from one subtle miscalculation during the designing stage that none of us had noticed, which was eventually exposed by snow and dandelions. In a sustained flurry the flakes get caught in the mesh on top and build up a blanket a few inches thick, making it bow downwards under the weight. Because of its rarity value snow always catches us unprepared, so I can easily forgive myself for not predicting it would cause a problem, but the dandelion debacle was wholly inexcusable. I should have realised that the size of an airborne seed was greater than my grid spacing, a basic botanical blunder as they couldn't be blown away and this resulted in the largest concentration of the yellow peril I had ever seen in one place. My only consolation was wandering through the garden with a barbecue lighter and torching the seed clusters before they took flight, which isn't the most effective method of weed control, but it's even better stress therapy than popping bubble wrap.

Anyway returning to the story, now you can understand why I was so shocked to find Bunny off limits without official security clearance. When I let him back into the living room I noticed that my front door wasn't closed properly, as the handle hadn't been pulled fully upwards. This meant that if left to his own devices, over a period of time he would doubtless be able to claw it open and I may have lost him forever. I have to assume full responsibility for this major lapse of care, but thankfully it was my attention to minor detail that eventually saved the day. Having been on constant alert ever since my investigations began, I've looked out for the unusual and if I'd gone straight to bed without reacting to Jasper's odd behaviour, well it's unthinkable. At times like these it really doesn't concern me whether I'm being taken seriously or not, as the only thing which secured Bunny's safety was my belief in the unbelievable. I would rather humiliate myself in front of the whole world than risk losing something as precious to me as he is.

This is the scene from Jasper's point of view and knowing that his half-brother may be in some sort of leopardy jeopardy, I couldn't understand what kept him glued to the spot unless he was too busy watching something else. It's the only remaining record of the event as all of my other photos were deleted due to lack of content. [\(39-PIC\)](#) The most rational explanation for the curious white blur would be one of his whiskers in front of the camera lens and there's a hint of another beneath it which is running parallel. Although I couldn't work out why the top edge is wavy, whereas the bottom one is more or less straight and you can see how the internal lines may be interpreted as a sign of motion. Of course I'm not suggesting for one moment that I've captured a spirit or ghost orb and we'll learn more about these later on, but to the untrained eye it could almost

pass as a smeary version of the planet Jupiter being propelled at speed towards my sofa. I'll apologise to any astronomers or atheists out there for the heavenly body allusion, but you have to admit that the picture is kind of weird and worth a few more hours of my time, which will mercifully translate to mere seconds of yours. So with an element of doubt lingering in my mind, for the next couple of nights I tried coaxing Jasper to sit still so I could recreate the effect, but then the thought occurred to me that a discarded whisker would be a lot easier to photograph than one with a fidgety feline attached. Needless to say I had no luck with either method.

After my morning bath on Saturday the 17<sup>th</sup> I took a few self-indulgent pictures of the watery outlines which had been retraced on the floor, but at first glance it didn't look like there was anything of interest. My snap-happy nature proved particularly fortuitous though, as if I hadn't felt the need to break out the camera to record this non-event then a vital clue would have been missed. I can't remember what happened at work or how much time I spent fiddling with magnets during the evening, but it doesn't matter as the only important thing you need to know is that around 12.15am I was ready to use the bathroom. An extraordinary treat awaited me on opening the door and I was presented with a wonderfully ornate trap puddle, which looked strangely similar to a bunch of flowers. [\(40-PICT\)](#) As usual it had stopped dripping, or perhaps spurting would be a better description as I'd never seen anything so elaborate before. You may have noticed this already, but about halfway up there's a shape which is formed out of tiny pieces of grit. I have no idea how they came to be there, but it's not the sort of thing you'd want to step on in bare feet. You must admit it would be highly improbable for a downpour of water to have gathered them together in such tight formation, which seemed to suggest that they had been placed there deliberately. It looks like a small triangular cairn, or maybe a creditable attempt to replicate the most common nine ball building block out of stone chips. You need four of them to form a hollow pyramid and these then lock together to produce some of the smarter structures I've made, like the one on my hearth. Then suddenly I remembered the photos I'd taken that morning, which would prove whether this was a new feature or not. Although all I had were long shots of the general area, they still showed me what I wanted to know and here's the best of them. [\(41-PICT\)](#) Finding its position again is easy, as there's a clear X towards the bottom where two fault lines cross and zooming in slightly above this point, you'll see a tiny white circular mark within three blobs that form the points of an equilateral triangle. You'll know when you've located the right spot, as the circle is partially intersected by a strand of hair which has curled around on itself. Unfortunately there's not enough detail to tell precisely what we are looking at, but it's clear that this was an earlier incarnation of a design which would change and become almost unrecognisable by the end of the day.

There was nothing to report until Friday 30<sup>th</sup> of October when I realised that marks on the floor like the doughnut were only temporary, as it had completely faded into obscurity. This was probably due to the same bouts of water incursion which now provided me with a vague triangular outline that had appeared to its left. Here it is and I'm sorry I couldn't capture a better view of what I could see so clearly, but you should be able to get the gist. (42-PIC) There are three deliberate straight lines drawn inside, which seemed to have been made in a different manner and I can't say how, but it certainly wasn't down to me or the cats. They could be seen as representing the component parts of the triangle and I wondered if this was a deeply meaningful insight, or just another way of saying hi through the medium of basic geometry. Please forgive me for jumping to conclusions again but I'm only loosely tying together stray ends, which can always be untied and retied to others if necessary.

The next day was Saturday and All Hallows' Eve, surely a no-brainer in terms of an outstanding opportunity for another experiment. You may be forgiven for thinking that I was just going to wing it at the eleventh hour, but a lot of meticulous planning and preparation had already been going on in the background. Profuse apologies for forgetting to mention that before, but I will try to redeem myself by filling you in on the details. I had e-mailed Steve to let him know about recent developments and suggested that he should come over one weekend, so we could discuss matters at greater length. He wrote back saying that a chat would be good, but firstly I should investigate the rites of the 31<sup>st</sup> of October and to let him know if I was up for it. Never one to refuse a challenge I accepted his terms and awaited my instructions, comfortable in the knowledge that Halloween was over two weeks away so I would have plenty of time to thoroughly prepare the arrangements. After sending him a couple of gentle reminders he finally got back to me on the 29<sup>th</sup> and this is how I replied, with my comments interspersed in brackets.

<Sorry just been rushed off my feet of late and I am down in Cornwall for the weekend.

(Have fun)

Anyway there are four days of the dead that follow the 31<sup>st</sup>, it is considered a time when the veil is thinnest between the dead and the living, making it easy for them to pass through. Traditionally a meal is cooked and a place for each participant is prepared, plus one for the dead. Use only candlelight as they're not keen on electricity.

(I'm afraid I don't have a table and candlelight is a potential fire hazard to my furry friends)

You should partake of the meal with red wine.



(No problems on that one)

A glass should be poured for the place of the dead, by this point the cats will start to notice what's going on.

(I can put the wine up in the top room, the cats can't get up there)

Then some silent contemplation of those who have gone on to the summer lands, usually with each person named aloud, which is followed by a period of inward reflection on their life.

(Walk in the park)

The place should be left, but each morning the glass of wine should be given as a libation to the earth to be placed in an offering bowl outside. Often a shortbread, or other sweet thing would also be left for the elementals, as they play havoc with things if they're not happy.

(I'm not sure if my home insurance would cover an elemental going mental, so I'll definitely give it a try)

Anyway I had better get back to work, let me know the results, oh and if you want to see them you will find a bowl full of black ink helps, as you can use it to skry. In other words look into the ink and let your mind drift and you will see things in there of relevance if you have the gift.

(A bowlful of ink is probably inappropriate when you have cats around and especially if they're not black ones)

Sorry this is late, just too much to do with all the workload and stuff these days, I really must get down your way and drop in.

Kindest regards

Steve>

So this was all I had to work with and as rites go, they clearly looked wrong for me, but I settled on two of his more practical suggestions which I could seamlessly integrate into my forthcoming though inescapably brilliant master plan. Back to Halloween then and by 12.30am I had just about finished preparing the guest bedroom with a sort of welcome pack in readiness for the arrival of my visitor. To start your guided tour, here's a close-up of a postcard that Géraldine had sent me when she went home to France for a holiday and although you can't see a name or address, they were obviously there originally otherwise it would never have arrived. [\(43-PIC\)](#) Andy kindly removed them for me in a paint program and I think

he's done a pretty fine job, but it was purely for purposes of data protection rather than shyness you understand. I love the tiny sketch of a beach and the way that in spite of multilingual warnings, she still signed her name with two kisses below the line you're not supposed to cross. Having puzzled for a while about the word "hollydays", I now believe it was a simple spelling mistake that she didn't notice until finishing the card and I'm guessing her last two words are a correction which had been inserted afterwards. That's because this line had to start higher up than she would have liked, in order to avoid the sun's rays and it's the only one which is written over the tail of a letter from above. It's sloping away from the rest of the text and rather cramped, but she had run out of room as you can see from the final "s" that has been squeezed in. I originally thought she'd written "Lollydays" and maybe on reflection it looked the same to her, so that's why nothing has been crossed out but left in as an amusing play on words, a girl after my own heart.

Moving towards the right we find a glass of port and I know that according to Steve's instructions this was supposed to be red wine, but I didn't have a corkscrew as my last one met its demise through multi-tasking. [\(44-PIC\)](#) It was great at removing corks, but the designers had been over ambitious as the device also doubled as a bottle opener. Eventually the extra stress of taking on this additional task led to its downfall, snapping one hot and thirsty Monday evening during a particularly rigorous cider session with Andy. Now of no use for either function I consigned it to the bin, making a mental note to get a replacement, which unfortunately I only ever remembered when at home and never out shopping. However I did have a bottle of port with a stopper which was easily removed, so I decided that this would be a more than acceptable substitute as it not only looked the same, but also had the added allure of being stronger.

Next we have my first ever stash box, which had originally been part of the packaging for a rather expensive Stanton cartridge that I'd installed on a customer's turntable sometime in the early Eighties, but I couldn't bring myself to throw it away as instructed. This small wooden container turned out to be the perfect size to house all of my smoking paraphernalia and despite being long since retired, it certainly saw action during the Géraldine years. I remember having to fasten an elastic band around the outside and while this may have spoilt its rustic charm, it also ensured that none of the essentials fell out which is of far greater concern to your average druggie. To the far right there's a photo of a piece of her artwork that Steve had recently e-mailed me and I'd taken this into town on a memory stick to get it printed out onto a stiff sheet of A4. This was then appropriately folded like a left-handed greeting card, but I didn't have a witty message to write so the inside had been left blank, which would also help keep costs down in future as I could use it again. I thought that this was a worthwhile inclusion under the circumstances as it predated some of the shapes she's shown us

already, specifically triangles, circles and curvy lines. Admittedly this may seem slightly tenuous, but three out of four isn't bad and why stop there, as I'm sure that the brownish design at the top could be associated with something equally unconvincing if we put our minds to it.

Here's a close-up shot of my centrepiece of earthly delights on offer to the unearthly. [\(45-PIC\)](#) Firstly we have a trial-sized portion of Green and Black's, representing the sweet item that Steve had assured me would prevent any unsavoury elementals from getting cranky. Of course I could have chosen to reduce my spend by buying dog chocolate, but I decided to shop at Tesco rather than Pets Are Us, as any component of an experiment that I can eat afterwards epitomises the pinnacle of domestic science. You already know about the two clues she left in an envelope before taking her life and I have no idea what they signified, but monkey see, monkey do, so I snipped off a pinch of hair then placed it adjacent to the modest lump of cannabis which was required to complete the scenario.

However I still had the feeling that something was missing, so I searched my stairs carpet for the whisker I'd used when trying to recreate the curious blur. I wasn't completely sure I'd found the right one, but that didn't matter as now human and feline DNA were both centre stage, which would double the chances of attracting her attention. Apparently a few days before disappearing forever she had asked Steve and Kate to look after her cat Shiseido for a while, but they refused, believing that having company while needing to provide a certain duty of care would be beneficial to Géraldine's rapidly deteriorating mental health. They were acting in her best interests, but by that time she was beyond help and in the process of locking herself away from the world. I didn't learn about this until the evening when she failed to respond to my texted invitation to join the three of us and by then it was already too late, but I constantly wonder what would have happened if I had found out earlier. Although as Kate pointed out to me a couple of weeks later, she was balancing on a pinhead and on reflection I'm sure that if anything, my intervention would only have postponed the inevitable. I've never been able to fully understand how Géraldine could have chosen to do away with herself whilst Shiseido was trapped in the flat and this is the closest insight into her ravaged mind that I can or dare imagine, but I bet she left the feeding bowls overflowing with cat biscuits.

Still not content with this half-hearted effort, I dressed the duvet with two more set pieces to quadruple my chances of a successful result. Earlier that morning I'd skived off work for an hour, with a self-allocated spending limit of two pounds fifty pence to procure additional supplies for the big event. I will shamefully admit to being a complete retail snob in the past, but now in order to make the most of my funds I couldn't even afford the pound shop. In urgent need of inspiration at pocket money prices I ended up in a clean, but somewhat smelly high street discount store. You could tell that the

management were doing their very best to rectify this problem, as the first section which the great unwashed had to pass through was devoted entirely to personal hygiene products. After perusing the various bargains on offer I purchased a small notepad, an HB pencil, some coloured fibre tip pens and a mystery item which will be revealed soon enough, though I wouldn't get too excited about it if I were you. I didn't know precisely what I was trying to achieve, but sometimes it pays not to overthink and just buy on instinct. Here's how they were arranged, but if I had been expecting some sort of a message, you'd be right in assuming that the likelihood of having it spelled out for me would be even slimmer than my budget. [\(46-PIC\)](#)

I'm slightly reluctant to show you this last one as my childish attempt at divination is a trifle embarrassing, but maybe an unseen hand has spun an invisible bottle and I can't be sure it's not pointing at me, so here goes nothing. [\(47-PIC\)](#) All I'm doing is asking whether she's found Shiseido or not and a simple yes or no would suffice, but why did I decide to write it in French? I don't know if this was out of respect or wanting to impress her, but it just seemed like the right thing to do at the time and when there's no instruction manual to fall back on, you have to make up the rules as you go along. The long-tailed cat was there to act as question master and doesn't he look bonny with his fancy green quiff. Now you can understand why I would be uncomfortable sharing this, due to its amateurish presentation, unscientific nature and worst of all my use of such colourful language.

I still remember giving Steve a lift to a local cattery, so he could pick up the poor little mite after she had been discovered cowering behind Géraldine's bed. In spite of the terrible tragedy I couldn't help thinking how organised and efficient the authorities had been, when it came to salvaging the only undamaged piece from a broken life. Shiseido lived out the rest of her days with the best loving care from Steve and Kate, but had died peacefully a couple of years ago, so I thought it would be touching to find out if they were reunited. Originally I'd wanted to write each letter in a different colour to get maximum impact from my fibre tips, but the clock was against me. I had hoped to have everything in place before the witching hour, but it was already approaching half past twelve so I decided to take a shortcut and only changed pens after every word. Removing two more pages from the handy jotter, I used my black marker to label the first as yes and the second as no before anchoring them down with identical magnetic constructions. You can also see a single ball poised in the middle, just itching to be drawn one way or the other and representing yet another example of my hapless optimism.

Having securely closed the door I switched my attention to the bathroom and looking back, I can see now that I was trying too hard as girls can detect the cloying whiff of desperation from a mile away. At the time I would have been totally oblivious to any such concerns, so pressing ahead with my

plans the mystery item was brought into play, which I am less than thrilled to reveal as nothing more interesting than a packet of chalk that I'd placed beneath the missing loo roll holder. (48-PIC) This was accompanied by one of the tins which had originally contained the magnets and I'd attached a second lid so it would be able to roll freely, like a poorly secured water wheel. I positioned it underneath the trap and carefully balanced the cap off a bottle of cider on top, so I would know if even minimal dripping had occurred during the night. My sole purpose for introducing the chalk was supposed to be a low-tech version of the pen and paper theme that I had pursued upstairs. I was hoping to provide some of Mother Nature's free writing material with my slate floor in lieu of a blackboard and living on the outskirts of town, I felt sure that I would be able to find a usable chunk without any problems. You see I'd been raised in the South East of England where it was in plentiful supply, so I spent a good half an hour scouring the neighbouring hedgerows and rock-strewn footpaths. Geology was never my strongest subject and I have since been reliably informed that chalk just doesn't grow in this neck of the woods, but the advice came too late to stop me bringing back a pocketful of likely candidates.

Disappointingly though, it all turned out to be fool's chalk and in no way fit for purpose. I definitely fumbled the ball at this point, fixating on chemical structure rather than natural provenance, so what I ended up with was factory produced and not the wild or at least free range variety that I had envisaged. To give you an idea of how inappropriate it was I've just checked the small print on the back of the packet, which clearly states that adult supervision is recommended and protective clothing must be worn at all times. Well I'm glad I didn't know about this before, as I would have felt obliged to stay up the whole night looking like a ninny in a pinny and a pair of Elsie's old Marigolds. I was all set to put one final addition directly onto the metal shelf, but fortunately I changed my mind at the last moment as it would have been markedly problematic to remove without scratching the surface. (49-PIC) Now all I could do was go to bed and hope that my hard work would be rewarded in some way. I'd completely ignored Steve's more impractical suggestions and I was unwilling to sacrifice good port by tipping it into a bowl in the garden every morning, but I would still go along with his recommendation to leave the experiment upstairs running for four days. Although after much careful consideration I thought it would be better not to interrupt at all, so I stayed out of the top room for the duration.

November 2009

It was Monday the 2<sup>nd</sup> and I'd just said goodnight to Andy as he left to get into his taxi. All evening I had avoided mentioning anything to do with my experiment, or the supernatural in general as I knew he wouldn't approve, so what gave me the right to spoil his night with the photo I e-mailed him some thirty minutes later. After he was gone I closed the curtain across the front door while checking the porch for feline stowaways and turning on my bathroom light, I could see a monster puddle in progress with a fresh drip landing every twenty seconds. Here's a picture which illustrates the extent of the flooding and if you look closely, there's also a tiny paw print that has been picked up by the flash. [\(50-PIC\)](#) This immediately brought to mind the flower petals I'd shown you earlier, but it's in entirely the wrong position and as before, there was nothing visible at all when the floor had dried out. So could this have anything to do with the question I'd asked, well I don't know for sure but it certainly was an odd coincidence. Nevertheless this had been the first leakage which actually happened while Andy was here and combined with the sheer amount of spilled water, it would have proved far too juicy a titbit to keep to myself for a whole week until his next visit. That's why I sent him the photo and sat waiting for a reply. It's important to note that neither of us chanced on the puddle during our last loo breaks, so I would estimate it could have started anything up to half an hour prior to discovery. Though looking at the blast radius, there was obviously a sudden surge which must have occurred within the past few minutes given that the furthestmost drips hadn't evaporated. As you can imagine it didn't take me long to get bored with staying up, so I soon decided that bedtime was the smarter option.

After getting home from work the following evening I turned my computer on and found that at 3.00am Andy had sent me back a question, asking if it was caused by the normal drip from the trap. This was either due to his lack of knowledge of plumbing terminology, or it could have been the drink as there is nothing normal about a trap drip. On the other hand it may have been down to the fact that he just hadn't been paying enough attention, so I tried to put him straight with my reply.

<Hi there

The trap leak is a far rarer occurrence and it has only happened a handful of times. This one was coming from the hot water pipe, only there's a lot more of it than normal. I placed a pint glass on the floor overnight, which filled and over-spilled before morning, so now I've used my mop bucket instead.

Curiously though, if either of us had needed the loo one more time before the cab arrived we would have seen it. I must admit I neglected to tell you that my Halloween experiment was still underway upstairs, which may have

been unrelated, but don't worry either way as I'll be dismantling it before your next visit.

Talk more soon.

Nick>

I had scheduled Wednesday for the big reveal and you might expect that throughout the day, I would have been obsessing over the outcome of my first authentic Halloween celebration after all these years, but I scarcely thought about it. You see I don't like to build up my hopes too high as that often leads to disappointment, so it's far better to have lowly expectations then any indication of success becomes an unexpected bonus. Although I succumbed to temptation whilst driving home and allowed myself the luxury of a few minutes to dwell on the possibilities of what I might find up there. Just after six I parked up and grabbed my camera from the kitchen before fitting a freshly charged battery, then headed upstairs to the top room. Rather predictably I found that absolutely nothing had changed so I won't subject you to the pictures I took which confirmed it, but if anyone wants to know exactly how they look, just go back to my setup shots and then alter the date to the 4<sup>th</sup> of November. Despite everything remaining steadfastly in position, my biggest letdown was seeing that the port had gone a bit crusty and no longer looked drinkable. Maybe the elementals had spat in it.

I gave the room one last glance before leaving and spotted an oddly-shaped piece of hard black plastic on the carpet, so without thinking I tidied it away in the kitchen cupboard with my other accoutrements. On a scale of one to ten I rated the experiment with a nice round zero, but this was fine as my score could only improve or stay the same and I felt reassured in the knowledge that at least it wouldn't slip backwards. Later that evening I found myself searching through the photos in case I'd missed anything and the only one you need to see was taken after all of my fripperies had been removed. [\(51-PIC\)](#) I'd noticed some peculiar marks on the shelf and I don't mean the little brown rust stains to the left, as these were from glasses of water that visiting friends would take up to bed with them. At first I thought that this was just a product of my imagination, but zoom in a fraction and to the right there appears to be a three dimensional geometric shape, almost like a space frame with its dark angular lines clearly visible against the shimmering background. There's maybe even a hint of an ear reflected in the mirror, so try thinking Trojan cat and you'll find it in no time. Some of you are no doubt muttering to yourselves that not content with seeing Jesus in the snow again, I'm now looking for his cat too, although I would disagree as from my limited knowledge of the bible I think he was more likely to have been a dog person.

The idea of having a built-in ironclad wardrobe had appealed to me for some time and it was during the latter part of my house renovations when I eventually chanced upon the decorative look I wanted. Whilst on my lunch break I'd been browsing in a small shop just off the high street, which sold the sort of arty items you would display at home to convince visitors of your good taste, but instead of finding anything of interest on the shelves or walls I became fascinated by its unusual counter. Made out of polished steel, the entire surface was covered in strangely hypnotic swirly patterns and I remember thinking that somebody must have been given a "Black & Decker" for their birthday. However in casual conversation I learnt that it had been supplied by a local metal-working company based only a few miles away.

A day or two later I drove out to see them and presented the owner, who also doubled as production manager, with my crude sketch for the design which he quickly cast his eyes over before cautiously accepting the job. I was totally out of my depth in that kind of environment and looking around the huge workshop, I could see how the other commissions in various states of construction dwarfed mine in terms of size, though not eccentricity. They were more accustomed to large scale fabrication, so I'm sure that my little project may have raised the odd eyebrow or titter after I left, but overall the mission had been a success as someone would soon be round to conduct a site survey. Dave and Ted had already built the timber carcass exactly to my measurements, although I'd been agonising for days over what type of hinge would allow the heavily flanged, deeply recessed doors to swing out, but they solved that problem without a second thought. Everything went according to plan, but it was lucky that my new carpet hadn't already been fitted as when they began to grind away at the metal, the resultant shower of sparks like a jammed Catherine Wheel would have compromised both lives and completion date by starting a fire.

The pipe kept on dripping and even though I felt confident enough to remove the bucket when the leak slowed down, I'd replaced it with a pint glass which still needed to be emptied every few days. This carried on unabated until Tuesday November 10<sup>th</sup>, when around 3.15 pm it dried up completely and I'm sorely tempted to show you a picture of normality after such a prolonged deluge. I can't remember why I'd been there to witness it, but I had probably come home to let in the electricity man who wanted to check that my ancient meter wasn't still reading in old money. Later that evening, I spent some time creating a small magnetic token of my gratitude for a drip-dry floor and suspended it underneath the basin. By Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup> there was another puddle in progress, so perhaps I needed a bigger token. The pipe was dripping again but at a much slower pace this time, although it had been enough to warrant moving the glass back into position. I decided that my previous attempt had lacked flair and there was room for improvement, so I started to construct something more elaborate which



finally ended up looking like this. [\(52-PIC\)](#) It probably required far greater skill than most traditional methods of sculpture and we can take stone carving as a good example. This is predominantly because I built the object from scratch and didn't just bash away at a lump of rock until I had revealed the hidden form which was imprisoned within. Having placed my star attraction on the bathroom floor, I retired for the night and hoped for a favourable outcome.

It was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> and unlike other special occasions there can be up to three of these a year, so I think that the gift card industry has missed a trick here, as people have been paying dearly for their irrational beliefs since the dawn of civilisation. My daily routine starts at half past seven in the morning when the radio alarm goes off and after a quick bath you'll find me back in bed with a book. At twenty five to nine I get up and dry my hair, which I've realised isn't taking quite as long as it used to, but looking on the positive side I could easily afford to console myself with an extra five minutes of reading time in the not too distant future. After getting dressed it's downstairs for a shave, then I clean my teeth, clear out the litter tray, empty the rubbish in a carrier bag, feed two cats, do the washing up and fix myself a sandwich for lunch before driving to work. As every minute spent in bed is highly valued I don't tend to leave a lot of contingency time for the paranormal, so this particular morning it turned out that I would have to outsource the sandwich.

Just before nine I was finishing up in the bathroom when a weird triangular mark on the basin caught my attention. Although I found it in precisely the same location as the round stain that I rather reluctantly showed you earlier, this one was considerably less distinct and more difficult for me to photograph, so I apologise for my mediocre camerawork. [\(53-PIC\)](#) In terms of size it would comfortably fit on a thumbnail and if I concentrate hard but let my mind wander, I might just be able to make out the figure four in there. When spun around it resembles either a shield or a sailboat, but the most inspired interpretation will come from Andy of all people, so I'll let that sink in for a while before telling you more.

After a busy day at work I spent a peaceful evening relaxing in front of the TV, but around half past eleven I heard a commotion going on in the kitchen and once again I was back to being confronted by a triangular conundrum. In the middle of the floor sat a tiny frog that one of my cats had brought in from the back garden and although seemingly uninjured, I could tell it wasn't exactly overjoyed about being flanked by predators. I say "it" as I didn't have any expertise or indeed interest in sexing amphibians and still don't. Sensing there was no immediate danger of pouncing, I retrieved my camera from the nearby cupboard and in that short space of time, Jasper had already started to circle with his eyes on the prize. I took up a strategic position over the unfortunate creature and successfully shoed the cats a

few feet away, but I didn't want to risk picking it up for fear of aggravating any puncture wounds which may have been inflicted during capture or transportation. It looked undamaged, but appearances can be deceptive and an oozing frog is not a happy frog. As my defence strategy would only provide a short term solution, I soon came up with the perfect rescue plan to save it from a slow and playful death. This involved using a pint glass and I could see several on the work surface, but the only problem was that from my kneeling position which offered maximum protection, I wouldn't be able to reach one without standing up. Slowly and steadily I raised myself off the floor, but this unsettled the frog which started to leap forwards making a beeline for the nearest feline, so I quickly hunkered down again before ushering it back to safety. Each time I tried to make a grab for a glass it either hopped away or the cats moved closer, so I'd have to crouch down to re-establish a neutral zone. If I chased them off then I risked losing the frog behind a kitchen appliance or cabinet, which was far from ideal as you can guarantee that with the natural siege mentality of cats, they would have located and despatched it long before morning.

You may wonder why I didn't try using the camera flash to momentarily dazzle or disorientate my furry assassins, but that wouldn't have worked as like all good executioners, they are immune to distraction and fazed by nothing. They are also equipped with those fast reacting inner eye mechanisms, which have evolved over a hundred million cat years to deal with this particular eventuality. To give you an example of their laid back nature and lack of concern, they regularly try to slink gracefully past the washing up left to drain beside the sink, but don't bat an eyelid when a glass is clumsily knocked onto the stone floor. Although I really should explain that I'm using this word in the generic sense and not referring to composition, as the sum total of my day to day glassware has dwindled to levels previously associated with the period in history before Roman occupation. Basically the reasons for the breakages were twofold and both cat based. From early kittenhood, the two of them would chase each other throughout the house with gay abandon and if a glassful of cider happened to get in their way, they wouldn't bother going around it. Then intrigued by the puddle and oblivious to its jagged dangers, they would start to splash about before leaving a trail of sticky paw prints as I escorted them from the living room. The other factor is Bunny's underlying predisposition towards mischief of all shapes and sizes, which includes his overwhelming fascination with liquids. If he finds an unsupervised drink on the floor, he'll brazenly claw away at the contents until it's knocked over, which more often than not would require fetching a dustpan and brush as well as the mop. In fact if I run my kitchen tap, he loves to climb into the sink and scratch at the water for all he's worth, scrubbing through layers of grime at the same time. Sometimes I do it on purpose just to get him to clean up after me for a change.

By the way has anyone here ever taken a bath with a cat, or for that matter would be prepared to admit it even if they had. I remember one particular morning when Bunny jumped into the tub just as it was starting to fill. Now you know how most cats will try to avoid getting wet at all costs, but as animals go this one is somewhat stubborn and didn't respond to the suggestion that maybe he would prefer to get out, even when pitched in my best pet-friendly voice. I could see the determined look on his face, which implied a level of resolve of King Canute like proportions and he certainly wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. As soon as the water was four or five inches deep I slowly lowered myself in, secretly impressed that he'd chosen the tap end and after applying shampoo I rinsed it off with the shower attachment. This didn't worry him in the slightest, as he just stood there and stared stoically back at me while the ripples lapped gently against his tummy fur. However the final straw came when I'd finished soaping myself and it was at this point that he forgot to make his excuses before leaving. To clarify the situation Bunny knew I wouldn't have dared to try soaping him next, as I'm not that foolhardy especially when naked and he clambered out moments before I plunged beneath the water, fully understanding the consequences of Archimedes' principle of cat immersion.

Getting back to my three way impasse, I even tried condoning behaviour which I'd previously deemed anti-social by encouraging them to leap up and knock a glass down, as the ones that I use nowadays are made of indestructible polycarbonate. There's no doubt that they do an excellent job, providing you can live without a clink when saying cheers, but still make one hell of a racket on landing if the impact isn't cushioned by something like frog flesh, which would have defeated the object of the exercise. Sadly this failed miserably as they had a very different strategy in mind and I realised that the longer the game continued, the less chance there would be of my reluctant visitor making an exit, unless it was through a cat's bum hole. So I needed to refine my tactics and abandoning the subtle approach I made a few quick feints before deftly snatching a pint glass, which was large enough to safely entrap it without dismemberment. It's about time that I showed you a picture of the little rascal and this one's titled "Froggy went a courting disaster". [\(54-PIC\)](#) The absence of visible puncture marks probably accounted for why this would-be hopalong casualty wasn't losing its sangfroid and despite the occasional blink, it had wisely chosen to remain completely motionless in order to avoid too much heavy petting on a first date. You can also see the shadow of the glass looming above, which with a well-timed swoop proved to be its deliverance from impending death and devourment. It's the same technique I use for spider removal and after sliding a piece of card underneath, I was able to evacuate the involuntary interloper to the sanctuary of my front garden. Jasper didn't seem all that bothered about the loss of a potential playmate, but Bunny gave me the evil eye before wandering off towards the food bowl.

I have nothing much to report about Saturday the 14<sup>th</sup>, apart from purchasing a game called Eye Pet for my dusty and rarely used Sony PlayStation. Bundled with a video camera, it showed a live feed of the living room as if I was looking into a carefully angled mirror, but with a cute monkey-like creature superimposed on top which responded to my movements. This was a clever piece of software that gave the impression of having a virtual pet scampering around, which you had to take care of and entertain. A sheet of thick plastic card marked with a white paw print was also supplied for the camera to lock on to and track as you moved it about. Depending on the mini-game you selected, it appeared in the guise of various different items that he'd interact with onscreen, from the shower head, soap and blow dryer which were used to wash him, to a trampoline he could bounce on. If you wrote something in black fibre tip on a scrap of paper and held it in front of the camera, he would mimic your scribbling on a little pad with his magic marker which turned the letters into different colours. He would even copy your drawings of cars or planes and these then filled out into three dimensional models so that you could ride him around on them. To achieve the right perspective I needed to mount the camera on a thin piece of wood counter-balanced on top of the TV, then bring down my bedside lamp to provide enough light and this soon became too much of a chore so I lost interest after a while. Setting it up wasn't the problem, but keeping my cats from toying with the cabling or trying to walk the plank had seriously compromised any chance of uninterrupted gameplay.

It was Monday the 16<sup>th</sup> and surprisingly sugar-tongued, I had talked Andy into employing his superior camera skills to take a definitive picture of the little triangle. After deleting his first attempts which I thought were perfectly acceptable and trying again, he was happier with one in the second batch. It was a far better effort than mine as he had turned off the flash, then braced himself against the basin to take a more detailed shot with a steady hand and a longer exposure time. I was pleased he captured it so faithfully as now I had a permanent photographic record and I won't harp on about how fleeting these ephemera can be, like a sandcastle that the gibbering wave takes, but who would have expected these words to become wisdom so soon. Andy agreed to have a go at digitally enhancing the image and getting up for a pee, he jokingly asked if I wanted him to wash his hands under the bath tap to avoid contaminating the evidence. I should have come back with some witty retort like, "If you're serious about it, then why not do your business in the garden and feel free to use the hosepipe afterwards." However my actual reply consisted of a decidedly meek clarification of whatever happened was meant to be and that he shouldn't modify his normal behaviour. Although when I went for my next toilet break, I was astonished to see that the mark had vanished without a trace so naturally I suspected foul play.

I sauntered back into the living room casually mentioning that if a job was worth doing, then it was worth doing properly, as he had neglected to clean the rest of the basin. This fell on deaf and confused ears as Andy didn't have the slightest idea of what I was talking about, so I beckoned him to join me in the bathroom where he robustly maintained his innocence. I tried to explain that out of the two of us, he was by far the most likely to have wiped it away, either accidentally or on purpose and I could see him bristle at my less than subtle accusation. Later on that evening when he went to visit the loo again, I asked him to give me a shout before washing his hands so I could observe the procedure. I only wanted to see if his meaty fingers would scour the surface below, but he was understandably self-conscious and the results were ambiguous. Perhaps I should have realised that this latest request wouldn't go down too well, as he smarted for a while before secretly paying me back for my impertinence by invisibly tracing the letter J on the mirror. This magically appeared the following morning due to condensation from my steamy bath water, though I'm pleased to say that I was only fooled for the briefest of moments, but forever impressed by his ingenuity and guile.

So if I didn't erase the triangle and Andy swears it wasn't his doing, we need to look for the answer further afield which may prove closer than you might have imagined. I left him playing my new video game while I took a comfort break at twenty to ten and found that we'd been given a heavy hint in the form of some leakage, which had already stopped by the time I discovered it. He had never actually witnessed this happening during a visit, as two weeks ago the only possible proof I could show him was a photo taken after he'd gone home. Unfortunately it didn't make the slightest difference and I couldn't convince him that this was anything other than a chance occurrence. [\(55-PIC\)](#) Up until then I'd only ever found fairly regular-shaped pipe puddles, but on this occasion there were two distinct dripping points and you can see from the arc of the surrounding splashes that the water must have spurted out quite forcefully. I'm not certain if this is relevant and it may be a case of a salaried mind working unpaid overtime, but don't you think that the lower one looks a little like the magnetic structure I constructed last Thursday to curb the flow. Before I show you a shot of it in situ, there's one final curiosity I'd like to point out. If you zoom in on the tiny bowler hat to the south east, just below it is a strange design which I'm only guessing was made from strands of human hair and possibly the odd spider leg or two. The arrangement looks too deliberate to be random, but I couldn't work out what it reminded me of until I spun the image through 180 degrees and quite frankly, it's not the sort of thing you would want to discuss in polite company.

Going back to last Thursday, here's the picture I took just before bedtime and with its holder still out of order, I had chosen to balance my loo roll on the handle instead of the cistern. [\(56-PIC\)](#) I was naively hoping it might be

toppled overnight, but obviously that didn't happen so I would have to buck up my ideas in order to persuade Géraldine into responding, as I'd forgotten she no longer needed to flush in the conventional manner. Thinking back, I was guilty of pitching my expectations at a pre-school ghost level rather than that of a grown woman, so I really could do with maintaining a certain degree of maturity in future and trying not to insult her intelligence. However my major oversight was that I should have spotted the little triangle at least eight hours earlier and I know a long shot like this isn't ideal for picking out tiny details, but if you imagine the plughole as the bull's-eye on a dartboard it would score a four. I'd like to think that it was still too indistinct and lacked the required definition to be detected by the naked eye, but maybe I ought to consider getting glasses, equipped with cat-proof lenses of course.

Here's the enhanced photo Andy sent me only three hours after he left and I picked it up the following evening, happy in the knowledge that I couldn't have offended him too badly. [\(57-PIC\)](#) By playing around primarily with the contrast he'd produced the clearest and most vivid image so far, which still offered no further insight as to how it came into, or went out of existence. After our usual Tuesday night gaming session had finished I checked my e-mails before turning off the computer and saw that only ten minutes earlier, he'd sent me another entitled "Pyramidology", which is a pseudo-science based on speculation rather than archaeology. He told me that by spinning the picture 90 degrees clockwise it reminded him of a diagram he'd seen of the Great Pyramid of Giza, showing how the mysterious shafts were supposedly built to align with Sirius and Orion. I must admit to being pleasantly surprised that he was taking his homework so seriously and this spurred me into action, which involved composing my own counter attempt at a geometry demonstration to amuse Géraldine, whilst distracting any irate Egyptologists from writing in to complain. [\(58-PIC\)](#)

My centrepiece sits in front of a bracelet which mirrors its circular shape and although they appear to be joined, that's just the deceptive camera angle. To the left there's a triangle that forms one face of the pyramid below and this was the basic building-block for my complex polyhedron. On the right I'd used my stick of chalk to draw a rough square, which I represented three dimensionally with the addition of a cube measuring six by six by six. Please don't read any hidden significance into its proportions, as if I hadn't run out of magnets I would have made a larger one. The pint glass which I'd carefully positioned to catch any drips wasn't originally supposed to be part of the composition, but at that time of night and with my bed head on, I didn't want wet magnets as I couldn't remember whether they rust or not. To be honest I don't know what I was trying to achieve by showing the process of fabrication, or reverse engineering if you start in the wrong place, so how could I realistically expect anyone else to appreciate it. In terms of food for thought, this could be seen as presenting her with a

hodgepodge of a meal made with too many ingredients, which only served to confuse the palate and crowd the trendy slate plate.

The following morning I cleared everything away apart from the chalk square, but it wasn't destined to be long for this world and endured only a few short days before being obliterated by nothing more mystifying than the socks on my feet. Being washed away by a sustained cleaning offensive from the other side would have been pleasingly dramatic, but she was obviously holding back and saving up for something far more imaginative. The next incursion happened on Saturday the 21<sup>st</sup> when I woke up to find fresh leakage under the basin, which was really no surprise after a five day drought during my wettest month since records began. [\(59-PIC\)](#) I really wanted to stay at home to observe it further, but with an excuse as feeble as puddle vigil I couldn't see myself phoning the guys to say that I wouldn't be coming in. This was chiefly because I'd only chosen to allude to, but not exactly share my ghostly goings on with the workforce to date. Later on when I had time to examine the photo in detail I could see what looked like a fish's head poking out from its watery lair, complete with clearly defined scales, closed mouth and an orange coloured eye. It wouldn't have been visible without the flash from my camera, so you may think that this is merely a trick of the light and if we were to swap places then I might agree, as it's always easier to dismiss someone else's observations than come up with your own. Although finding another creature of the deep lurking nearby would be too much of a coincidence and I'd change my mind in an instant if I could see a depiction of prawn, instead of porn on the grout line.

The floor was dry when I arrived home, but not for long as there would be fresh splashing by 8.00pm. [\(60-PIC\)](#) Instead of a fish there was now what looked like the face of a snarling animal and if you can't see one just concentrate on finding its eyes, then maybe the rest will fall into place. There again I wouldn't worry too much if it doesn't, as this won't have any foreseeable impact on your enjoyment of, or indifference to any future developments which may occur. By 9.15pm all that remained was an inoffensive damp patch, dried out to about a tenth of its previous size, but there would be more to come as I discovered when I poked my head around the bathroom door three quarters of an hour later. It was prolific in quantity and still dripping, but I didn't want to resort to a pint glass as that would be addressing the symptom rather than the cause, so I decided to opt for the creative approach. Having temporarily retired to the living room I grabbed a fistful of magnetic balls and began laying them out in a sheet, with no conscious idea of what sort of design I was trying to construct. I folded the whole thing over on itself to form a hollow tube, but this was in danger of collapsing inwards until I bent the ends together to form an elongated metal cushion, which just happened to be perfect for my requirements. My internal brief had been to produce an alternative altar for the commemorative cannabis and I was sure that she would find the attention

to detail just as customer focussed as a chocolate left on your pillow at a posh hotel. (61-PIC) It's at times like these I'm thankful that the heroine of my story wasn't a junkie, as possession is a jailable offence and I didn't fancy being locked up again, but more importantly powder tends to go everywhere apart from where you want it, as I've learnt from crushing tablets to medicate the cats.

There's one final matter that I should mention, as over the last couple of days my cold tap had become a little loose and would rotate by half an inch as it was turned on or off. That night when I cleaned my teeth before bedtime, it was completely slack and moved around uselessly unless I held the spout in position. I visited my toolkit but found it wanting, so I would be forced into tackling the problem with bare hands and if you thought that the prospects of success were minimal then you'd be right, though at least there was someone up there who must have admired me for trying. Holding the tap from above I attempted to turn the fastening nut from below, but I discovered that it worked better the other way round. After a few monotonous minutes of wiggling to and fro I'd done my very best, but being only finger tight I found that it still moved with even the gentlest of touches. However by morning not only had it become rock solid, but luckily fixed in the correct position and has remained so ever since. I can't say for certain that the spout was perpendicular to the wall when I went to bed, but knowing my tendency towards OCD I wouldn't have slept well if it had been left at the wrong angle.

We have previously seen how Géraldine can interact with metallic objects, so there's no leap of faith required to suggest that she couldn't do it again. You'll forgive me if I'm being a mite presumptuous here, by assuming that you have already accepted my explanation for the toilet roll holder conundrum, but let's quickly re-examine the two incidents and look for similarities. The items in question were standard bathroom fittings of approximately equal size and restoring functionality revolved around using the most basic screwing action against a metal thread. Both instances occurred overnight in response to bodged attempts at home maintenance and the money I spent buying a replacement for one of them, was kindly offset by not having to call in a plumber for the other. Maybe the force of gravity could possibly explain the first, but certainly not the second as nuts can't tighten themselves upwards, so without a viable alternative I would have to conclude that her involvement was more likely to be fact rather than supposition.

The next spell of seepage happened the following Saturday at about 10.25pm and having assumed a reactive, rather than proactive role in the proceedings, I'd done nothing to invoke or encourage it. You see I didn't want to be charged with being environmentally unfriendly or insurance fraud, which I'll explain later and it's a good job that I wasn't on a meter, as



the increase in flooding over the past month would have been enough to send Noah scurrying towards the wood pile. Traditionally I've reached for the mop if spillage occurs due to human error or rambunctious cats, but brandishing it around in the bathroom like an offensive weapon seemed slightly rude, so I have always resorted to other means when dealing with the foibles of my pipework. Although there was no need to worry on this occasion, as the dripping had already stopped and didn't require my intervention. [\(62-PIC\)](#) I was fascinated by the shapes and the fact that the two separate leakages were longitudinal under a latitudinal pipe. The final curiosity that I will bring to your attention is a leaping cat stencilled in the left hand puddle, which was reminiscent of Jasper's posture in the very first photo you saw. It took me a while before realising that I was on the right track but had the wrong kitten in mind, so sifting through old pictures I eventually found the one I really wanted to show you, taken in January 2004 when Steve and Kate were round for a visit. This time Bunny is jumping up after the toy on a string while his half-brother looks on, however he's barely visible with only a single ear in frame, like the tip of a furry iceberg. [\(63-PIC\)](#)

Sunday morning and as always, I was woken by Jasper vocalising his express desire that breakfast should be served sooner rather than later. I try to feed the cats at approximately the same time twice a day, but he must think that it's his job to remind me as I might forget if I'm not sufficiently badgered. He watched in silence as I put on my dressing gown, then scampered downstairs where I could hear him noisily reaffirming his demands before I'd even made it to the landing. I only found a fairly standard drip in progress, so I've decided to spare you the tedium of seeing this one and here's my reason for the need to exercise restraint. If I were to include a picture of every puddle I've ever been gifted, then you would be inundated by a veritable tidal wave of them and soon become immune to their watery charm. After finishing cat duties I enjoyed my usual Sunday breakfast of Marks and Spencer's luxury hot cross buns, washed down with a chilled bottle of Waitrose extra strong vintage cider before going back to bed for a couple of hours, which makes it seem like I'm having two days off in a row. I know it's traitorously un-British of me, but I'd rather die of thirst than drink a cup of tea and coffee wouldn't be conducive to a good morning's sleep, so I think of this as a wholesome glass of apple juice with a bit of a kick. It was recently re-branded as "Reserve" in order to placate the medical profession, but thankfully they only changed the label so alcoholic content and flavour remained the same.

By contrast while shopping in M&S about a month ago, I was reduced to apoplexy when I encountered the dreaded words "Improved recipe" emblazoned on the packet. I hoped all this meant was that glazing irregularities had been addressed, as sometimes the tops weren't shiny enough, but it's never worried me too much as you don't notice after they're sliced and buttered. No such luck as their culinary crime had been to

double the amount of raisins, maybe in a bid to help towards your five a day, but I can achieve this by cider alone. So not enjoying the new taste or wanting to risk an overdose, I swapped over to a stodgier and less healthy diet of crumpets instead. These provided an unsatisfying substitute for either physical or spiritual sustenance, as now my only redeeming ties with formal religion had been severed and who wouldn't want to be reminded of the horrifically barbarous method of execution by crucifixion while they're eating breakfast. Thank goodness the changes proved unpopular as sales didn't justify the increased spend on fruit, so I was happy when my salvation arrived a few weeks later and they admitted defeat by quietly reverting back to the original formula.

By about 1.00pm I'd noticed that the pipe had stopped dripping and the puddle was beginning to dry out, so I decided this would be a good opportunity to monitor its progress. Despite being rather small and unremarkable, I was fascinated by a tiny dry spot in the middle as on the whole water tends to evaporate from around its circumference, so naturally I wanted to record it. One of the many advantages of not having a live-in, or living partner is that your time is your own. Just imagine announcing after lunch that you are too busy to do the washing up and it will have to fester in the sink, as there's a spot of bother in the bathroom which needs your attention. See how well that would go down and here's the big difference as the dead don't nag about this sort of thing, or even silently add it to their list of grievances which are guaranteed to come out during the next major row. Unfettered by any of these minor complications I made myself as comfy as I could on the cold, although not paranormally so stone floor. I must admit to feeling momentarily amused by my situation, when I compared it to the millions of people out there who were enjoying a more conventional kind of interaction with friends of their own. In truth though I couldn't have been happier, bum on cushion and camera in hand as I watched the puddle shrink into nothingness, snapping time lapse photography without a care in the world or reason to think of myself as unstable in any way, apart from the lack of a tripod.

Halfway through the process my watchfulness was rewarded in a way I could never have predicted, as the water had dried to form a stylish capital J. [\(64-PIC\)](#) I took thirty photographs from start to finish with a ninety second interval between them and it would be fun to animate the sequence, but this is just a pipe dream as I don't have the aptitude or software. Although I suppose I could always get the images printed out and staple them together to make a flip book. I felt grateful that it wasn't a long or drawn out photo shoot as cramp had already started to set in, so fortunately both bum and cushion could soon return to their rightful places on the sofa. However I wasn't quite done yet as I'd decided to recreate a facsimile puddle to see if the drying pattern could be replicated, but the results were as negative as negative gets so I had to give up and figuratively throw in the towel.

December 2009

I had become so accustomed to seeing my bathroom floor as a wetlands environment for the past month or more, that I was fairly disappointed at the lack of leakage over the last two days. This was what I'd define as a seesaw sensation, because at the time half of me felt relieved that it had stopped and let's not underestimate how mains water pressure left unconstrained could flood the whole house, which would be a right pain. Bunny cat on the other hand would have a field day. You see if a friend knocks over a drink then it's easily cleaned up, but for one who could potentially turn your ground floor into a paddling pool, the principle of forgive and forget is harder to employ due to the resulting property damage. I struggle with filling in insurance forms at the best of times, but I don't think that describing the cause as sorcerer's apprentice mishap would be enough to satisfy the underwriters. Maybe this could be an example of that rarest of occasions, where a fib would actually be preferable to the truth on a claims sheet. I prefer ones with multiple choice answers, as I could safely tick the box for plumbing leakage, but in the area below marked "Other" I would have to restrain myself from adding the word "worldly".

By Wednesday night I was feeling more than a little neglected and we all know how unattractive it is to come across as needy, but I still required further content for my book. These happenings could stop at any moment and if that were the case then I'd simply choose a bigger font, which would not only boost the overall page count, but also increase my readership by getting me into the large print section at public lending libraries. I wasn't too disheartened though as Justin would be coming down to see me tomorrow, but I couldn't deny that it's always nicer if you can share new preternatural experiences with friends, rather than having to default to regaling them with stories of old ones. Good hosts will always ensure that their guests are fed and watered, so when he arrived on the evening of Thursday December 3<sup>rd</sup> I fulfilled my part of the bargain by cooking supper, but Géraldine must have had a more pressing engagement as the bathroom remained dry. So I was resigned to the fact that all I could show him were pictures of previous puddles, as he hadn't been lucky enough to have one of his own yet.

When I woke up on Friday morning there was no sign of activity in the bathroom either human or otherwise, so I had a wash before completing the rest of my chores and heading off to work, leaving Justin sound asleep in the top room. Late lunchtime he wandered into town for a coffee and a chat, but I couldn't arrange any time off as his visit had been at such short notice, so I gave him my key to get back in without me. I had instructed him to take full advantage of the facilities, as my motto has always been "Mi casa su casa" and the only house rule I insist upon is not letting either

Bunny or Jasper out of the front door, but apart from that pretty much anything goes. To be quite open with you, I'm by far the least outgoing of my group of friends as they all live a fair distance away and I wouldn't want to leave the cats on their own overnight, so I really appreciate it when one of them comes to stay with me. My simple but manipulative approach is to make them feel as welcome and pampered as I can, so they won't be able to resist coming back for more. As we weren't busy I managed to slope off a tad early, arriving home at five o'clock and even before Justin got up to let me in, I could see that he'd remembered the right buttons to press as there was an Xbox game running on TV. Although from his tightly zipped fleece I could tell that he still hadn't worked out how to light my gas fire.

This is an acquired art which I have tried to teach him, though in his defence it has become trickier with the passing of time, but I really don't want to call a man in for fear that it's condemned and I'll end up with a nasty little fan heater instead. In fact I was given one as a house warming present way back in 1991, but I've never liked them so it now resides safely out of sight and mind in my garage. For some odd reason these noisy, lip-crackingly souped-up hair dryers have been a pet hate of mine for as long as I can remember, so it will come as no surprise that in my opinion, they should be consigned to history like outdoor lavatories and hard toilet paper. I dumped my carrier bags full of supplies in the kitchen and allowed myself a quick peek in the bathroom before joining him on the sofa. After almost a week's wait there was a fully formed pipe puddle under the basin, but before fetching the camera I gabbled a garbled explanation for my uncontrollable excitement. Justin politely waited until I had finished, before casually remarking that he'd noticed it earlier. I realised that I'd been gushing disproportionately to the amount of leakage, but on this occasion the timing happened to be more important to me than size or shape. Pardon me if I don't show you a photo of this one, but there's no point as it was the same old bog-standard variety that we've seen before.

The floor had dried out completely shortly after six thirty and the night seemed to be passing by in no time at all. I particularly love the in-depth conversations which tend to follow after a few too many beers, when the video games are finished and the music is down low. Although any subject is up for discussion, the hot topic of the night was obviously Géraldine and during a visit to the toilet around quarter to eleven, I came across another of her practical demonstrations to corroborate our hypothetical musings. Justin was summoned immediately and it's a good job that my friends are canny enough not to expect an invitation to join me in the loo as an excuse for either a cocaine or cottaging session. It was as if she approved of being the centre of attention and wanted to show her appreciation, so we assessed the situation before decamping to the sofa while I came up with a reciprocal strategy. I explained the rules of the game as I saw them, saying that now it was our turn to formulate a reply, but when I asked him for

suggestions he wisely kept his counsel and assumed the role of an impartial observer. This must have been a bit surreal for him as previously he's only listened to my exploits at a distance, but now it was all happening a lot closer to home for his liking.

I had been racking my brains for the next move when a very wrong, but all the same very amusing idea came to mind. A fair few years ago on another birthday, Géraldine had bought me a present of a small wooden articulated mannequin which was held together by elastic threads and about six inches tall, or around eight if stretched torturously close to breaking point. He sits Gulliver-like on the shelf below the fire, riding on top of a Lilliputian tank made out of scrap metal and just waiting for orders to invade the bathroom, although armoured assistance would not be required on this occasion. Even the nicest of people can occasionally have unkind or unworthy thoughts, but normally we swiftly move on without externalising them, however this time I had an audience to impress and I couldn't help myself. While outlining my intentions to Justin I didn't consider the implications of being cursed with such a dark sense of humour and heedless to say, this was like dropping him in at the deep end when he hadn't even mastered wading. I'd been thinking of staging a light-hearted lynching using some magnetic balls as a rope and noose, but I could see that his brow was furrowing as my plan was unfurling. Nobody can say that there wasn't a certain amount of warped logic behind it, but all things considered I didn't know whether she would see the funny side either.

Justin did his best to discourage my bravado and on reflection, it may have bordered on the distasteful side of insulting, so to keep everyone happy I quickly came up with a less controversial alternative. Within a few minutes my flexible figurine found itself suspended beneath the toilet roll holder, but hanging by hand rather than by neck, which looked a lot more comfortable. As a finishing touch I'd placed one of my magnetic constructions underneath and at the time I remember being relatively pleased with the final result, so I freshened our drinks before we carried on chatting in the living room. I couldn't help feeling that something was missing though, but I didn't want to bore Justin unnecessarily with my as yet unconfirmed concerns. Trying to maintain a convivial conversation while reassessing and fine tuning your latest attempt to redefine the boundaries of science isn't easy, so I'm not surprised that it took me a good half hour to identify then rectify the problem.

Obviously the wooden figure represented Géraldine, but I'd left the poor girl in limbo, dangling uselessly in mid-air with nothing to do other than point forlornly with her free hand to an object which was tantalisingly just out of reach. In order to address my shortcomings I came up with a way she could make the connection, although not in the physical sense as that was no longer a workable tactic given her current condition, but through an

unseen force and magnetism looked like the best option. Justin had already given his stamp of approval to my revised planning proposal and here's the picture. [\(65-PIC\)](#) The second rope of magnets which I'd attached to her other hand should be parallel to the white grout line, but you can see how she was now invisibly reconciled with the structure below as it's been pulled ever so slightly off course. Of course you may think that this last minute adjustment wasn't really necessary, as I'd been fixing a problem which only existed in my head, but I wanted to provide her with an allegory of reconnecting with the world she had left behind. Hopefully this would provoke a reply and without wanting to be outdone, she may well introduce me to even more hidden treats concealed within her bag of tricks, but understandably it was probably getting a bit late for that tonight. As I watched Justin trundle off to bed I couldn't help feeling reasonably proud of myself, as I hadn't just been thinking outside the box this time, but within the very fabric it was made of.

There was nothing to be seen of him when I left the house on Saturday morning, but he wouldn't be staying for the weekend as his new job started on Sunday. Luckily all signs of leakage had dried up overnight, so I could leave for work safe in the knowledge that he wouldn't be presented with the sort of distraction that could prey on his mind while driving home and let's face it, you need your wits about you especially on the motorway. My day passed unhindered until 11.50pm when I found evidence of a little trickle of water from the pipe, about an inch in diameter and in an effort to try to dry the dribble I countered mysticism with magnetism. Having never come across a micro drip before I decided to devise a reply of excessively monumental proportions, so I started to build an obelisk and considering my comparatively humble constructions up until now, you'd scarcely believe that I had the balls to do it. As I had already prefabricated most of its component parts, the project didn't take as long as you might expect and when I'd finished there were absolutely no contingency magnets left, which was cutting it fine of course but that's the kind of guy I am. This bulk eraser of video tapes was carefully repositioned on the bathroom floor and thankfully it didn't involve passing by my treasured collection of Star Trek episodes on VHS, not that I have any way of playing them back nowadays.

Before closing the door I stood back to admire my latest and greatest creation, knowing that a concentrated magnetic field was an unlikely fix for a serious leak, but maybe I'd caught this one early enough. It was now way past my normal bedtime and I must have been tired as I forgot to remind Jasper to give me an early morning alarm call for his breakfast, so it's a good job that he remembered all by himself. Without his diligence I'd still be sound asleep and mankind would have missed this perfect demonstration of the playful nature of the perpetrator. It turned out that my scheme had backfired and the puddle was now significantly larger, as you will be able to tell from the following picture taken after being awakened at the uncivilised

hour of 7.15am. (66-PIC) I didn't have the time for preventative measures to discourage its progress, as the increasingly urgent demands from the kitchen meant that two mouths were now needing feeding and after finishing my usual breakfast, I headed upstairs then went back to bed. The French word for puddle is *flaque* which is appropriate as I'm setting myself up to take an awful lot of it, also happens to be of feminine gender and due to the unfathomable vagaries of a female agenda, I discovered no trace of either the lady or her lake when I resurfaced at 10.15am. Untold generations from now, educational establishments may well embrace this as part of the curriculum, so students could choose paranormal studies instead of the more rigid sciences that homeopathy and crystal therapy had both become over the intervening years. Looking ahead I could imagine an exam containing a question like, "Which cat famously prevented additional evidence for establishing the existence of life after death from being missed by a careless oversleep in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" Hold on, I know this one.

Enough of this nonsense, it's time to get back to business and around half past two on Sunday afternoon I was busily pounding away at the keyboard. I really don't know what triggered it as I was trying to stay focused on writing up the story, but I found my mind wandering and specifically towards the kitchen cabinet. Amongst other more interesting artefacts, it housed the previously ignored piece of plastic that I had recovered from the aftermath of my last attic experiment, so temporarily abandoning the sofa I retrieved said item for closer inspection. (67-PIC) Nobody likes to look stupid, so I normally try to hide my incompetence and mostly get away with it, but this particular instance is an oversight which is going to expose poor insight rather than eyesight. Searching for "Roberts Polypro" online, I discovered that my unknown object was commonly used in clothes shops to attach small items like socks or underwear to display rails. More importantly I also learnt that its generic name was a J hook and amazingly up until then I had never considered the shape to be significant, or a dunce cap to be quite so befitting.

During a conversation on our next games night, I quickly got to the bottom of how it got there in the first place and the explanation turned out to be more mundane than I was hoping for. On a previous visit around nine months ago, Justin had forgotten to bring a change of underpants so he'd bought some from a local discount store and must have dropped part of the packaging. Maybe the hook had remained hidden, tucked away under the mattress until fairly recently and was brought into play by an unseen hand or a determined paw, but there's also the remote possibility that I simply hadn't spotted it. This was still on the explicable side of strange, although I like to give the carpet a thorough going over with our vacuum cleaner from work before anyone comes to stay and my close-up vision may be deteriorating, but suction remains constant as I always empty the bag.

Following up on my lead I went to investigate the shop he'd name checked, only to find plenty of inferior quality unbranded versions which must have been far cheaper to buy in. Making sure to avoid the women's rails as I didn't want to draw undue attention, I continued my search before finally discovering an example of the Polypro, the Rolls Royce of J hooks. I can't pretend that I didn't leave feeling a little deflated as this confirmed his story, but at least I could now verify its date of introduction and place of origin. However the key point here is that I messed up and lost concentration, as this was the only object I found out of place after my experiment had run its course, but I didn't even give it a second thought. At the time my discovery seemed trivial, but in the context of the hunt for all things J-like I'd be inclined to judge it as category one evidence, even though I didn't have such a sophisticated system of classification back then and still don't.

The next bathroom action happened on Tuesday the 8<sup>th</sup> when I found an inverted otter in residence at 7.40am, but it didn't choose to hang around and had vanished without trace before I arrived home from work. [\(68-PIC\)](#) Despite the fact that I can get a bit floor fixated and not pay enough attention to other areas, by Thursday morning I'd noticed something curious on the shelf of the bathroom cabinet. As is often the case, these clues can appear to form overnight, but that doesn't mean to say they haven't taken a certain amount of time to reach the required levels of visibility. It's natural to become over-familiar with your environment and gradual changes are difficult to spot, so maybe I would be able to identify these phenomena sooner if every other day I routinely blindfolded myself before using the bathroom. This might also be a good drill for coping with power cuts, but I didn't fancy tripping and cracking my head open by accident, spilling out the first puddle I wouldn't get to photograph, although you could probably read about the gory details in the coroner's report.

It was ten o'clock at night when I remembered to take a picture of the vague pattern in the compacted dust and there are roughly a dozen concentric lines curving round to make a sort of angel wing or tree ring effect. [\(69-PIC\)](#) I couldn't begin to imagine what might have caused them, but it looked as if a comb had been drawn over the surface, much like the tasteful way they used to decorate plaster ceilings in the Seventies. They were remarkably hard to capture on camera and it wasn't until Sunday that I managed to get a slightly clearer shot. [\(70-PIC\)](#) You can see the diagonal wipe I made three months ago before mum and Ron's visit, which preserved vital evidence while providing a pleasingly aesthetic balance at the same time. The darker section is the side that I'd cleaned, but fortunately there had been a sufficient accumulation of fallen dust since then to show up the lines. Although it was getting late, I had been messing with a few different camera angles and settings in pursuit of the perfect picture. I stood back to take an overview of the whole shelf then carried on with trying to achieve a



decent close-up of the alleged angel wing, as that would be a saleable commodity in itself, especially if printed on postcards and sold online to the religiously gullible. Having transferred my photos onto the computer I viewed them in quick succession, but most were out of focus and I skipped past the long shot, as by definition it was the least likely to reveal anything of relevance. I'll admit to initially feeling disappointed, but when I revisited my efforts a few days later the one picture that I'd so wilfully ignored suddenly stood out from the others, as it revealed something new which had previously gone unnoticed. Being little more than a throwaway the image lacked detail, but I could see a suggestion of a roundish shape which meant I'd failed to observe that the segment I had so exclusively dwelled upon, was in fact a single quadrant of a larger design.

Andy was round on Monday the 14<sup>th</sup>, but after his third visit to the bathroom he still hadn't spotted anything worthy of comment so I chose not to mention it. When he left I set about the task of providing you with a clearer view of the newly found feature, but failed to produce any satisfactory results until the following evening. [\(71-PIC\)](#) There's a circular outline which is fairly accurately bisected by the cleaned section and it's a bit vague in places, but if you project the course of the curves they definitely join up. This enigma had been difficult to see and even trickier to photograph, but what could have caused it? Surely some of you must be thinking that this one's too easy, as the obvious answer must have been the toilet roll I placed there a month and a half ago during my Halloween experiment, although I didn't spot any sign of an imprint at the time. I'd left it there for no longer than eight hours and I can't see that the magnets on top had any significant part to play besides adding some extra weight. Maybe it had no connection with the markings whatsoever, but that's doubtful as I can't imagine any other object which could have produced a similar sized shape. The only element I found difficult to explain were the concentric lines, until I examined the supposedly flat end of a toilet roll and discovered a series of ridges which corresponded almost exactly. However you mustn't forget that it was positioned with care and even the slightest rotation would have constituted precisely the sort of harmful scrubbing action I've been trying so hard to avoid in sensitive areas like these.

So had I created the effect myself by placing the item on the shelf, or was it a later development somehow? Six whole weeks of dust had built up since then and it would have concealed rather than accentuate the imprint, so I am fairly confident that this was a recent occurrence which happened only in the last few days. Of course I'm fully aware that bleach is used to whiten the paper, but all traces must get washed away in the manufacturing process, or it wouldn't be safe enough to be rubbed up against our more delicate regions. Absorbency could also be a factor, but when we're dealing with dry incrustated layers that took a considerable amount of pressure to penetrate with a gnarly old sprig of weed, which incidentally is far too

abrasive for bottom wiping, it doesn't really hold up as convincing one. So unless you have any better ideas about its formation, this will only add to our concerns over burgeoning, though not overburdening discrepancies.

Talking of which, there were two remaining patches of our simplistic scrapings towards the bottom of the circle and beneath them I spotted what looked like a technical drawing by comparison. If you examine the front of the shelf, you'll notice a thick dark stripe that narrows and ends with a slight kink, but let's concentrate on the tiny yacht moored astern to its left which is delineated by a far more dexterous touch. See how beautifully the prow has been drawn with such precise strokes that go on to form the hull with its unorthodox mast, spar and boom configuration. I know very little about sailing, but I imagine the boat's superstructure is the sort of mishmash of styles that could quickly get you into deep water, even in the shallows. If anyone wants to reconstruct a life-sized replica of this vessel then you'll have my full consent, but only after agreeing to sign a lengthy disclaimer before sea trials begin. How can we tell that this is her work and not just a haphazard collection of lines, well if you turn the picture 90 degrees clockwise there's a strong visual clue in the form of a frog which is sitting nearby.

Being of French extraction Géraldine often referred to herself as the frog, even before she croaked and would always chose Yoshi when playing Mario Kart. However due to the primitive graphics at the time, neither of us realised that he was actually an unidentified species of small green dinosaur without fossil record. One year she presented me with a large gift-wrapped object on my birthday, which rattled slightly when I picked it up but offered no further clues as to what could be inside. I could see the delight in her eyes as I carefully opened the package to reveal its contents, a black ceramic box with four compartments for storing odds and ends, each covered by a lid with a frog-shaped handle. Luckily I didn't have one already and after a nice big hug to say thank you, it was granted pride of place in front of the fire. Soon after the house renovations began I decided to move my breakables into the garage for safe keeping, then completely forgot about its existence until being reminded by the kitchen incident a month ago and now this. I couldn't help feeling the odd pang of guilt as it didn't deserve to be hidden away and unloved, so I resolved to reinstate the frog box in a manner which would make up for my ungracious behaviour. Within a matter of moments I had settled on the perfect occasion, though you will have to be patient as it won't be this side of the New Year.

Me and my butter-fingered brain, I almost missed the fact that I've been overlooking someone's feelings here. Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> was games night and as Geoff had been unavailable due to family commitments, Justin took this as an opportunity to tell us that on his last visit to see me, he'd spoken a few quiet words to Géraldine during a bathroom break. I asked him to make

a note of them in an e-mail, which to my surprise arrived the day after and this is how it went.

<Hi Nick,

Great round of golf last night, so good to be a part of that.

Have been trying to remember exactly what I said in your bathroom that evening and yes I was in a certain condition.

But the nub of it was that I told her how as far as I knew, she was much loved and that those who were missing her were concerned that this could happen, especially as she appeared to have such a love of life and the company of others.

This is close if not exact.

Take care mate and talk soon,

Justin>

So his kind words were both validating and comforting at the same time, as now I realised that he wasn't freaked out by the whole experience, but had embraced it instead.

Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> of December and I was feeling all Christmassy, as not only had John confirmed that he would be coming over to stay for the festivities, but just like a treat behind the door of an advent calendar, when I looked into my bathroom at 8.45pm I found another puddle in progress. So off I went to fetch my camera and when I returned from the kitchen, Jasper was waiting to follow me in. There was definitely something unusual that he could sense and I watched him restlessly prowling around, yowling like a wildcat. We already know that Jasper can be an extremely vocal little chap, but here he was all but shrieking at me, louder by an order of magnitude than when he's really hungry and demanding food. Sound per pound, I could equate it to sharing an echo chamber with an angry seagull as these birds don't like being in confined spaces, although this is far from the only reason they rarely make good house pets. Eyeball pecking being amongst the worst of them and certainly topping my list. It's impossible to know why he was so agitated, but I reckon it must have been his feline powers of pussception kicking in which put him in such a heightened state of arousal. Here's a photo of my psychic sidekick looking decidedly apprehensive while standing on the rim of the bathtub and it's a pity there's no audio, as you would hear an ear-splitting howl accompanying this one. [\(72-PIC\)](#)

We've previously discussed how cats may stare into space while you're wondering what they are looking at, but this was very different as his eyes were dancing dervishly around the room, tracking something beyond my spectrum of vision or understanding. All I had was my trusty camera with its macro setting and flash function, but this would hardly give me a sporting chance of competing against a three week old newly sighted kitten, let alone a fully honed adult. Still I tried to follow his gaze and took countless, yet pointless pictures in various directions, as I could see absolutely nothing of interest until I downloaded them later. Unlike Justin I never discovered whether he was embracing the experience or freaking out, but all I can say is that my bathroom must have promoted a similar desire in each of them to externalise their thoughts and concerns.

You're already aware that I will go to any lengths to justify showing you a puddle picture, but I would stop short of selling my favourite grandmother as her ashes have been scattered to the four winds, however the other was buried and is theoretically though unadvisedly still up for grabs. I have always promised myself that I would refuse to acknowledge orbs as being evidence of anything other than camera malfunction, but I daresay you can guess what's coming next. Allow me to explain, since the introduction of digital photography we have had to put up with these unwanted spherical aberrations and according to experts they are caused by microscopic specks of dust in front of the lens. It's dispiriting to see so many of them posted on websites by amateur ghost hunters as supernatural phenomena, when they are just flaws of modern technology. In fact if you look through your own photos there will be a fair amount of them floating in the background, which must be particularly galling for the more house-proud among us. Of course there's always the slimmest of chances that maybe a tiny percentage of orbs are indeed the cat's whiskers as opposed to misleading camera artefacts, so I can't say for sure whether or not this is one of those hallowed few, but at least it gives me an excuse to smuggle in the puddling. [73-PIC](#) It's exceptionally bright and the teardrop inside can't be a pattern from the wall behind, as I've just been out there with my magnifying glass to check. As if this wasn't excitement enough, there's also a pale circular shape lurking on the skirting board towards the left. This can't be a reflection off the water, so what we have here is probably just a stealth or chameleon orb trying to hide in the woodwork, perhaps a little embarrassed by the showboating antics of its more glamorous friend.

Seriously though, the only significant shot that I'd taken almost ended up in the recycle bin, as being seemingly devoid of interest I came very close to discarding it on first inspection. After all it was just a close-up of my last one which you have already seen, but this goes to show that we should take more time to consider the implications before throwing the baby out with the bath water. That's because deleting a photograph is pretty final and the laws against child abuse are pretty explicit. It's easy to be wise after the

event, but seldom during so put yourself in my shoes and try to imagine just how amazed I was when I saw what I had captured. [\(74-PIC\)](#) At first glance there is nothing of merit here, until you zoom in vaguely right of centre and just below the skirting board you'll see what looks like a small marble or even smaller planet, but I hadn't encountered anything like this before so I didn't know what it could be. This sneaky little photo bomber was totally beyond my limited sphere of knowledge and as I had no point of reference, the only woefully optimistic speculation I could come up with suggested that it fell short of, or possibly exceeded the boundaries of the natural world. Luckily my logical mind swiftly intervened like it does when you suddenly wake up halfway through a dream, still convinced that you're Adolf Hitler's evil twin and just about to do something utterly unspeakable again. In less than a second or two my momentous discovery was undone, as I realised I'd only caught a water droplet in mid-air and the two big clues were the way that background colours had been inverted, together with a generous helping of camera flash reflected in the middle.

Wait a minute, don't drips fall in a teardrop shape and there was also an issue with its hazy shadow immediately to the left. I always try to make sure that when I take a picture it's more or less straight on, as science has never been a fan of jazzy camera angles, so naturally I would expect the shadow to be more behind the object than less. Another subtle detail I've noticed is a second chameleon orb, but this one's tiny by comparison. In fact it's high on impossible to locate unless you imagine it as a clock face, where the hours between seven and nine are partially occluded by the similarly-sized falling droplet. I will admit that it's fairly indistinct and could just be my imagination, so I'll try to find something more tangible for you to get your teeth into. However before we continue, I should tell you there's a medical term for this sort of thing and it's known as apophenia. This is when a person sees meaningful shapes or images in a random and meaningless environment, so what we really need now is to find out whether you suffer from it too. Zoom in until the reflected light from my camera flash fills a third of the screen and you may become aware of a minuscule mask-like face a short distance above it. Give yourself a pat on the back if you can see it, but in reality it's more of a smack in the chops as this means that the test was positive, although there's nothing better than a shared complaint for an author to bond with his readership. Trust me though, the symptoms are still very mild and there isn't anything to worry about unless you also spotted Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer's head. There's no known cure for this condition, but happily there aren't any recorded fatalities either and what with the festive season approaching, we ought to make allowances for some Christmassy cross-contamination.

I got up at 7.00am on Sunday due to Jasper's early mewling wake-up call and the bathroom floor may have been dry, but I was parched so I cracked open a bottle of breakfast cider before my customary eighth bedtime of the

week. No wonder days off always seem to pass too quickly and by late afternoon, I felt it was high time to make a start on the experiment I'd been planning from the night before. This involved nothing more complicated than investigating the shape of falling droplets and the relative position of their shadows under the influence of flash photography. My bathtub was the perfectly controllable location for this, but the tap had to be turned just so, not too slow or there would be an interminable wait between drips and not too fast as the water would stream out in a useless torrent. Up until now I didn't realise my extraordinary good fortune regarding the timing of the last photo I showed you, as it took me ages to capture another and a few more for comparison. I've been using cameras since childhood and my current digital compact is a miniature marvel of modern invention, but it has a fatal flaw when taking pictures of objects in motion. In the distant past I would buy a roll of thirty six exposures, which worked out to be one for every millimetre of film size and a spare, so there was little margin for error. However as there were no complex electronics involved, this meant the delay between pressing the shutter key and taking a photograph was insignificant, so I'd rarely miss the shot I wanted. Nowadays with such gigantic leaps in technology, after pushing the button I'm forced to endure a pause of indiscriminate length while the camera applies for a shooting permit before fulfilling my request, so it's lucky she's not one of those poltergeists who likes to throw their toys out of the pram. I can't quite find the words to tell you how frustrating this was, kneeling beside the bath while trying to second guess when a drip would fall and wondering whether I'd ever be able to take a picture of it. This comparatively simple task seemed like an impossible one and I had to scrap so many poorly timed attempts from the memory card that my low battery symbol was starting to blink, but with the perseverance of a bus spotter I eventually caught three in a row. These shots proved conclusively that a droplet does indeed fall as a sphere, which apparently is something to do with surface tension and the shape is unchanged until splashdown. Furthermore they all showed that the shadow was consistently located to the left for some odd reason and I thought this may be caused by refraction. On reflection it's also possible there's a far less complicated answer, which I could explore by turning the camera upside down. However I've chosen to put this on hold as being right-handed, the shutter button would be awkward to press and I didn't fancy a few more hours of crouching in a freezing cold bathroom.

I'd realised that the flash was positioned to the right of the lens which meant my pictures were being lit at a slight angle, so I'll save this one until summer or more probably decide to leave it open for discussion. Anyway here's my best photo which looks strangely like frog spawn with its shadow forming the dark spot in the middle, but let's just put that down to coincidence instead of a recurring theme. [\(75-PIC\)](#) You can also see an exclamation mark, which was made by a splash hitting the side of the tub and the globule underneath is where it's dripped downwards. From time to

time this serves as my reality check and zooming in on the down stroke, I can only see the random patterns of physics at play without anything of interest standing out from the background. So whenever I think that my condition may be spiralling out of control, I go back to this image and if there's still nothing recognisable then at least I know it's not getting any worse. It almost goes without saying that there's an ulterior motive for bringing this particular feature to your attention, but you'll have to wait until early January to find out why. As a fitting finale to the day there was a small but rather nondescript puddle at 8.00pm, which had mostly dried up by midnight and failed to make it to either my photo album or morning.

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> of December and I felt really excited to be me. I was just about finishing up for the afternoon at work when John called me saying that his train would be twenty minutes late, so I could afford a little more time to procure any missing supplies in my official capacity as designated bartender. From an early age I had been allowed snowballs at Christmas, so it's no surprise that advocaat is my special treat drink at this time of year and I'd scoured the town centre without success for some Warninks, rather than the own brand supermarket variety which tastes of rancid custard. These days I serve it neat with an optional slug of De Kuyper cherry brandy poured in the middle and luckily due to the inefficiencies of our rail network, there was enough time to make an inspired detour to my local corner shop where I purchased their last dusty bottle. Offering your guests alcohol with the price tag still attached is unnecessarily vulgar and when I peeled off the label there were two others underneath, so it had obviously been sitting on the shelf for a while. I was driving to the station when my phone rang, so I most likely pulled over to take the call, which is preferable to taking the call and most likely being pulled over. His train had terminated one stop short as they were operating a limited service, so I altered my journey plan, cursing the Romans for establishing their major settlement a few miles away and thereby costing us almost an hour of drinking time. I believe it's important not to let your sense of direction get rusty, which is why I don't use satellite navigation and quite enjoy being lost as uncertainty is character-building, but the holiday clock was ticking so I couldn't afford to dilly-dally on this occasion. Fortunately I was heading for one of the best signposted of all public amenities so I found it with ease, turned into the car park and ferried him home without further delay.

I don't need to tell you that it wouldn't be long before the night started to go a bit sideways, as a pick'n'mix approach to alcohol and high jinks was the order of the day. In order to demonstrate, here's a rather splendid photo of John looking all brooding and enigmatic whilst sporting a fine magnetic headdress we'd knocked into shape. I e-mailed him a copy a few weeks later, suggesting that he might get some interesting offers by uploading it to his online dating profile, so my apologies to any lonely hearts out there who have seen this one before. [\(76-PIC\)](#) Although Christmas is traditionally

a time for giving to the living, I didn't want anyone to go without so I had a small presentation in mind for the top room where he'd be sleeping, but I only remembered to tell him about my strategy a couple of minutes before four in the morning. Being a staunchly committed non-believer and fired up by Dutch courage, which by the way had decanted less freely than vintage ketchup, he appeared to be completely ambivalent about the prospect so I hastened upstairs to organise the setup.

It didn't take long as this one was less elaborate than my last and even though I'd only introduced two or three new elements, a lot of thought had gone into choosing them so please don't imagine for a moment that I've skimmed on preparation. [\(77-PIC\)](#) My first selection was the card I'd been sent by Géraldine's mother, but you can't see the second item which is an embarrassing black and white passport photo, taken for an exchange visit to France as part of a teacher training degree at college. I discovered it between the pages of my tatty old dictionary and that's where it's staying. My recollection is that either mum or dad had bought me this small blue book when I was twelve and needed it for French lessons, as I'd just been moved to a new secondary school for logistical rather than disciplinary reasons. That would also have been the same year in which Géraldine was born, but as it all happened such a long time ago I could be mistaken, so who knows whether I'm guilty or not of over-romanticising a touch on this occasion. Well my mum is now the only person who could provide the answer, although she is still blissfully ignorant of any of this at the moment, but I can rely on her support as she's always wanted me to find someone special. Confidentially I remember referring to my book of Chinese horoscopes, not that I hold much belief in such ancient and inscrutable wisdom, only to discover we were wholly incompatible in a relationship as two roosters under the same roof are bound to fight. Of course this wouldn't have been a deal-breaker in itself, but we were such great friends that any designs on intimacy might spoil things forever and not merely be regretted by both parties in the morning.

As luck would have it I got an early opportunity to test out the waters way back in 1996, which was purely by an accident of technology and cultural differences. I had just acquired a brand new mobile phone that opened up to expose a fully miniaturised keyboard and screen, which was great for texting, but too large for pocketing. In those days there were portals that you could use to send free SMS messages, so to practice my typing skills I decided to compose a few lengthy ones for Géraldine. Totally innocently I had chosen to translate the lyrics of some top Motown hits, which unfortunately were love songs and what with my poor grasp of the language and her poor grasp of the Detroit sound, things got a little misconstrued. She was unaware of my enhanced typing capability and must have thought that I had been spending an obsessive amount of time labouring away at a fiddly alphanumeric keypad, in an age before predictive text. If memory



serves me right the first lyric I butchered was “You can’t hurry love”, which she interpreted as an attempt at amorous poetry in rusty and consistently bad French, especially during the choruses. I am sure that some of you, on at least one occasion must have borrowed a line or two out of a song and tried to pass it off as your own during courtship. The last thing you want is to be cross-referenced and found out as plagiarism is rarely sexy, but that was precisely what I had in mind, a game of “Pop quiz, guess who it is”. She sent me a text saying “I didn’t know you felt that way”, so I speedily messaged her back with a fulsome explanation and do you know what, neither of us have ever mentioned this episode again until now.

My proposed career as a teacher didn’t go at all well. In fact it ended ingloriously when I gave up on the course and found a job selling hi-fi, as I preferred the idea of getting paid to listen to music rather than children. After almost two years of theory and the occasional stint of mentoring on a one to one basis, I was suddenly expected to spend six weeks taking charge of whole classes of rowdy kids, while trying to teach them a language they had no interest in learning. There was an inescapable logic behind their lack of motivation as a lot of French people are already bilingual, so why not prioritise a larger country with a higher percentage of the population who can’t speak English, like China or Russia. I also realised that schools weren’t the sort of places I wanted to spend the rest of my working life, as even the staffroom smelled vaguely of wee. We’d been told to write a lengthy report on our observations and mine were so negative that I hadn’t bothered, but my excuse of “If you can’t say anything nice, then don’t say anything at all”, was never going to win me any favours with the head of department. I still dream about being required to hand in work which I haven’t even started yet, but there’s nothing I can do to get closure on this short of going back to college as a mature student and just the thought of that is enough to give me the night sweats. My parents were understandably upset about this outwardly disappointing change of vocation and they urgently needed placating. Although it was totally out of character for either of them, they had both recently completed an alternative therapy seminar and wanted me to share in this uniquely life-affirming experience. Not that I knew it at the time, but their marriage was on the brink of collapse and this had got them back together again by helping to sort out twenty five years’ worth of accumulating issues.

The programme was called “Exegesis” and it supposedly offered a solution to any problem by forcing you to accept responsibility for every aspect of your life. I didn’t feel the need for enlightenment and up until then I had refused point blank, but if it would make them feel any better about my decision I was willing to try anything. It wasn’t cheap for them to enrol me on the course, as there were no government grants available for this one and I remember parking my old blue Mini outside a hotel on a sunny London morning, then taking a seat in a private suite with all of the blinds

tightly closed. You weren't allowed to wear a watch and if mobile phones had been around in 1978, they would definitely have confiscated them at the door. We'd also been informed that lavatory breaks were strictly forbidden and this added to the overall feeling of disorientation, which was designed to make everyone more suggestible. Another unsettling factor was the intimidating presence of a motley assortment of helpers standing around the room in strategic places, like guards who had been instructed to cover the exits and physically prevent anyone from leaving. These were card-carrying converts, who I daresay worked unpaid for nothing more than the relish of watching others being put through the same belittling, but apparently cathartic treatment that each of them had previously endured.

Luckily I didn't stand out from the crowd, so I was happy with not being picked for too much personal attention which mostly took the form of verbal abuse, but I'd find out later that we had a superstar in our midst and they were concentrating their efforts on recruiting him for the cause. Having introduced himself as Mick, he appeared to be a pretty cool guy until I witnessed him bawling and sobbing on the floor like a baby, but I must stress that this wasn't his fault. He was chosen for a procedure they called re-birthing, which had optimistically been designed to simulate and resolve the traumas of being forcibly evicted from the comfort of the womb at such short notice. Following instructions he was told to lie down on the carpet and breathe vigorously, while a few so-called helpers gathered round to encircle him before pushing evangelically hard against his body. This was an adaptation of a highly dangerous playground activity known as "The Blackout Game", which also involves hyperventilation, oxygen deprivation and an absence of proper medical supervision. Needless to say the poor man went to pieces and looking back I'm more than pleased that despite the fortune he earned from it, "Tubular Bells" was his idea instead of mine.

After two whole days of mixing introspection with indoctrination and humiliation, the final revelation we'd all been waiting for came as a real anticlimax, or more like a cheap cop-out if I'm being honest. Having been sceptical from the start this wasn't too much of a disappointment to me, but I'll never forget turning round to see a forty-something year old lady whose enthusiasm throughout the process had verged on desperation, breaking down in tears and asking is that all you've got. On the other hand I can't pretend that this experience hasn't helped a lot of people in many ways, including mum and dad, so perhaps I shouldn't be quite so scathing. If I've learnt anything from my participation I'd have to say it was the concept of living behind closed curtains, as they prevent minor distractions like sunlight and for that I'm nocturnally grateful, but considered freakish or at least mildly vampiric amongst friends.

Getting back to where we left off, in the last picture you may have caught a glimpse of something unpleasant reflected in the left hand mirror, but John

is sensitive to the cold and had asked by e-mail if I could provide him with a fan heater. I wrote back questioning just how many fans would he need to heat and a reply soon followed saying that his normal entourage was about two hundred. As everything was in readiness I made my way downstairs, wondering where the time had gone and we crashed out completely wrecked shortly after 4.15am. Around three hours later I briefly got up to use the loo and cancelled my alarm call by feeding the cats before going back to bed. I slept in until almost midday, which was fine as it's traditional to wake up Christmas morning and not afternoon. John however doesn't give a spit about tradition and emerged a little past one. Still feeling groggy from the night before, I managed to rustle up a spot of light but recuperative lunch and it was just getting dark when I noticed a couple of drips underneath the pipe. Though thankfully that didn't distract me from cooking supper and typical of my crisis management approach, I'd left the food shopping until mid-afternoon on the 24<sup>th</sup> so the shelves were unseasonably bare. I was losing hope of finding a suitably special meal for Christmas day when I chanced upon the very last boneless apricot-stuffed duck, obviously a winning combination of gene splicing and diet. Normally I would avoid raw ingredients as they're beyond the scope of my limited culinary skills, but on this occasion the choices were narrowed through procrastination, followed closely by desperation. I decided to accompany it with some ready prepared roast potatoes, pre-sliced runner beans and a sachet of onion gravy, so at least we wouldn't go hungry if the duck happened to be off.

Fortunately everything was cooked to perfection and I couldn't have chosen a more festive feast for our taste buds even if I'd planned it. We wassailed away the rest of the night, but once again I had to call it a day around 4.00am as I could hardly focus on the video game let alone compete, so I left them to play on with him topping up his score in my living room, while Géraldine topped up her puddle in my bathroom. After a few beers John can get quite stubborn about admitting defeat, staying up until early morning trying to beat his personal best, but the additional drinking that this entails makes him less proficient as time passes, while becoming even less inclined to give up and go to bed. I don't know what process goes on, or alarm goes off in his head that eventually allows him to quit, but I would imagine it has something to do with the first twinges of multiple organ failure.

Jasper woke me at quarter past eight for his breakfast and I found that if anything, the puddle had grown slightly larger. Knowing that John wouldn't be up for a while I fed the cats before going back to bed, beguiled by the sweet and sleepy taste of extra strong cider on my tongue, well it was still Christmas after all. Waking up around eleven I took a restorative bath, then turned on the TV with its volume set really low and a film had just started so I sat down on the sofa, never expecting to watch the whole two hours'

worth without interruption. You know how it feels when there's no sign of your houseguest the next day, who judging by the amount of empty bottles has obviously enjoyed a long night of over-indulgence. Inevitably as time wears on, you start to consider there's a small but niggling possibility that they may have died in their sleep. This is a worry, but what's done is done and I have to be honest by saying I was more concerned with the practicalities of whether the undertakers would carelessly let my cats out, or something dreadful like that when they come to remove the body.

Luckily there was no time to fret about imaginary complications, as around quarter to two in the afternoon the top door suddenly slammed open and John exploded down the stairs dressed only in his underpants. Not the prettiest of sights I'll have you know. I'd never seen him so animated this early in the day before his first cup of tea and he hurriedly told me that there was a situation in the bedroom, asking if I had a vacuum cleaner. Grabbing my rechargeable handheld Dyson and not forgetting the camera, I followed him back upstairs. Apparently when he opened the skylight, a multitude of insect larvae had rained down on the floor and the room filled with bluebottles. Well some of them must have escaped by the time we got there, but his appraisal seemed accurate as the carpet was littered with pupae and nasty little creepy-crawlies. In addition I could see a few dozen blow-flies circling around, which were probably attracted by the cannabis on the wooden cat's head.

Cyclone power soon brought things back under control, so normality was quickly restored and I wouldn't object if the manufacturer wanted to use this as inspiration for a Halloween themed TV commercial. It may not be such a bad idea, as this sort of subject matter enjoys a certain cachet with devotees of the horror genre and would endear the product to a whole new previously untapped market. There was nothing untoward to be seen when I'd left the same window open for a few hours to air his room only two days earlier, so the fact that it occurred during the course of my experiment makes this incident harder, although far from impossible to dismiss as a coincidence. Nevertheless it's a subtle reminder to watch what you wish for, as the estimated two hundred followers he'd promised didn't turn out to be so much of an exaggeration as we'd initially thought.

A plague of house flies is a distinctly new experience for me and even though I've been living here for nigh on twenty years, this is the first time it has ever occurred. Of course we can't forget the biblical connotations and I'll admit to feeling rather let down when I found out that my camera didn't have an indoor swarm setting, so achieving the epic Cecil B DeMille look I wanted remained unattainable. [\(78-PIC\)](#) Apparently he too had similar issues when shooting "The Ten Commandments", so only the plagues of Blood, Hail, Darkness and Death of the Firstborn would be portrayed on screen, as the rest were deemed impractical to film without appearing

unintentionally humorous. Funnily enough the only other one he actually completed happened to be the proliferation of frogs scene, but unhappy with his footage it was left on the cutting room floor.

Boxing Day, or what was left of it passed as an agreeably alcoholic montage of music and games with some TV thrown in too, while the puddle alternated from high to low tide. I must say that I was more than a little taken by surprise when John voluntarily informed me about an oddity he couldn't explain. Although I'd provided him with an efficient room heater, he said that his back was cold throughout the night and hadn't ever warmed up, even after folding the duvet over like a sleeping bag. There are two curiosities here, firstly the back is not a bodily extremity so it doesn't readily suffer from the cold as much as hands or most commonly feet. Secondly, the man is a self-confessed sceptic so he wouldn't normally draw attention to trivial weirdness, knowing that it was likely to fuel my fantasies and start me off on one again. However the question which can never be answered is whether he would have brought it up if the fly incident hadn't happened. By about 1.30am it looked like the leak was up for another all-nighter and this seemed a good time to intervene, so I positioned a pint glass underneath the drip before retiring to bed. Like the cat litter tray it needed emptying twice a day, which was a far more pleasant procedure but just as important to avoid overflow.

This petty encumbrance carried on until Tuesday morning, when true to form the dripping had stopped on cue, so I was confident enough to remove the glass before John got up to go home. Later that evening there would be a gaming session of course and I was already on serious social overload, as visitors rarely stay for more than two or three days in a row. I reckon that tell-tale signs must have leaked out in my erratic behaviour when Herman's Hermit turned into Herman Munster, but I was quickly forgiven as they all had their own tales to tell of what a handful he can be. After signing off for the night and finding myself at a loose end, I decided to unwind by taking some pictures in the bathroom. Now I don't want to abuse the privilege, but under the circumstances I'll expect you to pardon me for this next peccadillo, as it's the only instance of chicanery in my entire book and as such may begrudgingly be tolerated.

Before that, let's have a short discussion about product placement and why we should take a dim view of it as a commercial, rather than artistic decision. If you've read any of the original James Bond novels, you will know how the author's meticulous attention to detail meant that the odd brand name was bound to be slipped in occasionally. However this was intended to enhance the story rather than his bank balance, but by comparison the later movies have adopted the opposite approach. They seem to revolve around nothing more than the exploits of a spy licensed to make a killing out of advertising and it's all about high revenue endorsements, for

example you never see 007 getting out of his Aston Martin to buy a copy of "The Big Issue". Now I've pointed this out, perhaps they should consider writing it into the script of the next film in order to regain public support for such a tired and faded franchise. I don't know if you were aware of this, but the best thing to do after reading the magazine is give your copy back to another vendor so it can be resold and that's almost enough cash for a bottle of Thunderbird wine, should they choose to re-gift the money to a thirsty tramp.

So around 11.30pm I'd finished randomly snapping at friends and had started randomly snapping in the bathroom, when my eyes were drawn to the pretty little triangle of soap on the basin, which smelled as good as it looked. Fascinated by the odd fault lines on its surface, I balanced the small worn lump on one of my chrome taps before taking a picture or two. I'm simply reporting the facts here and expect no remuneration from the manufacturers unless they are feeling generous, but in order to fully savour the experience you must pop down to your nearest branch of Lush to purchase a wedge of Karma soap. However as there are enough people hooked on this addictive substance already, it would be callous of me not to disclose the only known antidote in the same breath. I've since discovered that you can wean yourself off with a bar of Pears Transparent, which is admittedly nowhere near as classy, but at only about a tenth of the cost it makes an acceptable substitute when times are hard.

When I transferred the photos to the computer it looked almost like a piece of amber and this in conjunction with my slightly puckish frame of mind at the time, gave me an idea of a trick that I could try to play on you. What I'm about to do is go back and seamlessly weave the image into the story so far, to see if I can't pass it off as something completely different. Who knows, I might even help you out by drawing your attention to my subterfuge in some shape or form if I'm feeling really kind. I promise this is my one and only instance of deliberately false testimony, but think of it as a lesson which shows that it's important to question everything you see, always drawing your own conclusions rather than relying on mine. If anyone spotted it then well done and thanks for reading this far, as you'd be forgiven for choosing to abandon the book in disgust at that point, having been put off by my needlessly deceitful ways. Well I'm glad the tutorial is now over, although if we take a moment to refer back to what I originally said, you'll see it wasn't a lie so much as a non sequitur and this confirms that you can trust my honesty, but not necessarily my continuity. "Here's an exquisite, but reasonably inexpensive item that caught my eye and I thought it looked worthy of a quick photo." Money for old soap, that's the punch line this was all leading to and I hope it was worth the wait. ([79-PIC](#))

You can understand why I was so intrigued by the striking design on its surface, which may be interpreted either as ghost art or most probably just

meaningless cracks. Although let's keep an open mind about that, as if we look closely at the top section there appears to be a baby pterodactyl skull embedded within, which is a lot more interesting than the dead insects you normally find in the real thing. I meant to preserve this piece for posterity, but occasionally the correct conservation techniques were ignored when my regular soap ran out, so even though the evidence is now severely compromised it hasn't been entirely washed away as yet. There was nothing unusual about Wednesday December 30<sup>th</sup>, apart from my return to normality after the best part of a week with John and I went to bed at a sensible time, casually noticing that the pipe had started to drip again.

New Year's Eve and just like normal people I had exciting plans for the night. The fact that the floor was dry come morning did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm, as I chanced on something peculiar when I drew open the living room curtains. [\(80-PIC\)](#) Let me talk you through this one, the cabinet is my hub of technology which contains the games consoles and there's enough space inside to hide all of the gubbins behind a frosted glass door, should I feel an urge to tidy up. The shelves may look frosted too, but that's just a gratuitous layer of dust which gives the impression of a more expensive finish. Sitting on top of my amp is a DVD recorder where I stack the games I've been playing most recently and you can see that during the night, either Bunny or Jasper must have knocked four items over the edge. Two have plainly fallen to the floor, but Eye Pet complete with its plastic card has somehow come to rest on the amplifier's little flap, which I leave open as it makes me look more technically minded. I can't imagine what sort of trajectory was required to ensure that the pair came to alight on such a narrow precipice, less than two inches in depth and I've since tried to recreate the event, but without feline participation they just tumble to the ground. There was something nagging away in the back of my brain as I left for work, something that I had missed, but like a defective detective I put it down to age and paranoia.

I freely admit that trying to concentrate for the next few hours was a mite difficult, what with everything going on at home and even rewarding jobs like advising customers which speaker wire to buy lost their usual thrill. Thankfully though we closed early and I was so relieved to be heading back. I'd already bought enough ready meals from M&S to last me until the weekend, but on the way to the car park I dropped in at Tesco to supplement my provisions with branded alcohol and chocolate. Although I'm not naming names as being donated a lifetime's supply would be deleterious to my kidneys and complexion, which is a fine example of evolution taking a wrong turn when the things that are most unhealthy for us often taste the best. It was only after reversing onto my driveway that I discovered the food had gone missing and instantly I remembered leaving the carrier bag beside a self-service till in the supermarket. This rare display of forgetfulness shows just how preoccupied I was at the time and I berated

myself for the twenty minute detour, which potentially could prove futile as sooner or later there would be someone thoughtful enough to give it a good home. In fact I could unwittingly be acting the role of agent provocateur, as my carelessness might become the springboard to launch an innocent person into a life of thievery and we all know that prevention is better than cure, so I didn't have a moment to lose. Everyone's heard of the well-known saying "Crime doesn't pay the wages of sin", but a lot of people seem to be doing very nicely out of it and for those who aren't, at least the long all-expenses paid holidays are a consolation.

Taking everything into consideration I thought my drive back into town was relatively sedate, but as the normally busy roads were virtually devoid of traffic I couldn't be certain. I knew that my fastest route was blocked by a mechanical bollard which lowered automatically when buses or emergency vehicles approached the restricted zone, but it could also be operated manually. Under the aforementioned circumstances I thought that this last category could arguably include me, so I decided to take the short cut and punched in a sequence of numbers on the control panel. I'd learnt it from a loose-lipped delivery driver and there's nothing stopping me from passing the knowledge on to you, besides the fear of prosecution, which is understandably one of my personal aversions. That doesn't mean to say I can't provide a subtle hint towards your local area code, should the council have installed one of these devices and the only other clue I'll give you is something along the lines of chlamydia or possibly genital warts. Of course I'm not recommending that you use this information for inappropriate reasons like your weekly shop, but when the breakdown of society is at stake it's always good to have options.

I'd already used the secret combination around a month ago while on foot, in order to help a frustrated British Gas van driver go about his business and hopefully find the leak before it ruined somebody's décor. Getting a police caution is never a great way to usher in the New Year, but I knew that this would save me having to go through two extra sets of traffic lights and shave at least three minutes off my mission of mercy. Ignoring a series of noisy reprimands from a scruffy gang of teenagers who clearly thought of themselves as the self-appointed law on the streets, I parked up before dashing through the exit doors to rescue my groceries and would you believe it, they were right where I left them almost half an hour earlier. I was momentarily transfixed by the unexpected goodness of human nature, until I spotted the hoodies heading towards my car and wisely chose to make a swift getaway. Driving back for the second and final time, I could finally look forward to the simple pleasures of ensconcing myself at home for the bank holiday.

I do so enjoy the luxury of having an additional day off and knowing that it would be 2010 within a few hours, only added to my expectations of the fun



filled times ahead. By a quarter past midnight I could tell that Géraldine was ready for her present, as a generous pipe puddle had formed under the basin. I'd wanted to buy her something for Christmas, eventually deciding on an Etch a Sketch, but with economy in mind I waited for the sales when 20% was knocked off the marked price. After all there was no reason why a New Year's gift wouldn't do equally as well and she'd doubtless approve of the saving. Earlier on I had laboriously but ineffectually tried to recreate the "July" motif that I'd found on my bathroom floor, to see whether she would accept the challenge and be tempted into playing with her new toy. I positioned it safely away from the leakage and my final addition was the sinsemilla silhouette resting on top, looking for all the world like Old Nick on a stick. [\(81-PIC\)](#)

As I had determined to do something drastic involving water and toilet tissue, I took a few last shots of the cabinet before proceeding to give the shelf a damn good scrubbing. Having just said goodbye to 2009 this seemed like a perfect opportunity to wipe the slate clean, which mercifully was only a metaphor as the floor tiles could take care of themselves. By the time I was finished, all traces of any evidence in the dust had been eradicated and now only existed in the digital domain. To be honest I suffered endless self-recrimination over such wanton destruction, but it was necessary as Géraldine's once orderly work surface had become an untidy mess and counterproductive to further scientific breakthroughs. I wanted to make sure that the tiny drawing scratched into the metal had survived, so I took an album's worth of photos in an effort to find it again, but there was no sign. This didn't worry me too much as maybe the light was wrong, so I decided to defer my search until the morning by going to bed.

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New Year's Day then and reawakening around 11.45am I saw that the dripping had stopped, but the Etch a Sketch was untouched. Although I really should have remembered to remove my botanical, yet unintentionally satanical offering before I turned it upside down for a quick shaking. After a short hunt around, I soon found the missing marijuana underneath my bathtub and put it safely back in the kitchen cupboard. Now I know that I've decided to ration the amount of puddles I show you, but it was the semi-eclipsed dry circle in the middle of this one which first attracted my attention. [\(82-PIC\)](#) I also love its symmetry and have you noticed how the overall shape resembles the fruit bowl inscribed in the dust, which I had so audaciously undertaken to erase less than twelve hours earlier. The best news of all however, was despite having snubbed my carefully chosen present, I managed to relocate her previously etched sketch which had eluded me the night before.

Less than happy with the limitations of flash photography, Mother Nature had kindly come to my rescue by turning up her brightness levels. [\(83-PIC\)](#) There are a lot of spurious markings to be seen, but I'm guessing that most of the downwards striations were caused by foreign matter caught below the original glass covering when Elsie used to remove it for cleaning. If you find yourself puzzling over the three strange letters to the top left, then don't as they represent nothing more enlightening than a clue to the make of camera I'm holding. You should also ignore the hovering space invader, which I can say in all certainty is most likely to be a stray fibre from my dressing gown. Curiously if I were asked to re-evaluate her handiwork, it's now a ladies' high heeled fashion shoe that has been accessorised to look like a speedboat. Maybe I should try to bring this product to market as it's the type of footwear which would tempt me to go a little spend-crazy, that's if I happened to be a trendy young female with a working credit card and nicely turned ankles. They could come in various different styles and colours, but I'd have to work on the brand name as "Nautical Girl" might come across as sounding overly slutty if mispronounced.

In the past I've been known to be more of a social animal at times like these, but speaking purely from experience as much as I value the animated company of living friends, I can tell you that entertaining my dead one is a lot less demanding. By 7.35pm I had an unconventional looking map of Britain waiting for me where the land is wet and the sea dry, but I was glad it wasn't the other way round. [\(84-PIC\)](#) Admittedly the Isle of Wight must have been subjected to a volcanic eruption that caused it to merge with the mainland, but more worryingly most of Wales which includes where Markie lives, has broken away and is fast heading towards iceberg territory like the Titanic's revenge. Around half past eight the floor was dry again, yet by eleven it wasn't. This called for some measure of creative input so I grabbed

my, sorry her new toy and started twiddling the knobs. As a youngster I may have spent a long time playing on an Etch a Sketch, but didn't keep it up or invest in refresher lessons so I've never managed to master the instrument and the best I could come up with by way of reply was a piece of abstract art. To tell you the truth it was more abject than abstract, but just about passable to grace my bathroom floor overnight when viewed from a distance. Fifteen minutes later the floodgates had started to open again and the puddle grew to at least ten times its original size in less than an hour. By midnight things had calmed down a bit and I was left with an inverted tea pot missing its handle, or possibly a snail with no tail if we remember to adjust for those all-important cultural differences. [\(85-PIC\)](#)

Precious little happened the next day apart from having to go back to work, but no matter as it would soon be Sunday the 3<sup>rd</sup>. It was ten to three in the afternoon and I'd been writing up my book for an hour or so, when all of a sudden the wooden mannequin on top of the scrap yard tank fell over right in front of me. The last time I'd moved it was almost exactly a month ago during Justin's visit and I'm sure I would have noticed any signs of wind gusting through my living room or seismic activity. I can also rule out the cats, as they were both fast asleep beside the fire until the clattering noise woke them up. This minor incident may seem rather trifling to you, but nothing like that has ever occurred either before or since, so it could have been just the sort of friendly tip-off from Géraldine which would be short-sighted of me to ignore. [\(86-PIC\)](#)

Initially this might sound confusing, but what I am about to tell you will explain perhaps the worst error of punctuation I've made so far, which must have seemed inexcusable at the time. If we were to go back to October the 9<sup>th</sup> when I showed you the photo of my wonky magnetic pyramid, you would see that I ended the paragraph with a superfluous exclamation mark. Before starting the book I had to make a conscious decision concerning my usage of this emphatical grammatical device and here's the reason why. I think we have become close enough by now for me to admit that I am a serial abuser of exclamation marks and it's probably just an age thing. You should see the state of my e-mails at work, as they are positively littered with them and each one detracts from the impact of the next. This annoying habit started in the days before computers when you had to write by hand and with a simple stroke of the pen it was easy to turn an unassuming full stop into something far edgier, instantly making the comment seem even more radical or amusing. Well at least in my mind it did. It's as bad as laughing at your own jokes and that's why I first chose to leave them out completely, but relented when I needed a subtle way of registering my surprise without distracting you from the storyline. I am still playing catch-up with the narrative, which means the events I'm describing occurred about three months ago and this is my way of demonstrating that something extraordinary has just happened in real-time while I've been

tapping away at the keyboard. So when my little figurine toppled over I wanted to mark the precise moment it fell, without the interruption of a lengthy and intrusive interjection from the future. However I soon abandoned this idea when I saw the exclamation mark on the bathtub and suspected that someone may have found an alternative method of introducing them into the text, just to mess about with my new system. You might be thinking that I'm being a tad premature or perhaps paranoid here by giving up on it so soon, but I had a hunch this could be the first of many such indiscretions and we'll have plenty of time to see if my instincts are inaccurate. Don't forget you don't know her as well as I do.

Looking from left to right we can see the double-lidded tin I'd used for detecting an overnight drip, then Andy's framed photo of Jasper and a thank you card from Polly. Finally there's the very special bottle of vintage sherry that she and Markie had gifted me, cushioned against cat damage by a Christmassy themed zip-up fleece. After my first glorious sip I determined to afford its nectar-like contents the best possible protection I could manage, which involved polishing off the last few fingers of novelty black vodka and doing a spot of cross-dressing to achieve it. I'm not ashamed of my relationship with the booze as it's more like a marriage than a succession of casual flings, so it pained me deeply to learn that having worked their way through umpteen cases of the stuff, most had been used for cooking purposes and this was the last remaining bottle. Some people may consider that I have a problem with alcohol abuse, but it's small beer compared to this which was the worst example I've ever come across in all my time as an amontillado aficionado.

After sitting the mannequin back on the tank I tried to provoke some sort of reaction by placing the wooden cat directly in front, like a toy town tribute to Tiananmen Square and it could be completely unrelated, but my sixteen hour leak dried up within minutes. This was good news, as I wouldn't have to make the decision of whether to use a distinctly more elegant but less commodious pint glass, or plump for the capacious bucket as my bedtime gazunder. It's like the faux pas of overestimating your partner's dress size and fluid retention can be a factor in that too, but erring on the side of caution is always wise, as a little overspill is infinitely preferable to buying them one from Mothercare. Some of you are probably thinking that my relentless obsession with water flow and the containment thereof may seem slightly excessive, although it hasn't gone beyond the pail quite yet. However I'd have to say that it's nowhere near as bad as the ancient Egyptians, who built massive stone structures called Nilometers to monitor and predict the size of their flood plains. Later on that night around 11.30pm I discovered a delectably diminutive dwarf puddle which had disappeared by morning, but when I came downstairs to run my bath the day after, it was back to normal proportions and hung around for almost twelve hours before vanishing again. These are just the ups and downs of

the white-knuckle roller coaster life I lead, but you may be inclined to say that it reads more like a water flume ride on the Norfolk Broads.

By Wednesday the 6<sup>th</sup> a sudden cold snap had arrived with a vengeance, so after arriving home I decided to take advantage of the freezing conditions outdoors by placing a snowball underneath the trap on an otherwise dry floor. Although I wasn't just fooling around in a winter wonderland, as there was scientific rationality behind my methodology. Earlier attempts to recreate puddles from above had been hugely unsuccessful, so I wanted to try it at ground level and go all out for a full-scale replica of the rarest variety. Here's a photograph taken about an hour later and I think it looks quite convincing, but still lacks the finesse of her better efforts. [\(87-PIC\)](#) I don't believe that the reason it worked so well had anything to do with drop height, but rather the steady and controlled release of water, which was previously impossible for me to simulate. The only problem with this approach was that it wouldn't produce any surrounding splashes, apart from a few where the snow had already started to melt from the warmth of my hand. You can also see a fresh pipe leak which looked remarkably like a one-legged duck and this could be interpreted as somebody showing off their superior technique, whilst alluding to the fundamental flaw in my somewhat lame strategy at the same time. On reflection I ought to have suspended it above the ground in a fishnet stocking, or one of those meshed plastic bags designed to hold tangerines, but my lack of inventory shouldn't stop you having a go and I'm sure that an ice cube would suffice if the weather isn't amenable. By 9.00pm the duck had flown south and in its place were two smallish marble-shaped drips, so close together on the floor that they reminded me of the business end of a figure of eight mains lead.

The melted snow water had all but gone by eleven, although you can see there was further incursion from the pipe in the form of a bear on its hind legs reaching down to stroke a skinny cat and I recommend using your zoom function to appreciate it fully. [\(88-PIC\)](#) I can imagine that the scientific community will be miffed at me on so many levels and this is hardly surprising given their sniffy attitude to paranormal research, but there's one aspect of my work which must infuriate them more than any other. Clearing up after experiments can generally be a tiresome or messy task, but a fair amount of mine are self-cleaning and here's a case in point of just how much energy I don't need to expend to get the job done. The following day around half past seven in the morning, all that remained was a dark stain which resembled a medium-sized button mushroom and when I got home from work, the floor had dried out without me having to lift so much as a finger, let alone a wooden cat.

When I came downstairs to run my bath on Friday the 8<sup>th</sup>, there was the same roundish pipe puddle on the floor that I'd discovered last night at 11.15pm, but it vanished within three quarters of an hour. There have been

a few occasions when I've wanted to stay home in order to follow the progress of events, but investigations are curtailed as I need to open up the shop. However this time she appeared to be working within my strict timetable and I'm not even feeling the slightest bit tempted to provide photographic proof, as that would make for excessively dull viewing, but all the same you'll be able to find it if you want to. Full access to all the shots I've taken will be made available if anyone wishes to peruse my archives, but you'll need a tireless and tenacious constitution as there are an awful lot of them. Although now is a good moment to inform you that due to my inherently lazy nature, this may not be as straightforward as it sounds. That's because I have never bothered to set the correct time on the camera and after starting a photo diary, I didn't want to complicate matters by making adjustments. We're not talking about a huge discrepancy, in fact after adding a day it's only fifteen minutes fast or forty five behind when the clocks have changed, but around midnight this can become extremely confusing as it alters the date.

Shortly after arriving back on Friday evening, I was eating supper when something caught my eye and here it is in a close-up of the frame surrounding the Illingworth print, which had sparked off the home improvements a few years ago. [\(89-PIC\)](#) Over the last couple of days I'd become vaguely aware of a subtle change that had occurred either somewhere or somehow, which wasn't being processed by my conscious mind until I found myself sitting and staring, while wondering why I hadn't noticed it earlier. The figure two that you can plainly see, appeared to have been deliberately inscribed in the dust but I had no idea of its significance or meaning. However that's never stopped me in the past from coming up with some hare-brained hypothesis, so why should this time be any different, apart from my inability to think of one. As a number two meant nothing to me besides a cheap excuse for toilet humour, my search for further clues dictated that I should undertake a more detailed analysis, which involved bending over for an upside down view and this made it look like a three. You can either flip the image or invert your head for the full experience, but take it from me this will turn out to be of no help whatsoever as we'll all find out sooner rather than later.

Admittedly I wasn't completely certain of my findings, so I e-mailed the photo to Markie and Justin in order to canvass their opinions. I still haven't found the right opportunity to take Geoff into my confidence with any of this, as he'd instantly dismiss it as utter nonsense unless I explained myself very carefully and that would be unwise to try at so late a stage, especially during a games night. He was frequently unable to join us due to work commitments, so I used that time to discuss matters in detail with the other two, who happened to be more naturally sympathetic to my wayward witterings. We hooked up around eight o'clock and I was talking them through this latest discovery, when it became clear that there could be a

problem with one of my conclusions. They both spotted the figure two a mile away, but neither could see the inverted three despite my determination to convince them. I don't like the idea of bending the facts just to suit my requirements, but this can so easily happen which is why it's essential to have friends like these to use as a sounding board and when they start sounding bored, that's the cue to move on. The way it works is a model of democratic simplicity, as if one of them disagrees with my interpretations then he is outvoted, but if they both have issues I plainly need to backtrack and reassess.

Although my train of thought was temporarily derailed, I must have been on the right track somewhere along the line as I found a tiny spatter beneath the basin around a quarter to nine. We were still in chatting rather than gaming mode, so I took a quick snap before sending it to them and they both made impressed noises, but chivvied me along to fire up the golf. I couldn't resist taking a few more shots of the picture frame whilst waiting for TPC Sawgrass to load and with nine o'clock approaching I turned off the camera, as it was getting close to tee time in Florida. After having finished for the night I downloaded my photos and apart from being too dark around the periphery, this one turned out to be a perfect representation of exactly what I could see from the sofa. [\(90-PIC\)](#) If you zoom about halfway in, that's approximately how large it looked from my point of view and it's almost dead centre, which is also the best position to be picked out by the downlight. All notions of an inverted three had now been discredited and discarded, but that didn't get me any closer towards solving the mystery.

Around 7.30am on Saturday the 9<sup>th</sup> I encountered my second time-sensitive puddle in as many days and it conveniently followed suit by drying out before half past eight, so I could fully document the event without being late for work. By ten to ten that night I came across a leakage more poodle than puddle and possibly more Pomeranian than poodle. [\(91-PIC\)](#) Before we continue, I'm lining up a quick test to assess your skill at prediction through observation or psychic prowess and if you'd like to take part, cut off a piece of card which is just large enough to hide the text below this paragraph. Then you must slowly inch it downwards one line at a time until answer C is visible, but no further than that before making your choice. This will require a brief intermission while you go off to find something more suitable than the cover of my book, which gives me the opportunity to stop for a moment and consider the dubious likelihood of a flexible pipe joint maintaining an intermittent leak over a period of about five or six years. Surely it would have become worse and even more gushy as time went on, but we can see from the varying amounts of spillage that this hasn't happened. Any geologist with a knowledge of plumbing or vice versa, will tell you that once unleashed, the properties of water are a powerful force to be reckoned with and compared to eroding solid rock, carving a larger exit route through an already leaky washer would prove far from problematic. Of course with no

personal expertise in either of these fields to call upon, I can't say for certain that there isn't a perfectly rational explanation for my dripping pipe and if this was all I had, then I wouldn't be wasting your time with it. However in the context of other more puzzling scenarios which continue to unfold around me, I feel it's my duty to record everything out of the ordinary and I must apologise for being so thorough. Going back to the ancient Egyptians again, don't forget that their hieroglyphs were deemed undecipherable but still worthy of preservation before the Rosetta Stone was uncovered and if we're dealing with a similarly complex form of communication, let's leave it to future generations to do the spadework.

Alright here's my question, when I go to bed in a couple of hours' time has the puddle either:

A. Dried out completely.

B. Turned into something which looks rather rude.

C. Quadrupled in size to form a swollen, but unmistakable capital J.

Don't worry if you can see this line as it's purely filler and acts as a buffer zone in case of an overshoot, but here is the answer so hide your eyes if you're not quite ready yet. Let's do this in reverse order and I'm afraid to say that those of you who selected A were incorrect. I can sympathise with your error as the most logical choice is often the most boring one, but we mustn't underestimate her creativity or artistic abilities. In addition you really should have been playing the percentages and noticed that I hadn't introduced any counter measures on the floor, which I commonly put into place when trying to stem the flow. How about those who went for answer B, well you lot really spook me out as your guess is pretty much spot on although your timing is slightly out, as it will be another three days before something like that happens. This only leaves option C and who knows, if I had been half an hour earlier or later I might have found a better defined J, but nevertheless all of the key features are present from the serif at the top to its upwardly curving tail. [\(92-PIC\)](#)

Sunday the 10<sup>th</sup> and the floor was dry when I arose at the unusually late time of 8.40am. It was a particularly cold night, so the full complement of cats had crept under the covers and I didn't want to wake either of them as I thought that they deserved a lie in. Normally they both like to curl up on top either side of me so moving while trying not to disturb their sleep can be tricky, but I'll know that I've failed if I hear a dull thump followed by a disgruntled miaow, when one of them subsequently rolls over and ends up on the carpet. Soon the daylight hours had flown past and I found a nightcap waiting for me on the bathroom floor before I went to bed around twelve o'clock, but I wasn't tempted to partake. You see I'm part of that age



group who still think fizzy drinks are special and exciting, so I prefer my water sparkling rather than flat.

The following morning the floor was dry again and after an uneventful day spent at work, I locked up the shop before driving over to pick up Andy. Predictably he wasn't exactly overawed by Friday's discovery, saying that it must be a mark on the frame showing through the dust and as usual I'd been making a fuss about nothing. He rang Mel and asked her to e-mail some old photos that he'd taken several years ago during Elsie's well organised cleaning regime, but I wasn't persuaded as the evidence proved unconvincing. In fact you've already seen a similar shot from 2004 which you might like to revisit, the one that shows Bunny in mid-air and there may be some likely looking blotches on its dappled surface, but I wouldn't bother as they don't explain how the figure could stand out so conspicuously from the background. The next thing that happened took me completely by surprise, as Andy came back from the loo armed with a balled-up lump of wet toilet tissue in his hand. Without so much as a by your leave he promptly proceeded to clean the dust off the frame, but of course this revealed nothing of interest. Was I unhappy with this unexpected turn of events, well yes and no as asking for my prior consent would have been nice, but on balance I think he did me a favour. Whenever I found myself lounging on the sofa watching TV, my eyes would inexorably be drawn leftwards to the new little Channel 2 logo and that didn't sit well with me, especially during advert breaks.

I can even recollect having a rare whinge to Markie and Justin that this distraction was adversely affecting my gameplay, but I guess it just goes to show how once again, you should always be careful what you wish for. The important thing is that I had fully recorded the evidence and what's more, if I could sucker Andy into so readily engaging cleaning mode the next time he's round, then maybe I'd be able to get him to brush my stair carpet. This would involve nothing more taxing than tracing a few lines in the moulted cat fur and presenting them as a newly found inscription from the afterworld. You could almost guarantee that within moments he would be scrubbing away with his fingers, trying to prove they were only irregularities in the pile. After a long but enjoyable session I phoned a taxi which arrived shortly after twelve and since tiredness had the better of me, I switched everything off then went for a pee. If either of us had visited the bathroom before the cab turned up we would have spotted it, but maybe this was for my eyes only and now yours too of course. As puddles go this one was oddly squarish in shape, so I delved deep into my toolkit and pulled out the only item which could assist me, laying it down on the floor to get an accurate scale of the dimensions. [\(93-PIC\)](#) I repositioned it horizontally before taking a few more photos for good measure and remembering that I was tired, went straight to bed.

By Tuesday morning it had grown nearly fourfold and I'd have welcomed the opportunity to stick around so that I could monitor its progress. However as I have never taken a duvet day in my life and the term deluge day has yet to be invented, I had no plausible excuse for staying home so heigh-ho. When I returned at about a quarter to six the puddle had begun to evaporate from the middle and despite a few cavalry drips coming to its rescue around 10.15pm, within half an hour the floor was starting to dry out again. I'm guessing that somebody couldn't decide whether leaking or not leaking was their favourite, so perhaps this is why they found themselves alternating from one to the other. Furthermore it was a good thing the three of us were golfing that night instead of racing, as I had plenty of time in-between shots to take others while I awaited my turn. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but the following one will be moderately rude so let's not go into too much detail and only allocate it half of that amount. Should you wish to safely bypass it along with a written analysis which transcends the boundaries of decency, I'd skip the next five hundred until Wednesday the 13<sup>th</sup> if you're easily offended by filth.

After finishing our game we were discussing Monday night's square shaped puddle, as I'd previously sent them the photos and this time I wasn't the one who could be accused of lowering the tone. Justin and I remained completely untainted before Markie's observation reared its ugly head, but from that moment on I could no longer look at my tape measure without feeling a little dirty. He told us he'd seen a tumescent willy on the floor and I doubt that was his exact turn of phrase, but you get the gist. For a few seconds I found myself possessed by the vengeful ghost of Mary Whitehouse, as this wasn't the sort of content that I thought appropriate for my book, despite its similarity to the toilet roll holder incident. Fortunately her considerable powers must have waned since she passed and indignation turned into investigation as we carefully studied the image, but purely in the name of research you understand. I'm not quite sure how the law stands on the distribution of paranormal pornography, but I hope it's still a bit of a grey and shadowy area on the statute books, otherwise I may need to purchase some parental guidance stickers or consider pixelating my puddle. If you're of a sensitive disposition then gird your loins in preparation for taking a quick glimpse before swiftly moving on, although you've already seen it in the last picture albeit subliminally and I wonder how many of you twigged the first time round. [\(94-PIC\)](#)

I'm guessing that those who did are predominantly male, as it's a boy thing due to the juxtaposition of the tape measure which probably brings back memories of adolescence. If you take a closer look to check out the intimate details, the member in question is clearly in rude health and ready for action, with bulbous testicles hanging underneath that give it a three dimensional effect. You can see that the one in the foreground is slightly larger and this might just be a matter of perspective, or possibly something

which urgently needs checking by a specialist. The upper sections of the spheres are patterns within the stone, whereas their lower halves are merely spillage in perfect alignment. Anatomically speaking it looks authentic enough to have been lifted off the page of a medical textbook, or cut and pasted over one to see if trainee doctors would identify the image as bogus. Although they may suspect that something was amiss after seeing a grout line along the testes. Alternatively I could transpose the phallus onto a picture of Michelangelo's most famous sculpture, before trying to pass it off as an earlier version which had to be shelved after he mistook the brief by depicting David with his goliath weapon. From an aesthetic point of view, I love the weird little droplets lined up to the left as their trajectory seems to be at a corresponding angle, though I won't be drawn into why that should be significant in any way.

It's Wednesday the 13<sup>th</sup> and I'm guessing that those of you who didn't fancy taking an unintentional peep would have jumped some distance ahead, but hopefully not too far before reading upwards one line at a time. If this was a tedious and unrewarding experience, then I can only apologise while promising to make it less of a chore when hopefully sooner rather than later, you decide to revisit my story as there are undoubtedly nuances that you'll have missed on the first run through. Of course I should have remembered to mention that I'd tried to make life easier by dividing my dirty divulgence into two equally-sized paragraphs, so you could screw up your eyes and count the gaps. However this method isn't very scientific and you've got to be careful the wind doesn't change, so in future I'll find a much better way of dealing with self-imposed censorship. At 7.30am the puddle was back to being a four inch square again with a touch of additional seepage along the skirting board, but just over an hour later it had dried out considerably. [\(95-PIC\)](#) We've already learnt that the right way up is a human fixation which holds no sway with the dearly departed, so let's play around and approach this one from a different stance by spinning the picture upside down. You'll need to look a fair way towards the left hand side before taking a shot at your best interpretation, just hazard a guess at what you see. I'm going to take a swing at predicting your answer and don't be teed off if you get it wrong, as on the whole that's par for the course in matters like these.

Despite being a reluctant pedestrian I walked into work for the sixth time in a row since the snow started, as I drive a pretty useless vehicle for this sort of weather. It may be a sports car but it's certainly not a winter sports car, with rear wheel drive and fat tyres which provide no real traction at all. Last February I drove it less than a quarter of a mile in similar conditions and got hopelessly stuck at the bottom of a gentle hill, so I wasn't going to put myself in that predicament again. It takes about thirty five minutes to walk into town, but you can add another ten to that when the pavements are treacherous and your work shoes have all the grip of a pair of slippers. I was

trudging past our local croquet club when I saw that someone had built a snowman which blocked the entrance to the car park, but it looked like his head must have fallen off and now lay on the ground. Then as I got closer, I could see a matching ball on the other side and each had an assortment of artfully inserted twigs. With the lingering image of last night's discovery still disturbingly fresh in my mind, I quickly recognised it as a crude, but amusing depiction of chilled meat and two frozen veg. I couldn't help smiling when I noticed the "Members only" sign on the clubhouse wall and decided that I'd be bringing my camera with me tomorrow.

Waking as usual at half past seven on Thursday morning, I went downstairs to the kitchen and peering through the window, I thought that I must have made a mistake in setting my alarm as I couldn't understand why it was still dark outside. After a moment's confusion it dawned on me that snow had built up on top of the cat cage and this was responsible for the artificial blackout. Having to support such a tremendous weight had also caused the cross beams to bow perilously low, which gave the impression that the whole thing was pregnant and about to drop. There's a hosepipe mounted on the back wall of my house which I'd previously used to melt the suspended blanket of snow with a jet of water, but this would be a time consuming job so I resigned myself to being late for work, although I needn't have worried as it was frozen solid. If the weather continued like this I could foresee imminent collapse and as there was nothing that could be done to prevent it, I decided to deny the cats access to the garden. My lockable cat flap wasn't an option as I knew from past experience that it would take them less than thirty seconds to dismantle, so I relocated their litter tray before closing the door between the utility room and kitchen, making sure they were securely though aggrievedly confined to quarters. The two events that I wanted to avoid were either of them being injured if it fell down, or possibly clambering out through the wreckage to dangers further afield, so I was just trying to take the cat out of catastrophe. I had a pervasive feeling of unease about me that morning and seeing how all of my concerns regarding falling timber were now safely alleviated, or so I thought, I put it down to the unusual absence of an overnight puddle.

Making my way into town, I was disappointed to find that the snowmanhood had been unceremoniously demolished by some pillocks of the community, as who in their right mind would want to play croquet when you can't even see the hoops. Sadly this meant that there was no photo opportunity, but ironically when another presented itself about ten minutes later I would be too shaken up to even think about using the camera. As the "Keep off the grass" sign now lay hidden under a snowdrift, I was taking a legitimate shortcut across a decorative lawn in front of the old college, when I heard an almighty crack above me. I'd been walking beneath a massive tree and had no time to react when a junior caber-sized bough landed almost simultaneously less than two feet away. If I'd left home a

second or two earlier it could have caused me a fair amount of mischief and that would be a new, but unwelcome slant on getting wood. I'll admit to being a little flustered, but that shouldn't have stopped me from bending down and tossing it out of my way instead of sheepishly stepping around. Typically the Highland Games analogy only came to me a few minutes later, as it would have been so cool if anyone was watching at the time, but if there's a lesson to be learnt here then at least now I'll know how to handle this kind of eventuality in future.

Although your doctor may have told you that exercise can be beneficial healthwise, he probably wasn't talking about traversing on ice in the dark with carrier bags full of cider, so I took a cab home from work and made sure I selected one which had the engine over the driving wheels. Obviously my first destination is always the bathroom, but finding nothing more unordinary than a dry floor, I soon discovered a situation in the back garden and safe to say it didn't look good at all. [\(96-PIC\)](#) Both of my cats were sat staring out of the window and I could see that the structure had suffered systemic failure, as all three cross members must have snapped at once, or at least in very quick succession. Judging from recent experience this would have sounded like the heavens were about to fall in if you had been standing below it, but deadened by the layers of snow above, I daresay that none of my neighbours heard even a whisper.

Just because I'd condemned the garden as unsafe for Bunny and Jasper, that didn't mean to say I couldn't creep out myself to take a few snaps of the snaps. Without wanting to invite misfortune by touching wood, I had to crouch down low as the top beams were only held up by good luck, but after all that drama my pictures turned out blurred so I decided to venture forth one more time. It felt dangerously claustrophobic under that huge mass of snow, as the only thing stopping it from engulfing me was the thin meshing designed to keep your succulents safe from the onslaught of bird attack and we are hardly talking ostriches or emu. All I will say is that was the closest I'm ever going to come to dying in an avalanche and should my obituary state otherwise, then I'll apologise in advance for being so presumptuous. I'm glad that I chose to go out again, as the next photo is your reward for my persistence and you will see how it's cracked at the knot, the Achilles heel of a three by two load-bearing wooden strut. [\(97-PIC\)](#) Luckily it didn't come crashing down on my head and the only thing which struck me was how remarkably clean the grain looked on the inside. If the fracture hadn't happened I would have continued to believe that it was dirty all the way through, but there again the discolouration may be due to a waterproof coating applied during construction, which evidently proved far from weatherproof. That's why you should always check the side of the tin. It's also worth mentioning that I needn't have bothered with my earlier attempts to determine the shape of a droplet, as we can see three of them more or less lined up and equidistant. Two are falling whilst the one in the

middle is at that tantalising moment just before it becomes airborne and if I was a drip, which isn't too much of a stretch of the imagination as I've been called a lot worse, then this particular point in time would be my favourite.

The pig-ignorant may well scoff in their trough, but I don't think you will be inclined to disagree with me when I say that we still have a lot to learn from water, especially when searching for answers to the meaning of life. It can be solid, vaporous or even a mixer if you've run out of Coke and want to ruin a perfectly good glass of malt whisky. However if I were to make a list of the cruellest medical conditions known to mankind, I suspect the winner would turn out to be hydrophobia which is the fear of water, as we are not only surrounded by it but mostly made of it too so there's no escape. Perhaps it's not a coincidence then that water covers 71% of the surface of our planet and human beings consist of roughly the same proportion. Now I don't want to get into this too deeply, but maybe a person's lifetime can be seen as starting from the moment the drip falls and finishes when it reaches wet ground, that brief period of detachment before merging back with the communal pool. Some droplets are destined for longer journeys whereas others have theirs foreshortened, but this is the only time those particular molecules fleetingly bond together to form a unique entity, because once they're back in the mix it's unlikely to happen again. When it comes down to it we're all one hit wonders unless you can embrace the concept of re-incarnation, which personally I'm not altogether convinced about even though Géraldine was definitely a believer, but let's not go down that controversial creek without the proverbial paddle. Getting back to a less contentious subject like puddle reading, or the study of hydroglyphs as I prefer to call it, here's the correct answer to my earlier question. You should have been able to see a little golfer about to take his shot, but there's a bonus point to be had for anyone who spotted the pin which is lying towards the rear of the shark's fin green.

The following morning the snow had melted away, so I let my cats have free roam once more as the cage was still both stable and secure. Their vantage point on top of the platform was compromised as they no longer had the headroom to sit up without bent ears, but this didn't seem to concern them in the slightest and I didn't notice any signs of distress or complaint. In fact quite the opposite as later on I'd catch them using this to their advantage, seeing that the wire meshing was now at the requisite height for scratching those awkward itches where claws simply can't reach. There was nothing else to report that day, but on the morning of Saturday the 16<sup>th</sup> I found a scarcely visible micro puddle in the final stages of evaporation. Within ten minutes it had dried up and sticking to house rules I'm not allowed to show you the humdrum, but as this one was witnessed by Jasper who's a lot more photogenic, here's a picture of him instead. [\(98-PIC\)](#) Over the past few months he had developed a strange new fascination with my bathroom, which wasn't at all shared by his half-brother. After making sure I got up on

time, he would sit on the staircase patiently awaiting his early morning nuzzle on my return from starting to run the bath. When he'd had enough, he would happily trot down with his tail in the air and scratch away until the door opened sufficiently to let him in. By contrast Bunny has learnt a faster method of gaining entry, as he will stand up on hind legs while bringing his forepaws down with such force that the door would bang noisily against the chromium plated towel rail, if it hadn't been purposefully equipped to cushion the impact. More often than not Jasper would be sitting on the closed lavatory seat or cistern, ready to greet me with a loud miaow and then proceed to patrol decorously around the rim of the bath as I washed, while trying my hardest to minimise splashing. Now I'm fully aware that we should respect each other's privacy at times like these and I don't know if it's just me, but has anyone else ever come across a bum wool bee, which is the colloquial name for the tiny ball of fluff you find when soaping your nether regions. Apart from the negligible risk of plughole blockage, there's no need for concern as this is nothing more than a matted build-up of fibres off your clothes, like belly button or pocket lint. However when fished out and placed on the side of the tub, it's a tempting target for a quick paw swipe from a passing cat.

I arrived home that evening around six o'clock and in all honesty I can't recall the precise moment when I made the connection, but my decision to put it to the test followed shortly afterwards. Cast your mind back to Halloween and my experiment in the top room, the one which centred on the question I'd asked about whether she had found Shiseido or not. Now remember the Eye Pet game I bought a few weeks later, well it suddenly came back to me that anything you drew on a sheet of paper and held in front of the camera would be instantly copied onscreen by his magic pen. I rewrote the question while loading the disc, using my black marker as per instructions and this was the result. [\(99-PIC\)](#) There are obvious similarities when you compare it to my original version and don't forget that I'd wanted to write every letter in a different colour, but with the clock against me I was pressured into taking a shortcut. Next let me take you back to New Year's Eve when I discovered the game alongside its plastic mat accessory, both perched on that barely protruding shelf while the others had fallen to the floor. This in turn provoked memories of Steve and the ceramic duck, as it wasn't the first time that Géraldine had used cats to do her bidding. If you think about it there was always an obvious tie-in here, but I needed to be reminded of the multi-coloured writing to establish a link between the question that I had posed and the reply I'd been given.

This was an elegant, but circuitous response which I counted as a definite yes and it made me very happy as I had long hoped that the dead would be able to keep their posthumous pets. Later that night on a loo break around 10.15pm, I was amply rewarded for my progress with a pretty respectable puddle although the dripping had already stopped. [\(100-PIC\)](#) We've no time

for an in-depth discussion, but I'm at a total loss when it comes to equating this to a conventional pipe leak, as the main feature is flanked by two upright pillars which can't be the result of drying action and must have been squirted into position. If these were meant to be some kind of hint or coded message then I'd missed it entirely, but with hindsight I wondered whether she'd resorted to using Roman numerals as a way of helping me to work things out. An hour later the pool of water was twice its earlier size and in my cider befuddled state of mind, I thought that if the puddling continued to double at this rate, then by morning I could well be paddling.

I felt like I had to do something and quickly before sleepiness overtook me, so maybe this wasn't my finest hour but I doubt that it will be my worst. Earlier on in the day I had acted as plumber's mate for Colin when he installed a new water heater at work and seeing me fiddling with a shiny brass ninety degree elbow pipe from his toolbox, he'd said that I could keep it. Although I suspected he couldn't have imagined that it would be put to use so soon. You see I'd been intrigued by the way that such a compact object could encompass both water flow and tightening on metal screw threads, two of Géraldine's favourite pastimes rolled into one. I'd taken the item home with me as experimental fodder and also borrowed a small adjustable spanner, so that I would be prepared for any development where more force was required than bare hands could achieve on their own. Even the best flood precautions can be prone to failure, so I closed the door to act as an extra line of defence before seeking higher ground by climbing upstairs to bed, but I couldn't stop myself thinking that it may be a case of sandbags at dawn.

It's 8.15am on Sunday January 17<sup>th</sup> and you could say that my DIY talisman must have worked as the expansion of the puddle had been checked, although there were still signs of a cheeky little rivulet underneath the handle. [\(101-PIC\)](#) Nothing worth mentioning will happen during the rest of the day, so this is an excellent opportunity to take a break as we've had quite enough excitement for the time being. I can't deny that I would relish a few hours off as this writing business is a lot harder than I thought, so why don't you join me for a spot of relaxation and watch TV or something. Before you go, let's synchronise watches and we will reconvene tomorrow morning at about twenty to eight in the bathroom.

It's 7.39am on Monday and I'm glad that you are here on time as it shows a degree of commitment. Last night's rather unremarkable puddle had almost dried up, but there was fresh leakage against the rear wall which looked fairly recent. Sorry how rude of me for forgetting my manners as sometimes I can get a bit carried away by all of this, but I hope you enjoyed your day off and slept well. I myself frittered away the hours, but still found the time to make up a song. Well in fact it's a potential chart topper and I can tell that you are impressed, so please read slowly, taking an unusually leisurely



pause at the full stop as I want to bask in your adulation for a short while longer. In reality it was nothing more than an adaptation of Disney's "Never Smile at a Crocodile", where I just changed the C word for a P word ending in "aedophile". If you're slightly confused, thinking that you can't recall hearing the C word in the song then you've misconstrued my last sentence and should take a second look, or alternatively hire a Tourette's choir to sing it. This subtle change of lyric could help out as part of a child awareness campaign and I would be willing to donate any re-write royalties to such a worthy cause, but I'd need some big-hearted corporate permission first, not to mention a competent lead vocalist. Either Sir Paul or Sir Elton could come to my rescue here without having to submit a CV, although they may want to step aside as I'll consider anyone deserving of a fast-track knighthood for services rendered, but if you turn up for the auditions and spot Ringo in the queue, that's your cue to go home.

Just after six I arrived back with Andy and so as not to incur his displeasure too early on in the evening, I had fetched him a bottle of cider before investigating the bathroom but the floor was dry. Straight away I told him about the Eye Pet connection I'd made and he bridled at my oafishness, as etiquette demanded that I should at least have the common decency to indulge in a smattering of small talk, before launching headlong into his least favourite topic. Remembering the importance of social niceties, I complied by asking him how he was then what he'd been up to, but at the slightest lull in the proceedings I couldn't help myself railroading our conversation back to Géraldine and her equally dead cat. I explained my theory as rationally as I could and to say that it fell on profoundly deaf ears is a medical understatement. He remained unconvinced so I backed up my conclusions with the relevant photos, but I was only backing him further into a corner of incredulity and brain numbing boredom. Desperate for something to make him change his mind, I revisited the shots I had taken of the figure two on my dusty picture frame. You'll pardon me for a brief interjection here, but this is like that quiz on TV when they freeze the action and ask what happened next.

One thing I will say is that you are in full possession of all the evidence by now and if you've worked out the answer already, then I am somewhat envious of your powers of deduction as it took me a lot longer. If you haven't then you've still got plenty of think time, so why not go back and re-examine the clues before I reveal all. I'll help out a little by saying that it wasn't Andy calling a cab after suddenly developing a splitting headache and there's nothing to worry about if you don't feel like pitching in with a suggestion, as you're under no obligation to take part. You must be aware by now that you're not dealing with the sharpest scalpel on the autopsy table and if I didn't know what had already occurred, then I probably wouldn't have chanced a guess myself. More to the point I'm no subscriber to enforced audience participation and to give you an example, I will always

politely decline an invitation to sing or clap along with the music at concerts. Being far less talented or rehearsed than the act on stage, I know full well that my contribution would only detract from their performance and it takes a prodigious amount of alcohol to persuade me otherwise.

Even if my musical hero, a certain Mr David Bowie had personally singled me out from amongst the crowd at the Milton Keynes Bowl in 1983, which shamefully is the only time I've seen him live, I still couldn't have been cajoled into joining in. On second thoughts, please disregard my last remark as it would be a theological impossibility to deny anything to this currently earthbound deity who I have worshipped from afar for so long. Interestingly though that wasn't the time I felt closest to him, as I'd previously been in his bedroom. Two or three years earlier, my first proper girlfriend and I had been looking to move on from our tiny four roomed rented flat in Bromley, with a view to buying a house together. One day we were shown around a property only a few streets away and the estate agent had reliably informed us that it used to be his childhood residence. Unfortunately that wasn't enough to convince me to overlook the spectacularly bodged home improvements and a large axe mark through the front door, which could easily have functioned as an auxiliary letterbox. Buyers were far less fussy about kerb appeal in the property boom of the early Eighties, so if there had been an enticing aroma of percolating coffee or baking bread emanating through the hatchet hole, then that may well have swung it for me.

Okay that's enough reminiscing for a while, as we should really be getting back to the important matter of what happened next. I was going on about the inexplicable appearance of the figure on the frame, when Andy asked me outright, "Why is it a two then, what's so significant about that?" Well when you're fighting your corner, there's nothing like being put on the spot and in that instant I hit on a revelation which might not surprise you as much as it did me at the time. When I first noticed the curious dust mark, I still hadn't worked out the multi-coloured connection between my Shiseido question and the Eye Pet answer, but here was a heavy hint to link both events as they took place exactly two months apart. The first happened on October 31<sup>st</sup> and the second was on December 31<sup>st</sup>, neither of which being particularly inauspicious dates on my calendar.

So that's why it was there, a kick up the backside from the other side as I'd been too stupid to tie the two together without a prompt. As all of this was so unmistakably her, I have no misgivings whatsoever in reinforcing the well-known fact that pet ownership can involve more of a commitment than you could possibly imagine. If any of you are finding this vaguely ridiculous, you're not alone as Andy did too, so we stayed up arguing the toss into the early hours and his cab had just left when I paid my final visit to the bathroom at 2.15am. Everything appeared completely normal apart from one solitary drip under the basin, sitting there like a doggy chocolate drop

and presumably my training reward for passing her test, or perhaps it was supposed to be a small coin which represented the penny that had just dropped. I stood back and contemplated it for a while, but as there was no more leakage aside from my own of course, I wisely decided that sleep would be the best course of inaction.

A dry Tuesday did nothing to further my enquiries, but on Wednesday the 20<sup>th</sup> I had managed to wangle a couple of hours off. I came home at 4.00pm to an achingly lovely newly born baby puddle which anointed the appointed area, although I am in no doubt that its beauty may only be in the eye of this beholder. It was gone by quarter past five, so if I hadn't bunked off work there would have been nothing to be seen on my return at the usual time and sometimes I wonder how many of these I've missed through conscientiousness. My colleagues aren't party to any of this at the moment and even though I'm supposed to be the boss, I still feel guilty about leaving early for no apparently good reason. Obviously they're bound to find out sooner or later and with their sceptical nature in mind, I'd hope that the revelations I share with them would encourage scrutiny rather than mutiny, when they discover I've seemingly gone as mad as my box of frogs. By midnight the dripping had started again, so I countered with an off-the-shelf magnetic sculpture which I'd already prepared for just such an eventuality. I'm talking about the shelf below the fireplace and not the metal one in my bathroom, as we all know by now that it would be impossible to extricate without reciprocal damage or deformation. [\(102-PIC\)](#) With a modicum of magnification, you can see how the pattern on the water mirrors the structure and it could almost be a reflection if light worked differently.

There was nothing left of it by morning, but after our Friday gaming session had finished I found these two in progress at a quarter past twelve and when flipped upside down, I would swear that one of them looks like the spitting image of Yosemite Sam. [\(103-PIC\)](#) Waking up on Saturday I could tell from the remnants that the puddle must have swelled considerably overnight, but now all dripping had stopped and it was down to a more manageable four inch diameter. As usual I had a bath before going back to bed for forty minutes or so, which is my allotted time for reading as I find it difficult to stay focussed when the sun is over the yardarm and there's cider in the fridge. You already know that I only enjoy breakfast at home one day a week, as I'm not a fan of cirrhosis or drink driving and whilst trying to postpone the former, I'm determined not to repeat the latter.

Rather strangely we're transported back to 1983 again, when I was caught shortly after a failed tryst with a young lady who I used to race against in the mornings. My girlfriend and I had found a lovely terraced two-up, two-down a comfortable few hundred yards away from the axe attacker, but after a couple of years the relationship went stale as we both wanted different things out of life. Even though we were still living together, I'd

have to say that it was the perfect breakup. The situation was so amicable that I had to guard myself against falling for her again, but now we'd made our separate beds with mine in the spare room, it would be a mistake not to lie in them.

Driving to work had always reminded me of a line from an old Bud Flanagan song, "Mr Brown goes off to town on the A21", until my dad pointed out that this was an anachronism and railways were the most likely commute of choice in those days. However this innocent error of judgement would turn out to be an unwelcome omen for the future. Twice or sometimes three times a week on the way in, I'd notice a car being driven by an attractive blonde girl and finding myself newly unattached, I shouldn't have been surprised that there would be an opportunity for romantic pursuits on such a predominantly single carriageway. I can't remember who started the competition, but it was probably me as I'd already seen that she liked to drive aggressively. Whenever there was a gap in the traffic, I would accelerate past before slotting in ahead of her and then slow down a fraction too quickly until she had a grasp of the rules. She would then overtake me and this was the way we leapfrogged to work for the next few months. One day I'd just pulled off a successful manoeuvre, but found myself trailing what was obviously a plain clothes police car. I willed her not to speed past the two of us, but she couldn't resist and was immediately pulled over. Waiting for her in the next lay-by, it was less than five minutes later that she spotted me and parked up behind. Policemen seemed to be more chivalrous to pretty women back then, so she was lucky to get off with a smile and a caution. Coincidentally both of us worked in Sevenoaks town centre, so we agreed to meet up for a pub lunch the following day and I recall sticking rigidly to the speed limit for the remainder of my journey.

Unfortunately I'd forgotten that tomorrow was a bank holiday, but all the same I had to keep the appointment as it would be rude to break my promise. I'd already guessed that after we'd driven off, she must have realised I had my dates mixed and wouldn't show up, so I sat at the bar having a drink or two more than strictly necessary whilst waiting in vain to prove myself wrong. To make matters worse I hadn't eaten all day and my stomach was only lined by the bravado beer that I'd downed before leaving to quell any first date nerves. Feeling frustrated by my ineptitude I jumped behind the wheel to head home and overtook a dawdler in front of the police station, but overlooked a conspicuously striped panda car waiting to turn right. If they'd been given Good Friday off like the rest of us then I would have carried on oblivious, but looking back I was an accident waiting to happen and finding that out without loss of lives or limbs is better than the alternative. I learnt my lesson well, which included the realisation that a disarming smile and fashionably blond highlights would never be enough to dodge the breathalyser or escape a year's ban. Somewhat bizarrely I can even remember which track was playing on the stereo as the blinking lights

went on and it took a while before I could listen to “European Female” by The Stranglers, without having unwarranted flashbacks of my arrest.

Ending up behind bars is never one of life’s highpoints, unless you’ve chosen a career in the pub trade and there was nothing good about this particular Friday, as being sent to jail for a romantic liaison wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I left the house. Thankfully this was narrowly avoided as I’d been fortunate to have a cell to myself, so I wouldn’t need to dodge the amorous advances from fellow lovelorn inmates. Knowing I had been guilty as charged and that my blood sample would come back positive, the last time I used the car was when I tested sober enough to drive it home. The next day I bought a bike and despite being a bright red, drop handlebar 18 speed racing model, I was only too aware that it wouldn’t be fast enough to have a hope of competing against even the slowest of drivers outside central London in rush hour. So that’s why the best alternative for the foreseeable future was cycling down to Bromley South railway station, where I would wait for the 8.21 train with a wry but resigned smile on my face. If you happen to be reading this and it’s ringing any bells, then now after all these years you’ll finally know what became of the mystery man in the white Opel Manta. I’ve never driven over the limit since, so you have unwittingly shaped my life for the better and most probably yours too when all eventualities are taken into consideration. So stay lucky, take care of yourself and thanks again for standing me up.

Back to Saturday morning, it’s approaching twenty to nine which is time to get up so I bookmarked the page before blow drying my hair, putting some clothes on then having a shave and sharing a few minty minutes with a battery powered toothbrush. It didn’t take long to finish the rest of my duties and this included taking a photo before going to work, not for your benefit of course, but to remind me that all signs of the overnight puddle had disappeared in just over an hour. In case you’re wondering whether I could have hastened its departure, let me assure you that I don’t use a hairdryer in the bathroom due to an absence of electrical sockets and I wouldn’t want to be fiddling about with extension cables on my tight schedule. Anyway I don’t need to worry as my house has five more rooms, or six if like the estate agent you count the small utility area and two of which are not only equipped with mirrors, but also have the added advantage of power points. The reason why one of them has become my first and obvious choice is going to make me appear even more eccentric than you had previously imagined, but see if I care.

During the renovations to my property, I was at a loss as to what I should do with the spare room on the first floor or how to have it decorated. It was the last one waiting to be done and even my reserve tank of creative juices had been running on fumes for weeks. Quickly ruling out the cheaper option of having it bricked up as a time capsule or priest hole, I decided that

whatever I chose shouldn't necessarily be the jewel in my crown, but more like a hidden sixpence in a Christmas pudding. Since this was to be my final flight of fantasy I envisioned an environment as far away from traditional country cottage as possible, hoping that visiting guests would be amused by its incongruous nature when they opened the door and stepped inside. I had always liked the look of those multi-gyms with all their moving wires, levers and weights working in unison, plus the chance of getting fit as a by-product seemed almost too good to be true. Searching online, I found myself captivated by the contraptions on offer and after a few more glasses of cider, a plan slowly started to come together. My problem with exercising is boredom soon sets in and the design flaw of these machines is that the mesmerising mechanical action of all the components happens mostly behind you, so it's out of sight. The logical solution was to have every single wall covered in top to bottom mirrors, so I would be able to see it from all angles with myriad images in motion bouncing off into the distance and that should surely be enough to divert my attention for the required fifteen or twenty minutes.

Early the next day I drove straight down to my local DIY superstore, the one that prides itself on excellent customer advice given by its ageing but knowledgeable workforce, although the only question they can't answer is why there are never more than two checkouts open at once. I found some inexpensive mirrored tiles, but after totting up the amount I'd need for the job it exceeded my credit card limit and besides, they fell a long way short of the quality of finish that I wanted. Walking away and feeling a little disheartened by my wasted journey, I cheered up at the thought that at least I wouldn't have to queue for ages to pay, so I'd make it to work on time. I'd been looking for something which was obviously closer to a commercial, rather than a domestic installation so I turned to my good friend Andrew, who's had experience of both as he owns a double glazing and conservatory manufacturing company. Six years later I would ask if he had a ghost story, but as it turned out to be quite lengthy and I couldn't remember the details, I asked him to write them down for me.

< My mother had been born in Poland in the mid-Twenties and during the war her whole family was moved to a Gulag in Siberia, so she lacked any sort of formal education. Three years later they were expelled by the Russians and she found herself going from country to country in search of a new home. Mum told us that whilst travelling with gypsies, she'd met some interesting people who knew the way the world worked and they had shown her how even a small amount of natural ability can be a powerful thing. For as long as I can remember she's suffered from premonitions and could read cards, I recall one time in particular when I'd taken her to visit my brother John who was living with his wife in Germany. He was on hand as an interpreter when a close friend of theirs had asked for a reading, though I really wasn't paying too much attention until an argument broke

out between my mother and brother in Polish. She'd said that either the woman was pregnant, or would be in a few months' time and he explained at length how this wasn't possible, as the poor lady had endured years of fertility treatment without success. John didn't want to pass this on as it would only cause upset, but mum was adamant, saying she'd read the cards three or four times and that's exactly what they said. After reluctantly relaying her statement there were some silent tears shed before the angry shouting commenced, with John and his wife bearing the brunt of it. No amount of kind words could repair the damage done, but mum remained resolute by saying "You will look foolish given time", which my brother diplomatically chose not to translate. Happily for all concerned, a pregnancy test taken a few weeks later confirmed that the prediction was spot on, even down to the sex of the child.

I'd met a lovely girl named Katrina and Adam was born in 2004, eight years after my mother passed away so she wasn't around to welcome the birth of our son. This is something that the whole family regrets as children and grandchildren meant the world to her. When mum died, none of us believed that she would just vanish from our lives forever, but after several years we all stopped looking for signs, including those which may have been seen more out of hope than reality. The Polish tradition is to celebrate Christmas on December the 24<sup>th</sup> and on this particular occasion there were nineteen of us including the kids. A short while after the breaking of the bread and celebratory meal, it was time to give out the presents. The other children were still absorbed by their new toys, but Adam who happened to be the youngest had already unwrapped and neatly stacked his gifts away before rushing off to play, which was a mild disappointment to a few of the relatives who didn't understand three year olds. A couple of hours later when things had quietened down he disappeared again, but was spotted standing at the front door which he'd managed to open, before one of the older boys escorted him back into the warm. When we asked if he'd been trying to go home, he told us there was someone outside and then just kept repeating himself, so basically in an effort to stop his babbling we took him back to the hallway. I was right behind my sister and as soon as Katrina opened the door with a reassuring "Look, no one there", he rocked our world by saying the word "Babcia".

Babcia means grandmother in Polish, which is my first language and if you substitute the i for an h you'll get a good idea of the pronunciation, but since mum's passing we no longer speak it at family gatherings. Everyone knows how I still struggle with losing her, which is why she is never mentioned so there couldn't be any way he would have picked up the word from a conversation. Katrina asked him where babcia was and when he pointed down the road saying "There, going", you could have heard a pin drop. Adam's eyes were transfixed and he wouldn't be distracted so we questioned him again as none of us could see anyone, but all he'd say was

“gone” while still pointing towards the same direction. We later asked him what she looked like but he found it hard to explain himself, answering in negatives as in not thin, not young and not tall. Mum was short, dumpy and in her early seventies when she died and to my knowledge he has never used the word again.

In August 2008 we went to Lego Land, having previously arranged to call round for a meal at my niece and her husband Mark’s house where we’d spent last Christmas. It took a lot longer to get round the park than expected and we arrived about 8.00pm to find that they had prepared a barbecue. Adam wasn’t feeling the slightest bit tired and went straight outside to run around in the garden while we chatted in the kitchen. After a few minutes we could hear him talking, but I didn’t give it any thought until he promptly came in and took my hand saying “Come on daddy, old lady.” I was in the middle of a conversation so I temporarily ignored him, but he kept tugging at me until Katrina said “Pay attention to your son”, so I knelt down and asked what he wanted. All he could say was “Old lady” and when I asked him where, he pointed at the window. Mark said he may have left the gate open, so I went out to take a look with Adam careering ahead of me, tearing about as if searching for a friend in a game of hide and seek. However everything seemed to be in order when I rattled the handle, so I thought no more of it. Soon we were all settled outside around the table, tucking into the sumptuous spread they’d laid on as dusk fell on a balmy summer’s night, when Adam suddenly shouted “Look” and pointed at something while his face lit up with a huge smile. Everyone turned round but there was nothing there, so my niece asked him what he’d seen and he answered “Old lady.” Mark jumped out of his chair to see if someone had opened the gate, but of course it was still securely locked so I asked Adam to tell me what she looked like and he described mum, saying that she’d been standing there watching us.>

Andrew also told me about the time he’d seen a UFO and from his description it sounded like the one which we’ve already encountered in Justin’s earlier, but equally remarkable story, despite the fact that these incidents occurred at least twenty years apart. I know many of you may have difficulties believing something as far-fetched as this and you’re probably quite right in thinking it was more likely that he’d just spotted an identical model with a matching paint job, churned out from the same alien production line. So what can we infer from this, well it suggests that although their technology is far superior to ours they must be under similar budgetary constraints, in the same way as the RAF still has to use airplanes which are over thirty years old. Alternatively it could be entirely possible that the newer, snazzier spacecraft are reserved for visiting planets where the life forms are a lot more advanced than us and harder to impress with outdated tat. Anyway one evening when driving his wife and son home after a day out, he had to pull over for a better view of the largest equilateral



triangle that he'd ever seen. A few other cars had also stopped as hovering silently above was a giant object with flashing lights, which not only looked easily large enough to accommodate an on-board football pitch, but one complete with changing facilities and a grandstand too. I'm sure that Andrew would have stayed to see what happened, but his instincts as a protective husband and father took precedence over curiosity, so he drove off in case it had a heat ray or worse.

He came round to see my spare room with one of the members of his installation team, who wasted no time by taking a comprehensive series of measurements while we discussed this rather unusual project of mine. I wanted every vertical surface to be covered in huge floor to ceiling mirrors and I had also specified two sliding doors, which would expose the window if I needed ventilation or a fire escape. At one point I even thought about asking them to install a mirror ball, but I was worried that people might not be able to see it and would bump their heads. The job was priced out at mates' rates and shoehorning me into his already busy appointment book, works soon commenced. It only took a few days to complete, but they surpassed all of my expectations and a week later a deep red carpet was laid from the bottom of the living room staircase throughout the two upper floors.

Constructing the home gym would prove an enjoyable though sweaty three day challenge for me, but after a lot of hard labour it was finally finished and towered to within a lucky half inch of the ceiling. I soon got into the habit of a twenty minute early morning workout, but gave up after I failed to see any results from my fitness regime, which probably should have lasted longer than the few weeks I followed it. You see the underlying problem was that the apparatus looked nothing short of magnificent even when static, so any further efforts on my behalf to improve its aesthetics seemed unnecessary. As I had much more fun building rather than using it, perhaps a better strategy may have involved dismantling the whole thing every so often before reassembling the pieces, which could constructively be seen as an entertaining exercise in itself. You never know I may have a change of heart in the future and start using it again, but only if my doctor insists that a little light physical activity could be of benefit after the transplant surgery. In the meantime it's a convenient place to hang clothes in what's become my dressing room, while also doubling as a cat climbing frame, so at least all of that backbreaking work hasn't gone entirely to waste. Getting back to the point I raised earlier, you can now understand why I wouldn't choose the bathroom to dry my hair, with such a purpose-built and mostly redundant resource like this going begging upstairs.

A tiny splash appeared around 9.30 that Saturday night and within half an hour it had been joined by others to form a typically rectilinear shape. By ten to eleven the floor was dry and having nothing better to do, I thought

that it would be polite to reply in some way, but often what starts off with the best of intentions can turn into a right cock-up if you lose sight of common etiquette. After having built a magnetic ball which due to the angle of my photo looks more like a metallic tortoise, I placed it in front of the drop zone, but I still felt that something else was needed in order to add extra oomph to the proceedings. I'd already kitted out the cat on the shelf with a herbal toupee, but that was hardly going to win me any prizes for originality so I decided to stretch the very limits of tastefulness and here's what I came up with. If this doesn't represent my most defiling moment then I'm jolly sure it's at least in with a chance, although I would have to say that the shameless appendage towards the left wasn't just added willy-nilly. [\(104-PIC\)](#)

It's positioned beneath my toilet roll holder to reference the angle at which the metal bar was fixed by powers unknown, while also paying homage to Markie's unexpectedly rude revelation and the similar discovery I made on that snowy walk into work. In all fairness I wasn't the one who started this flirtation with homoerotic art and you can blame the ancient Greeks for that, but nevertheless I can't say I feel particularly proud of my latter-day indiscretion. However let's be generous and put it down to impaired judgement after having too much to drink, which is probably just another case of history repeating itself. In the morning I safely cleared away my artefacts, but carelessly trod on the one which was too embarrassing to let anyone see out of context, a mistake I'll never make again in bare feet. Sunday passed without event and it felt good to be given a day off, but looking back I will come to regret that sentiment as I was taking everything too much for granted at the time.

It was Monday the 25<sup>th</sup> and I had been woken up early by marauding cats. Needing a pee I went downstairs at ten to seven to discover a smallish puddle, which I swiftly acknowledged with a pre-prepared sculpture before going back to bed and falling straight back to sleep. My alarm went off forty minutes later and when I opened the bathroom door the floor was dry again. Whether or not this was due to my earlier intervention I'll never know, but it's an example of another occurrence which I would have missed under normal circumstances. This irritated me somewhat, as a proper scientific investigation shouldn't pivot on playful pussycats or the bleating of a bloated bladder. Andy was round for the night as usual and I'm guessing from his glazed expression that he came close to a near death experience when I bored him with my latest developments. Looking at matters from an alternative perspective, we've known each other since the early Nineties and now I suddenly come up with all of this tomfoolery which is so contrary to his belief system that it scarcely qualifies as a subject for serious discussion. I know that the overarching enthusiasm of the newly converted may occasionally come across as haranguing, but he's a tough nut to crack and while some of you might be prepared to condone my pile-

driver approach, Andy probably won't at least not in his lifetime. As luck would have it though, the best piece of evidence for my defence turned up inadmissibly late when I was witness to a fresh double drip in the bathroom at a quarter past twelve, frustratingly only a few minutes after judge and jury had left in a shared cab.

I discovered the next puddle on Wednesday at 5.30pm, but it was gone by eight. Two days later and Friday night had already rolled over into Saturday morning, so it was just as well I'd stayed up until 1.30am or else I wouldn't have noticed a four by four inch newcomer. Bedtime was on the cards if I didn't want to wake up cranky through lack of sleep and six hours later when the alarm sounded, I went downstairs to find that most of it had evaporated. Even the leftovers had a schedule to keep and departed in an orderly fashion shortly after 9.00am, which once again allowed me to record its disappearance before leaving for work. Finding myself with nothing to do around ten o'clock that night I decided to see if I could instigate the proceedings this time, so I topped and tailed the tortoise before putting it back into position. A few minutes after midnight I'd achieved my objective with the appearance of this damp scamp, or it could just be seen as a lucky coincidence depending on which side of the fence your sympathies currently lie entrenched. [\(105-PIC\)](#) The pipe hadn't quite finished dribbling so I sat down to watch the puddle's progression, but the drips soon stopped and within half an hour it had turned into a tiny J shaped boot before vanishing completely.

It would be 12.50pm on Sunday the 31<sup>st</sup> when I found out that a leak had started up again and this picture shows the simple J I'd fashioned for my endgame, which was still in place from the night before. [\(106-PIC\)](#) When I checked thirty minutes later the spillage had swollen and could possibly be interpreted as looking slightly rude, but I was in no danger of prosecution this time as it would easily pass the Mull of Kintyre test. [\(107-PIC\)](#) By two o'clock it had morphed into another four inch square and just before three all that remained was a dehydrated worm lying next to the skirting board. At 7.45pm there was fresh evidence of seepage, so I thought it would be an astute move to invite my wooden cat along to the pool party. [\(108-PIC\)](#) Within three quarters of an hour the floor had dried out but by ten to ten I found this kittenish cutie, which despite or maybe because of my additional magnets was gone when I checked back in twenty minutes. [\(109-PIC\)](#) I really should apologise for my lazy ratio of fifty measly words per puddle picture in this paragraph, but I'm just going with the flow here.

February 2010

This prolonged period of activity and January both came to an abrupt halt that night, so the next time I'll have another photo worth seeing will be on Saturday the 6<sup>th</sup>, though I should warn you it may take a bit of explaining. Perhaps I should just show you the picture right now and then go on to describe what led up to it, but there again that might cause additional offence to any readers who may find themselves personally involved. As I wouldn't want that to happen, we need to go back to 2009 which had proven to be an outstanding year for new releases and I will list my top five albums for you. In joint third place are:

Empire of the Sun – "Walking on a Dream"

Maps – "Turning the Mind"

St. Vincent – "Actor"

My supposedly unassailable number one was going to be Animal Collective's "Merriweather Post Pavilion" and I could never imagine it getting edged into a close second as it's a real gem on every level, but that's exactly what happened, despite being awarded a remarkable 89% by the leading online review site. I wouldn't necessarily disagree with the rating although it scored four higher than "Ys", surely a contender for the eighth wonder of the world and unveiled by Joanna Newsom in 2006, which in hindsight made this year's voting seem overly generous. My new favourite came out a few months later, curiously going straight under their radar to the extent that it was shamefully overlooked and not even deemed worthy of mention on Metacritic. On first listen it could easily be dismissed as self-indulgent oompah nonsense, to the point that I nearly gave up myself before getting halfway through, but I pressed on and soon became convinced there was something daringly original in its very uniqueness. I'd never come across anything even remotely similar to this previously, so you could say that I felt like one of those pygmies hearing their first airplane through the jungle canopy, before deforestation and interbreeding provided them with a better view. Soon I was so head over heels in love with this astonishing album, that every opportunity to sneak another listen became a special treat which could be savoured time and time again. I don't say this lightly, but it truly is music of the highest quality and I wouldn't change the tiniest moment. That's more than can be said of some other my other all-time favourites, as even "Ziggy Stardust" has one underwhelming track and "Dark Side of the Moon" could have done with a little polishing to the lyrics of "Money". I was so besotted that I started to compose an e-mail to the record label for the attention of the singer-songwriter, but when I'd finished it sounded like nothing more than pretentious sycophantic drivel. To illustrate the point my subject bar was tackily labelled "To Raissa with love

for your work”, so at the end of the day I’m glad that I decided to sleep on it before hitting send. Answering fan mail must be a laborious task and as I didn’t have anything particularly original or exciting to say, I chose not to add to her workload.

The Mummers are a group of musicians based in Brighton, whose founder members were Raissa Khan-Panni alongside the multi-talented keyboard player and orchestrator Mark Horwood. It had been a long and convoluted process which finally led to them eventually meeting each other, but shortly afterwards they teamed up to work together. Apparently he had built a recording studio in a tree house which wasn’t the most practical of places, but this magical environment both inspired and infused the music they created. A band mostly playing traditional instruments had been recruited and their masterpiece, “A Tale to Tell” was released in April 2009 after two years’ of painstakingly hard work. Last week when browsing the Internet in a quiet moment between customers, I read that Mark Horwood had hanged himself a few months later and the tears welled up, but I can’t remember getting too much in the way of empathy or compassion from my co-workers. They didn’t understand my overwhelming feeling of despair at the loss of so much potential, as it had taken me straight back to that dreadful day when I found out about Géraldine. I would like to have thought that I was long past the crying stage by now, but at moments like these the gifts of time and perspective are fragile constructs which can be shattered in an instant.

My heart went out to the ones he had left behind, who would be going through the same tortured emotions that I experienced and it’s not much, but for anyone in a similar circumstance here’s the only help I can offer. It goes without saying that you won’t be able to avoid the crippling feeling of loss, but trying to apportion guilt solves no purpose and can be all-consuming, so we should simply respect the decision these brave, though deeply troubled souls have made. I say brave because suicide is hardly the coward’s way out, as it must take tremendous courage and willpower to actually carry out your last decision on planet Earth. We all know that life is precious, but when it becomes terminally and irredeemably intolerable, who can blame anyone for turning themselves to dust as the dead don’t hover.

Getting back to Saturday February 6<sup>th</sup> when a most peculiar thing happened at work, as against all odds another Colin has joined our story, but this one is a part-time musician. Here’s how I found out that he could soon be in a position to get me Raissa’s personal e-mail address and it was early afternoon when my long acquainted friend poked his head around the shop door. When I first met him his day job was piano tuning, but since then he’s cleverly expanded the business model by starting up a company which imports and sells them to future clients. Seeing that I wasn’t busy he came

over to the counter for a chat. He told me rather enigmatically that I had brought two old friends together again and straight off the cuff I asked him if this was related to The Mummers. When you take into account my day to day forays into the unknown, this wasn't just a lucky guess as I find that solutions to such low level enigmas are almost second nature by now. Undeterred by my presumptuous but accurate appraisal, we lamented their tragic loss before he began to explain further.

Thanking me for a previous recommendation to purchase the CD, he said he'd been playing it at a dinner party when one of his guests, a girl named Jenny remarked that she recognised the singer's distinctive voice. The sleeve notes were duly checked and confirmed that it happened to be an old friend of hers from Bristol University, who she'd lost touch with after they went their separate ways. It also turned out that Colin's writing partner in his current band knew something of her earlier career. Apparently Raissa's former A&R company had approached him a few years back and he'd been sent copies of the solo albums she'd already recorded, to see whether he could either engineer or produce any of her future releases. However some things are never meant to be and nothing came out of it, other than this tiny link in a chain of coincidence. Colin went on to tell me that when Jenny had sent her an e-mail to say hello again after so long, the reply she received was both warm and rapturous. I was more than delighted as having been responsible for reuniting them, I now had an excuse to make contact, but don't forget it's rarely the person that starts the ball rolling who scores the goal. With this in mind, you can probably guess that my message still hasn't been written or sent and her e-mail address was never actually confided to me due to privacy issues. So luckily I have been spared the potential embarrassment of coming over as a fan boy, well until now that is.

Saturday evening then and I'd been mulling things over as it was almost a week since the last puddle, which seemed like forever so I decided that some external input might be required. Colin's remarkable news was the springboard for my experiment and if there were even the remotest of chances that Géraldine could possibly have influenced any of the events which led up to it, then I felt beholden to acknowledge her efforts. I needed to devise something stimulating to get her attention back, but if the whole of time and space are indeed the playground of the dead, then that was going to be a toughie. Still it was the weekend after all and I didn't have to get up for work in the morning, so I felt quietly confident I'd sort something out. Before long the bare bones of a plan were being fleshed out in my head, although the only thing I knew for certain was that a question would be involved. My first one concerning Shiseido had been thoroughly answered, so in order to keep the dialogue flowing I thought that I could surely be forgiven for asking another. All of a sudden an idea barged rudely into my mind and didn't even bother to wipe its grubby little feet first. It

wasn't exactly pretty, but would pass as a functional, targeted and largely well-intentioned attempt to pique her curiosity.

I've already promised that I wouldn't be blasé about letting you know in advance what's coming up, but sit tight as we fast travel to Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> of April and having just finished lunch, I'm in the process of writing up these events which happened around eleven weeks ago. Yesterday there was a Snakes and Ladders development that may either give me all the answers I've ever wanted on a plate, or turn out to be a complete but hopefully entertaining waste of time. I'm afraid I don't have any way of forecasting the future, but on this occasion the law of averages would appear to suggest that somewhere in-between might be the most likely conclusion. Whatever happens I'm sure it will be for the best and if not, at least I'll have another few thousand words of padding in case my fountain of source material unexpectedly runs dry. Please accept my sincere apologies as I don't mean to do this intentionally, but when such an exciting breakthrough occurs I can't keep it to myself and need to tell you straight away. Teasingly though, I must withhold the precise details for now, but don't forget that I still have no inclination of which way things will go, so for the first time we're all at a similar disadvantage. There's one final comment I'll make and that's the way in which events continue to wrap around and connect to each other is both complex and extraordinary and the idea that it's all coincidence becomes harder and harder to defend than using the word "and" six times in a single sentence.

We need to get back to my preparations, which I can now reveal will focus on the hanged mannequin and anyone into Tarot or Lego may be visualising a likely scenario already. I wanted to be topical, but you'll remember how I balked at the idea of portraying Géraldine that way, as it was far too personal and might not have been taken in the best humour. However maybe it was possible that a depiction of someone else's similar exit strategy would assist her in tracking down said individual and I'll always try to help out a friend, either passed or present. It fascinates me that there are so many varied ways of dying, although only two of them come into play at birth, the first of which is letting nature take her course and the second involves butchery. I wondered if a deceased person might possess a common bond with others who shared their method of migration and perhaps they would be eligible to join some sort of club, or bereavement support group. Some of these would obviously have a higher membership, but others like being pulled apart by horses, which hasn't had many new recruits since the Middle Ages are more exclusive and a well-contrived or imaginative death must give you certain bragging rights in the hereafter. When it comes to questioning the dead, I tend to tread very carefully as any other rational person would do. Naturally I don't want to be accused of overstepping the mark, so my considerations are that it has to be pithy and pertinent, yet totally altruistic in content with sadly no reference at all to

lottery numbers or next month's Gold Cup winner. I was hoping that my request would tickle her pan-dimensional boxes and with the greatest respect to everyone concerned, here is the finished article. [\(110-PIC\)](#)

A short attention span is a hazard of modern life, as we all crave instant answers to the point where patience is rapidly becoming an increasingly outdated and irrelevant virtue. Though I'd forgotten I was dealing with an eternal being and that can take forever don't you know. Like a letter sent by clipper ship to foreign climes in distant times, I would have to wait for a reply and hope that it wasn't delayed by becalmed waters, or misdelivered to the seabed during inclement weather. In the mid-nineteenth century this primitive mode of communication was the very best they could muster and still much faster than the telephone, as it wouldn't be invented for another twenty five years.

It remained quiet until Monday night, or should I say Tuesday morning as Andy was round and we were having a bit of a late one. Around a quarter past twelve I visited the bathroom to relieve myself, but discovered two fresh puddles instead. You may be intrigued as to whether I hurriedly went about my business before reporting the leakage, but I've noticed how the body's priorities are reassigned at times like these and that urge is held in limbo. Perversely and as a direct consequence of this, now if I need a pee but can't go, thinking of flowing water is entirely counterproductive. So whenever I find myself in a similar situation, the trigger that eventually engages my wee reflex is the camera's electronic chime as I turn it off after recording the evidence. Reluctantly I have to say that I can't adopt this technique in public urinals, as photography is usually frowned upon and even the sound of it can make people jittery.

The reason behind this extended session, was that Andy had generously entered into a debate about the non-existence of life after death which started while I'd been describing my action-packed Saturday, but we were constantly at loggerheads with our diametrically opposing views. We already know that this may not be his favourite subject, but it certainly is one of Géraldine's and she loves to get involved by contributing from her standpoint as the resident expert. I have to shamefacedly admit that by summoning him to the bathroom and not taking no for an answer, I could be guilty of maybe using too sharp a stick to press home my point, though you'll see why I was so insistent. [\(111-PIC\)](#) As he'd taken the only available seat, I knelt down before explaining that the closest source of water was the pipe which feeds my hot tap from below. However as it was at least an inch and a half to the right of that grout mark on the wall, this meant the smaller puddle had somehow dripped diagonally. As if he could almost predict the various ways I'd capitalise on this to reinforce my argument, Andy wisely bailed out by calling a cab, but I was on a roll and it didn't only contain thirty six exposures. He was long gone by the time I next checked my bathroom



floor, so now you're the only ones who are still around for me to bore stupid as I stayed up to document the flow and I will try to be as brief as possible without skimping. At a quarter to one the two earlier puddles had all but dried up, although there was some fresh vertical dribbling to compensate. The drips continued to fall until a familiar shape was formed and this is a shot taken from the side at about 1.00am. [\(112-PIC\)](#) I knew it deserved some sort of response as the rules dictated that this was my cue to reciprocate, so I grabbed whatever happened to be lying around on the living room hearth to act as a hasty reply. This must have worked as half an hour later when I went to bed, there appeared to be a perfectly framed reverse silhouette of a cat eyeing up a bumblebee, which reminded me of Jasper and the bathtub. [\(113-PIC\)](#)

It was around this time when a new piece of technology landed on my doorstep, which I had Markie and his tiny demons to thank for. Around a year ago we had a pretty intense heart to heart about his state of mind and I always knew that he could be a volatile character, but I'd never realised the enormity of the guy's frustration with what most of us consider are just the everyday trifles of life. We all have our pet peeves, like being woken early on a Sunday morning by a hungry cat, but he was letting every last little thing escalate to the point where it seemed as if the whole of the general public had collectively conspired to infuriate him with their incompetence and annoying ways. Lately this had become much worse, which meant that he would regularly snap at the slightest or even imagined provocation, launching into an invective of Basil Fawlty-like proportions and usually to himself. Life can often imitate art and it was making him increasingly abrasive with Polly, so he candidly set out his stall of damaged goods for me to rifle through in the hope that I'd be able to come up with some useful advice. Maybe he had been too caught up to notice, but what struck me most was the frenetic yet humorous nature of his nonsensical though articulate raging against trivial or non-existent nuisances. I doubt that I'm the first to coin the phrase, "Where there's plight, there's profit" and as long as it didn't involve over-compromising my integrity or badly exploiting a friendship, I was willing to consider anything to help out. A solution slowly came to me over the course of our conversation and it was so elegant that I can safely say this one will be jostling for position amongst my very finest of moments, catch them while you can. Having explained the plan, Markie said he was up for it so here's a rough outline. I'd buy him a small portable MP3 recorder which he'd carry around to capture these mad rants, then play them back to himself in the cold light of day in order to analyse his feelings, while making sure to send me a copy. Andy would be responsible for designing a website called manicmarkie.com or something along those lines, then I could edit out the more slanderous comments before we went viral and split the advertising revenue three ways.

Admittedly the start-up costs turned out to be higher than I'd imagined, which is a common factor for most new businesses, but at that point I still thought my scheme would have a good chance of paying off in the end. Ironically in this particular case my thinking cap seemed to have worked too well, as after the first and only colourful outburst that Markie recorded, reflected over then sent me, he was already on the yellow brick road to recovery. Needless to say that was just fine and dandy for him, but it properly put the mockers on my little sideline. Mission accomplished, the device was retired from active service and spent its time collecting dust, whilst silently fretting over what would replace it in the format wars. The unimaginable waste of having an untapped resource like this just sitting around doing nothing had been bouncing about in the back of my head for a while and all it took was a flash of inspiration for an idea to pop up. I'd been contemplating my growing irritation at missing puddles which occurred whilst I was asleep and remembered that this piece of equipment would record up to twelve hours in high quality audio. Arrangements were made and the item soon arrived by post, though on opening the packaging I was taken aback by its minute dimensions. It was small enough to fit inside the battery compartment of my first portable cassette recorder and that could only manage sixty minutes before you had to turn the tape over, which would hardly be conducive to the most restful of nights.

By ten to twelve on Wednesday the 10<sup>th</sup> it was set up in my bathroom with a microphone suspended a foot or so above the floor, where I'd carefully positioned the cat and thrown in a magnetic structure for maximum effect. After pressing the record button then saying a few words to test that everything was functioning correctly, I closed the door and quietly crept upstairs to bed. A typical day for me is divided into three roughly equal proportions and I had already tussled with the logistics of regularly trawling through seven or eight hours of material, as this would take up all of my free time at home if I didn't want to encroach on a good night's sleep. I'd found a downloadable sound editor called Wavepad which would display the recording like a graph, showing volume level on the Y axis with time in hours and minutes on the other. This would allow me to spot any peaks or disturbances and I could concentrate solely on these areas to listen out for relevant noises. Obviously I was going to need a way of showing it to you, but taking photos of a rear projection TV is never straightforward as the reflected flash can cause a massive whiteout and totally obscure the picture. Although by sitting at a slight angle I found I could produce some fairly passable results. This was the method I used until Andy told me about the print screen button on the keyboard, so I went back and redid them to keep my production values high. An important factor for me was that this technology would be totally tamper-proof and therefore more admissible as prima facie evidence for the case I'm presenting, on behalf of the client I'm representing.

The next morning I felt like a kid at Christmas and as soon as bathtime was over I set about transferring the recording onto my PC. I really should have known better, as the feeling of anticipation slowly turned to frustration when I couldn't get it to work and with 9.15am approaching, I had to console myself throughout the day by hoping that good things come to those who wait. This was like getting a present and finding out that batteries were provided, but they needed to be charged for an agonising eight hours before use. Time passes very slowly in circumstances such as these, so it gave me adequate opportunity to read through the instructions and within thirty minutes of getting back from the shop I had the data loading into my sound analyser, but all was far from well. Unfortunately in response to the outrageous size of this monstrously huge file, a series of horrifying alerts kept flashing up onscreen, saying that my computer could die as its tiny hard drive was becoming dangerously full. I ignored them all of course and then completely without warning the transfer came to a sickening halt, but thankfully the error message was benign as it suggested that deleting a few programs would free up some extra room. After being ignominiously defeated by the punishing demands of time and now space, I embarked on a ruthless de-cluttering exercise involving the recycle bin before giving it another go.

I am pleased to report that it was an unmitigated success and here is the result. [\(114-PIC\)](#) You can see that there was no sign of dripping, but the night had been punctuated by a dozen spikes, which sounded like the metal pendant hanging from my chain pull light switch being swung against the wall. Maybe there had been a fierce wind randomly gusting through the supposedly airtight skylight, but I certainly couldn't hear any trace of it on the recording, so this was yet another mystery to add to my haphazardly assembled and teetering pile. Having the opportunity to listen to your home's hidden night time sounds makes for a fascinating experience and I recommend that everyone should try it out. I could hear the DVD recorder updating its programme details, together with the hot water boiler firing up sporadically and even that my next door neighbour wasn't suffering from a weak bladder, as our bathrooms share a party wall. Buy yourself a gadget like this and stake out your bathroom, although in order to avoid any potentially embarrassing noise pollution you may prefer to choose one which isn't ensuite. If you shop on the Internet using a credit card, apart from paying for return postage it needn't cost a penny, as distance selling regulations mean that purchases may be sent back within a designated cooling-off period and refunded for any reason. This could even include being a failure as a spectre detector and don't be afraid of writing that down on the questionnaire if they ask you to fill one in. Before I forget, I've yet to explain the loudest blip which you can see around twenty minutes after I'd closed the door and retired to bed. This looked like my most significant anomaly so I listened back with a keen ear, but on hearing Bunny's distinctive miaow a few seconds later, I realised it must have been

caused by the plates piled on the kitchen drainer when he carelessly trampled over them.

Geoff was supposed to be coming over on his motorbike that very evening for an overnight visit, which would have been the ideal opportunity to finally initiate him into my weird and wonderful world, but he called off at the last minute due to the appalling weather conditions. You see I'd finally decided to spill the beans, chiefly because watching what I said during games nights in order to keep him in the dark was becoming increasingly tedious and frustrating. In fact you could say that I was feeling as fed up as a goldfish swimming around in a bowl and looking for its babies, after having gobbled them up only three seconds earlier. This should all have been sorted out in November if you remember, but he's a busy lad and couldn't make it down to see me, so his trip had to be postponed until the New Year. Luckily the next day was a Friday and joining up with the guys on Skype, I couldn't wait a moment longer to tell him about my experiences, but I wasn't expecting quite such a negative reaction. I started to recount my story, but Geoff refused to take any of it seriously and in-between sarcastic remarks he was cracking up in fits of uncontrollable laughter, almost to the point of dislocating his jawbone. At least this would have saved me from further interruption, but the only thing which had been put out of joint that night was my nose. Mentioning that he'd already told us about his ghost story achieved nothing, as he backtracked by saying there must have been a logical explanation and although I tried to winkle it out of him, I couldn't deflect the fickle finger of fun wagging contemptuously in my direction. His merciless heckling continued unabated and I must admit it was beginning to rankle, as I hadn't been prepared for such a sustained assault of outright derision. I can handle criticism, it's like water up a duck's bum, but with friends like that who needs enemies. On reflection it was just bad timing, as I knew that my revelations would have enjoyed a far better reception if I'd been able to relay them to him in person the night before, with Géraldine on tap to back me up with some obliging puddle action. Come to think of it, I can't really blame him at all as this whole affair does seem to smack of the preposterous and I'll have to get used to being subjected to a lot more ridicule than that in the future. So he was probably helping out by breaking me in relatively gently, but I failed to appreciate that at the time, especially in the nose department.

Markie and Justin had both eventually rallied round, but their supportive comments were being ignored, so the only way of rescuing the evening was my suggestion that we should move on by turning our attention towards a nice game of golf. I may have been outwardly chatty throughout the nine holes before bedtime, but I was forced to bite my tongue repeatedly to avoid becoming a laughing stock again for disclosing even more about the amazing discoveries I'd made, that lay beyond the fringes of science and conventional wisdom. We finished around 11.00pm and fifteen minutes

later I found that fresh puddling had arrived in the form of a new breed of dog, which I hoped would be outlawed by the Kennel Club. [\(115-PIC\)](#) As if the docked tail wasn't bad enough, the only trick you could teach it apart from roll-over would have been stay, on account of a complete lack of legs. By twelve o'clock the puddle had dried to a tenuous J, which would hardly win me any new converts if I showed you the photo, although that didn't discourage my decision to endorse it with a hastily prepared votive offering and an MP3 recorder.

It was Saturday the 13<sup>th</sup> and woken by the alarm, I went downstairs only to find that a major resurgence had occurred in my absence. [\(116-PIC\)](#) The visual evidence was solidly backed up by my recording, which showed that the drips had been falling all night long at a more or less constant speed. [\(117-PIC\)](#) I'd started it on the stroke of midnight purely for dramatic effect, but this turned out to be a stroke of genius as the numbers below corresponded directly to the actual time and in case you were wondering, that dense area soon after seven o'clock was just a plane flying over. There were also three distinct examples of the percussive sound that I had heard before, but these provided me with no further clues as to the manner of their making. On my return from work there was no sign of further dripping and the puddle had shrunk considerably, which I have to say lulled me into a false sense of security, but later on this would lead to the sort of level of anxiety that comes head to head with abject panic in a photo finish.

You know I've never had to take on anything of this nature before and don't forget that it's something which I have involuntarily been volunteered for, like being press-ganged but in a Carlsberg way. Please don't think I'm complaining as nothing could be further from the truth, but it's just that normally I like to keep my embarrassing moments to myself, so the next section is going to be particularly difficult for me. This will turn out to be the only time that I have ever been scared by any of these events and it was enough to make me lose my composure, which I don't confess to lightly. It was shortly after 11.00pm and cosseted by my usual Saturday night routine, I didn't have a care in the world until the initial stages of a desire to relieve myself slowly but surely changed into a physiological necessity. Swinging the bathroom door open, I turned on the light and instantly my eyes were drawn downwards to an odd looking scuff on the floor, so I knelt down for a closer examination. You may find this extremely difficult to believe, but the mark seemed to be carved into the stone tiles and rather unsurprisingly that worried me somewhat.

I retrieved my camera to take a few photos but getting a good one was far from easy, so look for a dark patch extending south-easterly from the centre of the picture and if you zoom in, the striations appear to be etched into solid rock. [\(118-PIC\)](#) You can see that a lot of the detail has been obscured by using the flash, so I turned it off and had to rely on holding the camera

steady, because a sixty watt lightbulb requires a slower shutter speed. Unfortunately my fight or flight response had defaulted to the lesser known fright option and I was shaking like Elvis in an ice bath. That was the reason why most shots were unusable, but here's the best of a bad bunch and in line with every handbook ever written on the subject, I remembered to take it before holding my breath brought on asphyxia. [\(119-PIC\)](#) I couldn't help thinking how this clearly directional scraping reminded me of the furrows which had been drawn in the dust on the cabinet, though on a much larger scale and I tried rubbing away at it with my fingers, but that didn't have any effect whatsoever. Try to imagine how I felt at that precise moment, as up until then the physical force brought to bear on some of my discoveries had been impressive, but it was harmless and easily managed. This was on a completely new level and any previous concerns I had about matters getting out of hand, seemed to have turned into a reality right before my eyes.

I retreated to the living room and sat down on the sofa desperately trying to marshal my thoughts. This made everything that I'd witnessed so far seem tame by comparison and considering the circumstances, I was reluctantly provoked into breaking an important one of my ground rules which up until now has similarly been written in stone. Ever since I was a little kid, I've known that the sound of a phone ringing in the middle of the night typically spelled bad news. It didn't happen often, but on being woken up in the morning I'd be told about the recent demise of uncle this or granny that. What made it so vitally necessary for them to ring there and then had eluded me at the time, but now I realise that they probably just needed someone to talk to. Usually it's my job to be the sensible one who friends will call on if they want help or advice, but now the boot was on the other foot and it wasn't without due deliberation that I rang Markie, knowing I'd undoubtedly be getting him out of bed.

The long delay before it was answered confirmed this and I asked him to fire up his computer so we could have a proper chat on Skype, then I put the phone down until he came online. I waited for about five minutes, but there was no sign of him so I called again. He apologised by saying his Internet connection appeared to be down and went on to mention that this was strange, as it had been working faultlessly earlier on. After explaining the situation as best I could, I wandered cordlessly into the bathroom and sat down on the floor. I couldn't hide the fact that I was clearly distressed, so this must have been a novel experience for him as I rarely allow anyone to see beyond my normally calm exterior. Whilst reiterating how sorry I was for getting him out of bed in time of crisis, I nonchalantly rubbed my fingers over the score marks again and within the space of a few moments I had overzealously wiped the whole thing away. I felt foolish for overreacting and tearfully told him so, which I think was more out of a sense of sheer relief than anything else, as now there were no signs to be seen of the original reason for my paranoid behaviour. Markie had been incredibly supportive

throughout my ordeal, which was a great comfort to me so I thanked him and promised to send over the pictures in the morning.

There are a couple of matters that I should mention here before we move on. I much prefer the crystal clear call quality of Skype when compared to a telephone, together with the fact that you can listen with both ears and hemispheres, but my headset is connected by a wire which wasn't long enough to reach into the bathroom. Maybe that was the exact reason why it wasn't an available option and had been denied to us by forces unseen, although far from unknown. My last observation is directed to all the blokes out there who are reading this and even if you've only got one romantic bone in your body, surely you must have realised that after twelve o'clock it was officially St. Valentine's Day. Please don't get the wrong end of the stick though, as whilst she was alive the slightest hint of me doing any wooing on February 14<sup>th</sup> would have been completely off-limits and therefore totally unthinkable. However I reckon that it pays to push your luck a little with the dead and fingers crossed, she wouldn't feel too uncomfortable now about an amorous advance, as the worst this could lead to would be a phantom pregnancy, followed by the pitter-patter of tiny droplets on my bathroom floor.

Unbeknownst to you, I have spent the last two weeks preparing for this occasion and it fair took the wind from my sails to be waylaid at the last moment, as I had wanted to have everything in place by midnight. It's likely that she fully understood what I was going to do, but wanted to get her oar in first which is surely a woman's prerogative, so I couldn't see any valid reason to deviate from my plan to deploy the recently restored frog box before bedtime. I had decided on it a while back as I needed something which would resonate with her and this was the ideal choice. Having hunted high and low in my garage I eventually found it bundled up in a holdall, cushioned beneath a thin protective layer of old socks. Unfortunately one of its lids had shattered and I put this down to kiln mismanagement, as I would hate to think that the crushing weight of all those car parts I'd carefully stacked on top could be responsible for causing the damage. Anyway I was able to recover all of the broken pieces and popped them into an envelope for safe keeping.

I needed to think things through, as firstly there was the practical matter of where I would place the box for maximum effect. Perhaps I could find a spot on the bathroom floor, but not too close to the dripping zone as it was never designed to be watertight. There again I hesitate before leaving items too far away from the target area, as they may be deemed irrelevant and could also pose a tripping hazard, so my top room was the logical answer. Besides it would be better off up there, locked away and safe from probing paws until the reveal on the morning of Monday February 15<sup>th</sup>.

Next I had to select a thoughtful gift for each of the four compartments. My decision to glue the damaged lid together had already provided me with a first-rate candidate for a suitable item to be housed underneath, but the other three would require further contemplation. I'd long since realised that excluding the underlying theme of leakage, she's hardly what you'd call a boring or unimaginative ghost and always tries to come up with something original, although to her credit no two puddles have been identical despite appearing so to the casual observer. With this in mind I was determined to apply myself to the task, as I wouldn't want to fob her off with anything less than the perfect array of surprises for the night. We can all set ourselves some tough challenges from time to time, but I was looking forward to this one as there were no tiresome rules or guidelines to follow, so for starters I had decided that it wouldn't matter if the items weren't gift-wrapped. I reasoned that after having outlived their bodies, which had turned out to be nothing more than just redundant packaging for the cool stuff inside, the dead would see through distracting layers of useless decoration and no longer regard it as necessary or even appropriate. So there you have it, a basic blueprint for my St. Valentine's Day charm offensive and I hoped that everything would go according to plan.

I took the envelope containing the fractured pieces into work, as I knew that we had a tube of superglue which would restore the object to its former glory, or at least somewhere close. Rather wisely I had chosen a day when I'd be on my own for a while as the guys were out on an installation, so no awkward questions would need to be answered prematurely at this stage of the game. Taking my lack of craft skills into consideration, I didn't do too bad a job and the adhesive had just dried as they returned so I was able to surreptitiously sneak it beneath the counter. Curiously though, before they left that morning I'd discovered an uncharacteristic leak in the loo upstairs, which was coming from the pipe running between the cistern and bowl. I'm reasonably sure this is unconnected, but all the same I should mention that over the past month our toilet was becoming progressively more difficult to flush, so Colin and I had taken the decision to replace the mechanism about a week ago. Although I should add that he did all the work while I assisted by not getting in the way too much, but this suited me fine as it brought back fond memories of helping out my dad and knowing the job would be done properly.

Realistically it's altogether more sensible to assume that she had wanted to keep a watchful eye on my progress, but couldn't resist letting me know and now the restoration was complete, her attentions would revert to their normal sphere of aberrations, namely the plumbing back home. Tony had also seen the drips on the floor and I told him not to worry, saying that the problem would probably sort itself out. However I neglected to inform him that this would most likely happen after the refurbished lid had been removed from the premises and to hurry things along, I smuggled it out to



my car within minutes of their return. Unfortunately when I arrived at the shop the next morning he announced that he'd already been upstairs and tightened up the fixings, so I was unable to verify my theory. There's one final comment I would like to make and when I brought the matter to Tony's attention he said that it was nothing more than a random act, as just before close of business I'd watched him change the little icon at the top left of our Internet browser to a small green frog.

I knew that I would have to find different items for all four receptacles, but luckily the contents of the one with a broken lid had come to me only moments after I rediscovered the box and were never bettered. Back in July last year Steve had digitised and e-mailed me an old photograph that he'd taken of Géraldine, which must have dated from around the mid-Nineties when they were going out together. [\(120-PIC\)](#) Seeing that he didn't offer any explanation as to why the picture had been scored with a knife and ripped up, I wasn't about to ask as it's impolite to pry into people's private lives. More importantly I wouldn't be getting both sides of the story, but sometimes a few pieces of sticky tape applied retrospectively can speak volumes. He had never shown me this one before and it lifted my heart to see the somewhat startled expression on her beaming face, caught out on camera while about to roll a classic three skin banger. That's two side by side with the final one positioned horizontally on top, like Stonehenge but without the gaps. Géraldine would always stick to this basic, but effective configuration and I find it endearing how she's hiding her hands in order to prevent anything incriminating from appearing in an otherwise innocuous looking photo. You can also see that being born left-handed, it's not difficult to guess which one of them was concealing a small, yet deceptively potent lump of cannabis resin. On closer inspection there's a torn-up packet of papers next to the fresh wrap of tobacco she liked to use instead of Steve's stale Marlboros and I bet I could take you to the very shop that sold them to her, although it's since moved. Somehow I can't help half remembering a line from a song here, "Little blue Rizlas filled with nice things, these were a few of her favourite cravings."

Before leaving home on Saturday the 13<sup>th</sup>, I transferred the photo onto a spare memory stick and most of my lunch break was spent visiting a nearby printing shop. There was room to spare on the glossy sheet of A4, so I came away with three different-sized copies of the same image and back at work I furtively trimmed it down with a guillotine, satisfied that one of them would fit snugly into my frog box. I found that the largest picture worked best and as an afterthought I decided to modify it with the pointy end of a kitchen knife, taking great care to avoid the slashing motions of yesteryear. Instead I drilled a hole in the corner before attaching a loop of magnets, which I thought would be the perfect way of linking my present with the present.

Getting up to speed with the others, the next compartment all but filled itself with a little help from day one of our recent cold spell, as walking to work with hands in my pockets would have been unwise so it was a good job I had something to fall back on. Unfortunately repurposed socks are always bound to attract strange looks, although that I could cope with, but I didn't like the way they constantly reminded me of friendly fire and improvised bandages. This meant that I would need some woollen gloves and the only clothes store on the route home was Primark. I'd never been in before, having avoided it for the sole reason that Elsie had wrinkled her nose disparagingly when she told me they were opening up a branch in town. To my astonishment I found that they started from ninety nine pence, which must have been a strategic price point to undercut and entice the bargain hunters away from Poundland a few doors down the road. During the lengthy forty minute walk home I had plenty of time to consider the many advantages of shopping so economically compared with the previous extravagances of my past, which convinced me that I should definitely go back tomorrow to stock up on socks and underpants. You see I was running out of clean pairs, as I could no longer use the car to drive to the laundrette for a service wash and these would surely be cheap enough to carry on buying until the weather broke. I didn't know how long that might be or how mountainous the dirty pile would become, but if you can keep your head and standards of personal hygiene when all about you are losing theirs, then it's worth sacrificing a bit of floor space. You will remember of course that I do actually have a washing machine, but it had inadvertently become a domestic shrine, dedicated to the sacred memory of Géraldine and her last load of laundry. Using it would be an act of desecration and had nothing to do with the fact that I have no idea of how to work the damned contraption in the first place.

In any case the upshot of this set of circumstances was that I had accrued some extra J hooks, which were generic and lacked the status of the Roberts Polypro, but I didn't think it would worry her too much as unlike Elsie she wasn't particularly brand aware. My task was trying to tie together various key elements in the frog box, ones that only she would understand and hopefully be enamoured with, or at least mildly intrigued by. I laid out a design using four of them, but that looked too much like a hippy swastika so I ended up with just the three. These were artfully positioned and rested on the fossil shell she'd once given me, which was granted squatters' rights as it had been living there for well over the mandatory ten years.

Box number three was next and what else could be more appropriate than a red rose. However on this occasion the method of procurement would be more significant than the rather clichéd item itself, because in order to attract her attention I had decided to act totally out of character by stealing it. Although everyone likes to save money, this had nothing to do with the constraints of a tight budget, but was designed instead to test the age old

adage that good girls always go for bad boys. I had carefully selected one store in particular, which were selling even their entry level underpants for about three times more than the ones I'd just bought and having banked enough profit from my previous purchases, they could easily afford a master class in the art of shop lifting. As I'd done my homework and had been casing the joint for almost twenty years, I felt supremely confident as in addition to knowing the position of closed-circuit TV cameras, I was also acutely aware of the clandestine surveillance patrols of their plain clothed detectives. On reflection though, I was vastly overqualified for such petty pilfering and rightly should have conscripted some young street urchin into doing my dirty work. Be that as it may, you don't send a boy to do a man's job as child labour is sadly illegal nowadays, so I'd manoeuvred myself into position next to the St. Valentine's Day floral display and making use of my deliberately untrimmed fingernails, I casually snipped off a flowering bloom. Should anyone have accosted me, I would tell them why deadheading is considered to be beneficial to the plant as I'd read that they thrived on tough love, but nobody did so I'll apologise for their lax security if you're the person who was presented with eleven red roses and a sorry looking stalk. So the plan went like clockwork and having already committed the perfect crime, I quickly got bored of lawlessness by resolving to forgo my budding career as a horticultural thief. On arriving home I spotted an empty plastic milk carton which was destined for the bin, but I salvaged the pretty blue lid as it would serve as a miniature water tray. By the way I'll admit that this preyed on my conscience for a fair while afterwards, until I remembered how one of their self-service tills had diddled me out of a pound coin a few weeks back and called it quits, or "Quid pro quo" if you want the correct legal terminology.

Three down one to go then, but I'd hit a problem as I had no contenders for the contents of the last box and I was sure that a stumbling block wouldn't count as a worthy or workable choice. I'd talked it over with my support group and then my lack of support group, but neither had any constructive proposals. The fact that I still hadn't found anything suitable by eleven o'clock on Saturday night didn't worry me as I normally function well under pressure, but I wasn't expecting to have to cope with so much of it at once and missed my midnight deadline. After I'd calmed down sufficiently and with no further distractions to interrupt or indeed traumatise me, it wasn't long before an idea filtered through into my unusually unencumbered mind. I was already won over by the potential of my new MP3 recorder, but so far the results had been inconclusive and were liable to be dismissed without corroborating evidence. Rather optimistically I'd decided to encourage her to come up with something more convincing than a few random clicks in my miked-up bathroom and under the circumstances this last minute addition was the best I had to offer, so let's give it our full attention before moving on. Here's an overview combined with a question directed to all the girls out there, including any dead ones of course in order to establish a good

cross section of my female readership and who knows, you might have one or two peering over your shoulder right now. In fact if you bought this from a second hand book shop, we may even be talking about a previous owner dying to check out my story again from a whole new perspective. [\(121-PIC\)](#) So which is preferable, something like this or a love-struck teddy bear on an over-sized card and why not show it to your current partner if you're thinking that you deserve better.

I'd chosen to write out the notes of the song "Frère Jacques" and those of you with any musical training may have realised this already, but don't get complacent as there were more kudos points on offer for spotting my attempt at continuity with the multi-coloured script favoured by Eye Pet. Of course in an ideal world I'd naturally prefer something a little classier like "Claire de Lune", although I would certainly have ran out of time and space, my old but ever present adversaries. In case anyone is wondering, there was absolutely no thought whatsoever involved behind the orientation of these items, apart from testing my theory that the concept of a wrong way round is only relevant to the living. With everything in position, all I had to do was carefully replace the lids on the boxes before closing the door and heading downstairs. [\(122-PIC\)](#) You'll notice the Etch a Sketch has been given another chance, but I was fast coming to the conclusion that it might be unbecoming of her artistic talents, like leaving a Stylophone for Debussy if you happened to catch him haunting one of your guest bedrooms.

Sitting quietly on the sofa, I had a nagging feeling that I'd forgotten to do something important and this would certainly cause me to have a restless night, or what little remained of it, so bedtime was put on hold until I could finally sort out my latest mental blockage. Thankfully this wouldn't turn out to be a lengthy procedure, as before long my tired eyes settled on the envelope that I'd used to bring the three prints back from work. My upbringing has taught me not to be wasteful, so seeing that I had a couple of perfectly good photos going spare I realised they could be used to broaden the scope of the experiment and take it to different levels. In an amateurish attempt to establish some kind of synergy with the largest version safely sealed away in the top room, I made identical modifications to my remaining pair and found a great location for the medium-sized one. [\(123-PIC\)](#) The smallest picture would be situated on the first floor and you'll either see this as very sweet or more probably very sad, but after starting a bathroom recording at 2.00am I attached it around my wrist before going upstairs to bed. A day or two later I couldn't resist taking this to its logical conclusion by not only wearing magnetic bracelets on both wrists, but around my ankles too. However soon after dozing off they stuck together and I kept having these manacled slavery dreams, which weren't a whole load of fun so I didn't try that again.

Come Sunday morning there was already a prolific puddle in progress and after having transferred the audio file over to my computer, with a touch of magnification to compensate for a poorly positioned microphone, I could see that drips had been falling fairly steadily throughout the night. [\(124-PIC\)](#) Regrettably there was no sign of a disembodied voice moaning the lyrics to “Frère Jacques”, or bemoaning my taste in music for such an uninspired choice and ironically those odd responses at the end were just the machine recording its own warning bleeps before running out of power. Even though I only missed the last sixty minutes, here’s a piece of advice to anyone else who finds themselves in a similar situation, make sure you buy premium batteries and don’t use the cheap ones which are fine for remote controls but little else. You’ll be able to tell when they need replacing by holding a camera phone in front of the emitter, but it has to be a few years old as the latest models won’t work. Now press any button and if you can’t see a light flashing on the screen, then swap them for a new set. There again don’t worry too much if you can’t lay your hands on one, as being unable to change channels is also a pretty good indicator.

I had been keen to know whether gusts of air blowing the light-pull against my tiles could have caused those percussive noises that I’ve seen and heard on previous recordings, so I’d stuck an entire slab of virgin Blu-Tack on the wall to muffle the sound. There were absolutely no traces of any impact craters when I thoroughly examined it afterwards, but amongst the tiny blips from the drips, you can still see at least three much louder examples of the distinct clink that I’d been trying to identify. So it was back to the drawing board, as now I would have to eliminate the metal pendant from my enquiries. By late afternoon the floor was almost dry although I couldn’t help noticing what looked like a faint J, but we have the luxury of skipping that one as I’ll be able to show you an enhanced view tomorrow. The rest of the day passed without incident, but I had no complaints as I was glad of an early night.

It was Monday morning and having just climbed out of the bath I decided to take another photo, but rest assured I made myself decent first. [\(125-PIC\)](#) I’m afraid to say that the ghostly mist is only a result of warm water combined with wintry weather, but nevertheless I liked the way it had accentuated the J shape. Taking the camera with me, I went back to bed for my daily reading session which I’ve recently extended to forty five minutes, then ventured upstairs to record any results and clear away the doings. Predictably nothing appeared to be out of place or even vaguely amiss, so I took a few obligatory but worthless shots before tidying up. By the time I’d repositioned the frog box in front of the fire it was approaching 9.00am and I really needed to focus on my remaining duties or risk being late for work. I walked over to let some light in by parting the curtains, but on drawing back the one covering the inner door I discovered something which stopped me cold and seriously jeopardised my itinerary. [\(126-PIC\)](#)

You just can't beat the feeling of being cocooned away with a flickering fire at this time of year and I infinitely prefer the cosy glow of soft down-lighting in my living room to the harsh natural variety, which I would rather keep outside. Soon after getting home I always close the curtains and they're only opened again before going to work, so I was oblivious to the fact that it had been quietly poked through my front door at some point on Sunday. It's hardly a common surname yet there it was, languishing in my letterbox and believe me I'm more interested in football or frog sexing than politics, so I had no prior knowledge of the forthcoming elections let alone the names of any of the candidates. Besides I had been hoping for a suitable response to my St. Valentine's Day presentation, so to dismiss the idea that the two events weren't unconnected seemed ungrateful and rude. This looked like a straightforward answer to the question I posed last Saturday about Mark Horwood from The Mummers, which could only mean that the message I'm supposed to pass on is he's okay and says hello.

I know that from your point of view this might appear highly implausible and too hard to accept, but let's try thinking about it from the other way round. Einstein's Theory of Relativity has shown us that time isn't a constant and who can guess what happens to it after you die, so maybe Géraldine had already seen the flyer posted through the letterbox, which is why she sneakily put the question into my head a week earlier. This would just have been a simple matter of effecting a cause rather than causing an effect, which doesn't detract at all from the message but suggests that the idea of making contact had been theirs instead of mine, with Géraldine acting as the go-between while I was merely a convenient spokesman. However by revealing a geographical location I've been outmanoeuvred into giving away a portion of the anonymity I was guarding so closely, but it's not the first time she has pushed me beyond my comfort zone and I daresay it won't be the last.

Despite having over eight hours to evaporate, the J was still very much in evidence when I came home at 6.00pm and there had been another leak alongside that continued to expand until ten o'clock, but respectfully kept its distance. [\(127-PIC\)](#) Of course there's one major obstacle which can spell trouble for puddlephiles like me, almost on a par with being hunted down by dyslexic vigilantes and that's unwanted condensation forming in an enclosed room. As you can imagine this will inevitably lead to spurious or misleading drips, so in order to keep it to a bare minimum I always leave the door propped wide open after taking a bath, which solves the problem by reducing humidity to normal levels and also clears the mirror for shaving. By the morning of Tuesday the 16<sup>th</sup> it had started to shrink and the floor was feature free when I got back from work around half past five. It was a golfing session that night and I played the first few holes well, but my game fell to pieces whilst snatching a speedy toilet break at 9.15pm. I'd been diverted both towards and away from an oncoming birdie opportunity, as

the fresh dripping looked like a preoccupied penguin who hadn't yet noticed the tasty fishy treat which was swimming above. [\(128-PIC\)](#) Unfortunately there's no way to pause the game in multiplayer, so by the time I'd put the camera away after taking a picture, I had already missed my turn and would have to be happy settling for a par. We were finished by half past eleven and checking for any new developments, I discovered that everything was completely dry again apart from three unimposing inches of damp grout between the floor tiles. It was a good job that I had more pressing plans than heading for the bedding, as when I went to turn in and turn on my recorder a minute before midnight, yesterday's persistent puddle appeared to have returned, although left bereft of its alphabetical accomplice.

There were signs of further overnight discharge on Wednesday morning and somewhat curiously the J has made a re-appearance, but this time it wasn't steam driven as I hadn't even started to run my bath. [\(129-PIC\)](#) Here's an interesting exercise designed not only to test your patience, but also your IQ. Zoom in on the dry area in-between the J and the bloated O, then stare for long enough until you agree with me that it resembles a genie rising from an invisible lamp. If you are still unable to see him try looking for his over-sized head facing to the right, complete with protruding chin and a prominent nose. This is along similar lines to the old conundrum of whether the viewer can see faces or a vase and I'm not saying that my optical delusion is in the same league, but it's amused me for a while as it may well do you, although we all know how little things please small minds.

I fired up my computer and downloaded the recording I'd made, but there were no unusual results. Constant rain could be heard throughout the early part of the night, but later on it was apparent that external precipitation had given way to the internal variety. Once again there were only three or four instances of the percussive noises I'd heard previously and with nothing more to offer, it was reluctantly consigned to the vaults. This is probably a good time to tell you why I've never been tempted to make a recording during the day. I just don't think it would be worth doing, as any evidence that I present may have been contaminated by the extraneous sounds of terraced cottage life, which could also be classed as snooping. Here's a photo taken when I arrived home, but interpreting the shape next to the J is beyond problematic if I want to maintain any semblance of believability, so I'll leave this one to your imagination. [\(130-PIC\)](#)

You can tell whether leakage has occurred recently by looking for peripheral splashes, as these are the first to disappear when it stops, so a tidy puddle with a well-defined perimeter is a clear sign that it's no longer being fed from above. I've never had any reason to study water so immersively before and exploiting Andy's proficiency at computer coding, it would be good to ask him if he could write a seepage simulator for the purposes of data analysis. It would have to incorporate complex flow dynamics, a laser scan

of my flooring together with a detailed examination of its porosity and a virtual thermostat controlling ambient temperature. Obviously he'd never agree to such a ludicrous proposal but it would still be fun to ask, providing I could keep a straight face of course. By 9.15pm the floor was clear apart from a vague outline, but things were on the move again as a short while before ten o'clock I found more than just an inkling of further sprinkling. Less than ninety minutes later it was gone and my decision not to include any pictures which show nothing more absorbing than dry tiles, will mean that if I'm still alive a few decades from now, I'll be saving a small forest on the fully illustrated anniversary hardbacks with these cutbacks.

They say everyone has a book in them, well maybe that's where it should stay as I can tell you it's a right pain finding yourself getting bogged down in basic issues of spelling and turn of phrase, even at this late stage of writing the darned thing. For example my next sentence was going to involve a little light-hearted attempt at figuratively cross-pollinating tonight's waterworks display, by cleverly replacing the element of water with fire and I had been determined not to give up. However after many hours of misspent effort I couldn't get it to flow properly and admitted temporary defeat, but try as I may I just can't stop wasting my valuable time on these useless dregs of ideas, which hopefully will all be filtered out long before you get the chance to savour the final draught. Perhaps I'm being too harsh on myself, as it's not a criminal or even civil offence to be blighted by the curse of dodgy wordplay, yet I can't afford to let it typify my style. That would be as bad as serving up a well-crafted meal made from the finest of ingredients then smothering it with an overly ripe cheesy sauce, which is a recipe for disaster and not only the very opposite of what I set out to achieve, but also the type of foolish mistake I could see myself making. I apologise for this sudden bout of self-doubt, but my whingeing criticism is preferable to a cringing witticism and hopefully the next time I have to abandon another hopeless clause, I won't forget to leave out the thought process behind it.

Midnight was fast approaching, but I'd determined to fashion a prize as a reward for her earlier contributions and seeing that the wooden doll had no prior engagements, it would suit my purpose admirably. You would be right in guessing that I wanted to make amends for my appalling lack of decorum when I used it so distastefully to represent Mark Horwood, as this time he'd be standing on his own two feet and dressed to the hilt like a knight in shiny magnetic armour. This picture taken at a quarter past twelve shows my doughty yeoman of the guard in position and ready to see action, despite his painted-on eyes, but with a heart of oak he'd soldier on regardless, unconcerned as to whether he was made from something like ash in reality. [\(131-PIC\)](#) I customised the toilet roll holder by adding a print left over from St. Valentine's Day and with a nod to propriety, I remembered to use the lavatory before starting my recorder then retired to bed.



The following morning I found another one of those punctual puddles, which would go on to perform its usual trick of vanishing during the limited window between waking and working. As there was nothing new on the recording, this implied that I would need to try a lot harder if I wanted to improve my chances of success with the next attempt. I thought the problem through from all angles, but mostly the obtuse ones and decided that operation overkill would be my best bet. From the outset I've tried to adopt the doctrine that less is more, as it's one of an ever decreasing number of things which separates us from the animals, but I would be surprised if dead people couldn't see through this contradiction in terms and excuse for laziness. Later on that evening I started to assemble the bevy of accoutrements which were required to fulfil the brief and by twenty to twelve I was more or less finished. I'm asking for advice here, does anyone think it looks a bit over the top or like me do you have a feeling in your water that I've missed something and it's not resetting my alarm to go off ten minutes earlier, as either way there will be a fair amount of clearing up to do in the morning. [\(132-PIC\)](#)

Firstly I should probably take a moment to explain a couple of objects that you may not instantly recognise. Discreetly sandwiched between similarly colour-coded items, there's a red-topped jar which is preserving the dried herbs I found on the bathroom cabinet after my second experiment and we also have the World War 1 tank I made in woodwork class at school. This is normally stationed to the left of the hearth and directly in front of Bunny's portrait, which adds a certain touch of symmetry to my fireplace. Just in case you thought that I was falling behind in my attention to detail, I can also see a tiny hallmark shaped like a J on the side of the toilet and in the next shot there's a badge embossed in a slate tile with an N on it. Although it's important to add that I'm not altogether convinced of the relevance of having our initials hidden in plain sight and if I were you, I wouldn't bother trying to hunt them down unless you're predisposed to spotting supposedly random shapes in an allegedly meaningless environment. The latecomer to my gathering was a crystal wine glass containing an inch of water, which had been carefully placed to accentuate the sound of falling drips and of course I wasn't hoping that it would miraculously be turned into a nice crisp Chablis, as I always skip breakfast during the week. [\(133-PIC\)](#)

When I finally prised myself out of bed on Friday morning after drifting off for a quarter of an hour, the floor was as dry as it had been the night before and I could see no visible sign of leakage until I looked at the audio. [\(134-PIC\)](#) Don't take any notice of those confusing responses at the very beginning though, as they were caused by my last minute addition before I eventually closed the door and quietly tiptoed upstairs. For a couple of hours the recording is dominated by vigorous spikes and these were the bell-like tings I had hoped to hear whenever a drip landed in the drink. You can see that my positioning was spot on and they started a short while after

I'd gone to bed, then continued at irregular intervals before petering out to a twenty minute silence until a final curtain call which registered as the second loudest all night. From then on the only other interesting sounds were a series of the perplexing clinks or clacks which I'd yet to identify and while you should ignore the disturbance at 7.45am, thankfully I didn't as it was this large aircraft passing overhead that woke me up again. However I had identified an inconsistency within the last moments of my recording and the beauty of this useful piece of software is that you can zoom in until the screen only displays a few seconds of activity, then copy your selection to a separate file.

Bear with me for a short while here, as I would like to discuss the rather uninteresting subject of volume and please understand that I'll never try to bore you intentionally, unless the story absolutely requires it. Whenever I listen back to my overnight audio log, in order to appreciate every little detail I crank the amp up to maximum, but this is undoubtedly a high risk strategy as sooner or later expensive accidents can and will happen to your speakers. I remember almost jumping out of my skin on hearing the ear-shattering explosion of sound when I listened back to the bathroom door being opened on that first morning, as it must have been at least ten times louder than anything else on the recording. This urgently needed to be addressed as it had already caught me out a few times too often and was easily solved by softly rapping on the door, then silently counting to five before letting myself in, so I would have ample opportunity to turn the volume down. Here's the graphic representation of my newly adopted routine, the clip lasts less than three seconds and shows you what the individual sounds look like. [\(135-PIC\)](#) The four similar patterns in the middle are formed by the attack and decay of my favourite slow, quick quick, slow technique of requesting admittance, which is also an undeniably more courteous approach than simply just waltzing in on a lady going about her bathroom business. However they have been chaperoned by a first and a sixth shape, with a hint of a seventh, which all turned out to be the mystery clinks that were central to my investigations.

As much as I hate to disenfranchise the deaf because I can remember what happened last time, though fortunately for me I was only dreaming and got away with it, if you listen to this tiny segment there's something which can't be spotted from the picture alone. There's no need to feel left out if this is not an option, as you should be able to read the vibrations by lightly pressing a finger against a speaker cone, but if you're like me and a little heavy-handed after a few beers, I'd recommend buying some more durable replacements from a disco or public address supplier. Hiding within a larger waveform, there's another one of those piercing noises which can clearly be heard at the precise start of my first knock and any media player will continuously loop the sample, until you run out of patience or paracetamol. [\(136-AUDIO\)](#) It would be difficult to believe that these recognisable but

unidentifiable sounds could have occurred randomly, as they seemed to be consciously targeted on and around my precautions against playing the stereo too loud. This next one is an overview which would have shown the forty minute flatline and accompanying silence stretching from that last visible clink to those surrounding my early warning alert, if it wasn't for the wake-up reminder provided by a low flying aircraft at a quarter to eight. [\(137-PIC\)](#) Although looking in greater detail we can now be more specific and say that it was actually a seven forty seven alarm call, but this is referring to the time not the plane of course.

I doubt we've had a better chance than this to talk about my credibility as a reliable witness, as I will have to admit that virtually everything I've shown you so far could be challenged and easily dismissed. You've seen umpteen puddle pictures, some mystifying markings and the rest has been of equally questionable provenance, so it's just possible that I may have faked all of this in order to provide a false framework for my tall tale. However when we consider motivation, I'd surely be dishonouring the memory of a dear friend which is not only disrespectful, but also hurtful to those who knew her and that's contrary to my kind-hearted nature. Sometimes life cries out to be documented otherwise noteworthy events can go unheeded or get forgotten, so all I'm doing is saving these strange occurrences to a wider database and worrying about whether you believe me is not necessarily an item that's high on my agenda. It may have been mildly disappointing that up until now I haven't found a way of providing you with any real proof which would stand up to the sturdy rigours of scientific scrutiny, but my recordings can be thoroughly checked and rechecked to rule out value judgements or malicious tampering. So what are the odds against my rat-a-tat-tat-tatting being flanked by those elusive clinks and I should add that betting on one of them coinciding with the first knock would be certain to bankrupt even the shrewdest of bookies.

By 8.15pm that evening I'd been presented with the second in her collection of limited edition predator and prey puddles, which seemed to depict a snarling wolf-like creature breaking cover to worry a sheep, but rest assured no animals were hurt in the process. [\(138-PIC\)](#) Within the space of ninety minutes things had become decidedly more geometric, apart from the appearance of a wraith rabbit to the right. [\(139-PIC\)](#) Typical of the breed it was nowhere to be seen by morning, but I can report that the square shape had hardly changed at all. Unlike the other members of staff I don't take a day off during the week, but occasionally excuse myself early on a Saturday afternoon and I was lucky enough to catch it starting to dry out at around four o'clock. It had vanished by 8.00pm, but only two hours later there was fresh dripping which would in turn disappear shortly after eleven. Coming downstairs on Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> at 8.15am, I could see a substantial wet patch on the floor from another nocturnal emission, which looked very similar to the one I found yesterday morning. Loading up the overnight recording, I

could barely contain my excitement when I discovered what it contained, but don't get your hopes up too much as you know what I'm like. The pipe sprung a leak very soon after I had gone to bed and this continued for almost five hours, then things as you will see went a bit haywire.

I can say that without a doubt, this must be the most concrete proof of paranormal activity I've shown you so far and it has justified the cost of the machine many times over. [\(140-PIC\)](#) You'll notice that the dripping starts about ten minutes after I made my exit and continues rhythmically in a measured fashion for the next few hours before the fun begins. Although she's using an unfamiliar time signature, this improvised percussion solo might appear to be a tad minimalist in places, but as any good drummer like Justin would say, it's not what you play but what you leave out that's important. Here's a brief excerpt and the final noise you'll hear almost sounds like glass breaking. [\(141-AUDIO\)](#) It can't have been hailstones hitting against my Perspex domed skylight, as there was no hint of thunder and storms like these rarely last longer than fifteen minutes. I'll make sure that the complete file will be available so you can judge for yourselves and I strongly suggest downloading Wavepad, which has the added advantages of not only tying in with my screen grabs, but also comes with a free trial period to boot. Of course it's entirely plausible that I could have staged this for your benefit, but it would involve spending the night on the bathroom floor and hiding beneath a duvet so you couldn't hear me breathing, or toying with the comprehensive array of sound effects at my disposal. To complicate matters even further, I'd have needed an accomplice to knock on the door at precisely 8.15am and it would only take one small hiccup in the proceedings for the game to be up. Perhaps I could have changed the time and date settings on the recorder before trying again until I eventually got it right, but I'd still need to find a way of assuring that my assistant would never sell his or her story to the tabloids. Okay I'll come clean with you, because there is a way I could have carried it off without resorting to premeditated murder and that's role reversal. They say that no illusionist should ever reveal the tricks of their trade, but as you've been a good audience so far I'll make an exception on this one occasion and here's how I must have done it. I'd still be bivouacked on my bathroom floor overnight and Géraldine could knock on the door in the morning, so nobody would be any the wiser.

These results were so pronouncedly dissimilar to any I've had before or indeed since, that even to this day they cannot fail to amaze and confound me. Don't forget you've only just recently been shown how I managed to amplify the dripping by placing a glass of water below, well here she'd retaliated by turning her volume up to a level that I was drastically under-equipped to compete against. You can see from my screenshot that this sustained outburst lasted for a duration of around about three hours and it looks like a seismograph having a fight with a lie detector. Once again there

are approximately forty minutes of quietude before I opened the door, but now let's focus in and concentrate on my four warning knocks. [\(142-PIC\)](#) It's not hard to tell that I was still half asleep, as my first had been rather wimpy and I'd fallen short of the required gap between the middle two which are merged together, but at least the last one is perfect in every way. The fourth trace is far more uniform than the others and playback will confirm it as another mystery clink, which goes to show that like a lot of girls I've known, she insists on having the final say. [\(143-AUDIO\)](#) If you listen carefully there are a couple of what appear to be tiny reverberations afterwards and these put me in mind again of the possibility of my light-pull swinging against the tiled wall, so I determined to re-address that next. Although I'd already ruled it out as being the culprit, I just needed to make doubly sure and at ten o'clock that night my modification was in place. [\(144-PIC\)](#) My original findings proved to be correct, as before leaving for work on Monday morning I could hear nothing more than the normal quota of anomalous noises and there were no irregularities that I hadn't come across previously. So despite the addition of extra weight and knobbliness, this had no impact whatsoever on the recording which meant that I would have to look for an answer elsewhere.

The next few days went without incident and I had a feeling that a certain someone may have been completely exhausted after a busy weekend, so I wasn't surprised to find they'd taken a sabbatical to recover their faculties. It would be Saturday the 27<sup>th</sup> around 9.30pm when the next occurrence took place, as I chanced upon my first puddle after a disappointing week of normally functioning plumbing. Without a moment's hesitation I decided to retrieve the camera from the kitchen and as soon as I opened the cupboard door, I could tell that somebody had been messing with my stuff, but since there was no way of proving it we will just have to move on. Let's just say that she had moved one of my more significant finds by a couple of inches so it was sitting on top of the camera, which paradoxically meant I couldn't take a picture without disturbing the evidence. It was like being pinned in a chess match and I'd been out-manoeuvred by a grandmaster, so I would need to raise my game to have any chance of becoming a worthy opponent.

Here's my long-awaited photo and as I'm probably not the only one who can see a guy on all fours performing the spoon bending trick, it's hardly worth mentioning the bee-sized blob of wool nestling up his bum. [\(145-PIC\)](#) One last observation I'll throw in is that I'd spent most of the evening engrossed in a lengthy session of "Heavy Rain", a role playing adventure on the PlayStation which had been released the day before, although this was my first chance to play it as Friday is games night. She would love this one as water is the key element which dominates the storyline, so I like to think that the leakage had been her trademark way of joining in, even though it was never meant to be multiplayer.

After going back to the game for an hour or so, I suddenly remembered that some sort of response was called for and feeling slightly tired I settled on one I'd used before, but dressed it up a little differently this time around. By twenty past eleven the mannequin was all dolled up for another night on the tiles, or more accurately above them, but on this occasion I'd been thoughtful by providing him with a pair of angel wings and a safety harness. [\(146-PIC\)](#) I had also decided to devise a way of checking for air currents and you can see how I've suspended a sherry glass close to a chain of magnets, which meant that even the smallest movement by wind or whatever would be recorded. You may have noticed that its base is broken and as much as I like to attribute any such damage to the cats, I'm afraid this was down to pure carelessness on my part. A few days ago I watched helplessly as it plunged towards the stone floor in an earlier, but equally unsuccessful experiment where I'd failed to secure the stem properly. I would have to say that although the glass could no longer be classed as sherry friendly, it was now lighter and better suited to my purposes, so feeling relatively confident I engaged record before fast-forwarding until morning.

Sunday the 28<sup>th</sup> and I'm sad to say that there was no sign of puddling on the floor, or any discernible contribution from my commotion detector when I downloaded the replay. Worse still, any traces of dripping were drowned out by the sound of heavy rain falling on the skylight throughout the night, so you have to admire her sense of humour and sabotage. This is a French word which is supposedly derived from rebellious workers who would jam machinery by throwing in their wooden shoes called sabots and when it comes to popping your clogs, either by putting the boot in to disrupt progress or used as a metaphor for death, she's got both of these covered. Luckily it wasn't a complete washout and I picked up on something familiar at the very end of the recording, as my four precautionary raps were accompanied by the same loud noise that I had heard before. It was perfectly timed to coincide with the precise start of my first knock so you can't see much, but the minor tremors which occur afterwards are far easier to identify. [\(147-PIC\)](#) Here's the same section again so you can listen for yourselves. [\(148-AUDIO\)](#) I have absolutely no understanding of what might be taking place behind the closed door to produce a sound like this and right on cue too, but if you think back to the similar incident just over a week ago, it couldn't be down to resonance or air pressure as I was piped to the post on that occasion.

By Sunday lunchtime I'd already cleared away the broken glass and most of the chains, but my favourite swinger looked like he was enjoying himself far too much to go back to his day job as tank commander, so I left him trussed up in the bathroom for a while longer. If you've just picked up the book and randomly chosen my last sentence to read as a taster, then I bet you wish that your Saturday nights were as wild as mine, but first impressions can be deceptive so bear this in mind before purchasing. By 2.30pm there was a

reply of modest proportions, so it turned out that this had been one of my better decisions, unlike yours if you haven't kept the receipt. [\(149-PIC\)](#) Although the puddle may have been small it was beautifully formed and zooming in, I can see what appears to be the face of a black cat or perhaps some sort of mischievous imp, but I might be splitting hairs here as in my experience any differences are purely circumstantial. We've all heard about statues or figurines which are supposed to weep, so you can be excused for thinking that mine looks like a little wee has escaped, but it's just an accident of parallax rather than bladder control. Half an hour later it was gone and for anyone who won't rest happy until they know the significance of those filigree wings, well I can swiftly put you out of your mystery.

Some ten years ago, I felt extremely honoured when Géraldine asked me to be her plus one at a friend's wedding reception and the invitation advised that guests should come dressed appropriately, as it was going to be an 18<sup>th</sup> century themed affair. Unfortunately it fell on a Saturday in the holiday season, so I would be short-staffed and unable to get away early, but I could still join her for the party. Initially I was rather baffled when she suggested we should firstly take a trip to the local theatre, as up until then I had no idea that they ran a costume hire division from an adjoining warehouse. I can fondly recollect how several days later, the two of us met up and spent an enjoyable couple of hours rummaging through countless racks of clothing. She had carefully selected a dainty pair of shoes with a matching clutch bag, then completed her ensemble by opting for a lavishly decorated vintage dress, which leaned towards the tasteful side of ornate and I just hoped that the outfit I'd chosen would be equally as impressive. However when I got home I found that apart from a frilly white shirt, the jacket was the only other usable item as the boots were too small and those overly tight stockings made my already skinny legs look like rickety Twiglets. That would never do, so I consulted my wardrobe department and located the pair of trousers I'd bought from Topman in Oxford Street, which were intricately patterned to resemble a cloth of gold effect. They hadn't left my closet since the mid-Eighties, but would easily pass for a style that was fashionable just over two hundred years ago, as long as there weren't any historians present in the room. Lastly I picked out a handsome waistcoat which was embroidered with pastoral scenes yet never worn, as it looked like something my grandad would have owned, had he been a gentleman farmer and not worked in the printing business. I can guarantee this was another of those purchases where I'd either ignored or forgotten my own advice again and it proves conclusively that retail blunders are more likely to occur when you visit the pub before the shops. They say that you learn something new every day, but remembering it is the hardest part, especially after a few drinks.

Despite being far from cutting edge, my meagre collection of footwear was inappropriately modern in appearance and would spoil the overall look. I

decided to make the best of what I had and went in search of inspiration, discovering a shop which sold fancy lace bows mounted on crocodile clips. They were very reasonably priced so I took a couple home with me and after attaching them to the laces of my shiny black shoes, it became embarrassingly obvious that the transformation I had in mind was by no means complete. Buying two more didn't help matters much and it would take the addition of a third pair in as many days to finally make me happy with my alterations. This was both fortunate and timely, because on my last visit the young girl who worked there looked like she had been on the verge of reporting me as a stalker, a job for the Bow Street Runners if I've ever heard one. Well the night as you can imagine was unforgettable, but best of all I remember receiving a rare compliment from Géraldine, who mentioned how impressed she'd been by my charming demeanour in conversation with her female friends. Although none of them bothered to trouble her for my phone number.

So you can see that by re-using one of the lacy bows, I had put matters even further to rights by dressing my mistreated mannequin up as an angel and also brought a memento from our shared past into the present. Maybe at some point in the future the trousers will be dug out, dry-cleaned and pressed into service, but only after I've run out of more memorable memorabilia. As I don't have anything else to add, this gives me an ideal opportunity to sneak in a short but therapeutic break and there's no better way to take your mind off things than a feel-good feline photo, so here's a picture of Jasper's frustration when he realised that cats can't Skype. [\(150-PIC\)](#) It will also serve as proof that the bite marks on my microphone aren't only down to me.



March 2010

Take your time to enjoy it for as long as you like, before we move on to Monday night March 1<sup>st</sup> and I didn't need to be an expert in body language to tell that Andy was far from wetting himself with excitement at the discovery of my latest dribble around 8.45pm. (151-PIC) His cab arrived at a quarter past eleven, so I took this as an opportunity to investigate the bathroom again and found that it had almost dried up. This playful little geyser teaser at 11.30 would be its final adieu before disappearing by midnight, so let's pay our last respects and say goodbye to our old friend the pipe puddle, as after tonight they just stopped happening. (152-PIC) Of course I didn't know that at the time, but I'm not going to get a better chance than this to apologise for subjecting you to what could be considered as nothing short of legalised water torture. However it's only because I have been obsessively thorough from day one and couldn't bear leaving anything out which may be of value, although whether or not that should include my own personal interpretations is another matter. These might seem slightly irrational at times to a trained psychologist, but I'm just describing what I see and you should never be afraid of trusting your judgement over someone else's opinion, so it's lucky I didn't go along with Ted's original suggestion to re-carpet the bathroom.

It was the evening of Saturday March 6<sup>th</sup> and Géraldine had been laying off the drink for five puddle free days. Geoff wasn't around yesterday to pour scorn or even lightly drizzle it over me, so I'd been able to update Justin and Markie on the situation, saying that this felt like the right time to organise another late night rendezvous with you know who, but I needed to pose a good question. Various ideas were bandied then batted about until we decided on a favourite, which coincidentally happened to be the one that I'd put forward. The setup was focused on trying to provide her with a sonic sandbox and constructing a fully functional sound lab took a lot longer in reality than it had in my head, but when I stepped back to look at the finished article I felt that I'd excelled myself. (153-PIC) My matching set of four crystal wine glasses were all tuned to different musical notes by the amount of water they contained and any movement of the chains, which hung close enough to be almost touching, would produce a distinctive chime on the recording. It may seem like a miracle that these have survived intact for so long, but they are under a preservation order and rarely come out nowadays, unless protected behind a cat-proof door which sort of limits their usefulness.

Asking how we could communicate may indeed lack a certain flair in terms of subtlety and sophistication, but if I were to get an answer it would save a lot of faffing around in the future. So although my enquiry remained a valid one, it was also hopelessly naive and the Morse code chart to the right is an example of just how readily I thought I could come up with a workable

solution. I set up the recorder before bedtime, but when I reviewed the data on Sunday morning there was absolutely nothing of interest and I couldn't understand why it didn't contain a single drip or a solitary tinkle. Now I'm not saying that she was being a bit mean, but I had gone to an awful lot of trouble after all. Maybe my tuning was off, but there were no signs of her trying to rectify the problem with a little leakage into any of the glasses. However after a quick reappraisal, I'm more inclined to think that she must have been caught off guard by my jarring switch between upper and lower case, a capital offence for a self-styled grammar fiend like me. I could cite so many variables that it's impossible to say for sure, but above all I hoped my failure wasn't caused by trying too hard again, as I have been there before and never seem to learn the lesson.

It was Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> of March and checking out the bathroom is obviously the first thing on my to-do list when I get home. Mere moments later I fired up my Xbox, as I couldn't wait to test-drive a new racing game called Blur, which turned out to be so much fun that I looked forward to playing it online with the guys. Just before 7.00pm I felt the call of nature, or rather super-nature as I was ecstatic to discover this sizeable seepage on the floor. [\(154-PIC\)](#) I don't need to tell you that this was rocking-horse pee and the rarest of the rare, a virgin-birthered trap puddle which had stopped within an hour of starting, without either of the taps being run since morning. In all honesty I have no idea how these are formed and my only explanation for such a large incursion of water seemed highly unlikely, as it would require a massive blowback from the drainage pipe which could possibly cause a spillage by pressurising the trap. There again if that had happened, the water would have taken the path of least resistance and spurted upwards through the empty plughole. Looking at the complicated design I'm at a loss as to what it means, but I can definitely make out a lady wearing a fancy dress, although I couldn't say whether it's from the 1700s or not and if you still can't find her, she's pole dancing "en pointe" next to the figure in a white hooded robe.

The oddest thing about it though, was on arriving home and disappointedly finding a lack of leakage, for a brief moment I had considered getting her attention by creating my own trap puddle in the only way I knew how. That's by putting the plug in place then running both taps until water gushes down the overspill, but it's difficult to judge and you can end up with a flood of nigh on biblical proportions when compared to the genuine article. The idea was conceived on the spur of the moment and terminated shortly afterwards, as it could come over as pestering, but she had generously decided to provide me with a demonstration that irrigation needn't involve inundation. By 7.45pm it had dehydrated to a semi-articulated pelvis, which hung around for a while before vanishing soon after nine thirty. [\(155-PIC\)](#) I only had the narrowest of breaks to visit the bathroom in-between races and my advice would have to be that turn based games like golf are

infinitely preferable, if you're trying to conduct paranormal or indeed any other form of meaningful research at the same time.

We finished around midnight and running out of time to reply, I settled on the stripped back to basics scenario of nothing more than just grassing up a perfectly innocent looking wooden cat, but that didn't achieve much as my recording proved uneventful so it was instantly erased. While driving to work I experienced the strangest premonition that last night could have been her way of saying goodbye, as perhaps she thought I had enough to go on already and it was time to let me get on with my life amongst the living. Maybe that had been the point at which the volume of her downpours surpassed the sum of my tears and at moments like this I find it extremely difficult trying to type through blurry eyes on a slippery keyboard, so it's just possible I might have edged ahead again. You may remember I told you that running out of material was my ultimate worry as a writer, but now it had turned into my ultimate nightmare as a friend, because I didn't want to lose her a second time. That would be downright careless, so I will have to re-read the relevant section and let you know if I had a contingency plan. Even though I had been exceptionally vigilant, there would be nothing to report for the next few days and my prophesy appeared to be self-fulfilling, as the area I'd designated ground zero was living up to its name. By Sunday the 14<sup>th</sup> I was climbing the walls and clutching at straws like a short thatcher in need of a longer ladder, so it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise to find a lightly armoured cat spending the night on my bathroom floor with little more than an MP3 recorder for company. [\(156-PIC\)](#) Although in the morning the replay confirmed that it hadn't been enough to tempt her back out of retirement.

It was Friday the 19<sup>th</sup> and about eight in the evening, when I found myself accidentally engaged in the process of debunking a significant part of my own story. Legally speaking I have the right to remain silent, which means that I can choose not to compromise my already shaky credibility, or incriminate myself even further. However I feel honour-bound to reveal all, but in the interests of damage limitation a temporary amnesty has been declared which will last for the duration of this paragraph. I was out in the kitchen refilling my ice tray, when a trickle of water spilled onto the floor as I slid it into the freezer compartment. Looking down, I performed a quick foot sweep using my sock as a mop and was astonished by what I saw, as the resulting smear appeared to be almost identical to the one which had caused me so much anxiety in the bathroom that night. Somehow when damp, the tiny striations on the slate gave the appearance of deep furrows which were convincing enough to be mistaken as real. Rubbing at the mark produced no effect whatsoever and it still looked exactly the same after drying out, but my most important discovery would be finding that light finger pressure was now more than sufficient to wipe away any traces of its existence. So I can say with confidence that we have confirmation of the

mechanics behind the only one of my many mysteries which scared me silly and by solving it I've inconveniently made myself the prime suspect. To sum up I now concede that the whole situation was most probably of my own making, which is really embarrassing as this means I had unmanned myself by confusing conjecture with certainty and I promise it won't happen again.

Saturday night was my next chance to conjure up a little mayhem so I went to work, not literally you understand as I had been drinking and the shop would be shut. The more cider I consume, the easier it is to imagine that I can get into the mindset of a girl who's been dead for almost a decade and tonight was no exception. Foraging in my front garden I gathered a wild but seasonal salad served on the stalk, which couldn't possibly fail to attract the attention of a meat-dodger like Géraldine and here's a close-up for you to see. [\(157-PIC\)](#) A large part of Sunday was spent pondering how such a mouth-watering offering could go unacknowledged, but I had to get to grips with the fact that things may have moved on and she may have moved out. It's a good job I didn't chose to write this in a strict diary format with a minimum requirement of a hundred words per day, as you would become increasingly aware that the next two weeks are excruciatingly devoid of any appreciable content. By Wednesday March 31<sup>st</sup> it's plain to see that I'd run out of ideas and the chalky outline of my foot drawn around a pattern I found on the kitchen floor, shows the sort of screwball steps I was taking to get some kind of reaction. [\(158-PIC\)](#) Needless to say it didn't work and was quickly brushed away before anyone noticed that my crazy behaviour had escalated into a real cause for concern, or maybe sectioning.

April 2010

In deference to my last puddle and the prospect of new ones, I can say it was a definite hip hip hooray moment when I woke up on Saturday the 3<sup>rd</sup>, as John had confirmed that he would be coming down to stay for the Easter holiday. A few hours later I received another text saying that his train was due to arrive at 4.15pm, which gave me a good excuse to skive off early from work to pick him up. Disappointingly his next message explained that he would now be a couple of hours late due to a mix up at the station with some jobsworth platform attendant, but between the two of us I think he'd been drinking in the bar and had tried to fit a quart of ale into a pint-sized gap. This actually turned out to be quite convenient as I had time to drive home first before collecting him, so I could make room for his travelling bag in my tiny boot by unloading the food and copious quantity of alcohol I'd purchased. Using my formula to estimate his daily consumption, I'd bought him twenty four bottles of premium beer and eight cans of the weaker John Smith's bitter, which were there purely for health reasons. Hopefully that would keep him happy until Tuesday morning when he was scheduled to go home, but in a crisis borne of his legendary propensity for over-indulgence I could always crack open a few bottles of wine, or knock up some delicious three parts Baileys to one part Drambuie cocktails.

I drove over to fetch him and we got back around 6.30pm, immediately launching ourselves into what would doubtless be a seriously sozzled long weekend of unrivalled debauchery. Having already pre-ordered a meal from my favourite Indian restaurant, it arrived a short while later and I remember taking two well-cleaned plates into the kitchen, as the food was cooked to perfection. A time-honoured mix of music, chat and video games accounted for the rest of the night, but I hadn't forgotten to reserve a slot for the inevitable update on my latest occurrences. I finished up by telling him that there hadn't been any activity whatsoever since the last trap leak a little over three weeks ago, but in his opinion it was all just puddle twaddle. Of course I didn't let on how much I was inwardly hoping that something would take place over the weekend to make him change his mind, as even in olden days before records began, things mostly tended to happen when I had company. By about four in the morning I'm afraid to say that I couldn't drink a drop more and trying to keep my eyes open was proving a losing battle. John appeared to be similarly afflicted, so it was deemed bedtime and after saying our goodnights he wandered upstairs while I turned everything off before visiting the bathroom, where to my surprise I discovered something which could only be described as a shock to the cistern. He'd only gone and left the loo seat up. I really must try to reacquaint him with good-mannered female-friendly etiquette was my final, though futile thought while stumbling up to bed myself, so instead I'll say that I didn't want Bunny or Jasper drinking from the bowl.

It was Sunday morning and rather the worse for wear, we both surfaced roughly around eleven thirty. As expected I had been politely, but firmly coerced into feeding the cats a few hours earlier and making sure that we wouldn't be driving anywhere for lunch, I was already on my first bottle of strong cider since breakfast. Forward thinking doesn't get any better or more enjoyable than this, as there was enough food in the fridge for every single mealtime and if we ate out, it would upset my carefully planned provisional agenda. However it soon became clear that John would be suffering from cabin fever if we didn't go to the pub at least once during his stay, so I suggested a trip to my local. Though you have to understand that I use the word in terms of geography and not patronage, as these days I prefer to drink at home. We took a short cut through the field, which turned out to be a mistake as it was waterlogged and barely navigable. Although things were about to get worse, as April showers had turned a green lane into a muddy morass and I'd chosen to wear my smart work shoes. There were places where the suction effect felt so powerful that I could see myself falling foul of the dress code by arriving in mucky socks, but turning back was out of the question as it would admit defeat and cost valuable quaffing time. I tried climbing up the bank in search of firmer ground, but a barbed wire fence at the top soon put paid to that and inflicted a nasty gash to my right leg, which only hurt when I discovered it the next morning while bathing. Eventually we made it through and managed to get the worst of the sludge off our shoes by sloshing them about in a four foot long, non-domesticated behemoth of a puddle. We downed a couple of pints and despite giving him a run for his money, I lost all three games of pool before taking the longer but drier route home.

Fortunately their kitchen had closed for the weekend so we were only able to snack on a packet of crisps, which meant that my set menu was back on course and unaffected by our potentially dinner-disrupting detour. You'll remember that my last failed experiment but one had involved garden produce and I was starting to see a common thread here. This was also a matter of catering for the appetites of visiting friends and suddenly on an all but empty stomach, I could appreciate it from another point of view. Perhaps I'd been inhospitable by only serving up a main meal without pudding to follow and knowing her weakness for desserts, I could think of no valid reason why she wouldn't be tempted to go for afters in the afterlife. With Géraldine's strict vegetarian principles in mind and knowing I wouldn't hear any grumbling at such a long interval between courses, the best option to re-address my culinary oversight was the pretty daffodil I'd chanced to pick on our way back, so I placed it in a glass of water on the hearth. I hadn't worked it out at the time, but this was an appropriate offering to celebrate March the 1<sup>st</sup> which is Saint David's Day and also the retirement date of my final pipe puddle after so many years of dependable leakage. It's entirely possible that with all the types of plant life on offer, choosing a daffodil could be put down to pure luck even though they were

in season and super-abundant, but I was equally prepared to believe there may have been some degree of external manipulation involved. I offered John no explanation apart from my quirky nature which went unspoken, but I was working on the premise that all girls love to be given flowers, especially the most beautiful ones cut down in their prime.

The rest of the day was spent in a most satisfactory way if you discount liver damage and at 10.30pm I furthered my Welsh connection by going for a leak. I find it impossible to convey the euphoria I felt in mere words, so here's a picture and prepare to be unprepared. ([159-PIC](#)) Now I know what's going through your mind and I can forgive you for that. You're thinking that someone's clearly had an aiming accident with their pee shooter, but this definitely wasn't the case as there were no off-target dribbles down the outside of the bowl and only minimal splashing. The other thing I found was a collection of tiny droplets drying beneath the basin, which struck me as odd seeing that nobody had been in there for a good three quarters of an hour. I can't tell precisely how low John's spirits must have sunk when he heard the distinctive and bothersome sound of my camera being turned on, as it was bound to be heralding yet another so-called discovery. With dogged reluctance he finally consented to join me in the bathroom and initially looked quite concerned when I showed him the puddle, however there was no need to worry as I wasn't going to rub his nose in it, at least not in the physical sense. He could see it hadn't spilled over the rim from the forensically undisturbed coating of dust and this is another example of why it's vital to ensure that housework should be reined in, or even criminalised as vandalism around sensitive environments like these.

Unlike women, blokes don't tend to go to the bathroom together so this was an unusual place to hold a conversation, but nevertheless I asked if he had any ideas about its formation. Maybe he'd been feeling a little awkward too as nothing was forthcoming, so in what looked like a madcap feat of derring-do, I lightly dipped my index finger and took a lick to narrow down its composition. Now there's no need to be even mildly alarmed, let alone close to panic which was John's immediate reaction, as I didn't have the slightest doubt that it wouldn't be anything other than clean water and taste so refreshing I'd come back for seconds. This was one of those ultra-rare occasions which defied normal protocol as I know that he's always partial to a wee dram, but considering the circumstances I didn't bother inviting him to join me. He suggested there might be a crack in the bowl, but we couldn't see one and the same thing would happen every time I flushed, so obviously that wasn't the answer. The closest other source of water would have been my basin and although it was over two feet away, the easily missable signs of residual spillage underneath may well hold the key.

After having exhausted all possible theories of how such a large quantity of liquid could be displaced so accurately we reverted back to the sofa, but before sitting down I moved the daffodil to my bathroom floor, as maybe that was where she wanted it in the first place. By 10.45pm the temptation proved so great that I couldn't resist checking for any new developments and although the damp spots under my basin were gone, the pooling had spread out considerably. (160-PIC) This suggested that any water flow had been hastily cut off at source shortly before I opened the door fifteen minutes ago, but I'm surprised we didn't notice the puddle expanding, as after all it was our primary focus of attention and the only reason for being there. Could this imply that there was further leakage after we returned to the living room, well I don't know but it's more likely our waning powers of observation would no longer have been keen enough to register it slowly levelling out. Personally speaking, I think it would make far better sense to propose that she could have been a quarter of an hour behind schedule and I wasn't supposed to see the tiny clues under the basin, as I'm sure all of us can remember occasions when we haven't allowed sufficient time for stuff to dry properly. My last major miscalculation was pointed out to me in no uncertain terms by Tony, when one morning I'd chosen to wear a freshly washed, but slightly moist and subsequently smelly jumper to work. I've learnt in the past that rushing the drying process is like trying to play God and we all know how easily this can lead to poor decisions. A thought has suddenly come to me and in a moment of sublime closure, I can now trace my phobia of fan heaters back to its genesis.

In my early teens I used to enjoy building model tanks, but to be fair there weren't as many ways to pass the time back then. The plastic component pieces would have to be surgically cut away from the moulding sprue, as amputation by twisting invariably causes collateral damage. Then you'd glue them together in hopefully the right position and order, as mistakes were hard to rectify. This was also my first introduction to the foreign concept that besides the art of sword making and sericulture, Japanese quality had started to surpass its British equivalent. Tamiya was a newly imported brand which had begun to threaten the traditional dominance of Airfix, but soon their kits became the ones to aspire to apart from a handful of exceptions, notably HMS Victory, a rather large Spitfire and who can forget the fabulous 1930 4.5 litre blower Bentley. It had taken months of saving before I finally scrimped together enough pocket money to purchase the superbly detailed 1/35 scale Centurion Mark 3, which I'd only just finished assembling and painting. My ever-resourceful dad had managed to connect a modelling airbrush he'd recently acquired, to a rechargeable reservoir of compressed air and this was capable of producing highly professional results that looked as good as the illustration on the box. We couldn't afford the cans of propellant which would normally be used, so he had attached a bicycle inner tube valve to the lid of a catering-sized plastic drinks container. This had to be pumped up every few minutes, but I would have to say that it



worked amazingly well and it's a telling example of how genetics has cruelly cheated me out of practicality, though not ingenuity. I'd arranged to visit a friend's house and desperately wanted to take it round to show him, but unfortunately the final layers of paint weren't completely dry. Looking for a way to speed up the procedure as Graham would be expecting me in less than an hour, I spotted a fan heater and the subsequent melted mess is why I still hold a grudge against them to this very day.

Almost as soon as I had re-joined John on the sofa, we were ensconced in another stalemate argument of life after death versus death after life, when about twenty minutes later I looked round and noticed that the bathroom door was ajar. I try to make sure that it's never left open, especially when there's a situation in progress as cats are guaranteed to tamper with, or worse still lap up any evidence and curiosity got the better of me as I quickly inspected the floor before shutting the door. Based on previous experience I was prepared to bet good money on the former action being more interesting than the latter, but on this occasion I would have lost my wager. I'm struggling to think of a way of describing my reaction at the precise moment I tried to close it, but I can't so this will have to do. If you ask me, the perfect cup of coffee consists of three ingredients and during the day I take milk, which is substituted for Scotch when I get home as I don't enjoy burning my tongue or want to risk out of date curdling wastage. It was like being at work and inadvertently taking a sip from Tony's similar looking though sugared mug, which starts off as a familiar sensation, but a spit second later you realise that something is very wrong. As a testament to Dave and Ted's mastery of house renovation everything had functioned faultlessly up until then, but instead of the reassuring clunk click that I'd expected, there was only a dull thud when the door refused to close.

I was momentarily bewildered until I noticed that the little strike plate had somehow been bent away from the wall. You may not be aware of the term so here's a picture and if there are any metallurgists reading this, I would be keen to have your observations about how or where the pressure had been applied. [\(161-PIC\)](#) This next one is a rather gloomy shot which shows just how far out of alignment it had travelled and I hope you will be able to forgive the inexpertly executed, but at the same time quite dramatic looking image. [\(162-PIC\)](#) My last photograph is slightly out of focus and scores a lowly six out of ten on the keep-ometer, so it would normally have been deleted, but I didn't take too many of them as I was brought up to avoid hogging the bathroom. [\(163-PIC\)](#) Having called John back in, I wanted him to fully comprehend the degree of force required to distort this undeniably solid piece of metal, so I asked if he could bend it back into place for me. After all someone had to do it sooner or later in order to maintain basic lavatorial privacy, which is a non-negotiable stipulation of mine when I'm entertaining human company. Being a self-employed electronics engineer his working life centres around repairing complicated equipment like TVs or

stereos, but he's always up for a challenge and will have a go at fixing virtually anything, so I knew that this would be impossible for him to refuse. Without a moment's hesitation he was on to it and I watched his hands shaking under the strain, but I had forgotten to factor in the DTs so that couldn't be considered a reliable measure of effort. Glancing over John's shoulder I spotted his toothbrush sitting on the basin and after years of wondering why he's never upgraded to an electric one, this was when I finally came to the conclusion that he probably didn't need to.

Job done, the two of us withdrew to the sofa and having transferred my pictures over to the computer, I could see that we'd crucially overlooked something important. I had assumed that those whitish lumps at the bottom of the strike plate were dried drops of paint from the doorframe, but let me try to outline a few key observations or facts if you will. In my first photo you can see part of a slot in the wood, which had been chiselled out so the plate would lie flush and just below that, there are a couple of stray brush strokes on the metal. The left hand one conveniently marks exactly where it sat against the edge of the frame, which meant that those two mysterious incrustations hanging underneath had to be something else. As a point of reference you could revisit the earlier picture of my magnetically reinforced light-pull, but it's far from compulsory viewing as you'll find no sign of them at all. It's also worth mentioning that they are roughly equal in size, both look solid and cast approximately the same amount of shadow. Going back to my second one taken a few seconds later you'll notice a clear fracture in what now appears to be the larger of the two, which if not for a small amount of drooping would have lined up with a dollop of gloop on the frame, as if it had been piped like icing sugar. On the third there are no traces of paint dripping down the rear and besides, anything stuck to the bottom would surely have become dislodged by six or seven years of successful door slamming since Ted last brandished his brush in my bathroom. One of the protuberances has inexplicably decreased in size and on the other you can see what might be a tiny droplet forming. Luckily I have another photograph which explains the apparent shrinkage and to give you an idea of time scale, all four were taken sequentially within the space of two minutes. Shot from a different angle, this one shows why you can't see much as it seems to be jutting out horizontally instead of vertically. [\(164-PIC\)](#) I don't know what kind of rogue brushstroke could have caused this, but the answer I'm speculating would not include decorating.

Of course I went back to take a few more pictures, but now there were no signs of contaminates on the metal and my floor was free of debris, which is why it's important to always advise guests to wash their hands after visiting the lavatory. I haven't been able to conclusively identify the elusive substance we've seen here, but before you can say ectoplasm I've already come up with some crackpot theory, although I would do well to keep it to myself. The plate is around waist height, so to confirm that neither of us

had been accidentally responsible for bending it we both stood up to check our pockets and belt loops for evidence of snagging, but there was no indication of torn stitching or rips in the fabric which required sewing up. Needless to say I didn't think that this could ever have explained it away, but I was only guarding against future dispute by denying John a potential loophole to exploit, my very own stitch in time. After settling down again he pointedly asked why I always happened to be the one who discovered these odd occurrences and even though this was a perfectly good question, I could tell that it hadn't been posed without the less than subtle implications of an accusation of fraud. The only response which came to mind was that Géraldine had been my friend and not his, so naturally I deserved priority treatment. A lengthy debate had been brewing for a while and when we went to bed shortly before 4.00am, all that remained was a damp outline on the floor so I removed the daffodil to prevent a bleary-eyed, but full-bladder John from knocking it over to form a counterfeit puddle during the night.

This paragraph has nothing whatsoever to do with plot development, but it could save lives so here's a warning about one of the lesser known dangers lurking in your home, especially if you live alone. Not too long ago I found myself locked out of my bathroom, as something had obviously broken and although the door handle still moved, the innards didn't. After considering the alternatives, which were either relieving myself in the back garden or holding it in, I resorted to trying the old credit card trick as fortunately there wasn't enough space for a run-up to painfully dislocate my shoulder. I managed to snake the bendy plastic around a section of architrave, then sawed downwards before giving it a shove and the door sprung open, but what would have happened if I'd been trapped inside instead of outside? The only way to free myself would have been to cut through the hinges, but I couldn't do that without using something like a cordless power drill with a metal grinding wheel, which was unlikely to be at my disposal as they don't tend to fit in bathroom cabinets. This really worried me until I invented a survival tool that could be discreetly hidden away, yet always on hand in times of dire need and having already replaced the faulty internal parts of the mechanism, I was ready to test my prototype. Following the non-specific instructions from the bank to cut up my expired MasterCard, I'd sliced it into a thick capital J shape which was purely for sentimental rather than practical reasons. I hooked this behind the latch and with a swift tug the door popped open, so now I was no longer dependent on a working handle. Aesthetically speaking this initial design looked great but lacked the rigidity of the lower case Roberts Polypro, which incidentally was far too small and could only be relied upon to provide an efficient escape route for my mannequin, if I ever decided to build him a fully equipped dollhouse. Sadly it could only be used once or twice without snapping, so I sacrificed my debit card for the greater good by cutting an oblong out of the longer side, which made version two much stronger though no less susceptible to

breakage. If you're stuck with a low budget for a last minute Christmas present then this may be better than nothing, but there again not all latches are curved or as well-oiled as my newly repaired one, so a gift-wrapped and easily storable junior hacksaw would make a far more sensible choice.

Bank holiday Monday passed without any further abnormalities, but it still proved enjoyable nonetheless and I waved goodbye to John on Tuesday morning. I felt disappointed with myself though, as there were no photos which could accurately gauge how far the metal had been moved and this irritated me until Wednesday evening, when I measured it to just under a centimetre. It was difficult to concentrate at work as this unforced error had been gnawing away at me all day like a frisky beaver, which under the usual convention of combining your first pet and mother's maiden name, is what I'd have to call myself if I ever became a porn star. Then in a rare moment of clarity, I suddenly thought of a way to resolve my problem and the answer had been staring me in the face all along. There was no reason why I wouldn't have gone to close the door with the normal amount of gusto, so surely there should be some sort of impact damage on its edge. For once I was bang on with my prediction and the picture I took shortly after arriving home shows a visible depression in the wood where it hit the strike plate. [\(165-PIC\)](#) This one shot over every other most graphically demonstrates the sheer amount of force which had been brought to bear, way beyond puny spoon bending and thank goodness it's friendly.

I hadn't taken into account the possibility that affording me this minor miracle dressed up as a practical joke may have depleted her resources and she would need a good three weeks to recuperate. Wednesday April 28<sup>th</sup> and there were no further occurrences of any description to report so I was starting to lose hope, but fortunately I had something up my sleeve. Back in early February I remember teasing you with an advanced warning of a future development and the merest suggestion that a covert operation may have been going on behind the scenes. Although I had been unwilling to say more, as I'm not the sort of person who likes to count their chickens before they're hatched, fully fledged and oven ready. Now's probably the time to pour yourself a nice strong drink as this is where science takes a back seat to spiritualism, cue demonic laughter in the style of the late great Vincent Price.

It all started on November 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 when I sold a home cinema projector to an old acquaintance of mine and out of necessity, I have a copy of his receipt filed away to back this up. One major difference between being in business and being in the business of paranormal investigation, is that I need to keep my paperwork for longer than the six years required by the government, so under cross-examination I'll always be able to produce it at a moment's notice. I was chatting away while taking down his details for the guarantee and as I'd recently been collecting ghost stories, I randomly asked

if he had any, knowing full well that Fran fell under the category of a no nonsense kind of guy. His first instinctive response wasn't very promising at all, but after reflecting for a second or two he corrected himself by saying that there had been an occasion when he'd experienced something along those lines. Even though his account didn't qualify as the most compelling example of the genre I'd ever heard, it was what he said next which fascinated me, as now there could be a chance of furthering my research in ways that I hadn't considered. He went on to tell me about the only other time he'd encountered anything similarly inexplicable, which had been during a conversation with an exotically named friend of his called Teresa, but pronounced Teresa. Although some of the mystique would be bound to wash off a few months later, after she subsequently told me that it was down to a simple spelling mistake on her birth certificate.

He couldn't remember the exact scenario or what led up to it, but all of a sudden she had a coughing fit which was apparently her advanced warning of channelling the dead. When this subsided she relayed the message which had been given to her, but unfortunately it didn't make any sense so he'd more or less dismissed what was said until double checking with his mum. She confirmed that the facts were accurate, but couldn't explain it as this wasn't the sort of information a non-family member would have access to. It concerned an aunt of his in Australia who had recently retired and was unsure about what to do with the rest of her life. She had always wanted to teach in some capacity, but thought that it was far too late to consider even applying for a part time voluntary position at her age. The communication was essentially an affirmation that the lady should go ahead and fulfil her dreams, but I didn't feel any need to potentially spoil a perfectly good story by asking how it turned out when he stopped short of telling me. A brief smile provided my only clue, but I can't say whether this was due to a happy ending in the Land Down Under or hearing that his credit card had just been authorised.

Fran hadn't seen Teresa for quite a while as she was no longer living locally and had relocated to South Wales, but when I said that I'd be keen to get in touch he promised to come back to me with her contact details. Things were happening apace at home as you are in no doubt aware, so I put this intriguing avenue, or possible cul-de-sac of investigation on the back burner for the time being. I'm remarkably adept at storing information like this in the furthestmost recesses of my mind for retrieval as and when necessary, so having temporarily forgotten it as such I'm not distracted by fretting about the outcome. In fact I often get nagged at work for this seemingly useless talent of mine, as there are times when my colleagues will think that I've overlooked a critical situation or impending problem, but in reality I haven't needed to remember it quite yet. It was mid-January before I decided to give him a gentle reminder, thinly disguised as a product satisfaction survey with a last minute afterthought concerning my aforementioned interest in

all things supernatural. I sent an e-mail to find out if he was enjoying his new purchase, casually enquiring about the girl in a PS and within a matter of days I received a fulsome reply which eventually gave me her surname, although I had to plough through a lot of tedious projector based boredom before getting there.

Having carefully typed it into a search engine, I couldn't find any trace of her whatsoever and my total lack of experience on social networking sites didn't help me either, so to avoid nuisance value I waited a couple of weeks before asking him for additional assistance. Luckily Fran chose to take pity on me and reluctantly passed on a link to her Facebook account, but warned that he didn't know how frequently she visited it. I registered his last comment with no small amount of foreboding, but I was far too busy keeping up with the hurly-burly of current events to consider sending her a message straight away. Although you can probably guess that my reticence was primarily due to being nervous about making contact with this unusually gifted friend of his who had moved out of the area and possibly mine too, who had moved considerably further.

By March 10<sup>th</sup> I had run out of excuses, so it was time to grab the bull by the horns and post my rather risk-ridden request on her home page. I knew that I would only have one chance to make a good impression and naturally I didn't want to botch it. Here's my best effort after numerous revisions and although I still felt inclined to improve on it, with the bullishness that only a night of heavy drinking can bring about, I finally bullied myself into hitting the send key before hitting the hay.

<Hi there,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you, but I'm in need of a little help. My name's Nick and I have been running a small shop selling home electronics for about twenty years now. I heard about you when chatting to Fran, a pal of mine who I've known for less than that amount of time though not by much. I'd asked if he had any ghost stories and he told me about his experience at a gothic mansion where he'd been renting a flat with a friend. After returning home one day and getting out of the car, they both noticed that a bedroom window was open. This seemed odd as they always made a point of shutting them before leaving and hearing a sudden noise, the two of them were distracted for a moment before looking back again to see that the window was now closed. The only other instance he mentioned was with you and in his own words, "I know that there can't have been many people more sceptical than me when it comes to spirits, mediums etcetera and she just blew that out the water."

This is my dilemma, I consider myself to be a normal well-adjusted person and up until recently I've had a pretty much uncomplicated life, but now

things have turned out very differently. I think that a deceased friend of mine is making contact with me in various different ways, but I am at a loss as how to progress the situation or to find out what they want. There are many people who would dismiss this out of hand as being completely ridiculous, but I deeply believe that what I'm saying is true. It would be great if the two of us could meet up for an hour or so and I will of course expect to reimburse you for your kind efforts. Hopefully you won't think I'm being overly melodramatic, but I can't tell you how important this is to me. I'm dearly in need of some expert help and if Fran believes you are genuine, that's good enough for me. Please accept my apologies for this intrusion, but I would be obliged if you could take the time to answer, even if it's with an outright no. I have never written a stranger message to a stranger before and predict that I never will.

Best wishes

Nick>

Well that was bold, but not as brazen as the previous version when in complete innocence I had invited her back to my place to see where the action occurred. All in all I was trying to come over as confused but coherent, taking a flyer yet grounded and desperate for help without appearing crazy or creepy, which hopefully would increase my chances of securing a positive result. Although it looked like I might be speaking too soon, as my confidence in the venture was knocked backwards at an alarming rate which corresponded to the increasing number of days that became weeks without a reply. March turned into April and April turned into late April, specifically Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup> a reassigned games night due to the two usual suspects going AWOL on Friday. We'd finished playing and were chatting away as I checked out my Facebook page, something I'd neglected to do for a while. To my astonishment there was a message from Teresa which I read out loud to the group, who managed to conceal their excitement far better than I did.

<Sorry that I have taken so long to reply, but just had a baby and other stuff going on. I work as a medium normally and have no problem in helping you, I'm sure I can assist in resolving why they want your attention. You're not going mad either, as I'm typing this to you I feel someone with me, trying to get through...they are a pretty strong presence. Here's my number, you can call me any time after 10pm as I'm busy with 3 kids and I only get peace at this time of night, LOL. We can either meet or a phone call may be enough. I look forward to hearing from you Nick.

Teresa>

Gosh and golly and call me Molly, I couldn't have hoped for a more perfect answer if I'd written it myself. I felt ready and eager to step up to the mark that very night, but after a wait of around seven weeks I was unsure about how long to leave it before making the call. You may be surprised to learn that I lasted three whole days, but it was only down to prior commitments as Sunday, Monday and Tuesday night were already booked.

So now we've caught up again to Wednesday April 28<sup>th</sup> and shortly after ten o'clock you'll find me pausing for a moment to prepare myself, before carefully pressing the appropriate sequence of buttons on my telephone. I would have loved to progress the story at this point, but I was hampered by the dreaded engaged tone. Depressingly I knew from past experience that if you're calling a guy just dial again and you'll probably get straight through, but girls can take a lot longer to get off the line. I finally managed to speak to this elusive creature around 11.15pm, a dozen failed calls and seventy five nail-biting minutes later, which thankfully went a long way towards justifying such a contentiously sexist remark. Teresa must have been expecting me to phone at some point, but possibly not such an inconvenient one and explained that she'd been talking with her mother who was emigrating to Australia the following day, though I'm reasonably sure it had nothing to do with Fran's aunt. Understandably we kept it short and she suggested that I ring back on Saturday at 9.00pm for a proper chat. Even in those brief minutes I could instinctively tell that she was sincere and I had already warmed to her calm, friendly manner by the end of the call. I knew things would go well as I'd been given an earlier indication that I was on to a winner. Half an hour before I phoned her, I'd spotted three or four of the tiniest of drips beneath the basin which merged into a single blob before evaporating and the last time something like that happened was weeks ago.

There was one final peculiarity to report that night and it seemed as if somebody had been determined to have the last word again. Bedtime was fast approaching and bracing myself to get up from the sofa I spotted a sprig of cannabis nestling between my thighs, which by rights shouldn't have moved from its last known position in the bathroom. Earlier that evening I had routinely bedecked the wooden cat standing on the shelf, which as predicted was now looking rather forlorn without its herbaceous headgear. Being the only housemate who ever bothers to put things back in their rightful place, I acted like this was the sort of distraction that happens every day and smiling forgivingly, I rolled my eyes towards the heavens in a gesture of mock resignation. Without any further to-do, I popped it back into position and after one last parting shot I headed off to bed. Hoping to get my own back, I'd flipped the bottle of shampoo by the bathtub onto its side, as a dare to see if she could move it for me. I didn't intentionally set her a time limit, but by necessity it would have to be before I washed my hair the following morning. So now I just needed to work out how the shrubbery had upped sticks and joined me on the sofa. Discounting the



possibility that someone had palmed me off with a bag of Triffid weed, the only logical delivery mechanism apart from Géraldine would have been my woolly jumper, although I was hardly a bee and the substance in question wasn't pollen. Furthermore the item had been located just short of shoulder height and I can't see how it could have become snagged without causing the cat to high-dive into an unfilled basin. You know how precious I am with my paraphernalia, so let's eliminate this theory as I would never put myself into such an awkward position where I was brushing up against it and don't forget that Occam couldn't have picked a better place to use his razor than a bathroom with a mirrored cabinet.

By morning the bottle of shampoo hadn't even flinched so I plugged the tub, set the taps running and sat down to do my unpleasantries. It could have been vibrations from the gushing water or perhaps rising heat that caused the rectangular plastic container to topple over a couple of minutes later, two of the many variables I hadn't accounted for. I can't be certain if this merits a tick on my wish list as the thought process behind it was scientifically negligent, like Alfred Nobel tweaking the recipe of his earth-shattering invention and trying to market the world's first popping candy. However a valid challenge had been laid down and according to the rules I was forced to admit that my requirements were fulfilled in the final few allotted seconds, so I must choose between politely accepting the outcome or declaring myself guilty of unsporting behaviour. When all's said and done you are welcome to discuss, but not to dismiss this little incident, although I hope that I didn't tip the balance with my baritone rumblings reverberating out of the pan.

May 2010

It was rapidly approaching 9.00pm on Saturday the 1<sup>st</sup> and I had everything prepared. The digital recorder was mounted on a cushion to my left, but as it would only capture one side of the conversation I also had pen and paper to hand, so that I could jot down anything of importance. Being aware of the legalities involved, I didn't feel there was any need to ask for permission as her voice would be muffled by my ear pressed against the handset and totally inaudible on playback. With a minute to spare I topped up my glass of cider and punched her number into the keypad. It took a while to be answered, so I wasn't at all surprised to learn that she still had her hands full of children and I was asked to ring back at in an hour's time. By ten o'clock my already frayed nerves were now completely in tatters, as after all this was a momentous occasion for me and I had no idea what to expect. It could possibly be the first time that I wouldn't have to coax or coerce someone into believing my story and if anything, the burden of proof will rest on her shoulders instead of mine. This concerned me a little, as I was unaccustomed to being the sceptical one in conversations like these and I didn't want to overcompensate by turning it into a grilling. I suppose there was also the slightly demoralising thought of the long hours that I'd spent engaged in psychical research and with a quick clearing of her throat she could join all the dots together in an instant, while by contrast I had barely managed to put pen to paper. Although it soon became apparent that I had been worrying needlessly, as I felt instantly at ease chatting about cats and kids for the first ten minutes or so. I told her I would be taking notes and she said that was a good idea, as matters which didn't immediately seem relevant might make sense at a later date. Without knowing exactly what to ask or how much to withhold, I suggested that she should take the lead as I was new to this sort of thing.

She started with the basics, no I didn't experience any cold spots and yes I did occasionally catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye, but I jokingly added that when these types of sightings become too prolific you know it's time for a haircut. One thing she asked which immediately piqued my curiosity, was if I'd ever noticed the smell of perfume around the house. Well that had puzzled me for a while, as every now and then I would indeed catch a trace of some or other beguiling scent hanging in the air. The reason why I neglected to mention this previously is I thought that it might have been coming from my clothes, after inadvertently brushing against somebody during the day or walking through the beauty department at Boots and getting involuntarily misted. Though according to Teresa, this meant Géraldine wasn't just there but almost close enough to be touching, which struck me as such a lovely image that I couldn't find it in my heart to doubt her.

After cautiously broaching the subject of water leaks, I found it impossible to stifle a small gasp when she described them as quite commonplace, so I made a mental note to send her a picture to prove that mine were anything but. Next she told me my grandfather was there with her, but the few snippets of information which were passed on seemed so generic and stereotyped that I remained far from convinced. She didn't make it clear whether he was paternal or maternal, but I couldn't imagine either of them acting so ungraciously by jumping the queue when I had such pressing business to attend to, seeing that they were both gentlemen from a bygone age and fully conversant with the principle of ladies first. Initially I couldn't help feeling a fraction disappointed, as it looked like we may already have an interloper muscling his way in and more importantly the dramatic coughing fits that Fran had described were entirely missing. I found it rather disconcerting how one minute we'd be discussing niceties like our favourite programmes on TV and the next she'd be imparting a message from beyond, but without the auditory cue that I'd been relying on to denote a change of subject. She was clearly employing a more advanced technique these days, which may have involved using a spirit guide who hadn't died of Tuberculosis. Apparently this isn't as far-fetched as it sounds because Native American Indians always make popular first choices as they're quite affable, despite their numbers being ravaged by an infectious disease which has become civilised man's lethal gift to indigenous peoples around the globe throughout history.

At this point my expectations were low, but that was all about to change. Even though I'd purposely withheld any information concerning my friend's identity, she suddenly informed me that the one I was looking for had just turned up and her description of Géraldine proved to be uncanny. Maybe two out of a dozen observations were ones which concerned her family and I explained that having lost contact with them, it would be impossible to either confirm or deny, but they sounded more than plausible. The next thing Teresa told me, was that she'd been presented with a vivid image of this young woman bending down and fussing over a black cat. I didn't understand at first as Bengals are anything but black, though on reflection it made sense as the one she'd known from her time was Brew, named after the especially strong lager I used to drink back then. He was my long-haired and adorable pedigree adoptee, who I had practically stolen from a breeder for the asking price of thirty five pounds in 1985. A fleeting thought has just occurred to me and that's when my cats all meet up in heaven, I just hope they'll get along together before I arrive to mediate. She had also been shown feathers, but apart from the flapping variety that I'd occasionally prised from his jaws, I was unable to understand why they should have any relevance to my current situation. Just out of interest did anyone else spot an unusual choice of vocabulary here, as stroking would be most people's description of cat cossetting under these circumstances. In fact I still have all but the corner of a single page letter she'd sent me, chastising herself for

forgetting my birthday and making up for it with best wishes followed by the promise of giving Brew a fussing.

To explain the missing piece, Steve, Kate and I held an impromptu séance shortly after Géraldine died. I had constructed a passable Ouija board out of everyday household items and our planchette was the sherry glass that never suspected it would more or less survive an encounter with a stone floor in about nine years' time. This particular form of divination has always made me wary, as it's prone to manipulation even subconsciously and a good way to tell is if any of the participants' fingernails have a white tinge next to the cuticle. Our first attempt produced no movement whatsoever, so I needn't have been worried about falsified results and in an effort to gain her attention, I went to find something which would hopefully provide some sort of connection. I can't remember the precise details, but there was a little doodle at the top right corner of the page which must have appeared to be significant, as I tore off this small section and ceremonially burnt it in an ashtray. My methods were a lot more destructive in those days. We tried again, but this time asking the question "Are you happy?" Slowly the glass made its way to "S", then travelled to "I" before refusing to budge any further, so after a while we got bored and gave up. Although "Si" makes for a sensible reply in Spanish and we already know that she had a working knowledge of the language, it would be a fairly muddled one in French. The word can indeed mean yes in certain circumstances, but it would have been grammatically incorrect here as the question wasn't asked in reverse. However the newly dead may be in a state of some confusion and you should forgive them for such minor errors of syntax.

Looking back, I was guilty of trying too hard to establish a link when Teresa mentioned that the numbers 3 and 4 might be significant, as I told her they were consecutive with the 2 which I had seen on my dusty picture frame. After I'd finished explaining, she must have thought that this was the most spectacularly drawn out and unreliable confirmation of one of her revelations for a long time, if not ever. She had been told that music was very important to me with particular regard to the lyrics, which you already know is true of course, but I hoped it subtly alluded to a better late than never approval of my choice of "Cowgirl" by Underworld for her cremation. Next she went on to say how much her visitor liked what I had done to my house. This may appear to be the kind of general statement which many of you could relate to, although it made particular sense to me as the refurbishments were undeniably substantial and we're not just talking about a few licks of paint to tart the place up. She was firing on all psychic cylinders now, telling me that my friend happened to be a highly private person and totally non-judgemental. Visually she could see a brown-eyed brunette with shoulder length wavy hair, who still had concerns about the size of her stomach and hips. "Don't worry" said Teresa, "it's a girl thing", but she had described Géraldine to a tee, though for the life of me I

didn't remember and couldn't confirm the colour of her eyes. I'm guessing that this blind spot has been endemic to menfolk from time immemorial, but we've had no excuses since 1970 when Elton John and Bernie Taupin brought the oversight to our attention with their first hit single, which they might as well have subtitled "In one ear then out of the other".

February was mentioned as being an important month and it would be really sweet if this referred to my St. Valentine's Day arrangements, but she had probably been thinking of her virtuoso percussive performance that I'd recorded a week later. Teresa must have noticed that my mind had wandered off and qualified her statement by saying she was also being shown roses, which brought me back to the night of the 14<sup>th</sup>. Her next remark didn't seem pertinent, but captivated by the experience I tried to fit it into place all the same. She said they were pink, red and white, which I misguidedly took as a reference to the multi-coloured pens I'd used to ask my question about Shiseido. However considering that it happened way back in October and fibre tips rarely come in white, I was wrong on all possible counts so please accept this as a late apology to both parties in attendance for my uncharacteristic, but enthusiastic stupidity. There will doubtless be a way of atoning for this lapse of judgement in the not too distant future, which scarily is tomorrow for me as I'm currently typing these words precisely two months ahead of you. We'll just have to see what happens, but at least you've ample time to prepare for disappointment if it doesn't get a response and in the event of a no-show, I'll try not to give anything away through signs of dejectedness in my writing over the next few days.

Teresa said that Géraldine was there with me at work sometimes, which conveniently explained Tony's apparently random choice of a frog as our new Windows mascot after meddling with the leaking toilet. Inconveniently though for those of you who remain sceptical, her next observation was that she had been shown an image of a blond, no a very blond guy sitting at a brown desk with his hands moving deftly above its surface. Snowy, which used to be the nickname bestowed on him in times gone by, has been with me for exactly twenty years almost to the day bless his heart, so he was the only one of my current employees that she had met. Now Géraldine had a bit of a soft spot for Tony, although I couldn't work out if it was real or in jest, but she always spoke of him in glowing terms and I never saw any signs of insincerity in her face when an opportunity arose to extol his virtues. This talented salesman also doubles up as our resident technician, who miraculously brings broken equipment back from the dead on his makeshift bench, which just happens to be an old wooden desk located on the top floor. Despite the fact I couldn't prove it yet, her final piece of information would be the one which really struck home and filled me with renewed hope, as she concluded by saying that there was a lot more to come.

By ten past twelve we'd said our goodbyes and the last comment I found myself repeating before turning off my recorder was holy followed by the F word, but luckily for anyone who finds this sort of thing offensive, it had only caught the first three blasphemies out of about a dozen or so. I was astonished at the overall level of accuracy and dumbfounded by her dazzle shots, which were the statements she came out with that really made me go wow. The call had been an unqualified success and I couldn't have imagined it turning out any better, but that was another one of my mistakes which would soon be corrected. Andy had warned about being ripped off by some unscrupulous charlatan, but when Teressa said she may be able to come over to visit and only asked for petrol money, even if her car was a greedy gas guzzler nothing could have impressed me more. She had also asked me to sketch out a plan of my house, which would give her a clearer impression of what was going on. This exercise would do little to enhance Rob's confidence in me as either a conventional boss or for that matter a gifted draughtsman, when one afternoon he chanced upon my inexperienced efforts splayed out on the counter. Though fortunately he only quizzed me about the whats, but not the whys and wherefores.

It had been a late finish, but sleep was the last thing on my mind and thank God that Sunday is a day of rest, as otherwise there wouldn't be enough time to listen to the full playback before going to bed. This would prove to be an odd experience as I could hear myself speaking loud and clear, but Teressa's voice was totally inaudible as predicted, so I had to constantly refer to my notes. However it soon became apparent that there was something else going on in the room which had only been picked up by my recording. Our one-sided conversation was intermittently peppered by the loud percussive sounds that I had captured overnight in the bathroom and unsuccessfully managed to identify. I had been sitting in a quiet room about two feet away from the microphone and do you know what, I didn't hear a single thing. It goes without saying that the whole recording will be made available for your personal delectation, but for those of you with busy lives here's the best bit. [\(166-PIC\)](#) This picture shows the last moments of our lengthy chat and you can see that there are three distinct spikes. The sequence of events is that I say "Fantastic", then there's the first two thwacks within half a second of each other, next comes my hesitant "erm" before the final one, after which I sign off with an affectionate "love you and leave you". My voice was clearly no match for these piercing noises in terms of volume and having counted approximately thirty seven of them in total, I would happily rest the case for the defence after only presenting the last three which were timed with superhuman precision. [\(167-AUDIO\)](#) So presuming that this was Géraldine coming through as I can think of no better explanation, she had either been in two places at once or must have flitted between them at breakneck speed.

I know that up until now you have had to take my word for virtually all of this. We've already discussed how February's bathroom barrage could potentially have been faked and with a piece of fishing line connected to an improvised knocking device on the other side of the door, I wouldn't require a helper or be lumbered with an obligation to do away with them. In fact in terms of difficulty, I daresay it probably wouldn't have been harder to achieve than creating your average crop circle. Which reminds me of the time I tried to persuade my friend Caroline who worked over the road, to assist me in an April fool prank. It would have been my task to inform the gutter, or maybe glamour press that an example had turned up in an unusually intimate area and all she needed to do was a spot of creative pubic topiary, backed up by a few anonymous photographs. Sometimes I just don't understand women, as despite my best cajoling and protracted attempts to convince her that this would be a laugh, she didn't want to have any part in it especially not a private one.

This however was the first recording where there could be no chance of fakery as these distinctive sounds were easily loud enough for Teresa to hear, so any suggestion that I would have risked making them deliberately is preposterous, as deceit is such a shabby start to a new friendship. Though try as I may, I couldn't begin to explain why neither of us had reacted to, or commented on such a noisy and intrusive backing track. I chose this short section because of the remarkable timing involved, which was obviously her way of joining in and saying goodnight, but it's fairly representative of the politely unobtrusive interruptions that had been happening throughout our conversation. Admittedly the excessive number of times I said erm or um was embarrassing, but you mustn't forget that I had been treading miry new ground and a moment's hesitation is always preferable to putting your foot in it.

So this was my hard-earned piece of the jigsaw, but I wasn't sure how it helped as I still couldn't work out why these noises were imperceptible to the human ear, yet had been faithfully picked up by a relatively inexpensive microphone. It can't have been a problem with the recorder, as I've never come across anything even remotely like that in all my time working with electronics. Within the space of two seconds we have three instances of the same potential fault, which you would expect to be consistent in volume and pitch though that's certainly not the case here. You'd also think that they would be distributed reasonably evenly and to have almost 10% of them in those last crucial moments, reminded me of the similar responses I'd captured when softly rapping on my bathroom door. My penultimate observation is if they were the result of an internal malfunction, there wouldn't be any sign of the resonance which you can clearly hear, especially when listening on headphones as this could only have been caused by room acoustics. For the last month or so I'd been trying to discover how these sounds were physically created, although from my recent experience it now

turned out that they weren't, but could only be heard afterwards through the unlikely medium of technology and not Teresa. This presents us with an interesting quandary, were they only there because I had the means to reproduce them, or would anything have occurred unheard if I hadn't been recording. As Géraldine was always so much the gadget girl, I can only imagine that she had commandeered my device as her plaything to test me on the tree in the forest and other quantum riddles.

In addition to this I had totally forgotten that May 1<sup>st</sup> was Beltane, a special date in the old calendar which she might choose to celebrate and also the anniversary of her funeral, so it couldn't have been planned more perfectly if we tried. Please excuse me for taking the liberty of hijacking the rest of this paragraph which was supposed to have been kept short for dramatic effect, in order to correct a false assumption that doesn't deserve one of its own. As Teresa had said the smell of perfume indicated that Géraldine was here with me, I set out to investigate this phenomenon and in doing so I succeeded in scuppering my fragrant fantasy. When it happened again, I sniffed at the air with the questing nose of a cold and hungry bloodhound downwind of a hotdog stand, but naturally the bathroom was off limits due to my exotic taste in soap. I quickly isolated its source to the kitchen and taking a look around, I found to my great disappointment that sitting on a high shelf next to the sink was the enormous scented candle I'd bought a few years earlier from Caroline's shop. This was swiftly relocated to a cupboard and thinking I'd solved the mystery, you can imagine my surprise the next day when I found out that I hadn't, as it came back to confound me once more. I soon discovered that the over-sized candle had been obscuring a crumpled old bag of sugar, behind which was the small though pungent bottle of Acqua Di Selva aftershave I'd all but forgotten about. Mum had given this to me when she'd cleared out a cabinet after dad died and whenever I wore it I always thought of him. I'd top up the contents from a new bottle when it looked like getting close to empty, so there would forever be a little left which was his. Needless to say this too was re-housed and I can't honestly tell you I haven't smelled anything similar since, but we must dismiss it as unreliable evidence as I'd overlooked the fact that she never used to wear perfume during her earthly visits, so why should death change the habit of a lifetime.

Andy was round on Monday evening and when I subjected him to the full two hours ten minutes of my recording, the poor fellow looked bored from start to finish. Although he was soon tapping away intently at his smart phone and there were no real complaints as long as I kept topping him up with cider. Tuesday May 4<sup>th</sup> and feeling moderately happy with the e-mail I'd just finished, I hit the send key around half an hour before the start of games night.



<Hi Teresa

Just a big thank you for our long chat on Saturday night, it was a very exciting experience for me and one that I'll never forget. I hope you don't mind, but as well as taking notes I also had a dictaphone running. There was never any possibility that your voice would be recorded as my ear was always pressed up against the handset, so on playback all you can hear is half a conversation. However the machine picked up something else which took me completely by surprise, as I counted more than thirty instances of loud tapping sounds that shouldn't have been there. The first example can be heard around twenty minutes in and the last three are interspaced between my words when I said goodbye. Now this is really interesting as I've used the device to make overnight recordings in my bathroom, with greater or lesser degrees of success. Unfortunately I've never detected any voices, only a handful or more of these weird inexplicable clicks. I haven't been able to work out their volume level or how the noises were made, but now I'm a lot closer to an answer as this time I was sitting right next to the microphone and didn't hear a thing. By the way you were spot on with the colour of her eyes, though I must confess that I had to check an old photograph to make sure. You asked for a drawing showing the layout of my house and plans are already underway, so they can be in the post as soon as I have your address.

Thanks again and take care.

Nick>

Having already given the cats their supper and boiled the kettle for my occasional pre-game pick-me-up, which you can guess consists of a cup of strong black coffee laced generously with Scotch, I turned the computer on again before signing in to Skype. After an hour's racing, we were well into a round of golf when the item was delivered and discovered by 10.00pm. As bathroom based activity had become so rare and infrequent I hadn't expected anything out of the ordinary, but that's exactly what I found when I went for a pee. There on the floor was a beautiful trap puddle, evolved way beyond its amorphous ancestry and if you think that I may be over-selling this one, just wait until you've seen the photo. [\(168-PIC\)](#) It's a sizeable spillage and strangely elongated, measuring over ten inches from top to bottom which would have required a fair amount of squirting. There are two conjoined designs and the one to the right appears to be some sort of flower which wouldn't look out of place in an exhibition of Japanese art, whereas the other is more difficult to interpret. You'll have to admit that the way both stem and blossoms have been formed by dripping seems far too delicate to be man-made, especially where the only contender in the frame is clumsy old me.

With interlocked fingers on top of my head, I am struggling to identify the figure to the left although I can sense that he's familiar in some way. I strongly doubt that we're seeing a depiction of Jesus juggling three crowns of thorns while sermonising in my bathroom, but there again I'm not up to date with modern Christian iconography so I could always be wrong. With due consideration, I'm guessing that this could be an attempted rendition of the warrior in my Illingworth print and it shows what happened the moment after he was hit on the bum by an incoming arrow. [\(169-PIC\)](#) Notice that while his lower half has remained stationary you can now see he's got both hands up in the air, but I think it's more out of indignation than surrender. This may well be the product of an overactive imagination, but we mustn't forget how pivotal the picture has been to my story. By half past ten it had already started to dissipate and three quarters of an hour later the floor was dry. Nipping out to the bathroom between holes, I relayed these developments to the guys during our game and kept them informed of progress, but I soon became aware that they appeared to be more concerned with water hazards of their own, as we were playing on a windy day at Harbour Town. You can tell how thrilled I was with this discovery, as the following morning I even woke up feeling excited and could scarcely wait to e-mail my update to Teresa before eagerly awaiting her reply.

<Hi there

Sorry to intrude again so soon, but I think that you have definitely made a good impression on my friend Géraldine. I was gaming online with the guys last night and taking a quick bathroom break I found the rarest of puddles, one that had come from the trap beneath my basin. Please forgive my assumption that your knowledge of plumbing is as rubbish as mine, but being a drain the trap isn't subject to water pressure and can't possibly leak on its own. I've only ever seen a few examples of this sort of seepage, compared with countless others from the hot water pipe at the back and this is by far the most complex in terms of design. The attached picture was taken within seconds of finding it and perhaps she'd been trying to prove a point, as I'll guarantee that this is a lot more exciting than the commonplace puddling you've come across in the past. I may be quiet for a while as this kind of stuff doesn't happen every day, but I'll keep you posted.

Nick>

My last sentence proved to be oddly prophetic and May was all but over before I had anything else to report. This might not be entirely unrelated, but since Easter I'd decided that adopting a more passive approach may add weight to my argument so all experiments were put on hold until further notice. I reasoned that as the leakages were becoming far less frequent, this suggested Géraldine had made a conscious choice to scale down her activity

and it would be wrong of me not to follow suit. In effect the longer the gap between puddles, the more difficult they are to explain as mains water is under a lot of pressure to escape wherever possible and if it wasn't then your taps wouldn't work. I did falter once on Friday the 21<sup>st</sup> as I couldn't resist moving the cat to the floor before bedtime, but on loading up my overnight recording there was little of interest to be seen. A week later I tried eavesdropping again, but without repositioning the cat so it wouldn't count as intervention and the responses were more vigorous, if only for a couple of hours. As all that I could hear were the same old slapping and clinking noises, I snapped a quick photo before erasing the sound file. I'm not looking to copyright and merchandise this sorry specimen taken before Andy revealed the screen grab button under the dust on my keyboard, so feel free to have it printed on the tee shirt or tea towel of your choice, although people will forever recognise you as a cheapskate. ([170-PIC](#))

It was Sunday the 30<sup>th</sup> and I still can't believe that this actually happened. Almost a month had passed since my last e-mail to Teresa and I was looking for an excuse to send another with a subtle prompt for her address, so that I could post the house plans she'd requested. I can't remember if I've told you before that apart from left ear tinnitus, my house is as quiet as the grave and music is an unwanted distraction while writing so I always work in library, or maybe mausoleum grade silence would be a better way of putting it. Around 12.45pm I was busily pressing the flesh against the keyboard, but feeling a little despondent with my ineloquent turn of phrase and lacklustre descriptions, when I heard the strangest sound. It was just below the penetratingly side of loud, lasting no longer than a couple of seconds and seemed to have come from a spot to the right of my TV, slightly above the equipment rack. The cats who had been fast asleep on the rug heard it too, pricked up their ears and within no time there were three pairs of eyes all staring towards the very same direction. Although difficult to describe, it was like a sustained note of electronically treated birdsong crossed with the angelic fanfare which accompanied the creation of a knight in Populous, an early "god game" I loved to play on my old Atari computer back in 1990. I realise that this won't be of much help to the PlayStation generation, so think a snippet of the dawn chorus you could imagine waking up to in heaven, now add the accompaniment of a celestial choir with a touch of auto-tune and you're almost there.

After the unhealthy amount of time spent reclining on my sofa, you would think that I should be able to identify pretty much everything I could ever expect to hear from it, but this was new to me and dashed peculiar in ways I had yet to discover. I couldn't attribute this strange sound effect to wildlife like birds perched on the chimney above the fireplace or sitting close to my kitchen window, because it had come from somewhere in-between the two. Trying to establish a possible cause I quickly scanned my mental database of potential noises that a hi-fi system could produce, even though it was on

standby at the time, but of course I came up with nothing. It didn't seem like Bunny or Jasper could work it out either as they soon lost interest and went straight back to sleep, would that my life were so simple. Removing the wireless keyboard from my lap I investigated the back garden, but this didn't provide me with any clues as to its origin, so I returned to the living room and sat down again.

Being unable to come up with any sort of explanation was making me feel quite unsettled, although intuition and good manners suggested that maybe I should formulate a reply in case it had been an ear-bending from 'er indoors. Resorting to tried and tested tactics, I decided that I would move the wooden cat from the shelf to the floor before placing my take on a bouquet garni between its ears. I wandered into the bathroom and picked it up, only to notice some odd marks on the surface of my cabinet. It was plain to see that they were freshly made, as I couldn't possibly have missed them on my last visit. [\(171-PIC\)](#) You can tell from the surrounding dust that the four round patches are where its legs normally stand, but there's also a line of imprints leading away. If you remember I hadn't cleaned the shelf since New Year's Eve, so there was no way that any passing insect would be heavy or determined enough to leave these tracks after five solid months' worth of encrustation. In addition to that, if you look closely the trail starts with a dark area beneath its front right paw print and has clearly travelled under the left one too.

Of course for the time being I'm only assuming that it's moving in this direction, but the most important question which needs answering is whether or not the cat had been temporarily levitated in order to make these marks, or did they happen while it was still in situ. Both options may seem equally improbable, but there again we can see that the scoring is clearly neater and more precise than last time, so arguably one of its paws could have been used as a stylus. When viewed from another angle it looks like a representation of the cat's tail, even down to the tapering effect and small kink. Now I know this must sound like wishful thinking, but you'll have to admit that it would make perfect sense as an excellent choice of design under the circumstances. [\(172-PIC\)](#) It's easier to guess which way the line was heading from this photo, but you will need to look carefully at the tell-tail white stripes between the dark ones. These can only have been made when the displaced dust was pushed forwards, which accounts for them being slightly lighter than the background. This suggests that whatever her drawing instrument was, it didn't lose contact with the surface until forming the tip and leaving a small build-up, although considerably more pressure must have been applied at intervals to expose the bare metal underneath.

All things considered, this would have been a tricky manoeuvre for anyone to pull off without making a mistake and there was no opportunity for a second attempt if it went wrong, but perhaps we've already seen what

might be a crude prototype acting as a mooring post for her yacht in an earlier shot. If you were to extrapolate the line, it would bisect the rear mirror to within a whisker and point to where I was sitting on the sofa, but I can't be absolutely certain about that without taking down a supporting wall. I haven't forgotten of course that you can't normally triangulate on the source of a noise made within a sealed room, as it will always appear to be coming from the door which is the path of least sonic resistance. However I can assure you that this wasn't the case here, as the piercing sound seemed unconcerned by mere bricks and mortar. I'm still a lifetime away from understanding the secrets of my cabinet of curiosities, so I will just have to keep on searching for an explanation, but it's doubtful I'll find one until me and spooky drawers finally get to meet up for a good old natter.

Nothing at all happened for the remainder of the day and to save repeating myself, this last section concerning Sunday's news was adapted from the e-mail I'd send Teresa soon after, as I wanted to hear her reaction. From previous experience I know that this might involve more than a short wait, so I can surely spare a few moments to clear up a small matter of vocabulary which may have been confusing you and I'm talking specifically about my usage of the term heaven. After all there are plenty enough complications to deal with already, without my contentious choice of language being one of them. Please don't read too much into this as it has no religious connotations whatsoever and could readily be replaced by something like paradise. This would be a far less volatile but also far less versatile word, as it's one which you can't turn into an adjective so easily.

I know that it's getting late, but there's just enough time to squeeze in one last paragraph before going to bed as we're not quite finished with these odd markings yet. On this final photo you can see some straight lines emanating from the rear left paw print, although from the look of them they could have been made a fair while earlier. [\(173-PIC\)](#) One thing I will say in case you're in doubt, is that they couldn't have been my doing as I always lift vertically and cleanly when it's needed elsewhere, making sure I replace each foot in exactly the same position while taking great care not to disturb the surrounding area. Hang on a minute, is anyone still wondering about my opening sentence as how could I possibly have known that you were feeling rather tired and ready to call it a night. Well if you weren't altogether happy about being told the truth about Santa Claus or the tooth fairy and would still like to preserve a little magic in your life, then please follow my instructions to the letter, but everyone else of course can just carry on as normal. I've also taken into account the possibility that some of you may have missed or ignored my advice about speed reading and will already be a few dozen words ahead before applying the brakes, but no matter as it's all under control. Now I'm going to delay my answer for as long as I can, which will give you the time to cut a thin slot in a piece of card so from this point onwards you'll only be able to read one line at a time and avoid any

spoilers. The others will have to forgive me here because I need to pad out the text while you find a pair of scissors and yes, paper would work just as well, but be quick as I haven't got all day. Obviously those of you who took part in my earlier multiple choice quiz will still have the materials to hand and you'll probably be finished by now, but we can't begrudge making allowances for stragglers as it's one of the cornerstones of civilisation. There must be some old nonsense I can dredge up to pass the time and luckily I've just had a sudden insight which fits the bill perfectly, but I wouldn't imagine that many of you will be impressed. Thinking back to my conversation with Teressa, I remember she told me that the numbers 3 and 4 were significant. I thought I'd mistakenly connected them with the figure 2 on my picture frame, but now there may be fresh evidence that suggests otherwise. As the tail-shaped mark appeared exactly 150 days after I'd cleaned the shelf on New Year's Eve, these digits can be mixed together and hey presto you get a consecutive sequence, which works even better as a countdown. Speaking of which it's almost time to skip the rest of this paragraph, so please capitalise "spoiler alert" in your head as it looks ugly in print. At the end of my next sentence, quickly turn your viewing slot through ninety degrees so all you can see is a meaningless vertical cascade of letters and then proceed in an orderly fashion to the start of June before reading on. Don't try to spot any hidden words as my manuscript is written on A4, so it would be a bore of a chore when I come to reformat it into a bookshelf friendly size. It's your last chance to comply, so don't blame me if you choose to ignore this final and unequivocal warning. Okay they're gone, but we only have a short amount of time to ourselves before those absent friends of ours, the starry-eyed softies start to suspect that something is amiss and risk a quarter rotation for a horizontal peek. So let's squander some of it on my favourite riddle, which they would doubtless find unnecessarily vulgar and offensive as opposed to relatively amusing. "What's the difference between your granny and the Christmas turkey? You can't get your granny moist even if you cook her upside down." We need to wrap things up here fairly smartish, so I'll run through the rudiments of my deception which may have left you temporarily confused and I would definitely apologise for that if the clock wasn't ticking. Revisiting my opening sentence, it's easy to see how they were led astray and thought that I'd been talking about their bedtime instead of mine, as in actual fact I was the sleepy one. Don't forget that I had the inescapable advantage of mathematics on my side, as there would have been a few people reading this at night who were feeling tired and debating over whether to reach for the bookmark or not. However my misdirection didn't end there, as those of you who are currently in the month of December would have thought that I'd just cracked a seasonally topical joke. Even though it's tantamount to cheating, I needed a way to spare some of the more sensitive members amongst my readership from the family-orientated, but rather tasteless humour that I'd been determined to include and I couldn't resist a playful wake-up call for a twelfth of the rest of you.

June 2010

Welcome back to a week which had passed without incident and you can only imagine how restless I'd become, so I decided to resume operations. Around a minute or two before midnight on Saturday the 5<sup>th</sup> I had just finished assembling my latest spectacle, which was also the first to be sturdy enough to ride piggy back. There are few statements I can make with absolute certainty, but I'll bet you haven't seen one of these loitering in your bathroom. [\(174-PIC\)](#) Meet my scrapyard alien made from old car and motorbike parts, who normally resides in the recess under the living room stairs. This was the stunning centrepiece on a pop-up stall in a local shopping arcade and as soon as I spotted the creature, I knew that it would be the perfect choice to fill my rather empty looking niche. Consisting entirely of metal I guessed it wouldn't be light and when the vendor let slip that he'd been suffering from a lower back disc injury, I made him a cheeky but orthopaedic offer at 70% of the asking price, in case he didn't fancy taking this heavyweight home after his pitch expired. He scribbled my phone number on the back of a till receipt and promised to give me an answer in a couple of weeks. I was so taken with it that the next day my homemade sandwiches came back with me for supper, as I had decided on a takeaway from a neighbouring snack bar where I would be able to snatch the occasional fleeting glimpse without appearing excessively keen, caveat emptor.

Everything went according to plan as you will have already guessed from seeing the photo, but it was a bitter disappointment to find out that even with the hood down, its torso and head wouldn't sit on the passenger seat of my car. Any element of surprise can work to your advantage at the traffic light Grand Prix, so imagine glancing over and seeing something like that giving you the eyeball. I can confidently say that in terms of shock value alone, it would be more than enough to sort out the men from the boy racers. Utilising all available luggage space, I only just had room for its six component parts when disassembled and I was lucky there were no bottles of cider rolling around in my boot, as they may not have survived the journey intact. This new recruit of mine performed well, standing sentry duty for three long years until being promoted to the drylands of my bathroom which he totally failed to rehydrate, so unfortunately for him that meant it was back to the cubbyhole. Before we move on there's a slight discrepancy I'd like to address, although even my most observant of readers would surely have missed it. When I described my experience of sharing a bath with a cat, I said that Bunny was standing at the tap end, but now you can clearly see there isn't one. However this wasn't the case with my original avocado coloured tub and throughout those early years I had become so accustomed to facing the rear wall, that sitting the wrong way round has never occurred to me as it simply wouldn't feel right.

As there's nothing further to add, we can skip forward to the night of Thursday the 10<sup>th</sup> and I couldn't help thinking that somebody was playing games with me again. You'll remember the story about Markie and the mouse, well here it's been wittily brought up to date with a woodlouse I discovered under my basin, though I'm no David Attenborough so I don't know whether he's the same one we've already seen in an earlier photo. (175-PIC) Don't pay any attention to the water, as it had dripped from the glass I'd snatched off the draining board so that I could detain my shy and reclusive beastie until he de-balled. Maybe my next door neighbour has taken to tagging them with Tipp-Ex as part of a study of land-based crustaceans, but I find that improbable considering his dour Scottish nature and strict standards of housekeeping. It could have been caused by a decorating accident of course, but as their maximum lifespan is only about four years, this certainly wasn't down to Dave or Ted. If I were ever asked how to punctuate a woodlouse for comedic effect, then I would be swaying between a question and an exclamation mark. You know I've worked hard to restrict how frequently the latter appears in my narrative, but speaking purely hypothetically I wouldn't have chosen any differently as it's funnier and more to the point, easier to paint on a moving target. To make matters even worse I've just spotted something else which needs bringing to your attention, so I'm going to ask you to ignore my previous advice and look very closely at the water spill. Towards the top you'll see that yet another one of these little blighters has snuck its way into shot, for the sole purpose of confounding my plans and taking me to the brink of exasperation. In the short time it took me to stroll leisurely off to the fridge for another glass of cider, my camera-shy critter must have scuttled back into the woodwork, as he was nowhere to be seen when I returned and never showed his face or carapace in public again. This was a real shame as being over the drink driving limit I didn't want to risk losing my licence by relocating him a few miles away, so I wouldn't have to waste money on cabbage in order to fulfil the second half of the original experiment.

My next two ventures panned out badly and were also deemed unworthy of a response, which left me doubly disappointed. Fair enough the first was a rather unimaginative angel-winged wooden cat jockey just before bedtime on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup>, but let's come back to that later as I thought my second looked far more promising. Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> was Summer Solstice, which had always been another important date in Géraldine's calendar and maybe more so this year as it also happened to be the day that Steve would be getting married, although my invite must have got lost in the post. Perhaps I could turn this into a triple whammy, as I'd recently learnt from researching on the Internet that lavender was traditionally associated with the celebrations and I knew where I would be able to lay my hands on some free samples.



One day last week I was heading back to the car park after closing up, when I recognised the chap walking about twenty paces ahead of me, as he worked at the local branch of my bank. I slowed down a fraction so that I would be trailing by a comfortable distance, as I didn't want to catch him up and risk having to trade fiscal pleasantries, when all of a sudden he did the strangest thing. Going past some iron railings, he put one hand out to stroke the little mauve flowers which were poking through and then sniffed his fingers. Heaven knows what had inspired him to get in touch with his feminine side, but as I approached the spot I did exactly the same thing and caught a distinctive whiff of lavender. My knowledge of botany is severely lacking, but even I could identify it due to the helpfully eponymous smell and colour. Looking back, I hoped that the old codgers waiting at a nearby bus stop didn't think there was some secret form of communication going on between us on account of the plant's connotations, as it's no longer the early Sixties and folk can afford to be a lot more open nowadays. Despite having walked that particular pavement many hundreds of times, I had never registered its existence before, but now I knew and quickly filed away my latest discovery. I felt reasonably unhappy about that because as the years pass by, my brain cell count is rapidly dwindling and I can only memorise a new piece of data at the expense of an older one being deleted. While I was driving home I wondered what this seemingly useless scrap of information would cost me and hoped it might be the lyrics to "Agadoo".

Unfortunately it didn't turn out like that, as the only thing I forgot was to tell you about my really important news. Let's go back to Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> of June around 11.00pm and I was routinely checking my e-mails before saying goodnight to the guys, when I found exactly what I had been waiting for. I told them that Teresa had apologised for not being in touch due to domestic problems and was suggesting another phone call, so she could help me out to the best of her ability. She was also in the process of moving house and would come over to see me as soon as things were back to normal. Knowing that it's a mistake to reply on a bellyful of cider, I wisely decided to turn off the computer and get ready for bed. Every good story needs a beginning, a middle and in the absence of anything more promising, this was the sort of big ending I had in mind. I wanted to thank Géraldine in case she'd been even partially instrumental in arranging it, but I really was bursting for a pee so I grabbed the closest thing which came to hand and hoped for the best. No it's not what you're thinking, so please remove that image from your head as I hadn't even got around to unzipping by then. The following morning there was no sign of any kind of response, so I lifted what could have been mistaken for a small-scale model of Icarus's crash test dummy off the cat and returned it to the living room. On arriving home from work I quickly replied to her mail and by the day after it was confirmed that she'd be expecting me to call at 10.00pm on Saturday. Some people tar all psychics with the same brush, but like estate agents, used car salesmen and South Africans, I think you'll find that there are plenty of good ones out

there. Although I couldn't understand why she hadn't come back to me sooner, unless my reports of unexplained occurrences were just everyday shop talk to her and as such, there was no urgency to comment on them. Maybe I should have sent her some cutesy cat photos or asked how the kids were doing, before bringing up minor variations of stuff she'd already experienced and had become professionally impervious to.

Come June 19<sup>th</sup> I was as much use at work as a distracted zombie and my colleagues ribbed me mercilessly, but I wasn't biting. It was clear that I couldn't concentrate on the job in hand and I'd be amazed if anyone got a sensible answer out of me all day, so I kept my head down by demoting myself to tea boy. Just because I personally can't abide the taste of it, that doesn't mean to say I don't make a mean cuppa or so I'm told. Tonight there will be another chance to become familiar with the unfamiliar, but I couldn't risk sloping off before we closed up, as nervous tension would lead me to start drinking early and I'd be properly toasted by ten o'clock. Although it turned out that once again I'd been worrying needlessly, as an e-mail was waiting for me when I arrived home. Teresa had been smitten by a nasty flu virus, which apparently would affect her performance so she suggested we should try another night. I replied that it wasn't a problem and asked her to let me know when she felt better. Admittedly this was a bit of a blow, but rather than mope I saw it as yet another lesson to be learnt about patience and reward, which brought to mind how long I made Géraldine wait before I eventually got back to her.

Waking up still feeling a tad testy on Monday the 21<sup>st</sup>, I had bounced back by embarking on a new mission which would involve a spot of urban foraging and as it was the longest day of the year, I could afford to take my time. In my head I had some Zen thing going on about the serene grace and inner peace that this harvesting ritual would bestow upon me, although in retrospect I really should have brought along a pair of secateurs. I found myself in broad daylight, tugging at the lavender through the railings and consequently removing clods of earth too, which certainly didn't fit into the way that I'd envisioned my transcendental experience would play itself out. Thankfully the plant survived as I only needed a handful of stems and I had evaded detection by careful timing, combined with kicking away the falling soil like a prison-camp tunneller or grave robber as I wandered off. After getting home I put them in water and here's a picture taken before I went upstairs to bed with a thoroughly misplaced expectation about the level of response that I would find in the morning. [\(176-PIC\)](#)

You can tell just how wide of the mark I'd been as it's now Tuesday the 29<sup>th</sup>, another sweltering summer's day although the forecast was stormy and that's a sure-fire tinderbox for sparking off heated arguments at work. Fortunately it wasn't to be as both Tony and Rob had the day off, so we were too short-staffed for an all-out ding-dong. Customers were few and far

between so I used this to good purpose by thinking about what I would do for her birthday on Friday, well it was either that or dust shelves which is a job I've latterly come to enjoy, but only on New Year's Eve. When the house was refurbished, just about everything that she would have known from her time had either been painted over, or thrown into the skip and replaced. However I've been keeping something in reserve and that's the old white tufted rug which I found in my garage whilst searching for the frog box. This used to lie in front of the fire and despite being allowed on the furniture, that's where she would always choose to sit during our evenings together, so for sentimental reasons I just couldn't bring myself to consign it to landfill like the rest of my junk. I never once thought of questioning Géraldine's preference for the floor over a roomy and plush three piece suite, but I knew she'd bagged the next best spot as it was a lot more salubrious than my manky living room carpet. Of course the rug now looks decidedly the worse for wear and careless storage, but I wanted to roll it out on one last occasion. It would fit nicely upstairs beside the bed and apart from the mandatory migration of a wooden cat, I hadn't formalised the rest of my arrangements but there were still a couple of days to go.

When I arrived home I reheated the remains of yesterday's pizza delivery, but I wasn't much in the mood for eating so half of it became second generation leftovers for tomorrow's lunch. You don't need to worry about malnutrition though, as I relied on cider to maintain the correct calorific intake for a healthy living guy like me. I watched some TV and it was soon time to feed the cats before games night started at eight o'clock sharp. Geoff wouldn't be joining us as his Xbox was playing up and he'd sent it away for a warranty repair, but I couldn't take advantage of that as I had nothing new to share with the others. We had our usual preliminary chat about one thing or another before racing for the rest of the evening, but Justin was working early shifts and needed his beauty sleep, so the session finished around 10.30pm. I powered down the PC and switched over to catch up on Big Brother, yet another squalid secret of mine that you are now a party to, although the show's long past its best so I've promised myself this will be my last year.

During an advertisement break I visited the loo and the unexpected surprise of seeing a puddle on the floor took me right back to my childhood when we'd owned a dog. I was awash with excitement to find this lovely, but unsummoned trap leak which felt better than being visited by royalty, as I didn't have to do any tidying up or give the guest duvet a good shaking. [\(177-PIC\)](#) As it was still relatively early I fired up the computer and telephoned Markie to ask if he could join me on Skype for an update. He has a nose for news and I could sense his impatience when my phone rang halfway through sending him the pictures I'd taken, asking me what I was up to. I always try to wait until they have left my outbox, or the resulting loss of bandwidth can make everyone sound like a Dalek and therefore

difficult to be taken seriously when discussing matters of a sensitive nature, unless it's the subjugation of mankind. Less than a minute later I had my headset on and we were discussing this latest development. The overriding question was why she should choose tonight to come off the wagon after such a long period of inactivity, but absence of evidence can also mean evidence of abstinence. Thinking out loud, I wondered whether it might have something to do with her upcoming birthday on Friday and Markie pointed out that this was another instance where she had second-guessed me ahead of schedule, but I couldn't help having my doubts. You see when it's happened previously, there were usually only a few hours or minutes before my plans were put into action and never two whole days. I had a sudden flash of *déjà vu* when we said goodnight again, but this time I knew that sleep wouldn't come easily until I'd dreamt up a better answer.

If you exclude any petrol heads like Géraldine, I would imagine that nigh on one hundred percent of the female persuasion will find my first suggestion not only trivial, but also somewhat sad and nerdy. In most racing games, your primary goal is working towards unlocking a currently or formerly owned car and then driving it onscreen. Markie and I had both achieved this motoring milestone tonight, but I doubt that would have impressed her as much as my earlier disclosure. Before we started playing I had briefly touched upon the life changing moment I'd experienced that day, when I bought my first set of reading glasses from a well-known high street stationery and book store. The shop in question has recently come under fire and mostly from me, for expanding its range with products you wouldn't expect to see, although I must admit that this speculative sideline was far more tempting than the potential germ nursery lurking within their unsupervised pick'n'mix display.

This had been a big step for me as the magnifying glass I always keep in my pocket is extremely effective, but only slightly short of eccentric and a source of cheap entertainment for everyone around. The cruellest barb of all was when a customer compared me to his great aunt, who had resorted to carrying a Rich Tea biscuit in her handbag and by peering through the tiny holes she'd been able to see things in close-up. This really hit home as sometimes to avoid making a spectacle of myself, I'd narrow my eyes to have any chance of seeing the finer details on the pricelists at work, but after the huge personal embarrassment of undercharging on two separate occasions I knew it was time for change. On the upside I've now been upgraded to high definition for a one-off payment of £9.99, which is money well spent as I think they make me look more intelligent into the bargain. On the downside I wasn't prepared for the shock of my own reflection and seeing such highly defined wrinkles, so maybe I should have acclimatised myself first by staring at a prune for a while. So if you want to stay looking ten years younger, my advice would be to put off your purchase for as long as possible and avoid squinting at mirrors.

The puddle itself was interesting, as it consisted of two separate shapes which were connected by a thin channel. This meant that the water was under some sort of pressure and had spurted from opposite sides of the trap at reasonable speed, or else it would have formed a single pool. I'm not even going to begin to deliberate on the bottom design as that's your homework for today, but you'll have to admit the top one resembles a stubby though recognisable J. You know I've never seen one of these in action and my guess is that the squirting is over in a matter of seconds, but I'm sure there's a good reason why she doesn't want to share her party trick with me. It would be helpful if I could unscrew the trap to find out how much water remained inside, but I can't do that as just like the toilet roll holder, it's stuck fast and refuses to budge. Besides, some people may consider this internal examination to be overly intimate and I'm far too polite to put the rude into intrude, even if the story absolutely requires it. As you would expect I've done a little research and I had been amazed to find that there's actually a device known as a J trap, but regrettably mine is the standard bottle variety which lacks the same level of charm or elegance. Although somehow I doubt that this matters in the slightest, as when Géraldine was alive she showed no sign of a discriminatory stance on pretty much anything, let alone drainage options.

I'd set my recorder to run for the remainder of the night and this is what I found when I checked it the following day. [\(178-PIC\)](#) Ignoring the litter tray interaction that occurred forty minutes after I went to bed, there were only two significant noises before morning and I recognised the first at once. Occasionally when I'm in the bathroom, there's a single clunk which is made by the cistern lid settling and I haven't necessarily put this down to a sign of intervention from another dimension, but it's something I've been closely monitoring. [\(179-AUDIO\)](#) Of course we all agree that this shouldn't happen by itself and the most likely priming mechanism is Jasper cat, who often likes to sit on it while he's watching me bathe, seemingly fascinated by my inability to lick myself clean which would be a lot easier. His weight must alter the pivoting point, although you wouldn't think that there could be such a disproportionately long delay between him jumping down and the clunk when the lid shifts back into its normal position. It's possible to work this out from the information onscreen and seeing that I always get up at 7.30am apart from Sundays, you can calculate an interval of at least twenty hours since my last bath. Around thirty minutes before I entered the room there was a frightfully energetic example of the mystery sound, which we've learnt may not have been audible at the time, but you can see that it still registered almost twice as loud as my warning knocks.

July 2010

It was the morning of Friday the 2<sup>nd</sup>, her birthday and what would be my last attempt at a multi-element experiment. After all I'd been trialling them for exactly a year now and I didn't want to get too predictable or start repeating myself. Just before I jumped into the car to go to work I happened to notice a single feather on the driveway, which wouldn't quite fulfil my requirements but nevertheless it got me thinking. I remembered that Teressa had mentioned being shown feathers, followed by pink, red and white roses which didn't make much sense at the time, but now I realised she could have been relaying a wish list to see if I'd pick up on it. Towards the end of the call I'd asked if she could let Géraldine know that I had something special in store for her birthday, referring to the rug of course. "Oh you can't surprise them" she said very matter-of-factly, "as they already know what you're thinking." It's never easy trying to hide anything from a mind reader and that's why I had purposefully decided not to choose the rest of her presents in advance, as now I understood the rules I could exploit them to our mutual advantage. This meant that I didn't have to worry about it beforehand and she would still get a surprise on the day. During my lunch hour I managed to track down a local florist, which was the only place in town that sold roses singly and not in pointlessly extravagant bunches. I bought one in each colour and with the stems cut unromantically short, I was able to wrap them up in a couple of carrier bags to avoid unnecessary questions from the lads at work. Speaking of which, on my way back I had cunningly purchased some Karma soap from Lush, as this would be enough to mask the scent of a whole shelf full of flowers and that's why you'll never see these two retailers next door to each other on the high street.

With the uneasy feeling of predestination, or maybe it was just my feline-friendly predisposition, I'd been drawn to The Cat Protection League charity shop where I chanced upon another item which would no doubt come in handy. After a quick scout around, I was busy shovelling small change into the collection box when I found myself taking a fancy to a cute little note book, which would serve me well if I could think up something appropriate to write in it. I was walking back to work and feeling happy with the gifts I'd chosen, but obviously not quite happy enough as with an involuntary pang of conscience I spotted my favourite Big Issue seller, the one with the dog. Whenever we went out on the town together, Géraldine always gave to the homeless even though she could scarcely afford to and would supplement her meagre donation by bending down to offer a few whispered words of support. I on the other hand couldn't think of anything more rewarding to say than, "Here's a tenner, keep the change."

Lastly and leaving matters completely to chance, I planned to make use of the feather I'd noticed earlier that morning if it hadn't already been blown

away. After driving home I parked up and not only was it still in place, but there were now three smaller ones alongside. This was ideal as the brief called for more than one, so they were quickly scooped up before being stashed in the kitchen cupboard, safely away from a pair of sensitive little noses and mischievous mouths. Having removed the roses from the carrier bags, I placed them next to the sink and smiled as a thought went through my head. Visits to the florist are great retail therapy for someone like me, as these are the only shops where everyday reality is put on hold and you can actually buy things for dead people without appearing weird or ghoulish, not that I mentioned who they were for, but I could have if I'd wanted to.

To prevent cut flowers from wilting, it's important to remember to smash the ends of their stems before putting them in water, so I pounded away with a suitably blunt utensil while reciting this helpful ditty. "Osmosis is the process where you drink through your toeses, that's if you're a plant and you can't if you aren't." I'd have a busy couple of hours ahead of me if I wanted to be on time for gaming at eight, which included cooking a meal for myself and catering to the needs of two hungry cats. Composing my rather specific request took a while longer than I had allowed for, but the installation was complete and I finished the last mouthful of supper with only sixty seconds to spare. (180-PIC) Now this won't take a minute, but we should confront the small question of the big ask. With an unlimited supply of optimism, which you've come to expect by now, I wanted to give the girls a chance to shine so I had to entirely remove the possibility of coincidence. You can understand why I desperately needed another phone call and I realised that Teresa must lead a busy life, but if there was a way of gently exerting a third party influence then this would be the ideal opportunity to do so. As I had to be absolutely sure of Géraldine's involvement I considered plenty of personalised code words, but if any of them could be mentioned by accident they weren't rigorous enough for my purpose. (181-PIC) I told you it was ambitious, as I couldn't imagine that Teresa's esoteric abilities would include knowing how to produce French accents on an English keyboard so I'd have to cut her some slack, although copy and paste off the Internet has always worked for me. However in all seriousness if it goes according to plan then I'd be truly astonished, but there again Géraldine never liked to impose on people and may simply refuse to help, thinking that this was one particular hoop which she didn't care to jump through.

I had recently found out that the expression Houp-là roughly translates to whoops-a-daisy and this used to be her favourite exclamation during racing games, but at the time I never got around to asking the precise spelling or what it meant. Anyway I thought that it would be an inspired choice, as there have been quite a few trap puddles which occurred either during or after competing online with the guys. Despite a hectic schedule I had been able to e-mail them the latest sound clips I'd captured and these were discussed along with tonight's birthday preparations, but I revealed my

authentication procedure to nobody. The session was over all too soon and three hours had passed in no time, so I wished everyone sweet dreams before signing off. I didn't want to forget to make an overnight recording, so before settling down in front of the TV I used an old memory-aid trick of mine which involves putting an everyday object in an unusual position, knowing that I wouldn't be able to miss it later on, or in this case on my way up to bed. It then becomes a trigger which reminds me that something needs doing and I placed one of my shoes on the staircase, but this would be a poor decision in a multi-person household as tripping on the way up is less injurious than tripping on the way down.

Saturday morning I downloaded the audio file while running a bath and apart from one massive blip which sounded like the cistern lid moving again, the results were sub-standard. About an hour later I was getting ready to empty the cat litter tray and as delightful as Bengals are, they do do stinky doo-doo. I'll apologise for my childish turn of phrase, but I'm trying to describe this bodily function without profanity and it's my opinion that if you live by the S word, then you'll die by the S word. As it's within easy reach, I opened the back door to let in some fresh air and noticed that the twin bolts on the gate to my immediate left were both pointing inwards. This was installed by Dave and Ted to allow access to a narrow walkway, so that I can prune the privet hedge which runs the length of my garden. I can practically relive the moment in my head, thinking that this won't do and absent-mindedly flipping them down by ninety degrees to their proper positions. Retail has also undergone a similar downturn and Saturdays have changed from being our busiest, to one of our quietest days, which gave me ample time to assess my deviant door bolts. She had already demonstrated an affinity towards metalwork and the more I thought about it, the more I realised that I'd almost missed a cast-iron, but somewhat unconventional gesture of thanks for her birthday treat. Although perhaps there was more to it than that and this may have been her own way of leaving a little aide-memoire for me, but I wouldn't remember anything remotely of significance or dubious likelihood until early evening.

You know what a stickler I am for trying to leave evidence untouched until it's been thoroughly photographed, but I was caught unawares due to a combination of early morning autopilot and blindly accepting the fact that like my cats, she normally does her business indoors. The gate hadn't been opened for about three weeks and that was only to remove a handful of wispy tendrils of ivy from our adjoining brickwork at the behest of an aforementioned next door neighbour, who is on my left side geographically, although I try to stay on his right side metaphorically. At this time of year I have to trim the taller plants inside my cage at least once a week to stop them growing through, so failing to notice that the bolts weren't properly fastened was inconceivable, especially when you factor in the additional need for litter tray ventilation in hot weather. I'm also mindful of the



calamitous consequences of the cats escaping and I would never have left them anything less than fully secured, but as both shafts still needed to be moved laterally before pressing down on the latch, they were in no real danger at all. On arriving home I carefully eased one of them back to the way I'd found it this morning and seeing that cobwebs are forgiving of minor disturbance, it's an accurate reconstruction of how they had been left, prior to my all too hasty interference. [\(182-PIC\)](#) Looking at the healthy proliferation underneath compared to their relative scarcity on top, you can tell that it had spent most of its life facing downwards.

Bunny has been able to open cupboards since kittenhood, but I doubt that his little paws had enough strength to shift metal knobs like these, as they were both slightly rusty and fairly difficult to move. This in turn made me think of that evening in January and my worries concerning a potential escape route when the beams had snapped due to a build-up of snow. I'd happened to notice four parallel scratches on the ground next to my back door and although partially obscured by plant matter, you can also see a matching set only a few inches away. [\(183-PIC\)](#) They hadn't seemed important at the time so I didn't mention them, but if these curious scrapes could be attributed to claw marks, then something of that sort of size would easily have done the trick and shifted even the stubbornest of bolts.

Sunday afternoon July 18<sup>th</sup> and having nothing new to write about I revisited earlier sections, but trying to tidy up some of my more impenetrable prose could be likened to creating a well-manicured garden out of a quagmire bordered by a thorny briar thicket, with a colony of hornets nesting inside. Being English you'd naturally expect that I would be quite good at writing it, but this was my first realisation of just how much longer the editing process could eventually take if I didn't raise the bar by at least a notch or two. After our gaming session there was an incident which I captured on camera and I thought of phoning Markie to tell him that it had happened again, but on reflection I decided my news could wait for a couple of days. In an effort to progress the investigation I left my recorder running in the top room overnight, but after having transferred it to the computer all that I could see was millpond silence. This in itself is worthy of a mention, but not a photograph as it effectively rules out any malfunction in the machine. If it was faulty then a change of venue wouldn't make the slightest difference and I should see blips on the recording, but there weren't any. Up until now I've been describing events which have all taken place in the past and catching up with the present means there's nothing left for me to tell you about. I wasn't looking forward to this degree of uncertainty or the prospect of only being able to comment on a situation as it unfolds, although for reasons of practicality make that a short while later. So for the time being I may have very little to say and with no more glimpses into the future to offer, anything which happens from this point onwards will be as much of a surprise to you as it is to me.

It was Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> of July and before signing in at 8.00pm, I'd sent the guys my photo so that Géraldine would be the first topic up for discussion. Well Markie and Geoff were busy talking about car engines, so I waited for a dip in the conversation before I could change the subject to something more pertinent, unless of course you've been looking for pointers on how to adjust tappet heads, timing belts or the like. I've had my current car for over five years now without ever feeling the need to open the bonnet, as there's nothing underneath which holds any fascination for me and by judicious use of screen wash, I don't even have to refill the bottle in-between services. Soon they were both opening their e-mails and the picture took only a few seconds to come in. (184-PIC) As you may already have gathered, it was a shot of the trap puddle I'd taken at 10.55pm on Sunday. I told them that I could see a definite pattern emerging, as I found it about ten or fifteen minutes after our gaming session had finished, which was exactly the same as the last one on June 29<sup>th</sup>. We considered the feasibility of leakage and Geoff came up with the possibility of some kind of blockage, but there again it would happen whenever I rinsed my hands so that theory wouldn't wash.

Our lengthy debate had severely encroached into what should have been playtime and this wouldn't be the only thing to overrun that night, but we were still able to fit in a couple of races before half past nine when it was late enough for Markie to put away the chickens. Just like kids they're none too keen on going to bed before dark, but leaving them outdoors would only be a good idea if you're a fox, or the Child Catcher. Getting them into their henhouse isn't an easy job at the best of times and he can either be in for a trying ten minutes, or a paltry five if they are ready to cooperate. I excused myself for a moment, leaving Geoff alone on Skype while I went to the loo and he must have heard me whooping like a demented gibbon at my discovery. It really couldn't have been timed any better and provided a perfectly targeted response to our earlier speculations. You know how it feels when an old friend excels themselves in present company, well I was literally bursting with pride and I do believe that even Geoffrey had been marginally taken aback. I had to work quickly if I wanted to surprise Markie on his return, so I loosed off a couple of shots and e-mailed the best one. (185-PIC) It was always going to be a close call, but after sitting down and adjusting his headset I mentioned that I had sent over a photo. On opening the attachment his first words were, "That's just happened hasn't it" and any question mark I've missed out would certainly have been a rhetorical one. Nobody likes the feeling of being underappreciated or hard done-by and I guessed that she'd pulled this neat stunt to bring the conversation back her way for the next half hour. Geoff was really getting creative by suggesting that our games nights may have coincided with a local sports club emptying out their plunge pool and he tried to explain exactly how it could affect my plumbing, but on matters like these I can never understand his rather twisted grasp on reality. As usual we agreed to disagree and a splendid time was had by all, apart from Justin who'd been working lates.

August 2010

He was finally able to join us on Tuesday August 3<sup>rd</sup>, two weeks later and it felt good to get the posse back together again as we were playing a Wild West shoot 'em up, which looks so realistic that you feel like you're in an interactive movie. We rounded off the night with a spot of racing, although this would be the first time we'd decided to compete in a public session and I surpassed myself by finishing first out of a group of ten competitors, which was an improvement on always bringing up the rear alongside Justin or Geoff. I'm sure that a lot of online gamers aren't even old enough to drive, let alone hold a drinking license, so they don't have the handicap of swapping a steering wheel for a joystick after a daily commute, or need to worry about alcohol impairing their youthful and inherently fast reactions. So it's not surprising that Markie always tends to beat us, as apart from being the baby of the group by a year, he is also mostly teetotal and works from home.

We'd all said our goodnights just like normal and everything would have continued that way if I hadn't needed a pee, as this was when normal chose to do a runner, followed closely on its heels by the laws of physics. I get the feeling that while I won't be doing myself any favours here, it shouldn't cause too much of a major upset to those readers who still have faith in me, as I've already blotted my copybook beyond the point of legibility. As for anyone else who's lost confidence in my credibility and I can't say I haven't given you plenty of opportunities so far, then I guess that you're just tagging along for fun, although the poking type is less desirable but understandable all the same. It's fine by me if you want to nit-pick, that's just human nature, but should we happen to meet in the afterlife I'll look forward to an apology or even a small nod of mild contrition for any sneering and sniggering. That only leaves the others who haven't quite decided which way to swing yet and find themselves teetering on the precipice of disbelief, well this could easily push you over, however don't forget I'm always here to lend a helping hand but you'll have to stick with me to hold on to it.

Let's pause for a moment before taking that small step into the bathroom where we'll find nothing you haven't come across before, as the giant leap has already happened. To recap, we've encountered three different types of puddle and I will start by listing them not only in reverse order of rarity, but mystery value too. Firstly my old favourite the pipe drip, although this is fairly easy to explain as we know that pressurised water will always try to escape confinement, but the hardest part is figuring out how the flow could be stemmed so readily without calling a plumber. Secondly we have a leaky trap to contend with, which is also capable of spraying outwards and while I don't understand how this could happen, at least I can identify it as being the likeliest source. Lastly and most crucially there's the one I found when

John came round at Easter, if you recall the small pool around the base of my toilet that had apparently appeared out of nowhere. I'd wasted valuable time by choosing to drink the undrinkable rather than think the unthinkable, which was that water didn't necessarily need to come from a pipe and could be conjured up out of the blue. Considering there was no way that it could have splashed down there so neatly from either the basin or bowl without leaving a trail, this odd event had been unexpectedly side-lined when we were diverted by a deformed strike plate which would come to dominate our attention.

I had no time to prepare myself for what I saw when I opened the door and yanked at the light-pull. The first thing I noticed were a few new dribbles near the toilet bowl and looking up, I spotted a single falling droplet just over head height making its way to the floor. Instinctively my eyes tracked downwards and I watched it land, forming the largest drip mark to the top right of the picture. [\(186-PIC\)](#) Let's try to keep a firm grip on matters here by asking myself a couple of questions. Am I sure I saw what I saw and the answer would have to be yes. Could I have proven it with a photograph and that would be an unfortunate no. You'll remember my fixation with the shape of falling droplets and taking into account the amount of time I had to spend leaning over the bathtub, you can tell that it was extremely hard to frame a fast moving object with a slow reacting shutter button. This is the reason why you're unlikely to see a picture of a trap drip, even if I found one in progress, so try to imagine the sheer frustration of actually witnessing something truly unbelievable and knowing that I could never have caught it on camera. However with hindsight I can now see that my last assumption is inaccurate, as if I had planned better and chosen a different approach, I may have been lucky enough to get the shot.

Say my New Year's resolution had been to pick out a single second within the coming year and make sure I was ready to open up the bathroom door at that precise moment in time, while simultaneously taking a photo. This would have given me a chance, albeit a small one of capturing the falling droplet. Even though there are approximately thirty one million seconds in a year to choose from, this wouldn't be as difficult as it initially appears when I more than double the possibilities of success by excluding the hours where I'm unavailable due to work or sleep. Mathematically speaking you might say that I'm being hopelessly optimistic as my odds of hitting the jackpot would be roughly equal to winning the lottery, but this has never affected ticket sales and besides, I wouldn't even have to spend a penny unless I really needed to. Maybe another point I should mention is that it seemed to have dropped from somewhere below the translucent glass globe which covers the light bulb. This is the only remaining item in the bathroom that she would recognise as everything else in there had been replaced, so I checked for any signs of dampness or condensation but it turned out to be a dry and dusty distraction. Apart from one solitary tile the

rest were spillage free and with no other traces of dribbling, this ruled out dripping hands in search of a towel as a possible cause. Furthermore it had been about an hour since my last visit and given the hot weather you'd think that they would have evaporated, but you can clearly spot reflections of the flash which only occur in standing water.

Until I looked it up, I never would have guessed that there are anything up to 30 grams of suspended water for every cubic metre of my bathroom. Taking a conservative estimate of two thirds of that figure, this would still be capable of brimming a medium-sized wine glass which is more than enough to produce a few measly droplets wherever she wanted, so I could hardly say they came out of thin air. The only missing ingredient was some tactical chilling to make it fall like smart rain and despite the fact that I haven't directly experienced the phenomenon myself, forming cold spots is an area in which most ghosts are traditionally adept. What might initially appear to be a random arrangement of splashes was turned into a vaguely geometric pattern when the last one landed and this may be seen as a goose step too far for even a detail Nazi like me, but there's also a possible representation of the cat's tail reflected on my toilet.

In order to double check that I wasn't seeing things, I filled up my syringe and with a careful thumb on the plunger, began to experiment at different drop heights. Of course when I held it higher, there was more time for speed to build up which equated to a larger circumference at ground level. The one I purportedly saw falling ended up measuring three centimetres in diameter, whereas the rest were a maximum of two and there was no way that I could replicate this discrepancy without lifting the syringe well above my basin. Fortunately I hadn't needed to work out the precise dimensions at the time, as this is a grossly undervalued and seldom used unique selling point for Indian Peacock slate. Markie had recommended these particular flooring tiles for their good looks and reasonable cost, but he'd failed to mention that I would be able to distinguish features in the geology which could prove useful as a forensic yardstick. However what really convinced me that I'd experienced something beyond extraordinary wouldn't be found until the following morning, when I discovered a full glass of cider which I had totally forgotten about and abandoned next to the kitchen sink.

A week later it was Tuesday August 10<sup>th</sup> and the four of us were having a right old laugh playing Split Second, when I needed to use the bathroom around 9.50pm. By the way while we're on the subject of racing games, this one has turned out to be my all-time favourite and I'll tell you why. The person who's out front, which is inevitably Markie, has a clear and unfair advantage as it's difficult for anyone else to catch up or overtake when there's so much tussling going on for second place. However they have cleverly countered that by designing city circuits and allowing you to trigger detonations ahead, which with careful timing can collapse an entire building

on the lead car or send it flying into nearby water. That's why I find Formula One so dull, no matter whether it's simulated or real as most tracks lack any potential for a dockside dunking let alone downtown demolition, even if the governing body decided to level the playing field by relaxing a few rules vis-à-vis the tactical use of explosives. Monaco could be the perfect place to start if they wanted to bring back the excitement factor, but that probably wouldn't go down too well with the locals.

I'd never have imagined that the night could get any better, but there again I wasn't expecting to find a trap puddle which resembled a footprint and although it's a little misshapen around the toes, you wouldn't expect this method to look as neat as my earlier chalk tracing. [\(187-PIC\)](#) It's become increasingly obvious that these particular leaks are most likely to happen on gaming nights, so I decided to check back on previous examples and all bar two of them have followed this pattern. I think that she must enjoy the friendly competition and welcomes it as an opportunity to tease any non-believers, so maybe we should start a league table consisting of the five of us, whereby a trickling trap would make her the overall session winner. In theory Géraldine would now be on top of our leaderboard with the puddle representing her champagne celebrations on the podium, like finishing first in a Grand Prix but without the exorbitant dry cleaning or bar bill.

With the exception of receiving a brief message from Teresa wishing me happy birthday, which must have been prompted by a Facebook reminder, the next two weeks were staggeringly uneventful. I decided not to reply, as I've been brought up to believe that you're only required to say thank you when greetings are accompanied by cash, or perhaps a book token. My manners may be slightly old-fashioned and I hoped this didn't come over as rudeness, but if I were to return the compliment on her birthday, I'd be able to learn about current protocol so there would be no excuse for any future transgressions of etiquette. Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> of August and Andy was over as he couldn't make it on Monday. The evening was going well and seeing that nothing new had happened since his last visit, I didn't want to spoil it so I purposely avoided the subject, giving him a well-earned respite from the very discussions he liked least. When his cab arrived a few hours later, we said our goodbyes and I settled down to watch TV before calling it a night. I stayed up for thirty minutes, then turned everything off and headed for the bathroom.

You've probably worked out by now that I'm not exactly what you would call house-proud, but even I can't begin to justify the disgraceful and embarrassing nature of this next photo so I won't bother. All I'll say in my defence is that countless atrocities have been committed over the years in the name of science and this one pales into insignificance by comparison. Due to a shortage of more promising targets, I had been following the formation of a round blotch on the basin which ended up looking like a

long-necked moustachioed gentleman with a balding head and blatant comb-over. A style still known by hairdressers or footballers of a certain age as a bobby cut. I'd already decided that this development was probably irrelevant and unworthy of mention, but before I knew it someone had persuaded me otherwise by forcing my hand. My surveillance had been going on for a week or two and hopefully you'll understand why I'd banned all cleaning agents, as they would have compromised the evidence like a farmer using his plough to excavate a mosaic. [\(188-PIC\)](#) This was taken a minute before midnight and by zooming in you can see the curious mark I'd been monitoring next to the plughole, though please forgive its insanitary surroundings as they represent a testament to my powers of self-restraint, regardless of possible health issues or public humiliation. To be honest it's really not that bad and I've been responsible for far worse breaches of hygiene in the past, so if I'd wanted you to see this particular shot then I would either have scrubbed up first, or adopted shock tactics by throwing in a sprinkling of maggots for old time's sake. However this ugly duckling of a photo has a hidden swan to reveal, although you may not have spotted it yet as all too often we're overly preoccupied with mundane distractions and leave life's true wonders unnoticed. I couldn't resist e-mailing the picture to Andy and despite my promise that he'd have a night off, I didn't feel too bad about ringing him after hours as it had just turned morning.

Let me take this opportunity to quickly explain that the metal chain which used to connect the plug to my basin had long since come adrift and in an effort to maintain some semblance of order amidst the chaos, I'd wound it up inside to keep things tidy. Luckily when I examined my archive, there was one single photo taken eight days ago which shows precisely what I'm trying to describe. [\(189-PIC\)](#) I can say with all certainty that it's stayed in the same position for at least a couple of weeks, as I never fill up the basin to wash my hands and the only useful piece of information gleaned from observing Andy's toiletry habits way back in November, was his similar preference for soaping them under flowing water. Don't forget that you weren't supposed to see this one either, but now you're here let's take a look at the bizarrely shaped blemish in its infancy. Being circular by nature, this was the sort of discolouration that you would normally expect to find directly beneath the tap instead of a short distance away, which may be why I felt compelled to observe its progress.

We haven't got long before he picks up the phone as Andy's a bit of a night owl, so here's a close-up for you and I can't help thinking that it looks like someone has been playing with the magnets again. [\(190-PIC\)](#) At the time I had absolutely no idea that each and every one of my future attempts to recreate such a simple design would end in abject failure, but all the same I sensed it might prove tricky. Somehow the chain had been either been flung, or carefully laid against the wall to form a vertical sculpture and this is perfectly safe for you to try at home, so feel free to give it a go. If yours isn't

detached yet then a concerted tug should be all that's needed, but please ask for permission from the water bill payer first. After apologising for the lateness of my call I got straight down to business and asked him whether this had been his doing, but I wasn't expecting a straightforward answer as he can be evasive on matters like these at any hour of the day. All he would admit to was having some recollection of knocking his hand against the plug, but this didn't even begin to answer my question so the following morning I e-mailed him from work. Of course I never got a reply, but in the great scheme of things that didn't amount to much of a setback as I knew this one had Géraldine written all over it.

<Hi Andy

Sorry again about my unsolicited phone call and I know I've already asked the question, but I may have been a little too far gone to follow what you said. You told me about knocking the sink plug, but my recollection is that it was still upside down with the chain coiled inside when I went to the loo just before your cab arrived. On my next visit to the bathroom I couldn't help noticing that it had been flipped over and half of the contents were stacked up against the tiles. Please can you have a really good think about it and let me know your version of events. Take your time as I'm in no hurry, but it would probably be best, all things considered if you reply to my home e-mail address.

Cheers

Nick>



September 2010

It's now Wednesday the 1<sup>st</sup>, a week later and I have absolutely nothing of interest to report apart from this important piece of news. Today I arranged to meet up with mum and Ron for a meal on Friday evening, as they would be spending the weekend at a local hotel. If everything goes according to plan, they'll come round to visit on Saturday morning and see a side of me that neither of them would ever have expected. The only trouble with that is my house is an absolute tip as usual and it will certainly take more than waving a duster around to make the place look presentable, so I've booked a day off work tomorrow to clean up. My biggest problem is one which I've been considering for a while and that's whether I should leave the chain sculpture intact or remove it. Admittedly it would be nice if they were able to actually witness evidence in situ instead of just seeing a photograph, but this was overshadowed by one major drawback. It would severely hamper cleaning the basin, as I'd have to take great care not to disturb the structure and that meant demarcating an exclusion zone of two or three inches. This would look messy and take far longer to achieve, but nevertheless it was the course of action that I found myself leaning towards.

The next morning I took a bath whilst still debating what to do for the best and shortly before I was ready to get out, my mind had been made up for me. Being underwater at the time I didn't see what happened, but when I resurfaced from dunking my head to wash off the shampoo I noticed that the top loop had collapsed, leaving a perfectly symmetrical and matching pair underneath. Do a ball count if you don't believe me. [\(191-PIC\)](#) This was ideal timing as the decision had been snatched out of my hands at the last minute and now I would have no compunction about clearing it away, after I'd taken the photographic record you've just seen of course. Could I have done something to cause it to collapse, well I can't see how that would be likely as my daily bathing routine isn't subject to change or inconsistency and the item had already been in place for over a week. So with no further impediments to deal with, the house was soon spick and span from top to bottom of the ground floor, as I wouldn't be giving them any reason to go venturing upstairs.

Sometimes things go so accordingly to plan that you could almost believe they were pre-ordained. It was Friday September 3<sup>rd</sup> and being a dutiful son I'd already done the best I could to prep my mother in advance, as I had posted her a copy of "Ghost Hunters" by Deborah Blum. She is one of a small band of science writers who have risked besmirching their reputations by putting forward a well-reasoned argument for the survival of life after death. Although let down by its rather sensational and less than academic title, this is a fascinating account which details the formation of the Society for Psychical Research in the 1880s. Some of the finest minds at the time were involved in this pioneering enterprise and even they were ridiculed by

the establishment, so that will doubtless be of immense comfort when it happens to me. The astonishing list of luminaries who subsequently became members or affiliates defies belief, but searching for the existence of an afterlife by committee involved exploring plenty of dead ends. Apparently after much hithering, thithering and dithering they found tangible proof in less than five percent of cases investigated, which is why I prefer to work alone.

I arrived at the hotel just after six o'clock and during the course of an excellent meal we chatted about various matters including the book, which she said had been really interesting. Tastes can vary enormously between generations, but I knew that mum would be bound to enjoy it as she's had a couple of brushes with the supernatural herself. I asked if she could tell me her ghost story again, as Ron may not have known about it before and this would only bolster my credibility in preparation for what he was going to hear tomorrow.

One day she'd been walking the family dog with Joan, a friendly neighbour and soon to be grandparent, who wanted to pop in to visit her daughter before the baby popped out. Her rented flat occupied the top floor of a house belonging to a solicitor and they wandered down a side alley to the back garden, where mum waited while Joan went round the front to check whether anyone was at home. Seeing that she was well-behaved for the most part, Tansy had been allowed off the lead to have a good sniff around, but spotting a door left slightly ajar proved too much for her canine curiosity. As the 1960s version of my mother approached the newly opened doorway, there was an older woman standing at the sink wearing a white blouse with an apron over a black skirt, so she apologised for any intrusion and hastily called her dog back. The only reason this struck her as odd was despite clearly having attracted the lady's undivided attention, she scarcely looked over her shoulder for more than a moment or two and didn't utter a single word. At the time mum thought little of it, but after mentioning her encounter in conversation she was told in no uncertain terms that there couldn't possibly have been anyone in the kitchen, as the owner never had house guests and he didn't employ domestic help. Joan didn't want her daughter becoming worried or distressed in the later stages of pregnancy, so she quickly advised my mother to forget all about it, but some memories last forever and recollections of distant events can be as fresh as if they happened only yesterday.

In addition to this I reminded her of an incident which occurred on the morning of dad's funeral, when she'd been doing the washing up and a glass drying on the draining board shattered into pieces. There was nobody else around when it happened and with few other options to consider, she wondered if he could possibly have sent her a sign. Later on when she told me about the unexplained breakage I said something comforting like "Well

you never know”, although inwardly I’d already dismissed it as a random coincidence of applied thermodynamics, as Géraldine wouldn’t be dead for another year yet and back then I knew no better.

I’d already pre-warned the two of them that I would have to leave before nine in order to get back in time for my gaming session and they were fine about it. This may seem a little mean of me, but a fair few years ago I’d told mum about my curious episode involving the water heater, so the longer I stayed the more chance there was of her remembering and bringing it up again. Complications were the last thing I needed, as I would have to resort to being evasive and risk spoiling all my hard work by changing the subject, or lose face by telling a fib to save them from a troubled night’s sleep. I’d been left to determine the agenda for tomorrow, so I asked them to meet me at home in the morning saying we would take things from there, but I made a point of promising that it was going to be a very exciting day. Luckily the evening couldn’t have gone any better and I was soon driving home for a proper drink, as I didn’t want a sleepless night myself. After all I’d only had a single beer followed by a pint of “Thames Sludge”, but until it catches on you might have to give the bartender a hand when ordering. It’s a non-alcoholic delight, which may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it consists of a small orange juice mixed with a bottle of ginger ale topped up with Coca-Cola and ice, although don’t be afraid to ask for a straw as this doubles as a much needed swizzle stick. Of course it goes without saying that apart from using another reputable brand of cola you should never ever fiddle with the recipe, but feel free to substitute the name of your favourite silted waterway. Fortunately my self-medication worked a treat and I was in the enviable position of waking up in the morning feeling refreshed without being hung-over, which takes years of practice I can tell you. I still miscalculate occasionally as it’s not an exact science, but you know that’s the kind I prefer. Now before we go any further, take a moment to calculate the accumulated dread of all of your visits to the dentist, then weigh it against the total amount of joy from every Christmastime you’ve ever known. I’ll apologise in advance to Buddhists and any other party-pooing Nativity deniers who have been blessed with good teeth, as you guys will really struggle with my analogy, but it’s the best way of describing how I felt as they arrived.

Obviously I don’t need to go into the details of what I said as you know them already, but I remember starting with as clear a declaration of my personal sanity that any mouth could manage under the circumstances. After the first half hour had passed I felt more relaxed and at ease with recounting this strangest of stories, which was probably down to cider consumption rather than natural composure. I consulted my collection of photos, using it as a sequential timeframe whilst drawing their attention to the relevant shots and talking them through any observations I had to offer. The problem with trying to cram over a year’s events into a single day is

information overload and I can't remember hearing any complaints when I suggested adjourning for a pub lunch around one o'clock. Chewing over their reactions so far, Ron was always going to prove the more sceptical of the two and with no personal experiences of this nature to draw upon, I realised that I wouldn't be able to change his mind even after the second instalment. Mum however was both biologically and historically motivated to trust me, yet she had to come to terms with the sort of revelations which put my last one on their previous visit distinctly in the shade. The afternoon session spilled over into early evening and I can guarantee that her poor head must have been spinning as they drove back to their hotel. Feeling utterly exhausted all I could manage was turning on the TV and vegging out on the sofa until bedtime, but whatever I watched I couldn't stop the theme tune from "Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em", constantly repeating in one of those annoying sections of my brain which can't easily be switched off.

Monday the 20<sup>th</sup> and having left things a while to sink in, I thought it was about time to write them a short letter as a follow-up to their visit. As we weren't all that busy at work, I'd managed to get it done during a quiet afternoon despite feeling a little under the weather, although I didn't know whether this was down to a bug which had been doing the rounds or the after-effects of a boozy weekend. Unfortunately I was right as rain the next morning and I couldn't be sure if my hangover had simply worn off, or whether the germs weren't able to handle a mild dose of alcohol poisoning, but this is so often the case with preventative medicine.

< Hi there and hope you are both well,

I thought that I would take a moment to let you know how things are with me. The story you heard that Saturday was a concentrated version of events which have spanned years, so I had a lot to fit in. I probably gave you the impression that these odd occurrences were commonplace, but certainly in the past few months they have become a rarity. Nothing that I am aware of has happened since I found the last puddle and I've come to expect them in the bathroom, but this time it was somewhere else. Coming downstairs on the Sunday morning after your visit, I noticed that either Bunny or Jasper had been sick on the living room rug. Not the first time I've had to deal with this sort of accident of course. I could also see that about a thimbleful of clear liquid had spilled over onto the stone floor, so I fetched some toilet tissue, although it looked more like normal tap water and there was no sign of the slimy consistency you would expect from a cat's stomach.

Having carefully picked up and carried the rug to my back garden, I draped it over a wooden chair before removing the worst of the mess with a stiff brush. At times like these my natural obsession with cleanliness and hygiene can really pay dividends, as if I hadn't given it a thorough shake for good measure I would have been none the wiser. The sky was rather cloudy and

looking down I honestly thought that it had started to rain, as I could see a large accumulation of water splashes gathering on the paving slabs. After a second or two I realised that they were coming from the rug, so I popped it back onto the chair before grabbing a glass from the kitchen in order to evaluate a sample, but there wasn't enough left for me to collect. A further surprise was finding a trail of drips from my living room leading out to the garden, like when you wash a sweater in the bathtub and take it outside to dry. So I can effectively rule out the cats, as losing that amount of fluid would be life-threatening and necessitate a trip to a somewhat sceptical or downright dismissive vet.

You might remember I'd been drinking sparkling water at one point during the afternoon, but I would have needed to knock the bottle over to produce that sort of shower, although it was more likely to be absorbed by woolly tufts or socks and trouser bottoms than lie on the surface overnight. I'm sorry I didn't take any pictures, as my cats may be photogenic, but their sick certainly isn't and perhaps this was part of an opportunistic ploy to deter me from doing so. The only time that I ever sit on the rug is when the two of you come over, as I normally prefer my sofa though not solely for reasons of comfort and guess who always used to occupy that very same position whenever we spent an evening together. As you know, it was an important day for me and one that I'd been waiting for since last year. So it only seems logical then, that a special occasion like this should have been marked in an extraordinary manner.

Love

Nick>

On getting home from work I found a small white envelope lying on the porch floor and recognising the pre-printed address label, I sat down on the doorstep so that I could read it straight away. It was from mum of course and I felt quite nervous opening the letter as I'd wanted mine to reach her first, but instead of that they had crossed in the post. She told me I'd been right when I said that the day would have a considerable impact on them, but I soon realised this was partially due to my careless lack of forethought. A few months ago during a conversation about job security, I'd informed the lads at work that I wanted the shop to be theirs if I were to die and quite understandably, they asked me whether this was mentioned in my will. I'd written one a while back naming mum as my sole beneficiary, but the first chance I had to tell her about this change of plan was during our evening meal on the Friday night. Although like a complete imbecile, I hadn't taken into account the fact that she might tie it into what I was going to say to them the next day. I remember wincing when she wrote about arriving back at their hotel and worrying that I may have been considering the idea of joining Géraldine. However mum said that the following morning, her faith

in my common sense had returned and banished those thoughts entirely. She went on to say that it really had been an amazing day and followed this by no less than four exclamation marks, but I was reading too much into some of the “signs” I pointed out to them. On the other hand, some of my happenings were more difficult to explain and that’s why she remained open-minded. The letter had finished with a valid question and this wasn’t the first time that I’ve come across it. If someone had been trying to make contact, why wouldn’t they have chosen a more straightforward or at least less cryptic form of communication?

This seems to be a common factor in cases like these, so maybe there’s a shared code of conduct amongst the dead as they don’t want to reveal too many details and risk defusing the best bombshell of your life. That’s if formal religion hasn’t already spoilt it for you, by giving the game away and providing all of the answers in a handy book. There are endless reasons why information should never be passed over from the other side and I haven’t the time to list them all, so I’ll just pick my favourite. The first words we ever speak are predictably something dull like *mama* or *dada* and our last are rarely that memorable either, as perfect timing is crucial. Being mere moments away from death, you may have delivered one of the most profound or witty remarks of all time, but this will be declared null and void if it’s followed by “Ouch that hurts.” We all love watching people’s reactions to nice surprises, so just think how much of a letdown it would be for the ones who have turned up to welcome you into the next world, if your opening line consisted of nothing more original than a well-rehearsed and deadpan, “Oh hi there, sorry I’m late.”

It was a relief to reach the end of the letter pretty much unscathed and I felt more than happy with my mother’s observations, though maybe I wouldn’t have got off so lightly if Ron had been given a freer hand in its composition. The evening passed most pleasurably and it was soon time for a super-chilled glass of cider. This doesn’t mean to say that I hadn’t already been drinking of course as I always keep a few bottles of Sainsbury’s Vintage in the fridge, so allow me to explain myself more clearly. A number of years ago Steve and Kate had bought me an acrylic freezer mug, which was ideal for those times when you fancy an extra cold one. As an added bonus it was “Simpsons” merchandise from one of the best written and funniest shows on TV, with a picture of Homer in his underpants holding a glass of Duff beer. Choosing the right gift for somebody can often be a hit or miss affair, but I warmed to it so much that I’d rudely asked if there was any chance of another, as I couldn’t find them for sale locally and two would be sufficient to last me until bedtime. Although deep down I still secretly resented the Americans for leaving us way behind after the sad decline of British comedy, together with the vast majority of modern music if I’m being honest, but speaking from experience I haven’t been able to do much to redress that particular balance.

Here's a little known fact for you, but there was a time in my life when I had aspirations towards becoming a musician. Having always admired people who could play an instrument, I'd tried my hand at the guitar, various keyboards and finally bought myself a drum kit, but couldn't find anything which I was even remotely good at until I discovered "Music 2000" on the Sony PlayStation. Up until then I'd used my console exclusively for playing games, but a software company called Codemasters had released a virtual sound studio where you could stitch together pre-recorded samples and riffs, which made it relatively easy to make up your own tracks. Around the time when Géraldine was at the height of her illness and most delusional, I'd been at my wit's end as nothing I could say or do seemed to help, so as a last resort I tried an alternative kind of therapy. With her current situation weighing on my mind I had put together a demo version of a tune called "Can't cope", which I would have to class as euphoric electronic dance, with a hint of whale song thrown in because I'd heard it used on meditation CDs as a calming influence. I bought her a PlayStation as a surprise present, before taking it round so that she could listen to my half-finished efforts and hopefully start composing something for herself.

She hadn't been doing any drawing or artwork recently, which was so out of character and having exhausted all other options, I thought that re-igniting her creative abilities seemed like the best chance of getting back the girl I once knew. If there's a magic bullet to cure disorders of this nature then mine either misfired or ricocheted off target, as she appeared to be lost in a world of her own making and showed no interest whatsoever, but I wasn't going to give up just like that. During my next visit I showed her how to construct a simple drum pattern and layer instruments on top, saying that she should give it a go, but when I called round a few days later the console had been unplugged from the wall so I didn't pursue the matter. Her mental state had gone from bad to worse and it became increasingly obvious that she needed professional help, as my futile attempts to suggest a logical but contradictory point of view were just driving a wedge between us, so there was really nothing else I could offer apart from company.

When Géraldine went into care and I should mention that this wasn't of her own volition, she found it hard to forgive me for my perceived participation in such an inexcusable violation of personal liberty, although after the drugs kicked in they provided us with a temporary reconciliation. Fortunately the secure hospital facility where she was staying happened to be on my route home, so I frequently popped in to visit her and I noticed a substantial improvement in the weeks that followed. I can't remember precisely how long they kept her in, but after being certified well enough to be allowed to go home I was dismayed to find that she avoided me for the next few months and ignored my text messages. You can imagine how much this hurt, but I suspected that she had discontinued her medication prematurely and wasn't yet fully recovered. I finished off my little composition, as that

gave me a feeling of being close to her in some small way and after piecing together the discarded parts which didn't fit, before I knew it I had the basis of a new one. It's odd because I have had plenty of friends in my time, but never one who has inspired me as much as Géraldine and I became obsessed with compiling enough music to fill a CD. I even surprised myself by the countless hours I put into this project, which was entirely without precedent, but I'd never taken on such an all-consuming task before and couldn't see it ever happening again.

One day I was quietly sitting behind the counter at work and minding my own business, when I spotted a familiar face outside peeking through the window. She was reluctant to come in, so after an awkward few minutes of furtive eye contact and pussyfooting around on the pavement, we arranged to meet up on neutral ground. We'd decided on a pub about four miles out of town and a friend must have dropped her off as she didn't own a car. After a shaky start, our boundaries had been established and we successfully skirted around any contentious issues for an hour or two before I asked if she wanted a lift home. I had sheepishly mentioned that I'd been working on a new song which she was keen to hear, so we took a detour back to my place and spent the rest of the evening catching up over a bottle of red wine. Things soon returned to the way they used to be, but I often wondered how much she was keeping back and not telling me. A long time passed before she started to open up and I learnt that the voices in her head were still present, only now they seemed to be under control rather than destructively rampant, so I looked out for any signs of relapse but there was nothing to be seen.

In fact quite the opposite as she had recently moved into a new flat and I could tell that her job at the college was going well. She had previously been staying at a friend's house until some degenerate lowlife broke in to steal everything he considered worth taking, which was basically her stereo and motorbike jacket. This generous offer of accommodation was only supposed to be an interim measure and she had already been looking for somewhere else, but I'm certain that the burglary would have speeded up the process. What impressed me the most was her resilience, as Géraldine bounced back almost immediately by saying that somebody obviously needed them more than she did and it's moments of selfless forgiveness like this which stay with you forever, shine on you crazy diamond.

Luckily she knew someone who worked in a hi-fi shop and they were able to pass-on a part-ex system which had been cluttering up the stockroom in the days before eBay. As a special treat I even sent Tony round to install it. I also asked her if she would like my smart waterproof jacket, as since buying a car I no longer cycled to work, but French girls are renowned for their sense of style and bright yellow Gore-Tex didn't exactly cut the mustard, so it was politely yet firmly refused. This made me smile as I could tell that



she was back to her old self again and I failed to spot any major clues which suggested otherwise, because there weren't any. Of course Géraldine never did normal, so it was difficult trying to establish a baseline and even with the benefit of hindsight, I still can't work out how she went from being fine to taking her own life in such a short space of time. Apart from one final addition tacked on as an afterthought, I had almost completed the album by March 2001 and I'd have to say that I was really pleased with a couple of the tracks, but never got the opportunity to play it to her from beginning to end before she died in April. I'll put a copy on the website so that you can have a listen for yourselves and who knows, maybe in the future people will be buying the book just to gain access to my music, but I very much doubt it.

So getting back to Monday night where we left off, it was around half past nine when I opened the ice box door which takes up the top third of my refrigerator and I could see that they were sitting next to each other as usual, but the liquid in one of them hadn't frozen. This didn't make any sense to me, as I always do the washing up before going to work and leave it to dry on the draining board, apart from my two mugs of course which go straight back into the deep freeze. Perhaps I'd been in a hurry and had left one of them beside the sink, but I couldn't remember doing so or correcting my error when I arrived home. I struggled to come to grips with my double forgetfulness, but put it down to the fact that I may have been equally distracted by thinking about writing mum's letter in the morning and then unexpectedly reading hers around eight hours later. Either that or I was really starting to lose the plot as some of my friends had already suspected. Fortunately there was no immediate cause for concern as I automatically defaulted to the more serviceable one, leaving its less chilled-out twin in place. [\(192-PIC\)](#) Out of curiosity I checked again just before midnight, but the mug remained unfrozen and the flattish dots which represented Homer's nipples were still anatomically correct. There are another couple of small points I should mention, you'll notice that the interior walls are free from the frosty build-up which can reduce cooling capacity and my tubs of ice cream were the perfect consistency, as was confirmed by a thorough analysis of experimental dessert.

I had finished washing up by 9.00am on Tuesday the 21<sup>st</sup> and mindful of yesterday's negligence, I made sure that I didn't make the same mistake of leaving a mug on the drainer again. However when I opened the top door to pop it in I found that the troublesome one was still liquefied, which meant I could cross the onset of short-term memory loss off my list of possible explanations. I even briefly thought about moving it further back, but quickly decided that wouldn't make any difference as the temperature should be uniform throughout a sealed compartment. So despite an overnight stopover in sub-zero conditions, the freezer mug hadn't fulfilled its minimum requirement and couldn't even compete with the cheaper, but

less elegant alternative of pouring water into a plastic pint glass before stacking an empty one inside, not that I've tried it.

Dearie me, I haven't explained yet why this should be significant or even deemed worthy of mention. Let's go back to Friday 17<sup>th</sup> of September and the mixed fortunes it would bring, which were only marginally preferable to the misfortunes of the supposedly unlucky 13<sup>th</sup>, although I've survived three of these in my time with you without incident. The four of us had been enjoying a round of golf and aside from a convincing win, I was beyond ecstatic to get my first hole in one. You know how long we've been playing this game, so it was a real achievement for me and now I might be in with a chance of catching up with sharkie Markie, who had a precocious two under his belt already. By the time we'd hung up our headsets my glass of cider was approaching room temperature, but I had the perfect remedy for that waiting for me in the freezer compartment. Somewhat inconveniently, both mugs had stuck to the ice cube tray where I always leave them to dry, as I don't want stalagmites building up on the shelf and any drips would only help to refill it. I grabbed one of them to shake it loose, but unfortunately I shook too hard as the other came free at the same time and was in the process of describing a graceful arc towards my kitchen floor. Within a fraction of a second I'd made the painful mistake of using instinct over logic and rather annoyingly there was nothing I could do to override it. Basically my brain was quick to classify any kind of transparent drinking vessel as a glass and it didn't have the time to work out that plastic tumblers are designed to be shatter-proof. When an object is falling, my subconscious mind makes a snap decision as to whether it's likely to break or not and if the answer is yes, I'll try to put the nearest available body part in the way to cushion a crash landing. Thankfully I'm relieved to say that bladed items or anything on fire have the reverse effect. So reactions overtook reason and I moved a shoeless foot beneath the calculated point of impact. It landed rim-first on my left big toe, a little short of the nail and to say that this didn't hurt would be just the sort of false statement I've been trying to avoid +9999999999999999.

Now it's taken a brave editing decision not to delete those last fifteen nines and the preceding plus sign, but I'll tell you why I left them in. Jasper has been having a bit of a rough ride recently due to a burst anal gland and after visiting the vets, he's had to wear an Elizabethan collar for a week or so while it heals. He hasn't learnt Bunny's technique of scooting his bum across the rug from time to time, which looks distinctly unsanitary, but effectively clears any blockages and this is the main reason I prefer to sit on the sofa. Jumping onto my lap for a much needed head scratch and going nose to nose like Eskimos, his ungainly plastic cone must have pressed briefly against the right hand side of the keyboard as when I gazed up again, the characters had appeared onscreen. You already know that I'm not adverse to third party contributions and this looked vaguely in context so I kept it in.

I removed my sock to check for disfigurement and although nothing was outwardly amiss I suspected that it would be badly bruised by morning, but on waking up the following day there were no signs of discolouration, inflammation or mortification. However by Sunday the 19<sup>th</sup> my big toe looked like a small, but angry aubergine and when I mentioned this to Markie, he said that the injury must have been deep which is why it had taken a while to come to the surface. It took more than a month before I could eat in bare feet without feeling slightly queasy, so I'm betting that the bone was chipped and I'll willingly bequeath the toe to science if you're still desperate to bring my judgement into question, albeit on a posthumous medical technicality.

Before we continue there are two possible tie-ins here, even though I'd have to agree that this first one consists of more barrel than scrapings. The last time Andy came over, we were watching an episode of "The Simpsons" and he told me his parents just didn't get it, so after a quick search I handed him the card that mum had chosen for my birthday. It showed a doctor asking a patient who was particularly hard of hearing, "What are the symptoms?" and of course the reply had been "An American cartoon family." Not the funniest of gags I'll admit, but unlicensed products aren't subject to the same stringent standards of quality control. Now you already know that the mugs were a present from Steve and Kate, but I'd lost all contact with her after they split up a few years ago, although we'd recently been e-mailing each other to arrange a weekend so she could come down for a visit. In the past she's always seen me as a hopeless cause whenever we discussed her frankly insane, yet endearingly assured belief in the supernatural and back then I was even less convinced than Andy is now, but an altogether better listener. A couple of my photos had aroused her curiosity and when she proposed that we should conduct a séance, I was eager to give it another go as once every ten years or so could hardly be seen as harassment. I know these may seem like tenuous links, but don't forget that I'm only suggesting possible connections and it's up to you to decide whether they're relevant or not. However giving the dead the benefit of the doubt is not only respectful, but also useful preparation for leading a harmonious afterlife.

Getting back to Tuesday the 21<sup>st</sup>, when I returned from work I found that both mugs were frozen solid. I logged onto Skype at eight o'clock and once again Markie was the only one online, so we put our heads together to see if either of us could come up with a viable explanation for this latest development. It was fair to say that we didn't make much progress, but this didn't stop us formulating a plan for a thorough investigation and any ideas of his which I considered surplus to requirements will be conveniently forgotten by tomorrow. Before going to bed I identified and removed the problematic one, leaving it to thaw overnight so I could check for any hairline cracks which may account for such unpredictable behaviour.

On Wednesday morning I carefully examined every last square inch with my magnifying glass and apart from the smallest of indentations on the base, there was nothing to compromise its performance. A vigorous leak-free shaking confirmed that the damage was purely cosmetic, so I popped it back in the freezer and went off to work. Having rescheduled Monday's visit, Andy was round that evening and I always aim to hand him a bottle of cider from the fridge as soon as he sits down, so I took this as an opportunity to slyly check the top compartment without disturbing his peace of mind unnecessarily. You see I hadn't mentioned anything yet and if this turned out to be a one-off anomaly, then there was no point in stretching his patience by bringing it up. Needless to say I soon felt obliged to offer a full and comprehensive explanation when I showed him that one of the mugs might as well have been filled with antifreeze, although it had worked perfectly the day before. Nothing had changed by the time his cab arrived at midnight, or even eight hours later when I removed it in the morning and I wondered how a fall could possibly affect the liquid inside. Remembering the one remaining item I hadn't pruned from Tuesday night's investigative agenda, I took the mug to work and asked Tony if he could do me a favour by testing it at home. I told him I wanted to find out if it had gone faulty, or whether my freezer may be in need of attention, but being used to solving problems of a far greater technical nature I could sense he was more humouring than helping me by playing along. The next day he reported back saying that it was fully frozen after three and a half hours, so I thanked him for his attention to detail while secretly admiring the sort of dazzling sheen I've never been able to achieve, as this can only come from someone who owns a drying-up cloth.

A whole week has passed since I was mugged and after the remedial visit to Tony's house it had performed well within specification. Although tonight everything was topsy-turvy, as now the inability to freeze had temporarily transferred to the other one, but any such problems disappeared within twenty four hours and both of them resumed normal functionality without misbehaving again. If we put aside the possibility that somebody has been playing games or trying to communicate even more cryptically than normal, there must be a practical explanation which doesn't involve Géraldine and the best I could come up with was built-in obsolescence. Maybe the fluid had somehow degraded over the years, after all it wouldn't be designed to have an indefinite shelf life as no manufacturer likes to make a product which lasts forever, not even God.

While we're on the subject, I should really take a moment to clear up what these three letters actually mean to me, as I've used them a modest number of times already and substantially more if you count anagrams. I'm referring to a concept rather than a specific individual of course as I've no solid proof that such a being is real, but there again I have none which conclusively proves he, she or it isn't. Like any good practicing agnostic I

am neither God-fearing nor God-sneering, so I'm keeping my options open by using the word hypothetically. If I were the kind of person to exclaim "OMG", I wouldn't be name dropping and most of us will think nothing of sending Christmas cards with Santa Claus on the front, but that doesn't imply it's endorsing our belief in him. For all I know this particular pair of cultural icons could in fact be two rolled into one, if you allow for a seasonal amount of weight gain craftily concealed by a change of outfit and I'm willing to bet that nobody's ever seen both of them in the same room together. Following on from that, if we're talking about a case of mistaken identity then it doesn't stop there, as Santa could be a typo for Satan and Saint Nick was probably referred to as old Nick before he died. This is all too confusing and you'd think that the time I spent studying religion at school would have helped me, but it was more akin to indoctrination rather than education so I'm still undecided. In my opinion taking a stab in the dark at discerning the truth from the many alternatives on offer, would be as pointless as trying to pin a tail on a donkey that's wandered off. If you really were to tie me down, my understanding of the word God is that it's like a collective noun for everything which exists, either inside or outside of our universe. Here lies my major problem though, as strictly speaking this means that the first letter shouldn't be capitalised unless it's used at the beginning of a sentence. However seeing that an upper case G is just about the only thing which atheists and believers both agree on, I don't want to jeopardise this unholy alliance with petty semantics when a quick press on the shift key will keep everyone happy. Language was never designed to be concise enough to accommodate a subject of this magnitude in a few short lines without musical accompaniment and my efforts leave a lot to be desired, so take a listen to the track "God Said" by Todd Rundgren, as he puts it far more eloquently than I ever could.

The next couple of weeks passed without incident and I was relegated to a life of normality, so I bided my time by conducting a little research. I have been reading a remarkable book called "Swan on a Black Sea", co-written by two women who had come to know each other through the Suffragette movement and their shared skills of mediumship. Although when they finally got around to it, one of them would have to take on the role of backseat driver as she was slightly hampered by being dead at the time. The way this worked involved a technique called automatic writing, whereby you hold a pen over a blank sheet of paper and if your hand starts moving unconsciously, it's supposedly acting as a conduit for a message from the other side. This apparently has its inherent problems as a reliable method of communication, because the sender could be on a completely different wavelength to the receiver, which would lead to confusion and ambiguity. However on this occasion a posthumous clairvoyant was in contact with a living one, so who better to successfully navigate a raft of information back across that fabled river which divides our world from theirs, like playing reverse Pooh Styx against the ferryman.

It turned out that the deceased had been a prominent political figure and not wanting to be mocked or defrocked, she chose a pseudonym to disguise her secret psychic identity. She used to give readings to some of the most influential people of her day, but was able to maintain anonymity from the general public until passing away in 1956 at the respectable age of eighty one. Although there was little chance of this old girl resting in peace as she had been volunteered by the founding members of the Society for Psychical Research, her long dead but recently rediscovered friends, as the one who would be most capable of transmitting a coherent message. Their short collaborative book was published in 1965 and I can't say that I've ever read a more convincing or detailed account which puts a better case for a belief in the hereafter, but there again mine isn't finished yet so I could be speaking too soon. The various insights, confessions and chidings within the forty odd dictations are so touchingly authentic, that this lady's forceful but fallible character couldn't have been fabricated without an awful lot of editing. I can't tell you how difficult it is to write the perfect version of what you want to say without any revision, as I've already spent well over fifteen minutes on this sentence alone and it's still not quite there yet. There are no crossings-out to be seen in the photographs of the original scripts, but they had been written in so much haste that words often flowed into each other and sometimes she would exceed two thousand in a single hour, which from this author's point of view is plain cheating. Your local lending library should have a copy, so I'd recommend borrowing it if you're even vaguely interested in the subject and would like to learn more. I couldn't resist trying my hand at this dark art, but all that I could summon up were involuntary tremors caused by nights of excessively heavy drinking, which didn't really work as I was no great shakes at producing the lateral movement required for readability and almost wore through the paper.

October 2010

There's nothing more to report until Thursday the 7<sup>th</sup>, when I'll admit to feeling massively excited and it's not just because Kate has confirmed that she would be coming to visit me on Saturday. We hadn't seen each other in ages and I've not only missed her friendship, but also the purely platonic hugs which that entailed, one of the areas where ghosts can't compete with their living counterparts. You know that we've been corresponding by e-mail over the past weeks and this will be my first chance to tell her about some of the stranger happenings I've encountered. She was highly dubious about the possibility that Géraldine had come back, but wanted to hear the evidence in order to make up her own mind. Although in Kate's opinion my taste in music is mostly reprehensible, a couple of days ago I risked posting her The Mummers CD, saying that it was tied into the story and well worth a listen anyway. This was always going to be the first album I'd planned to play her over the weekend and somewhat optimistically I hoped that she would grow to love it as much as I did. However my second selection was chosen for me in a most peculiar manner and that's what I wanted to talk to you about.

I fancied some background music at work and seeing that we've been given a complimentary subscription to Napster, this meant I could choose from virtually any artist at the click of a mouse button. This is a dream come true for me, as ever since becoming a teenager I've fantasised about having a job in a record store so I could play anything I wanted, without being limited to my humble collection of LPs and singles. I also used to tape off the radio with a microphone next to the speaker, but this was far from ideal as a song can lose its impact when either a DJ or your granny comes in too soon and starts talking over the ending. Some people still seem to have an outdated dependence on materialism by placing unnecessary emphasis on owning physical media, the type which you can see or touch, but I for one didn't need to be dragged kicking and streaming into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today I felt like listening to a bit of Lou Reed, but after a quick search I found that the particular album I wanted to hear was missing from the list. Don't forget that legalised digital music distribution had only recently become mass-market and it wasn't unusual to find the odd omission in a back catalogue. I'd been looking for "Magic and Loss", but it just wasn't there so I made do with "Berlin" instead, which proved no great hardship. Tony was the only one in the shop with me and he had hidden himself away in the back room, ripping a customer's CDs onto a purpose-built hard drive. After copying the discs it conveniently tags them with all relevant track details and cover art off the Internet, so gone are the days of scribbling in tiny letters on a cassette's inlay card. I'd already finished paying bills and answering e-mails, so completing the local council's pointlessly unscientific asbestos survey was next on my list as there were heavy fines involved if I didn't comply. It was required by law that I had to draw up and submit a diagram of the whole

interior, labelling every single surface which wasn't made of brick, glass or wood as a potentially deadly health hazard. I was pleased to learn that I didn't actually have to test for the stuff, as lab time is expensive and I couldn't afford to lose any members of staff to the cheaper, but longer-winded scratch'n'sniff alternative.

By the end of track two I'd already mapped out the ground floor and started to colour code it, when I heard Tony calling to me for advice as he was having labelling issues of his own. Apparently he'd loaded the next CD to be copied, but instead of being recognised as "The Best of R.E.M." which was clearly stated on both jewel case and disc, he couldn't understand why the display showed it as "Magic and Loss" by Lou Reed. My exuberant rather than quizzical reaction to the problem took him completely by surprise as I was beside myself with excitement and after taking a couple of deep breaths to calm down, I explained that this had been the album I'd wanted to play but couldn't find. The "Gracenote" database contained well over a million entries so mistakes or misidentifications would occasionally happen, but the chances of this particular one coming up were astronomical. I asked him to repeat the procedure, but the results were identical and listening to a few seconds of "Man on the Moon" on a CD player, was all I needed to confirm that it couldn't have been a pressing plant error. You may think that I was doing a disservice to the band by stopping it there, but name checking Mott the Hoople is my favourite part of the song and I didn't need to hear any more. Of course I made a point of showing him that the album was missing from Napster, but as I hadn't shared my experiences with anyone at work he naturally put it down to coincidence. Géraldine's basic working knowledge of computers used to be on a par with mine, but while her skills must have improved considerably since we last saw each other, my tenuous grasp of technology is still woefully deficient like that of an ant trying to sun itself under a magnifying glass. I can't see how I would be clever or devious enough to fake something like this and even though Tony was technically a paid witness, if you asked about it he'd say that I don't pay him enough to commit perjury. So to sum up, here's another example of where the rational explanation is statistically more improbable than the irrational one and you can't argue with mathematics.

A week later I chanced upon another copy at The British Heart Foundation shop, which is where I regularly get all my books and in a reciprocal act of charity, the manager kindly agreed to loan it to me for half an hour. This meant that I didn't need to resurrect my short career as a shoplifter and obviously I would have donated it back afterwards, but I make a rule of never buying "Best of" compilations, not even in the name of science. They are invariably put together by record labels for purely commercial rather than artistic reasons and I'm low enough already on credibility to risk being spotted with one in my possession, either on the street or having been frisked at the door. Tony was interested to see if this would resolve his



earlier problem, but it reacted in exactly the same way, so I returned the disc in the discreet brown paper bag which I have always politely refused up until now. Listening to Henryk Górecki's "Symphony of Sorrowful Songs", featuring the talented soprano Dawn Upshaw has become one of my preferred coping mechanisms for dealing with death at close quarters, but "Magic and Loss" isn't far behind. Based around a theme rather than a collection of unrelated tracks, it's the sort of concept album which has fallen out of fashion nowadays, mainly due to attention deficit disorder and the more worrying trend towards shuffle play. Here the artist has lovingly documented his mixed emotions concerning the passing of two very close friends and I'm probably not alone in saying that it provides a measure of comfort to those who find themselves in similar circumstances.

It was lovely to see Kate again on Saturday the 9<sup>th</sup> and she would be staying the night so we'd have plenty of time to catch up with all her latest news, before running through some of the baffling events which had been happening around me. She's always had an interest in the stranger side of life and has indulged in the kind of activities which were punishable by bonfire in historically less tolerant times, but I don't know whether she would describe herself as an occultist or not. This word can come across as quite damning to some people, especially witch finders, but its meaning derives from nothing more sinister than hidden or secret and from what little that Steve has told me, it sounds like a bit of harmless fun. I suspected that my story would intrigue her and being tonight's resident expert she was able to enlighten me on a few key facts, for instance Cancer is a water sign, which may go a long way towards explaining G  r  ldine's fondness for puddles. Although after taking the opportunity to think this through while Kate went to the loo, I thanked my lucky stars that she hadn't been born a Leo like me.

At some point in the evening I mentioned my keenness to hold a s  ance and she warned me that we had better get a move on, as too much alcohol would impair her abilities. I of course had the opposite problem and needed to be far less sober for such an undertaking, but in retrospect maybe two o'clock in the morning was leaving it a trifle late. This wasn't entirely my fault, as we'd been so engrossed in conversation that the hours had flown by without either of us noticing. I was ready but poor Kate was all but ready for bed, though I managed to coax her into it by suggesting a five or ten minute mini version. There wasn't enough time to construct a Ouija board and remembering our previous attempt almost a decade ago, I didn't even have a platform for the visual aids I deemed necessary, so we used a large cardboard box I'd brought home from work for the cats to play in. This acted perfectly well as an improvised altar, but the only issue was going to be keeping Bunny quiet as he had taken up residence inside and refused to budge. After all it was his toy and from experience I knew that he's not one who is favourably inclined to share. Any efforts to oust him had

resulted in a territorially defensive swipe from a clawed paw, so I wisely abandoned the idea and before long he was sound asleep. Knowing how girls appreciate a little greenery as part of the scenery and seeing that the vegetable matter I'd balanced on the wooden cat's head was insufficiently decorative, I snipped off some foliage from my garden which I arranged in a half pint glass before placing it alongside.

Kate wasn't feeling up to taking the reins, so after Googling séance and finding a suitable template for beginners I prepared myself to repeat the words onscreen, substituting "Géraldine" whenever I saw "Insert name" in brackets. It would be a bit like singing Happy Birthday, but without the awkward timing problems that too few or too many syllables can produce. As the MP3 recorder was already running I began to read from the pre-written script, but it sounded so insincere that I responded to Kate's advice and turned off the computer before making up my own. Starting with a short invitation and then a follow-up welcoming speech, I tried to speak conversationally as if she was physically present in the room with us although invisible, so I had to picture her in my mind's eye. This was made slightly difficult, not through the passing of the years you understand, but seeing we'd bagsied her favourite position on the rug I couldn't envisage where she'd be sitting.

I kept to my word as the recording turned out to be eight minutes long, so we had a chance to listen to the playback before bedtime beckoned. Interestingly enough there were a few of the loud percussive clicks I'd captured previously, but also some odd thumps and perhaps the merest hint of a voice, which will require further examination at some point in the future as we might have imagined it. Neither of us heard any of these sounds at the time and we both agreed that they couldn't have been generated by a sleeping cat. Not unsurprisingly, Kate slept in a little late so I prepared a quick breakfast of hot cross buns and being a novice driver, she shrewdly opted for a cup of coffee over the more traditional accompaniment of cider before making her way home. I spent most of Sunday sprawled out on the sofa watching TV and if you discount my next door neighbour banging noisily against the wall with his vacuum cleaner, there was absolutely no sign of any activity or goings-on from the other side until tomorrow.

Early Monday morning on October 11<sup>th</sup> and our answer machine at work had developed a strange fault. As the display indicated that there had been a call, I pressed play and grabbed a nearby pen to jot down any relevant information. It was a gent ringing to say that he would be coming in to purchase a..., but then all I could hear were the weirdest variety of noises which totally drowned out the rest of the recording. If I had to describe them, they sounded something like an assortment of the fast high-pitched squawks when you used to connect to the Internet on a dial-up modem in

the days before broadband. I played it back half a dozen times and even though the infernal screeching would start at slightly different places, I still couldn't make my way through to the meat of the message. Thankfully I recognised the customer when he turned up around an hour later and apologising for not having rung him back as he'd apparently requested, I blamed my ill-mannered behaviour on our newly defective answer phone. To prove that this wasn't just some idle shop worker's excuse for laziness, I reached over to hit the play button and you can guess what happened. Every single last word from beginning to end could be heard as clear as a bell, which made me look a bit of an idiot, but fortunately that didn't put him off and he still walked away with a pair of speakers. Out of sheer curiosity I tried it once more before closing up and the maddening noises were back again to torment me, but we shouldn't necessarily pin this one on Géraldine. I remembered that with Kate's blessing, I had thrown out an open invitation for anyone else who was around to join us and wondered if my mistake may have been forgetting to ask them to go home afterwards, like a lingering guest outstaying their welcome at the end of a party. The next day it was functioning perfectly again, but continued to misbehave on occasion from there onwards. Tony said that the problem was caused by the inevitable reliability issues of cheaply mass-produced electronics and although he's supposed to be our technical guru, I still had my doubts.

I'm sure that with a little research, I could contact some sort of religious institution which is self-licensed to perform exorcisms, but I don't know if they would do answer machines. You can imagine the automated helpline, "Please press button one if the demon is lurking in the phone you're calling from." My workmates have been nagging me to purchase a replacement, which makes perfect sense from their point of view, but cash flow is tight and I like to give these things a couple of weeks to iron themselves out. It seemed like exactly the same kind of problem as the intermittent fault that I encountered last year with my surround-sound amplifier. The left rear channel would cut out for days at a time, but after a while it permanently fixed itself without having to be repaired, replaced or sprinkled with holy water.

All four of us were online for our gaming session on Tuesday the 12<sup>th</sup> and we'd been deliberating over my latest developments. I'm always willing to dwell on the subject all night long if needs be, but the guys were hankering for some Wild West action and it was around nine thirty when we holstered our six-shooters to take a short break before a spot of racing. Normally this would have given us plenty of time for well over an hour's uninterrupted play, but we ended up with a lot less. The reason was my visit to the loo and I'm not talking about constipation. Finding another trap puddle, I rushed to the kitchen cupboard so I could capture its loveliness and imagine my horror when the camera failed to turn on, now double that after I realised the spare battery was flat too. I slotted one of them into the charging device

and the five minutes I waited seemed like an eternity, but there wasn't even enough power to take a single shot so I put it back in. Please don't tell me at least some of you haven't come across this conundrum of the modern age yourself. Say for example that you've inadvertently left the sidelights on and your car doesn't start in the morning, so after wiring up a trickle charger, how long do you leave it before turning the key? If there's enough current to spin the engine then you'll still be at work on time, but hearing it slowly grind to a halt without firing up means that you should have been less impatient and it's back to square one or a walk to the bus stop. I knew that after discovery, this type of puddle would evaporate quickly and I couldn't afford to waste any more precious minutes so I explained my predicament to the group. After a short discussion the consensus of opinion had been to leave it for a quarter of an hour and finding myself under the starting flag, I was too worried about my race against the clock to drive competitively, so I lost three times in a row before failing to win them over with this moist marauder. ([193-PIC](#))

There are two possible explanations for the dead batteries and choosing my favourite will be a purely tactical decision, so don't let it sway you either way. Firstly it had been four weeks since I'd taken any photos and we all know that rechargeables are notorious for going flat after extended periods of storage. Secondly I've read numerous accounts of paranormal research where batteries can suddenly drain of power, which is why a professional ghost hunter should always carry a backup pre-digital 35mm camera and wind-up torch. Even though this is the only time it's happened and knowing how she delights in finding new ways to confound me, I'm still going for option one as I'd like to briefly endear myself to all those non-believers, before alienating them again with my next sentence.

I should apologise in advance as I've forgotten to tell you about a recent innovation of mine, which I have unimaginatively dubbed the ten minute séance. Although this is more of a guideline than a strict time allocation, as it's rude to finish halfway through a sentence and pointless to waffle on if you've run out of interesting things to say. The recording I made with Kate had definitely produced results, so I figured it may be possible to replicate them on my own and besides, they say that everyone should have a hobby. Possessing absolutely no psychic ability whatsoever, I have to rely solely on a mixture of charm and technology as my only method of establishing some sort of basic, but demonstrable repartee with the departee. I've conducted five sessions over the past few days, achieving a fair degree of success on all but one which I deleted, as neither of us were particularly on form that night and our performances suffered accordingly. The mysterious clicks that I could hear on playback and see as spikes on the screen tended to either momentarily precede what I was going to say, or would happen a fraction of a second after I'd finished. Sometimes they corresponded simultaneously with the instant I started to talk, whereas others were jumbled amongst my

speech and of course I mustn't forget to mention the ones out on their own, which stood out against a backdrop of total silence. These were far away the most interesting as while I'm not saying that my lips are incapable of making a sharp smacking noise before, during or after I speak, there was no possibility of the microphone picking it up here even if they did.

They varied in terms of volume, but a typical example measured about half the level of my voice and even though a few exceeded it, none were loud enough at the time for either me or one of those ever vigilant cats of mine to notice. Looking back at what seemed like a sensible step in the right direction, I think that I might have been trying to run before I could walk, as my request for one click to answer yes and two for no didn't appear to be working at all. This was doubtless my fault for never having explained to her what I meant by that, as I'd neglected to establish a cut-off point after which the second one becomes a separate entity in itself and forms another false positive. Unless you enjoy talking at cross purposes, the importance of having certain ground rules in place can't be underestimated, especially when conversing with foreigners and if you're dealing with one who's on the wrong side of the Great Divide it's multiplied. A further complication is allocating sufficient airtime to the other party or else you'll end up with a tiresome and self-indulgent monologue, although too much can also be problematic, as I'm still doing my best to identify the precise moment when a strategic silence turns into an embarrassing one. In order to help me out a little, I've invented a sub game which now traditionally takes place at the end and after inviting her to finish the recording on a high note, I aim to keep quiet for thirty seconds. However I soon start to feel uncomfortable with my lack of input, so usually I can't resist giving her a quick time check at the ten and twenty second markers. It's a real pleasure to have found an activity which nicely rounds off the evening when I'm too far gone to focus on writing up the book and there's nothing worth watching on TV, apart from my latest results on Wavepad of course.

Sunday the 17<sup>th</sup> was a big day for pushing the boundaries of communication and confident in the knowledge that a potentially disruptive Geoff wouldn't be joining us, I'd suggested conducting a quick séance on Skype before our gaming session began. I'd checked the small print and as far as I could see, it doesn't contravene any of their regulations or codes of practice, so this was always going to be my next logical course of action. Markie and Justin were both prepared to give it a try, but I didn't take into account the fact that the bleed-through from my open-back headset would be picked up by the other microphone which was sitting about two feet away, so I hadn't given them any guidance on when to keep quiet. In retrospect this was a huge mistake that would be back to bite me on the bum a few days later. To make things even worse I remember encouraging them to talk normally and they took me at my word as less than halfway through, their scintillating but wayward conversation was starting to concentrate on trivial matters instead of the

job in hand, so I had to lay down the law on occasion. If ever you feel like having a go at this yourself, then try to learn from my errors and I suggest that a short briefing beforehand will produce better results, especially when it's accompanied by fines, forfeits or remotely operated USB pain collars. Although I'm not for one moment saying that I was at all unhappy with the experiment, as when I reviewed the recording there were more spikes to be seen than in the average bulldog sanctuary.

Despite the running time being negotiated down to a miserly five minutes, I can tell you that I was quite astounded when Andy agreed to take part in one on Monday evening and I'm not easily surprised. "Oh really" I can hear someone saying to themselves, "This guy has been surprised by just about everything he sees from dust marks to leaky plumbing", but believe you me I used to be the most level-headed and unflappably-eared bunny that anyone could hope to meet outside of the rabbit hole. Therefore it's understandable that from time to time I might get a little over-excited by seemingly innocuous matters, as the past year or so has been wholly unrepresentative of the life I led before you knew me. This is also why I'll never be writing a prequel, as it would make for a terrifically dull read by comparison. Assuming the proper position, we knelt facing each other either side of the cardboard box and I positioned a couple of pertinent trinkets on top. Next I turned on the recorder and performed the customary volume check, which I should hasten to add never involves tapping the mic, before launching into my welcoming speech. Andy kept an admirably straight face as I invited Géraldine to join us and then went on to tell her how pleased we would be if she could spare the time to make it. I remember asking a few slightly inane questions before bringing the session to a close, by thanking her for listening and hopefully responding.

After I'd transferred the recording to my computer we listened with our ears pinned back and there were nine inexplicable instances of the mystery sounds. Now if that's not enough to convince you of strange goings-on then this should, as within half an hour Andy requested a follow-up. I couldn't understand his willingness to indulge me the first time, let alone instigating a second, but I was delighted with this turn of events and confident that Géraldine would be up for a rematch. Having replaced the objects on the box with other reminders of distant but happy memories I restarted my recorder, knowing that this was the perfect opportunity to stretch, though not over-abuse our restrictive five minute limit. Rather oddly he'd asked me to hold my arms aloft for the duration of the séance and I initially refused, as I didn't want to risk a case of jazz hands which would ruin any semblance of taking the whole thing seriously, although it's widely known to improve circulation. Being a bit naive I didn't cotton on at first, but obviously the reason I had to hold them in clear view was that Andy wanted to rule out any annoying habits I might have picked up, like cracking my knuckles or cheating. An outright accusation of underhand trickery may have gone

unspoken, but it soon became clear that this was going to be a deal breaker, so I did my best to comply and he quickly reproached me whenever they started to droop.

We could see fifteen noteworthy blips in eight minutes, which was exactly the same ratio as our first effort and I couldn't find anything radically different so I scrapped it. In fact there may still be a surviving copy on Andy's old iPhone, as he'd made his own recording to check if the noises would be picked up and they were, but I suspect that this was probably deleted long before he traded it in for the latest version. Nevertheless if anyone has a pre-enjoyed model of this sort of vintage, either in use or lying in a drawer, then it may explain the fascinating insight into the life of the previous owner that you couldn't quite bring yourself to erase. Before going home he told me never to mention to another living soul that he'd taken part in a séance and I gave him my word, but presumably I must have obtained his permission at some point or you wouldn't be reading about it. One of my more redeeming qualities is that I'm staunchly committed to respecting a confidence and even wild horses couldn't drag it out of me if they tried, which would be a messy but intriguing story to dine out on in the afterlife. As an aside, the only time I ever failed to produce any results at all was during a session with John. He had set up his laptop to record simultaneously and the screen would also show a real-time display of the various noises it captured, but apart from our voices there were no signs of anything else occurring. I haven't investigated the reason behind this, which may have just been a coincidence, but it was almost as if by monitoring the situation too closely we had restricted her options and affected the outcome.

Another day another dollar, same dog different collar and in terms of our playing order, Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> of October turned out to be a carbon copy of games night a week ago. Although this time the leakage occurred around 10.00pm which was thirty minutes late, so we'd both missed the designated comfort break between disc changes by three or four races. [\(194-PIC\)](#) I still can't believe it took me almost a whole month to realise that there was something unusual about this one and maybe you were quicker to notice a discrepancy, as the trap above is located about ten centimetres in from the furthest edge of the tile. This is easily worked out as they are all the same size and measure forty by sixty, which means that the large drip at the top was directly underneath. However the main puddle lies a short but significant distance away and I found this difficult to assimilate, as water seems to have been diverted in mid-air from its natural trajectory. To give you a better idea of positioning I attached a magnetic chain to the bottom of the trap, which bends ever so slightly where it comes into contact with the floor. [\(195-PIC\)](#) Please excuse the tidemark, as earlier that evening I'd used my syringe to test where the water was supposed to fall. As usual I'm overcomplicating things, so let's concentrate on the two little white marks

to the left and luckily they're visible in both shots taken about four weeks apart. It's clear to see that any vertical dripping should inevitably land north of them and definitely not south, as was the case in my last photo.

There was nothing unprecedented about Wednesday night October 20<sup>th</sup>, until my big telly finally gave up the ghost and I'd suspected that it would only be a matter of time, as the picture had been slowly degrading over the past few days. Even though this happened whilst I was writing up the book, I can't attribute it to anything more untoward than a faulty power supply or something equally irrelevant to my story, but all the same pivotal to its progress. I'd always been fearful that it would die on me before I had an opportunity to save my work and terrified in case a forced shutdown corrupted the entire file. When I consulted the instruction manual it didn't offer much help at all, apart from informing me that my unit was state of the art. So Tony had proven to be right this time, as when the phrase is applied to the reliability of consumer electronics, we've barely progressed from handprints on cave walls. Luckily I'd been given a lifeline, as I could still briefly fire up the display before it switched itself off again about five seconds later and after a number of failed attempts, my Speedy Gonzales mouse manoeuvring had improved to the point where I was able to exit the program in a dignified manner. I can tell you the thought of having to start again from scratch would be, well daunting doesn't even begin to describe it, so since then I've gone along with the advice given in every computer user's bible and that's Jesus saves, but Moses invests in a backup drive.

The next day I liberated a twenty six inch Samsung from work, but all I could find to tie it to a previously redundant black leatherette swivel chair was a spare SCART lead, despite the fact that I hate acronyms and everything they stand for. This was a bit of a comedown for both me and the cable, but it could have been far worse for my new TV as Bunny cat has always liked jumping up on the headrest to claw away frenziedly at the fabric. His increasingly energetic scratching was causing the panel to wobble in a most precarious fashion and I didn't want it crashing to the hard stone floor as I knew which one would sustain the greater damage. I could shoo the destructive little monkey away while I was there, but come bedtime by way of a screen saver I draped my waxed jacket over the top, which hopefully wouldn't allow him the necessary purchase to prosecute his usual havoc. Thankfully the repair men soon came round to fix the fault and I consigned the televisual equivalent of a postage stamp to my garage, in case it ever happened again.

Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> and I'd brought home extra provisions as Justin was coming to stay for the night. After we had finished the scrumptious belly of pork I'd cooked, I was up for a spot of dabbling with the dead and to get us in the mood I played him last Sunday's Skype séance which he'd participated in, but hadn't heard yet. However we soon became preoccupied with a tiny



section near the beginning, where it sounded like there was a strange and unintelligible voice trying to come through. I cut and pasted the ten second clip so we could hear it on a loop, but foolishly neglected to check out what followed afterwards which would have explained everything. It's easy to get swept up in the moment and we were so fixated on our apparent discovery that the rest of the recording was virtually ignored in favour of creating a new one. You'll remember that the three way séance had turned into a bit of a free-for-all, as I'd forgotten to explain best practice for producing optimum results, so this time I pulled rank by outlining our objectives and described how we would go about trying to achieve them. I moved the box onto the rug then placed a keepsake or two on top, so I could focus my thoughts on Géraldine before inviting her along as our guest of honour and after dinner speaker. Being the self-appointed master of ceremonies I did most of the talking, but made sure I gave Justin ample opportunity to ask questions and offer his observations, a valuable technique I'd borrowed from conducting job interviews. Face to face with only the two of us, the relative ease of maintaining order was highlighted at one point during the proceedings when I just had to hold an index finger to my lips to stop him speaking, when he ought to have been listening and you can't do that on Skype without using a webcam. Adopting a more disciplined approach had obviously paid off as the uncluttered playback was feature rich on clicks and clacks. There was one other oddity which neither of us were too sure about and I'll need a second opinion before coming back to you on that, but only if it passes quality control.

Come Saturday evening, I was keen to re-examine the mystery voice that we had been obsessing over on the group recording and after listening to it all the way through, I'm embarrassed to admit my fundamental error. Unfortunately I'd missed my comments shortly afterwards, which made it abundantly clear that the strange vocalisation was nothing more than an instance of either Justin or Markie chattering away in the background. The maestro of mickey-taking was sadly unavailable to join us on Sunday night, so I explained to the other two where we'd gone wrong and laughed it off as a simple mistake, but one of them failed to see the funny side. Imagine if you'd been in the same situation and had allowed your normally logical mind to go off chasing after phantoms, only to be told that in reality it was at best a friend, or at worst yourself talking out of turn. You won't be at all surprised to hear then, that this was around the time when Justin reverted back to disbeliever status.

It's not difficult to find numerous, but often dubious examples of verbal communications from the dead on the Internet if you search for EVP, which is easier to type than electronic voice phenomenon. These have purportedly been caught on tape or other recording devices ever since the mid-Fifties, although the fakes aren't difficult to spot as they are usually far too loud and growly, like the lead singer in a death metal band. Others are less

discernible and take a trained ear to pick them out from the background, but that can often be an early sign of schizophrenia rather than a measure of authenticity. I know that my judgement has recently been called into question, but I believe we've already come across something along these lines which may be of interest and I remember promising to investigate it further. You'll have to make up your own mind if there is anything of value here, as when I sent it to the guys they all thought that I was deluded.

Listening back to my first séance recorded in the early hours of Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> of October, it was easy to find the relevant section again. After welcoming Géraldine to our tardy soirée, I was wondering whether she'd come on her own or not and Kate quickly seconded my proposal that anyone else could join in if they wanted to. About ten seconds later there was the briefest interjection of a male voice in a low register, which sounded a lot gruffer and far more sober than mine at the time. Either by chance or design, it fits quite concisely into one of my short pauses while appearing to stop when I start speaking again and I'd have to say that if you're going to butt into a conversation, then this is the most courteous method of doing so. I transferred the vocal snippet to my desktop so that I'd be able to listen to it on repeat, but I could only make out the first word which was "Thirty", followed by another beginning with the letter "S". As this was getting me no further forwards I copied a longer segment so I could hear it in context and suddenly realised that somebody had taken the words out of my mouth, a few moments before I said them. Of course you'll have to judge whether I'm imagining it or not, but to help out here's a transcript of the section you should concentrate on, with the mystery voice in brackets. "We'll give you a little bit of silence for a while and err, (thirty seconds) no more than thirty seconds or so." I'm aware that this could be seen as leading the witness and now I've put the words in your head, you're more likely to interpret them as I did, so we will need corroborating evidence. Without giving away any additional information, try playing it to a selection of your friends who will become our control group to see whether they agree with me or not, but if they're as cloth-eared as mine, then I wouldn't expect too much if I were you.

Here's the sound file and if you're using a pair of speakers, I'd recommend listening in complete silence while gradually winding your volume up to almost maximum, but don't forget to turn it down again afterwards. Drag it into Wavepad for the ultimate sensory experience, as you will be able to see everything in detail and have a better idea of what's going on. The dull thumps you'll hear could easily be mistaken for Bunny thrashing his tail against the inside of the box, but in my mind they are far too well-timed for that and seem more like a running commentary. [\(196-AUDIO\)](#) If you can't detect anything out of the ordinary, try a decent pair of headphones and failing that, a visit to a local hi-fi dealer may be required to upgrade your equipment. In the unlikely event that none of this works, then there's

always a chance I could be mistaken and having already made my mind up erroneously, I can no longer listen objectively without hearing precisely what I want to hear. However I doubt if that's the case as there's definitely something odd going on at the twenty nine second mark and those sorts of sounds don't make themselves. After all we'd just thrown out an open invitation for any others to join in, so there's no need to act surprised when somebody else comes through and probably more out of curiosity than jealousy, I couldn't help myself stewing over who she had chosen as her plus one that night.

I was fortunate enough to have another visitation on Wednesday the 27<sup>th</sup> and I couldn't believe my good luck in getting an additional guinea pig to practice on. Geoff would be working in Manchester the day after and I'd suggested that he could break his journey by spending the night at my house. I had asked him in advance if he would be up for the full treatment and to my astonishment, the answer was a guarded, but reasonably enthusiastic yes. A tasty tandoori turned up around eight o'clock and by half past nine we were ready to go, so I started the recorder thinking that he was going to be the most challenging out of all my sitters, or should I say kneelers. I wondered if his scepticism might prove insurmountable and whether my other friend, being faced with so much negativity would even bother to show up, but I was wrong on both counts. The next ten minutes took me completely by surprise, as I couldn't believe how well-mannered he was throughout the séance and prepared to give valuable input when prompted. This just demonstrates how badly I had miscalculated by trying to sell my story prematurely on a gaming night, instead of waiting until he was down here in person, as you should never underestimate the importance of eye contact or striking distance during communication. At one point I caught him looking distracted, so I asked for his thoughts and he responded by telling me that he'd been quietly listening to the room's acoustics for any sounds which were out of place. Apparently he had heard a single click, although I can't say I noticed anything abnormal, but that was only one out of the multitude he'd missed when we came to replay the recording.

We cautiously sat down again on the sofa to listen to the results, which were far from disappointing and he couldn't explain the extraneous noises during playback, but there was nothing that you or I haven't encountered before. I intend to make the almost complete version available if you'd like to check it out and the only thing I've removed is a section containing some bad language, as I don't want to be that sort of role model to the younger generation. To make amends I could show you a screenshot of the deleted expletives in Wavepad, which would be pretty pointless and puerile, but I'd still have the satisfaction of sneaking them past the censors. Since he was here and strangely receptive, I particularly wanted to get his observations on the session I'd conducted with Justin, which contained the curious

anomaly we had heard but couldn't identify. Unfortunately by the time we got around to it he'd nodded off and I would imagine that was down to the fresh country air rather than the alcohol, as I don't want to call him a lightweight in public. So with no further help coming from his direction, I'll need to ask for your opinion on whether it's worth including or not and I'm afraid there's only one way to find out.

People can take séances too seriously which is where they go wrong, but I certainly don't and this one was no exception as I found myself finishing up with a line from a Monty Python song. Around the point where I stop chuckling and start singing, there's a loud gasp which seems to be an octave higher than I could comfortably achieve. [\(197-AUDIO\)](#) I know because I've tried to replicate it just now and failed miserably, but there again most of us think we sound different "on tape" so I can't be absolutely positive that it's not me. Although when I listen closely, I'm convinced that my laughter ends a fraction of a second after the wheezy intake and if this is the case, then it would effectively rule me out as the perpetrator. I've always tried to be open with you in terms of offering my best take on what's going on, but it's like being told the list of ingredients when you're biting into a cheap sausage, sometimes honesty isn't necessarily the most tasteful policy. Nevertheless I've been considering the alternative chorus, "Always look on the bright side of death, just before you draw your terminal breath" and maybe in a perfectly timed example of gallows humour, she slipped in an echo of her final inhalation prior to expiration. Of course I can't be sure whether this is true or not, but I do know that she would be the last person to take offence if it wasn't.

Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> of October and I was quickly running out of time to plan the celebrations for Géraldine's big day tomorrow, but that didn't worry me in the slightest. I was so overjoyed to have had such a series of life and more to the point, death-affirming communiqués from our sessions on my MP3 recorder, that I thought a full-on installation in the top room would possibly weaken the rapport we'd established by taking us back to basics. Above all I wanted to keep this one a secret from her until the very last minute, as after the usual lengthy procedure of selecting then collecting the necessary props, any surprise factor would be long gone. Plus there was still my unanswered request to get Teresa back on board, which you'll remember from her birthday in July, so posing another question would be impolite and come to think of it counterproductive. If I kept on stacking them up and then came across any evidence that suggested some sort of a reply, it would be like multiple choice, but the wrong way round. My world is already confusing enough at the moment without me muddying the waters even further by adding too many variables.

I'd been planning to leave the shop early in order to get stuck into the mountain of bookwork waiting for me at home, but equally I couldn't ignore

the growing pile of invoices that needed paying first. By half past two all of the cheques were ready for posting and crossing over the road, I couldn't help noticing an A-board outside the ladies-only fitness club which was publicising their Halloween themed open day. Normally this would have been of no interest to me whatsoever, but I was intrigued by the poster on the other side which advertised that they had booked a celebrity psychic to give readings and I could do with a few pointers. Still holding my small sheaf of envelopes, I gingerly mounted the spiral staircase that led to the gym's first floor location and was charmingly greeted by a bubbly, athletic looking woman who I guessed would be the owner. I told her I worked over the road and was just being nosey, but on introducing myself she reminded me that we had already spoken, as I'd previously rung up with a complaint. About a year ago I received a phone call from someone selling discounted vouchers for her establishment and I had no desire to explain why the lady in my life would have minimal interest in membership. The Birmingham accent suggested that it might be from a call centre, so I asked if they were ringing from the actual premises and the answer was yes. However when I said that I worked within eyeshot and they should give me a wave out of the front window, the line suddenly went dead. Taking full responsibility for these geographically dishonest sales tactics, she instantly apologised and promised to give them a piece of her mind first thing in the morning.

She told me that they had officially closed at two o'clock and the event was supposed to be over, but asked if I wanted a quick tour as there were still plenty of people hanging around. I accepted her kind invitation, but never expected the VIP treatment that I was about to receive. Compared to its tiny entrance at street level which was nothing more than a doorway, the place turned out to be quite a labyrinth and she showed me the various facilities with their top-of-the-line exercise machines. She asked if I would like to have a go on one of them, but I smiled coyly while gesturing at my inappropriate work clothes and graciously refused, so we moved along. I enjoyed the novelty of being in an exclusively female environment and couldn't help feeling a frisson of schoolboy excitement whenever she shouted "Are you decent?", before taking me through to the next room in case anyone was dressed unsuitably for guys' eyes. Finally she led me down a semi-darkened corridor and halfway along we passed a door with a do not disturb sign on it, which apparently meant that the medium was in the middle of conducting a sitting. Having now seen almost everything I could possibly want to, apart from my primary objective of course, I strategically manoeuvred myself into position a short distance away and stopped for a chat while gently fanning my brow with the bunch of envelopes.

I don't know if it was a happy coincidence or whether I just kept her talking for long enough, but the door suddenly burst open and out came a wide-eyed slip of a girl who rushed back towards reception to babble away in teen speak with a bunch of equally excitable friends. Turning my head to

look at the narrowing gap as the door slowly swung closed, I was asked if I'd like to take a peek inside. Perched on a straight-backed chair at the very far end of the room, I could see an enchanting vision of loveliness who looked no older than twenty something. She was sitting behind a small table with a stacked pack of Tarot cards next to a cluster of crystals, which like the rubber bats and spray-on cobwebs, might have been provided for dramatic effect by the management for all I knew. I lingered for a couple of moments longer than was strictly necessary and my attentive host asked if I would care for a reading. Despite trying to maintain an aura of calm detachment, an overly eager yes please came out far too quickly for my liking and even though I realised that it would be queue jumping, I was only trying to be polite after refusing her previous offer.

Before I knew it the door was ever so softly, but firmly closed behind me and I walked over towards the table. The first thing I said after hello, was that I knew she had other clients waiting and I would only need five minutes of her time. After being motioned to sit down I asked if she could see anyone with me, which was a rather pointless question as it elicited the standard reply that there are always others with us. She elaborated by disclosing the presence of two men, but I swiftly intervened by saying that I would give her a helping hand as I was specifically enquiring about a female. Having thought about this for no more than a second or two, she told me there was someone of that description who had just arrived, so I kept quiet for a while and listened carefully. The first message she relayed to me was that this individual originally came from abroad and we had enjoyed a close brother, sister kind of relationship. She also said that there was no long term illness involved and her passing had been very quick. Butting in again I asked if this person was accompanied by anyone, but apparently she had come on her own. I was told that she'd been watching over me and had averted a nasty accident when I almost stepped out into oncoming traffic a few weeks ago. She asked if I could understand that and although I suppose it's plausible, this wasn't the incontrovertible evidence I'd been looking for. However the next two statements that followed were on another level and had me reeling. She said that my friend was loving the games, which struck me as a curious thing for her to bring up without insider knowledge, but a perfect assessment of our playful shenanigans back home. The last piece of information I received before the timer on her phone ran out would also be difficult to explain, as she'd just been told that there was a lot more to come, the exact same words Teresa had used six months previously. After saying my goodbyes and thank you's, I walked around the street corner to pop the now decidedly dog-eared bundle I was clutching into the post box.

It was Sunday October 31<sup>st</sup>, the end of British Summer Time and guessing that the dead don't bother about setting their clocks back, I didn't think Géraldine would mind if our séance started an hour before midnight as some of us have to go to work in the morning. I was determined to leave

the specific details of my Halloween celebrations to the last moment, so I said goodnight to Markie and Justin, but only after we'd cooked up a whole load of half-baked suggestions to keep her off the scent. Having fetched the recorder from the kitchen cupboard I tried to use my synapses like a reel in a fruit machine, never knowing which idea I might eventually settle on and hoped it wouldn't turn out to be a real lemon. I didn't have the time or inclination to be fussy, so with no conscious game plan in mind I selected one at random, which involved rushing upstairs to locate and slip into the same shirt I'd worn in the photos taken by Andy's camera back in 1997. These were the pictures he'd e-mailed me after my very first experiment and I hoped that it might stir up a few old memories for both of us. As it was a dressing gown day I grabbed a clean pair of underpants to preserve a certain level of decency, though not for her benefit of course as I'm sure that she has seen my bits far too often by now to be offended. It's just that I didn't fancy answering a knock on the door from any easily impressionable young trick or treaters and then from the police who would inevitably call round after complaints from their scandalmongering parents. Luckily there would be no interruptions and I finished around 11.15pm, but when I listened back to my recording I found that the results were rather poor. I'd expected something far more spectacular on such a special night, but maybe she was just doing her best to squeeze me into an already tight and double-booked schedule, which could have been partially my fault as you will soon see.

November 2010

Popping out from work for a bite to eat on November 1<sup>st</sup>, I wasn't surprised to see that the high street had hastily distanced itself from shamelessly marketing the dead, with a premature but less controversial display of Christmas decorations and all of the skeletons were back in their closets until next year. Andy was round that night, so I fired up the computer for some background music before routinely checking my e-mails and I couldn't conceal a squeal of delight when I saw this one. For the sake of authenticity backed up by linguistic provenance, I've cut and pasted her message for you while substituting a few asterisks to thwart cold callers.

<31/10/2010 23:07

hi nick, my new no is 01\*\*\*\*\*51, just so we can catch up asap, any eve after 10pm is good for me .....sorry i have been so rubbish but had the busiest year i can remember, lol. let me know what night is best and i can sort out everything for u....Teresa xx>

Remarkably she'd sent it only minutes before I started yesterday's séance, around the time that I would have randomly been generating my next move. Like a taxicab driver providing a free and unexpected lift to a casual acquaintance on New Year's Eve, I wouldn't imagine that a professional medium couldn't have chosen a less hectic night in her diary to do exactly the same thing. It was either a sheer fluke, or Géraldine had decided that this would be the perfect moment to fulfil my request and clear the air for another. I'll admit that this could be seen as a wasted opportunity, so it's a lesson about the importance of regularly checking for new mail, no matter what you may be up to at the time. To save you the trouble of having to search out the right photo again, here's a reminder and please ignore the stray exclamation mark, which I've included strictly for reasons of accuracy over any hidden meanings or personal prejudice.

Happy Birthday!

Please ask Teresa to e-mail me to arrange another chat. Get her to write Houp-là so I know you got through.

Thanks for everything

All my Love

Nick xxx



They say that it's better to give than to receive, so dressing up my demands in the guise of a birthday greeting may seem a little bad mannered, but equally if you don't ask you don't get. However when there's no stipulated time limit, you have to learn to be patient and I counted myself lucky as I only had to wait four months almost to the day for an answer. Hold on you might say, there wasn't any mention of my code word, but take another look as all of its letters are contained within her reply and what's more they're in the right order. Admittedly the French accent is missing although you'll recall I'd already made allowances for that, but what about the dash? Well check again because it's both spelled out sequentially and in the correct place, so it looks like she got us on a technicality as I hadn't specified that the component parts needed to be joined together. Unfortunately I think that a whiff of subtle coercion may have filtered through, as despite replying within a couple of days and the follow-up message I left on her answer phone a week or so later, I heard nothing back. Perhaps I'm reading too much into the situation and she was swamped by domestic concerns, so even if things look bleak at the moment I doubt that we've heard the last of Teresa.

Talking of answer phones, it was crunch time for the one at work which had just obliterated the last halves of two consecutive messages and no matter how often I hit repeat, the pesky interference wouldn't go away. I'm not convinced that this malfunction has lost me any business, but having failed to fix itself I crumbled under the mounting pressure from my conscientious colleagues and I purchased a replacement on Saturday morning. Maybe I should have been more proactive as I hadn't tried to clear out the gremlins by taking it back to my place for a banishing ritual, not that I know any of course, but it's at times like these when the Internet comes in handy. Although I'd soon find out that this would have been a pointless exercise, as when I brought the faulty one home with me and simply plugged it in, both messages played perfectly. By the way, if this sort of thing ever happens to you and nothing else cures the problem, then go easy with sprinkling the holy water as it's not recommended for electrical items.

Sunday 7th of November and we'd finished gaming by 11.00pm, but before going to bed there was one last task I needed to complete. You see I'd been thinking about the time when I left my recorder running overnight in the top room and the absence of anything significant on playback. After careful consideration I had decided to take this one step further by conducting a silent séance, not because I'd run out of things to say, but to investigate whether Géraldine would still respond if I buttoned up and my thoughts were the only method of communication on offer. Talking to yourself may indeed be the first sign of madness, but it's the quiet ones you really have to watch. This would be my first experiment with telepathy since I'd abandoned it in early adolescence as a non-starter, alongside other failures like spoon bending and clarinet lessons. You can tell by now that I don't

have a particularly orderly mind, which is probably why the results will be interesting but far from ideal. I should really include a few words here to let you know that my house is well-insulated from noise pollution, as I live on the borders of where town turns into countryside and the nearest road leads to a field, so there are practically no passing vehicles. As it's an old terraced cottage with thick brick walls, I virtually never hear my next door neighbours and thankfully both cats were sound asleep on the rug in front of the fire. Being gas powered, there are none of the crackling sounds that a log burner would produce and its soft popping is scarcely loud enough to register on the recording at all, if it weren't for automatic level control. The advantage of a period of prolonged silence is that your hearing similarly becomes more sensitive as time passes, so I can assure you there were no background noises during the session which could subsequently have been misconstrued as anything of importance.

Looking at the overview you can see that I managed to last for a total of six minutes and please ignore the kerfuffle at the very beginning, as I'm just fiddling with my microphone. [\(198-PIC\)](#) The most impressive results start after about ten seconds and end before the halfway mark, which coincided with the duration of my welcoming section. This was the straightforward part, but I'd made matters much harder for myself as I had scheduled two questions, one at precisely three minutes in and the other at four, though I really can't remember what they were. That way I could easily check to see if any sort of reaction had been recorded around either of these time slots. Unfortunately here's where my plan went astray, as normally after making an enquiry we tend to stop talking and wait for an answer, but if you're doing it in your head it's impossible to stop thinking. I found it difficult to prevent my mind from wandering off on a tangent, so at the pre-arranged times I resorted to mentally repeating the questions over and over again, which explains why she held back as this style of interrogation can come across as mildly irritating. We played the thirty second game at the end and if you look closely, there's a tiny blip right on cue just before I turn off the machine.

There's also a particularly odd incident at one minute twenty eight which I would like to share with you, it only lasts for half a second and consists of a rapid-fire volley of unidentified noises. [\(199-PIC\)](#) This was unlike anything I'd heard before on previous recordings and it reminded me of a competent typist spelling out a three letter word on a keyboard, although mine had been lying at the other end of the sofa. [\(200-AUDIO\)](#) I experimented by hitting random keys and you've probably noticed how despite looking the same, they all have their own individual sounds but it's obvious why that should be. Every one is a separate mechanical device and minute variations like the amount of wear sustained or dirt accrued, gives each of them a subtly different percussive note. After a considerable number of failed attempts I eventually managed to recreate the sequence more or less by

accident, when on a complete whim I typed “jay”, which sounded pretty much spot on so I could stop there and go to bed tired but happy. I daresay that wasn’t the only combination which would approximate the noises we’ve heard, but it’s too late to try again as cheap keyboards like mine are notorious for going out of tune and I could hardly call upon the services of my friend Colin, who’s too much of a purist to take on a job like this.

There is one final observation that I must tentatively add before we go any further. At the start of my self-imposed vow of silence, a tiny gossamer-thin feather drifted down only a few inches in front of me, which I instinctively blew away rather than risk a hush-busting coughing fit by breathing it in. Seemingly nothing more than a minor distraction at the time, I didn’t see or for that matter care where it landed but looking back, these are the sort of details I shouldn’t leave out, however questionable they might be. It may have been lifted to the ceiling by convection currents from the fire and trapped for days on end by a strand of spider web, which just happened to give way as soon as the session began, but there’s also a chance I had found my first apport. This is when an object supposedly appears out of the ether during a séance and the phenomenon has been well enough documented in the past for there to be a word for it. I probably wouldn’t even have thought to mention anything if it hadn’t formed part of a reoccurring theme which I couldn’t ignore, from the first reference in her poem to their inclusion in the last birthday extravaganza. Let’s not forget that this was a direct result of my chat with Teresa, who said she’d been shown feathers and now maybe Géraldine had shown me one too. Although as I have no tangible evidence to support this and having failed to find any down on the stone floor, it seems pointless to waste my time on wild goose chases like these, after all that’s strictly for the birds.

Thursday the 11<sup>th</sup> and I have just witnessed an extremely odd occurrence at the shop, which will involve a further example of product placement I’m afraid. Around half past ten in the morning I was concentrating on replying to an e-mail we’d received, which reminds me of another issue I’ve been experiencing so let’s quickly get that out of the way first. When it’s quiet I’ll often jump onto the computer and use this as a good opportunity to get on with writing up the book. I would then send these segments home before deleting the text, postponing the time when my workmates will eventually come to the conclusion that I’ve lost what little of it I originally had. Having just e-mailed a substantial section which concerned my exploits in the ladies’ gym, you can imagine the sense of horror I felt after it failed to turn up when I got back. Not only had I lost a couple of hours’ work, but more disastrously I may have sent it to someone else in our address book. This might provoke an embarrassing complaint to head office and unwanted complications that I could really do without at the moment. The next day I was able to maintain a reasonable amount of keyboard privacy and I always have a magazine article, or something similarly frivolous open in the

background, so I can swiftly swap over to it if a member of staff comes too close. I believe that this is what's known as a boss screen. With the first draft still fresh in my head, it wasn't too difficult to re-write with some additional overnight insights and I made absolutely sure that I sent it to the right recipient this time, but also saved a copy to a memory stick just in case. This was a great backup plan as my revised version and two later test messages have all neglected to arrive. Andy very kindly checked out my spam settings last night, but couldn't find anything wrong so he installed Google mail instead. This wasn't really the solution I'd been looking for and luckily I didn't have to try it out as in a few days' time the problem will simply go away, but maybe that's just computers for you.

Anyway back to this morning and I'd been drinking a cup of coffee while single finger typing a reply to a customer's enquiry, when Rob who was standing on the other side of the counter called for my attention. One of the brands we sell is Sonos, which is a high end but low margin wireless music player. You can stream individual songs or whole albums from a computer and with a monthly subscription to Napster, listen to anything from their vast library. I could see him staring intently at the remote control sitting in its charging cradle on the shelf and he asked me if I would come round to take a quick look. Stopping mid-sentence and temporarily abandoning my correspondence, I could see the reason for his puzzled expression as the unit appeared to be working by itself. Various screens for different menus were flashing up around twice a second and it didn't seem like a typical electronic malfunction, whereby an image will freeze or maybe alternate with one other at most. It looked as if all of the applications, folders and settings were being explored, like when one of those naughty speed reading aliens in Star Trek flicks through the Enterprise's schematics on the ship's computer, in order to turn off life support or something equally antisocial.

This came to an abrupt halt after about thirty seconds when all of a sudden the display went dead, so he picked it up and despite the fact that the batteries had been charging overnight, they were now completely flat. Rob has a keen mind, so I was impressed to see his next but one step towards conducting a methodical and scientific investigation. He asked both Colin and Tony if either of them had been trying to choose some music, but the system doesn't work like that as every remote is independent, so it won't show the selection process from another handset or operating device. Although to be fair to him, this was the sort of mistake that I would likely have made myself if I'd been quicker on the uptake. Following a curt denial from the backroom boys, I watched as he moved swiftly on to the next level of enquiry by bringing up the control app on his smart phone to find out what was going on. Taking his lead I fired up the desktop interface on the PC and saw that a certain album had been lined up to play, however I am disinclined to tell you what it was for a couple of reasons.

Firstly it's really not my kind of music and secondly the band's name is three exclamation marks in a row, which would ride roughshod over the remnants of any punctuation guidelines I'd carefully put in place. Colin had introduced us to this one over a month ago and even though Rob already knew the answer, he still asked me if I'd selected it, but a slight narrowing of the eyes was enough to convince him otherwise. There was a stray song listed at the end of the album which I hadn't noticed, "Let's Stay Together" by Al Green and I don't know how it joined the queue but maybe I know why. Rob spotted it and he told me that this was the track the system had been attempting to play, although curiously not via Napster. I love the sentiment behind this selection as the lyrics speak for themselves, but she would doubtless have realised that it was just a redundant link to a previously removed hard drive, which in human terms is like keeping someone's number in your phone memory after they've died. It was a sad day when I finally erased her name from the list of contacts on my mobile, but you don't always need caller ID to know who a message is from, especially if it's as clear as this one saying that she's still here for me and only playing dead.

On Saturday the 13<sup>th</sup> I tried another test e-mail from work and successfully picked it up when I got home, which only goes to reinforce my belief that problems of this nature will often sort themselves out without requiring intervention. The next day would be a case in point as I'd been discussing this with the guys and when I turned on my Xbox, I thought it was about to expire on me as there were these weird horizontal flashes on the TV which refused to go away. When I tried changing channels the picture was fine, so clearly the fault lay with the console and after unplugging it for a count of thirty seconds I had exhausted all of my options. Although I'm pleased to report that it didn't hamper my progress or indeed enjoyment, as the interference was right at the top and too far away from the action to cause distraction. Suffice to say it's never happened before or since, so I haven't been able to use this as a selling aid to my customers as one of the many advantages of buying the largest screen you can possibly accommodate.

Wednesday the 24<sup>th</sup> was the day I chose to share some of my experiences with the lads at work and surprisingly only two out of three were totally dismissive. Later on Rob told me that during his soldiering stint in Iraq with the Territorial Army, he had the feeling someone was watching over him as there were a few occasions when he'd narrowly avoided certain death, which defied all rational explanation and couldn't easily be put down to coincidence. This notion of having a guardian angel reminded me of what my stand-in psychic had said, but even though the standard of driving out there is appalling, he probably wasn't talking about crossing the road unless doing so exposed him to enemy sniper fire. That evening I was contentedly tapping away at the keyboard and describing my day at the hi-fi shop, which you could hardly call stereotypical, when for no apparent reason the cats suddenly went from being sound asleep to a state of high alert. The two of

them were now sitting bolt upright in front of the fire with their heads acting like twin missile launchers tracking the same target, so I went to fetch my dowsing rods. Traditionally these can either be bought off-the-peg or tailor-made, but I'm pleased to say that mine were arguably a combination of both.

It was a blisteringly hot day in the height of summer when I decided that I should expand my meagre array of test equipment, so I'd picked Tony and Colin's day off to take a couple of innocent looking coat hangers into work. Customers were seasonably thin on the ground, so I headed for the back yard clutching a pair of pliers from our toolkit and seeing that advances in modern electronics had reduced the hammer from a must-have to a vanity item, I chose a large adjustable spanner to use as a fashioning accessory. It took plenty of time and precision effort, but I was eventually happy with my newly fabricated crossed stick diagnostic device which had the stylish addition of two empty biro tubes for handles, although I held them like table tennis bats as I just can't get on with the penhold grip. Despite giving me some highly bemused looks earlier, Rob had eventually worked out what I'd been up to and asked if he could have a go, which was a far more enthusiastic response than the one I would get from Andy later that evening. Unfortunately I've never had much luck with them for one reason or another and I put this down to an apparent lack of natural talent, but I also suspected that my ideomotor responses were being suppressed by the effects of the cider. This term had originated in scientific circles around the mid-nineteenth century to describe the involuntary muscular movements caused by subconscious thoughts, essentially a spoiler for Ouija boards which explained why it was never mentioned on the packaging. I can now discount both ineptitude and inebriation as I'd drunk no less that night, but on approaching the spot by my porch door which was still the object of feline fascination, the rods started to crash into each other unless I held them wide apart where they proceeded to spin freely. The three categories of evidence that this could fall into are labelled as conclusive, inconclusive and get out of here, but don't make your mind up quite yet until I've told you what happened overnight in the shop.

You'll remember that I'd been browbeaten into buying a new answer phone and one of my last duties before locking up is to turn it on. Well it was early morning on Thursday the 25<sup>th</sup> when I had a surprise in store, just after I opened up and switched on the lights. I noticed that the phone's docking station had slipped from its secure position on the shelf and was now lying on the floor, still connected by its wires like some abstract form of telecommunication by puppetry. It normally sits a good three inches away from the edge and I don't see how I could have been so ham-fisted the previous day when I'd pressed the button before leaving. There's also the fact that if I'd knocked it down onto the hard wooden planking, then the loud clattering sound would surely have alerted me to my clumsiness and I

ushered Rob over as a witness, but he couldn't come up with any kind of logical explanation either. Funnily enough the handset was left dangling a hair's breadth over the same bin where I'd retrieved its predecessor after someone threw it away, caught in a cat's cradle of cabling looped and ready for demos. With yesterday's revelations in mind, I confidentially reassured Rob that this was never likely to happen again and replaced the two items on the shelf, but there were no new messages apart from the wonderfully cryptic one from Géraldine.

December 2010

It was getting close to bed time on Wednesday the 1<sup>st</sup> and I couldn't help thinking that after a drought of around six weeks, I'd be bound to see some puddle action either today or tomorrow. I had literally been waiting years for this, as back in 2006 I traded Markie a flat panel TV he wanted for his bedroom, for a bed that I needed for mine. This would be fairly easy for him to knock up in his workshop, although I'd been warned that it might take a while as he had a barn to convert first. He was planning to turn it into a high class holiday let, but the building had been derelict for decades and consequently the only structures worth keeping were the outer walls. I sent him a photo I'd found which was in the style I fancied for my top room, but he thought that it looked more rustic than Gothic and countered by telling me about a superior design he'd torn from a page of a magazine while waiting to see his doctor. Luckily nobody raised an eyebrow at this outward display of vandalism, which seemed more than acceptable and even tame for someone in camouflage pants sporting a Mohican.

He digitised then e-mailed me the picture and although his choice was infinitely better than mine, we both knew it would involve considerably more work to build, but curiously that didn't put either of us off the idea. I was a paragon of patience over the coming years and the only jibes about completion dates happened on games nights, but these were from people who had to endure the hardships of sleeping on an inflatable mattress, which would often be flat as a pancake by morning. The luxury replacement I'd chosen had been delivered last week by a courier who offered a door to door service, but I didn't realise that the driver's liability insurance stopped short of allowing him to come inside, so he left it tightly wedged in my porch which was still legally over the threshold. It took forever and a garden fork to lever then drag its weighty bulk into position on my living room floor, to the consummate delight of two cavorting cats. Markie had stressed the importance of buying a quality product and I couldn't bring myself to undermine his efforts by looking to economise, but both of us would come to query that decision when we tried to get it upstairs.

He arrived late afternoon with the component pieces protected by bubble wrap, which also kept them hidden from view until the long awaited reveal and despite having seen photos of various stages in its construction, I was overwhelmed by his exemplary woodworking skills. As we hadn't seen each other in ages, you can imagine that the night would inevitably turn out to be a wild one and he was undeniably keen to top it off with a ten minute séance. Géraldine must have appreciated his craftsmanship too, as when we listened back to the results they were quite pronounced and I told him that he should take this as a compliment. The next morning with a combination of Markie's bad back and my hangover, we had the unenviable task of hauling the new mattress upstairs. I realised that this wouldn't be easy as



besides being extremely heavy, it was also a foot deep and far less flexible than the ones I had manhandled in my past. After much upheaval it had jammed solidly between the doorway to the top room and my narrow winding staircase, so I was resigned to the fact that nothing short of a miracle would help us squeeze through such a tight gap, but around fifteen exasperating minutes later we finally succeeded. I knew that I could call on his joinery expertise twice in one visit without being too cheeky, so I'd previously asked if he could repair the damage to my cat cage. Following a short recuperative spell on the sofa, we drove to a builders' merchant in town for some timber and stopped on the way back for a spot of lunch. I was glad that the structure hasn't been listed yet, as what happened next could hardly be described as sympathetic restoration, but it would prove sturdy and just in time for the first significant snowfall of the year.

The bed went together without a hitch and everything fitted perfectly, which reminds me that I've completely forgotten to tell you why I needed a one-off custom made model in the first place. When I designed the built-in wardrobe I thought that a couple of inches over mattress width was enough to accommodate a standard double bed, but of course I hadn't allowed for either the headboard or legs, which would be sticking out too far and foul against the hinged doors. However this only proved to be a temporary setback, as mistakes are just opportunities for a rethink and when I saw the finished product I was glad that I'd miscalculated the measurements, rather than settle for something chosen from a showroom. Polly had kindly bought me a present of an elasticated shiny silver sheet with matching pillow cases, a daring choice of colour that I never would have dreamt of, but it looked stunning against the shimmering metal backdrop. Markie headed home around six o'clock, leaving me with a bed fit for either rock star or royalty, which is a coincidence as a few weeks later I was reading an article on rock's royalty. Scrolling through the pictures of Ronnie Wood's house I noticed that he has one which looks exactly the same, but it probably cost him a fair bit more than your average thirty two inch LCD. Although I suppose if you're a millionaire with a history of legendary excess, that's offset by a speedier delivery time. Seeing that there were no puddles during his stay, I will have to console you with a photo of my new acquisition and aren't I the lucky boy. [\(201-PIC\)](#)

January 2011

It's no surprise how fast time flies, when you're having fun or otherwise and more than a month had passed without incident. Now this may seem rather irrelevant as I don't generally read too much into them, but I wanted to let you know about a dream I had. You see they rarely make any sense at all and more to the point I tend to forget them soon after waking up. However this one was different, so I ventured downstairs in the early hours of the morning in search of pen and paper to preserve it for future consideration. It was most unusual and I vividly remember saying to Ron that the two of them need have no further cause for concern, as all paranormal activity had finished a while back. Something which made it stand out even more for me was the fact that he'd never featured in any of my dreams before, as they haven't kept pace with the times and dad is still very much mum's partner in all of them. Presumably it must have been my guilty subconscious reminding me to tell them that life had gone back to normal again, but there wasn't any hurry as they would be on holiday abroad for another two weeks.

I started to write them a letter around mid-January, but this was our busy time at work and I couldn't get any further than the first few sentences before a series of constant, though legitimate interruptions forced me to save it for later. Strangely I couldn't bring myself to finish it, as this was the first time I would be externalising and therefore endorsing my belief that maybe I'd lost her again. I was preparing for bed after our gaming session on Friday the 28<sup>th</sup> and reaching into the bathroom cabinet for a tube of toothpaste, I distinctly felt a droplet of water land on the back of my neck. If this had happened early morning it could have possibly been condensation from my hot bath forming on the cold skylight above, but that was hours ago and any remaining moisture would be long gone by now. There again the alternative seemed equally unlikely, as a single drip after a three month dry spell was far from conclusive and I would be hard-pushed to convince anyone otherwise. I even started to doubt myself as it could just have been my imagination playing a trick on me, so perhaps this was the right time to go ahead and complete the letter as if nothing had happened. With this in mind I decided that it would be finished the following day, then printed and posted without further delay.

<Hello there,

I thought I would write a quick thank you for my Christmas money. It turned up on time in my bank account, but your card didn't arrive until early January. I think there was so much snow on the ground that the postman more or less gave up and went into hibernation. The newspaper clip you included was very interesting, although I won't need to call any of those would-be ghostbusters as all of the strange phenomena have come to an

end. There has been no supernatural hanky-panky whatsoever for over two months now and I find that a little disappointing in a way, but at least it's allowing me to lick the material I already have into a better read.

From all accounts, although occurrences like these may have been going on for months or even years on occasion, they can just stop at what seems to be a completely arbitrary moment. My theory is that I have been given more than enough information to fill a decent-sized book and any further antics might prevent me from ever getting it finished, as I'd be constantly delayed by having to write up new events all the time. I had planned a big ending but I've decided against it, as that's not how things were meant to pan out and any theatrics at this late stage could permanently damage my already ragged credibility beyond repair.>

You don't need to see the rest of my letter as it contained nothing more than pleasantries and minor news, which were designed to put them even further at ease. Mum had sent me a cutting from her local paper about people who professed to live in haunted houses and listed at the bottom there were the contact details of some self-proclaimed removal experts, unregulated by a governing body but happy to help out on matters like these for a non-returnable fee. Not that I have ever wanted rid of my ghost, but it would be great to pit Géraldine against a load of pseudo religious mumbo jumbo as she'd certainly find the experience entertaining and nowadays I rarely get the opportunity to buy her the odd treat like I used to. I honestly couldn't tell whether my mother was still worried about me or just playing along, but either way I felt that I ought to keep her up to date with the current situation. Obviously the alternative and dramatic ending that I had envisaged was inviting Teresa over to investigate my house, so she could give me a room by room account of her findings, but I didn't want a Yeti at the end of the book. Knowing how rude this might initially sound and before I go putting my big foot in it again, I should really explain exactly what I meant by that.

Geoff had recently lent me a paperback called "The Long Walk", an allegedly true story of a Polish cavalry officer who was falsely imprisoned for spying and managed to abscond from a Siberian Gulag during the Second World War. If I were to tell you that while incarcerated, he'd met a young girl who was destined to be Andrew's mum, it would be far more believable than the encounter which supposedly happened later on. Despite most of his fellow escapees dying under miserable circumstances along the way, he succeeded in trekking across icy wastelands, deserts and mountain ranges in a heroic bid for freedom. Although his description of their arduous journey is very well written for the most part, before the survivors made it to safety in British controlled India they spotted a couple of Yetis while crossing the Himalayas and observed them from a distance until being forced to press on. Oh the sights you see when you're out without your gun. In the space of

only a few hundred words, all of the author's hard-won efforts at portraying a convincing account of what had happened to him were undone by his abominable decision to include this exceedingly unlikely revelation at the last moment.

I could so easily fall into the same trap by letting Teresa have the final say, as this might well prove to be disastrous. It would have been a different matter if all activity at home hadn't ceased a couple of months ago, but with Géraldine now unavailable for comment, I didn't know who or what she'd pick up on instead. Even though I trusted her abilities, I couldn't afford to gamble everything that I'd accomplished so far on what was effectively hearsay from hangers-on or other undesirables. I wouldn't be able to either confirm or deny it and what if she concluded by saying something really detrimental, like an elemental who'd been deprived of his sugar rush had only given me a one star rating for hospitality. This sort of disclosure could ruin my reputation and I felt somewhat relieved that if it ever came to making the book into a movie, which is what happened with "The Long Walk", the director wouldn't have to leave anything out in order to preserve a sustainable level of believability.

After addressing the envelope I popped it into the post box around 4.30pm on Saturday January 29<sup>th</sup>, which meant having to walk in-between a row of parked cars in front of the shop and dodging through oncoming traffic. For some unknown reason I had decided against padding it out with an extra paragraph, although I normally believe that a good thank you letter should contain at least enough words to fill a single page. Of course I can't say so for sure, but maybe she was watching over me after all as a few minutes later I heard an enormous crashing sound and made my way outside to see what had happened. My shop is located smack bang in the middle of a one way system and it was clear to me that a driver had forgotten to slow down before stopping in the disabled bay, or more probably he'd mistaken his accelerator for the brake pedal after an extended liquid lunch. I could hear that his engine was still running, so I rushed over to remove the ignition key and the portly old gent sitting behind the wheel must have been suffering from shock, as apart from an occasional twitch he remained utterly motionless, like a pickled frog connected to a battery. He'd ploughed into the parked car ahead of him which rammed the next one and so on, until five vehicles in a row were smashed up against each other. Besides a few broken bumpers, the only real long term damage occurred when a man loading bags of shopping into his boot had failed to prevent further carnage by acting as a human crumple zone and now lay howling in agony.

Some people seem to have no problem with callously cheating the disabled out of their allocated parking spaces, by using ill-gotten permits borrowed from family members, but I'm not suggesting that this was the case in his situation. Although I hadn't seen him prior to the accident, the poor chap

certainly looked genuine enough now and you could safely say that he's not going to be one of those whose limping is miraculously cured when they get a certain distance away from the traffic warden. Of course the opposite can also be true as some may saunter off in a sprightly fashion, but will soon tire and come back hobbling, so it's unwise to pass judgement too early. This means that unless you are fortunate enough to actually witness the injury, coming to an informed decision about whether someone is eligible or not is never straightforward and since last summer I've given up trying. A new customer of mine would always park and rather cheekily I thought, right outside the shop, but until I spotted his hi-tech metal leg in a pair of shorts one hot day in July, I didn't see how he could have possibly qualified for a blue badge let alone the Paralympics.

I am aware that ambulances are allowed by law to speed pell-mell towards their destination, while ignoring large portions of the Highway Code and this makes perfect sense to me. However here's the puzzling part as when the paramedics arrive at the scene, they don't appear to be in any sort of rush to administer due care and attention to their patient. They diligently unpack their equipment before calmly walking over to provide assistance, with all the urgency of an AA repair man on overtime. Please don't misunderstand me as I'm in no way criticising the emergency workers themselves, but the bureaucracy and red tape restrictions that suddenly kick in, which now seem to frown upon the simple life saving strategy of getting a move on. I can still remember the moment when his wife asked if he was okay as they lifted him onto a stretcher, but the monosyllabic answer snarled through gritted teeth wasn't the one she wanted to hear. While driving home, I couldn't help thinking about the impact it would have had on my plans for the weekend if I'd crossed the road a few minutes later and ended up in A&E or worse. This would have been deeply annoying as I'm forever wary of stepping in-between stationary vehicles, especially when I can hear one of their engines running and here's a piece of advice which will stand you in good stead, rather than see you crippled. When you're trying to guide someone into a tight parking space, never position yourself directly behind or in front but always to the side, unless you like the taste of hospital food and fancy an all-expenses-paid break on the NHS. I prefer to stay safely on the pavement and adopt the old anglers' technique of using my hands to indicate which size of fish would comfortably fit into the narrowing gap.

Even though I've seen some really strange things in my time, nothing could have prepared me for the surprise I found when I closed the front door and walked into the living room. I was astonished to see a mound of kitty litter about five inches across at the foot of my staircase and I had absolutely no idea how it got there. [\(202-PIC\)](#) Their tray is located in my utility room beyond the kitchen and when the cats scratch around in it, they're none too fussed about how much ends up on the floor, but it's never usually fifteen feet away or so neatly piled together. I instantly knew this must have been

Géraldine's idea of a little prank to announce her comeback and to tease me for doubting that she had left for good, although there was another explanation I needed to explore before I could be absolutely certain. Every morning I use a poop scoop to shovel their doings into a doubled-up carrier bag containing the rest of the daily rubbish, which I then fasten with a secure knot before it gets dumped in the wheelie bin. Just as I'm leaving for work, I pick it up and have to pass within a foot or so of the bottom of the stairs on my way out. However it seems highly unlikely that I would have paused for a few seconds while two layers of polythene sprung a leak and some of the innards formed a small heap on the floor, as there were no trails heading either towards or away. To confirm this I recovered the bag and I have no hesitation in saying that it was the right one, as bin day is always on a Friday. The plastic looked intact, but to make sure I held it at arm's length for a while and not even a thorough shaking could dislodge any of the contents. I was going to leave the pile in position for Andy to marvel over, but on Sunday afternoon Jasper decided to thank me for building him a second toilet and had started to paw it in readiness. He gave me the funniest of looks as I quickly shooed him away and carefully swept it up into an old vitamin pill pot which I placed in a kitchen cabinet.

If you think that this could be classed as moderately unhygienic then I'd have to agree in principle, although I made sure the container was tightly sealed before being thoroughly rinsed and besides I never keep food in there anyway. I'd also noticed on closer inspection that the granules looked pretty clean and could just as easily have come fresh from the packet, which is stored safely out of harm's way behind a cupboard door. There were certainly no traces of fecal matter or signs of the discolouration you would expect from a day's normal usage. Both of my cats like to have a wee in the morning and Bunny is always first in as soon as I've scooped out any nastiness from the last twelve hours, but occasionally he forgets to squat so it can splash off the high-sided walls. Jasper on the other hand prefers to wait until he's finished breakfast before his consistently well-mannered performance, so by 9.00am the litter in the tray has already been soiled and it wouldn't be my first choice to dig into if I fancied a takeaway. Without sending it off for chemical analysis, there's only one way I can get any closer to identifying its most likely source and that will involve a nasal appraisal to test for the distinctive odour of feline waste. Well that was fairly pointless, as fuller's earth is famous for its deodorising qualities and my nose detected nothing of interest, so maybe I should consider filling up a control pot before hitting the park to see whether the canine equivalent would do any better. Unfortunately though, I would never have the opportunity to try this out for fear of being apprehended by an off-duty drug squad officer walking his sniffer dog and getting prosecuted for contaminating the evidence. You see I had become accustomed to storing my class B potpourri in a similar looking tub and the expression useless dope is applicable in more ways than one, when I realised that I'd unintentionally mixed the two together.

I would prefer not to show you anything other than a close-up shot of my discovery, as I don't need to appear to be more slovenly than is strictly necessary. You already know that I'm less than proud of my poor standards of housekeeping and therefore not entirely happy about publicising one of the areas where I've let them slip. Like a lot of other single guys who live on their own, I'll only feel the need to do a spot of cleaning before entertaining a lady and especially if she happens to be my mother. You can understand why I wouldn't want her to see a photo of my filthy staircase carpet and particularly not one which focusses on the bottom steps, as these invariably look worse than the others. Prior to her visits I'll always borrow Henry from work, Elsie's old vacuum cleaner of choice and Teressa would have enjoyed the same treatment if plans had worked out differently, so it was hardly my fault that things were in a bit of a mess. Once again Géraldine has tricked me into giving away more information than I care to and had I known that she was liable to drop in so unexpectedly, then of course I would have tidied up first. [\(203-PIC\)](#)

Okay so it's just as bad as I remember, but in my defence the stairs don't usually have such a generous deposit of kitty litter scattered around. It tends to get stuck in their paws and then falls away when dislodged by the carpet, but we're only talking about minor smatterings which are still comfortable to walk on in bare feet. Here though, we can see a potentially painful concentration of granules which form a rough diagonal and if you ignore the vertical drop, they appear to line up with the mound below. Above that there's a suggestion of what could thinly be interpreted as a top stroke, but whether it's upper or lower case this still looked like another fine example of a J to me. Strangely there's far more litter to the left of the letter, while those tiny specks to the right give you a good indication of normal grit dispersal and I wonder if that unfeasibly large vertical paw print has anything to do with it. So I think I can absolve myself from shouldering the lion's share of the blame, but I have to hold my hands up regarding the trodden-in swathes of moulted fur, although they're difficult to shift and a portable Dyson with a worn-out battery isn't exactly shed-loads of help. Perhaps we can salvage something from this embarrassing incident and that could be an insight into how the dead empty their cat trays in heaven. If time is on your side, it would be a better option to avoid removing the clumps of waste matter as this might leave contaminated residue, but by picking out the unsoiled bits first you can easily discard whatever's left. In truth the only positive I could take from being shamed by my domestic deficiencies was an overwhelming desire to prevent it happening again and with that in mind I decided to buy myself a full-sized vacuum cleaner, so even if you aren't learning anything from this at least I am.

February 2011

It was Friday the 11<sup>th</sup>, Colin's day off and feeling peckish I'd just popped out to grab a sandwich for lunch. We had run out of sales receipts, so before leaving I set the printer into action to churn out some more which is quite a complicated process. You have to do side one first and then leave the sheets to cool down for a while, as putting them straight back in will cause unsightly creases. In order to eliminate an odds-on chance of making a mistake, Tony had helpfully indicated which direction and way up the paper should face with an N.B. in marker pen on the loading tray, so it would be correctly aligned for phase two of the procedure. [\(204-PIC\)](#) I was back in less than five minutes and astonished to find that both sides had been completed without any signs of creasing. Although I had every reason to suspect that this couldn't have been down to human resources I still congratulated my team for finishing the job, more to grab their attention than anything else, but as you would expect neither of them knew what I was going on about. After taking the time to explain myself properly, their only suggestion was that I must have already completed stage one of the print run and it had just skipped my mind, well thanks for the vote of competence guys. It was only after we'd read the manual to find out more about the machine's capabilities, that I remember catching the last half of a mumbled apology from one of them and a look of complete indifference from Tony.

Surprisingly after three or four years of daily usage, none of us knew that it could print double-sided, but don't forget Géraldine had acquired a working knowledge of PC peripherals during her job at the college and she always enjoyed helping out. By following the instructions I found a submenu where the box which turned on this facility had already been ticked and the final comment I heard but still couldn't disprove was, "Well that's computers for you." I know that due to their inherently complex nature, it's only a matter of time before either hardware, firmware or software will start acting erratically on occasion and these inconsistencies are seldom good news. This is exactly the reason why I find it difficult to believe that after all these years, there could have been a lucky glitch which instantly gave us the labour-saving improvements we'd previously overlooked. However this was just a fanciful theory until being confirmed around 9.30pm that night by the appearance of a small offset trap puddle during our regular gaming session, the first of its kind for almost four months. [\(205-PIC\)](#)

Of course there's every chance that I could easily be mistaken, as she was just as likely to have been excited about Justin coming round on Monday evening. This was news to both of us and had only been arranged during our customary precursory chat, as having mentioned that he would be running an errand in the near vicinity, I'd offered him overnight accommodation in my previously spare bedroom. You see I'd recently adopted it as my own,



though I would move down to the first floor temporarily so that he could experience spending the night in Markie's masterpiece. Alternative sleeping arrangements can also be useful when you have unwelcome visitors, as I found out only a few short days ago. Before jumping into bed, which is now nothing more than a turn of phrase due an injuriously tight trajectory between unforgiving beams and sharp pointy finials, I opened the Velux window to take a quick look at the cloudless sky. The Moon could be made of green cheese for all I care as gastronomy has never been my thing, so I'll confess to being a frustrated UFO spotter and while it would be great to actually see one, I was about to have a close encounter of a very different kind. Suddenly the air was teeming with flies buzzing around, so I grabbed the duvet and closed the door behind me before defaulting to my other bedroom downstairs. Knowing how difficult they are to catch brought back memories of a similar, but earlier episode and I think that this would be a good opportunity to get the book's more or less obligatory sex scene out of the way.

You'll remember me telling you about the time when I was living in a small flat with my first proper girlfriend, well I recall one night in particular and although neither of us felt sleepy, we were already in bed. However there was an annoying bluebottle circling around above our heads which seemed intent on ruining the mood, whilst resisting all of my increasingly desperate efforts to catch it, so I had to come up with a plan. Swatting an insect can prove messy and losing track of where the corpse lands is always a distinct pisserbolity in situations like these, so I decided to stun it with my air rifle. I balled-up a small piece of toilet tissue that I'd moistened under a tap and inserted the soggy pellet into the breech before returning to re-acquire my target, which had settled on the ceiling above us. Being a northern lass, she was strangely at ease with the presence of a cocked and loaded weapon in the bedroom, while remaining totally oblivious to the innuendo bless her. I took careful aim before firing and scored a direct hit, but whether it was due to the fly being excessively plump or because we lived in a hard water area, any romantic notions I'd been nurturing came tumbling down around my ears. Luckily its pus-splattered carcass stayed stickily in place, but unluckily the same couldn't be said about the disgusting fragments of wings and legs which started to flutter down in revoltingly slow motion towards the quilt. It took much longer to clean up than I'd envisioned, as girls are quite fussy about this sort of thing and by the time we'd finished, neither of us had the energy to continue where we left off but I can't remember that stopping us.

Sadly this means that we should consider downgrading John's Christmas surprise from the classic plague of flies scenario I'd initially proposed, to a simple case of infestation. Although there's no time to worry about this now as I had more immediate issues on my mind and by inviting Justin over to stay, I'd forgotten that it would clash with a previous commitment. Knowing

that Andy wouldn't be free to come round on Monday, as it was February the 14<sup>th</sup> and he'd want to spend the evening with his sweetheart Mel, I'd promised Géraldine a ten minute séance so I could whisper a few sweet nothings in her general direction. It wouldn't be fair to let either of them down so I decided to combine the two and after telling Justin about my dilemma, I was relieved when he chivalrously offered to join in despite his misgivings, which were easily outweighed by not only being a good friend but also the consummate ladies' man. Things were going remarkably well until the gas fire went out halfway through and by trying to get it going again, I unwittingly polluted the rest of the recording with misleading clicks from my barbecue lighter.

All four of us were online for games night on Tuesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> and I told everyone how elated I felt about the prospect of spending a rare day at home tomorrow. Colin and Rob's holidays had overlapped, which meant I didn't have anyone to cover for Tony who is always off on a Wednesday, so I decided the best idea would be to close as I'd never expect him to work a six day week. Running the shop on my own can be an incredibly peaceful experience and I've done it before, but everything changes for the worse if things start to get busy, which is precisely what happened last time. I hate the idea of keeping customers waiting, so my worst nightmare was when one of them walked out in a huff before I had the chance to apologise for taking a phone call, whilst checking a delivery and paying Joe the window cleaner all at once. Although the others were obviously keen to start racing, I couldn't resist subjecting them to a somewhat fatuous account of my latest experiment. Yesterday had been the anniversary of the bathroom bombardment, so I'd set up my recorder overnight to test whether it was a random or yearly affair. I didn't want to witter on for too long about my findings, as there was nothing much to be heard and a lack of percussion doesn't merit discussion, so thankfully I suggested that we fire up Split Second before anyone lost interest or perhaps the will to live. Taking a quick pit stop at 10.15pm, I couldn't help but be mesmerised by an amazing trap puddle which was so far in advance of her last tentative effort, that when I eventually caught up with the guys, I found they were already on lap two and had left me stalled on the grid.

Maybe she wants me to introduce the racing league scoreboard and I'd love to let you know how that works out, but every story must come to an end sooner or later, so this seems like the right moment to call it a day. I don't think that she will ever be able to top this one and in terms of water displacement, even the great Archimedes himself would have struggled to explain it away, so here's the last picture for you. [\(206-PIC\)](#) We've already gone through various reasons why this type of leak can't possibly be caused by any sort of pressure other than the force of gravity, but somehow the spillage was at a perfect right angle to the rear wall and over thirteen inches in length. All previous ideas about how these puddles had formed were

blown out of the water by its elaborate tree-like shape, which seems to have been more pumped out than squirted. Although it's pleasing on the eye just to look at, I still feel compelled to pick it to pieces and on closer examination we can clearly see the order in which the design was produced. The bottommost blob was made first, then the one above it and so on until finishing a few inches north of the trap. I'm guessing that the whole process took around five minutes from beginning to end, as the lowest one has lost definition and any traces of splashing have evaporated, which means it was formed earlier than the others. The pattern continues until the final splurge, which is still crisp in detail and accompanied by the largest splattering of rebounding droplets. Who knows, this could potentially be another attempt at a representation of the wooden cat's tail, but the only thing that I'm sure about is I can't have been more than a minute or two away from catching it in progress.

I feel like I should go on the record one last time to remind you that apart from my sneaky soapy stunt, none of these events have been either staged or fabricated in any way. If you take into account my inborn lack of practical skills, how could I have known the correct amount of pressure required to bend a strike plate, or Colin-proof a defective toilet roll holder? After all, these aren't the kind of things which you can easily look up on the Internet. Unlike Géraldine I've never been renowned for my artistic abilities, so it's not hard to tell which of us was most likely to have etched such an intricate design into the metal cabinet, or chosen to use the dust on top as a canvas. Rather regrettably there's no reliable way of telling if a digital photo has been tampered with, but I've allowed for that as I can provide an archive of backup shots taken from different angles and getting them all to match identically would surely be an inconceivable feat to carry off.

I've tried to include as much evidence as is humanly possible and frequently the opposite, so that you are in total possession of all of the necessary information to arrive at your own conclusions. To say that some of these occurrences have been incredibly bizarre is putting it mildly, but as you're still here there's nothing which has insulted your intelligence to the point of abandoning the book in disgust and never coming back. You may have found my story utterly laughable, but I'll take that as a compliment as it's difficult to inject an element of humour into a serious subject like this, although a light-hearted approach is often the best way to put people at ease with their mortality and the concept of eternity. I've long since given up on hoping to persuade any hard-line sceptics that there's life after death, as if I couldn't even convince close friends like John or Andy, then what sort of chance would I have with strangers. Whatever you choose to believe, it's always a good idea to keep an open mind and questioning accepted wisdom is the first step on the path to progress. History has proven time and time again that we don't have all of the answers yet, so there's no point in being a flat-Earther when the horizon is throwing you a curve ball.

March and April 2011

Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> and trust me I didn't intend to extend my coverage beyond the cut-off date, but it was obvious that someone had a small amount of unfinished business to wrap up. Although I'd started the racing league table a month back, I abandoned the idea a week ago when it became clear that she didn't want to join in. I daresay the basic premise was probably fine, but she must have thought that my scoring system gave her an unfair advantage and no real challenge. Andy was round as usual that evening and we were trying to complete some of the tougher achievements in the single player game. I took a bathroom break at 9.05pm and had it been a Tuesday, Friday or Sunday she would have notched up an overall win, as Monday nights don't count on the leader board of course. [\(207-PIC\)](#) It had vanished by twenty to eleven and as if to prove a point, precisely a week later the two of us were making good progress again, when I found that she'd flaunted the rules of engagement once more by pulling off exactly the same trick under identical circumstances.

I wish she'd picked any other day to give me the answer to how at least some of the trap puddles were formed, as April 1<sup>st</sup> was not a date I would personally have chosen to reveal my conclusions to the world. It was a Friday so we were racing again and around 10.30pm I had to go for a pee. As always, the first thing I do whenever I turn on the light is check out the floor and I can swear to you that nothing was amiss. After flushing the loo I washed my hands before taking a step backwards to reach for the towel, only to see that this had appeared out of nowhere. [\(208-PIC\)](#) I can tell you for a fact that it wasn't there before and couldn't have been caused by conventional leakage, as when I checked the underside of the basin then examined the trap, both turned out to be completely dry. Maybe this had been her way of demonstrating that she was way ahead of the game when it came to split second timing and proof of how unfairly the odds could be stacked against us, if we were to select the night's winner by adhering to my simplistic guidelines.

You remember earlier when I said that I'd seen a single droplet fall out of thin air, well there was no good reason why exactly the same thing hadn't happened again, albeit in greater volume this time and beyond my field of view. Of course I hadn't heard anything as there was a tap running, which I imagine would have been a key part of her plan as we've learnt that Géraldine never likes to give too much away. Assuming she has this ability, it would instantly provide the answer to a few unsolved mysteries ranging from an inexplicable soaking of my living room rug, to that puddle around the base of the toilet bowl. Perhaps I've been wrong all along and the trap has never actually leaked, as if she can indeed produce cold spots to create indoor rain, then this was the ideal place to practice her shower power as chilling the metal would result in drips running down its surface. I don't

know why I didn't think of this earlier, as the dewy rings left on the floor by a freezer mug give me a daily demonstration of condensation and apart from dropping one of them on my big toe, I'd failed to make any sort of physical connection. That's possibly what she was hinting at by messing about with them for several days afterwards, but I've been distracted before by concerning myself with how over why and concentrating my efforts on investigating the method as opposed to the motive.

I really should tell you about my mum's latest news, as she rang to say that something very odd was happening at their house now and it reminded her of what had been going on at mine. She'd found one of dad's floppy discs on the carpet in the spare room, which was strange as nobody had used any of these since he died. Incidentally the rest of them were still neatly stacked behind some CD-ROMs in an old wooden drawer sitting on top of a filing cabinet next to the computer desk. This newly repurposed software storage tray was all that remained of a larger piece of furniture and the result of a downsizing exercise when they moved into a smaller property. Without thinking she put it back amongst the others and carried on with her day. The same thing happened on three or four more occasions over a period of a few months and Ron was equally baffled, as he didn't understand how they could be knocked down accidentally, especially one at a time. Apparently they were still unaware that anything particularly out of the ordinary was going on until a couple of weeks ago, when she found a disc on the floor on two consecutive days. It didn't escape me that this was similar to several of my own experiences, where they stealthily filter into your consciousness before slowly rising out of mundanity towards being something worthy of note. This unforeseen escalation of events was enough to arouse her curiosity so before putting it back she jotted down its title "MYOB", which turned out to be a shareware accountancy package instead of a short and rather terse message from dad. Even if I'd been there to advise, I couldn't have suggested a smarter move than her next one when she counted and recorded the exact number of discs, which came to twenty two in total.

On returning from an off-season mini break they found another floppy out of place, but this time nestling defiantly in front of the CD-ROMs, including the one for their recently installed printer which meant that it couldn't have been there for long. The surprise factor didn't stop there, as after a quick tally-up this not only turned out to be disc number twenty three, but rather unexpectedly it was clearly labelled "Book" in my handwriting. [\(209-PIC\)](#) Now considering my current literary ambitions, you may find this highly improbable but it's relatively easy to explain. You will doubtless remember that I'd previously mentioned my abortive attempt at writing a novel, which I started in the old-fashioned way with pen and paper until I was able to transfer it to a newly acquired laptop. Although the main character was always going to die and I had established that beyond doubt right from the very first chapter, I'd been counting on at least a dozen more which would

have turned around this seemingly tragic beginning into a reasonably happy ending. It's understandable if some of you are drawing parallels here, by thinking that you're merely reading a failed author's attempt at rehashing an old theme, but any resemblance to persons either living or dead would have been purely coincidental.

I'd long been fascinated by the phrase "Being above the law" and how it was frequently applied to criminals who menaced their local communities, but would escape prosecution due to the constant threat of retribution which stopped potential witnesses from coming forward. We've all seen films about vengeful vigilantes who take it upon themselves to rid the streets of these scumbags, but this rarely happens in the real world as two wrongs don't make a right and most people have too much to lose if they are caught. My story centred around an otherwise ordinary chap, who had moved into a neighbourhood that was being terrorised by members of the same notorious family and his frustration with the authorities, as they seemed powerless to bring them to justice. As if things couldn't get any worse, he received the news about his illness being terminal shortly before returning home and discovering yet another break-in, which in spite of the mindless destruction that accompanied it, cheered him up no end. He found it strangely ironic that the killer disease spreading through his body would now set him free to start eliminating a different form of cancer, one which was endemic to modern society. You see he'd already prepared himself for a grim prognosis, by hatching a plot to strike a blow for the common man and permanently deter at least some of these loathsome individuals from a life of crime. At the point where his condition started to deteriorate, he too would effectively be above the law, as prison hospital beds are no less comfortable to die in than normal ones and morphine flows freer when the nurses are used to administering to habitual users with increased tolerance levels.

Getting hold of a handgun had proved easier than expected, but he knew that his one man crusade would achieve little to nothing in the long term without an ongoing supply of fresh recruits. Through joining various support groups, he was able to meet others in a similar predicament and casually introduced them to his master plan during innocent conversation, by way of dressing it up as a great idea for a book. This was planting a tiny seed in their minds and he hoped that leading by example would encourage it to germinate. I hadn't worked out how many bad guys he would be able to take out before being apprehended, but it was enough to hit the headlines. He soon became a popular folk hero due to sympathetic coverage from the media and ended up spending the rest of his life in a secure medical facility, dosed up on the sort of illegal drugs they would normally put you away for. I'm pleased to report that he died alone but happy during visiting hours, shortly after a newsflash came on TV about a copycat killing which had taken place and the rather emaciated looking stranger sitting by his bedside

gave him a knowing wink, before wheeling herself off to join the cause. Cue sequel and lucrative film franchise.

This of course was only the basic framework of the story which obviously needed developing and expanding upon, but that would never happen as when I read through the first chapter, I realised my ability to write fiction hadn't improved since high school, despite being held down a year. They say that you should always write about what you know about and being a confirmed pacifist living in a curtain-twitching neighbourhood watch area, I couldn't have come up with anything less believable if I'd tried. By including this short résumé I'm not trying to encourage an outbreak of disorderly behaviour and although it's said that a little violence never hurt nobody, I wouldn't want to be accused of inciting cold-blooded murder just because someone has missed the double negative. Careless language can cost lives you know. Besides if the pen is indeed mightier than the sword, then a word processor and printer combination would be dynamite by comparison, so I'm sure that if Guy Fawkes were alive today he'd opt for a more diplomatic approach to instigate change. "A4 B4 C-4" and this is a handy mnemonic to remember if ever you find yourself planning a protest trip to the Houses of Parliament, as petitioning is better than partitioning your local MP.

Okay so it's taken considerably longer than I had expected, but at least this explains the lettering on the floppy disc they found, which must have been my saved copy that I'd deleted and reused to send dad a program or screen saver to try out. I asked mum to post it to me wrapped up in silver foil to protect against stray magnetic fields, but regardless of Andy's best attempts at data retrieval he couldn't find anything aside from a text file containing directions to their house, which was only of passing interest as she's since moved. Curiously enough on the same day that I took her phone call, I was spending the evening relaxing and watching TV when I discovered another puddle beneath the trap. Although I'm sure that photographic proof won't be required on this occasion, as apart from the unfamiliar but thoughtful timing in case I'd been feeling neglected in a mostly ghostly kind of way, it was nothing special.

May 2011

Now there was only one obstacle to prevent me from publishing and that would be getting permission to include an image of the Illingworth print, otherwise I could find myself in hot water due to infringement of copyright. The artist is well-known for being a bit of a recluse and I can understand his reasons for not wanting to be in the public eye, but this would make my quest to contact him a lot more complicated, or at least that's what I thought. Try putting yourself in my position, or his for that matter and you will understand why I dithered for a while, as situations like these should be handled with the utmost delicacy. It was Monday May 16<sup>th</sup> before I finally summoned up the necessary gumption to make an approach and having searched through various sites on the Internet, I soon chanced across a gallery specialising in his work which looked like a good place to start my enquiries. Without wasting any more time I sent them an e-mail to find the best way of getting in touch with him and as luck would have it, I received a phone call a few hours later from the proprietor, who also turned out to be his agent. After briefly introducing myself, I told him I was writing a book and that the picture had become an integral part of the storyline. He asked me what it was about and somewhat nervously I said that I had been compiling a sort of diary, which charted the allegedly paranormal events I'd observed over the last couple of years. Rather surprisingly he asked no further questions, but offered to contact Mr Illingworth on my behalf and give me an answer in due course. I must admit to being immensely relieved, as I'd been expecting a resounding no and hoping that the conversation wouldn't be swiftly terminated before I had the opportunity to explain myself properly, or extol the many benefits of free advertising.

You can imagine how anxious I felt when I answered his call the following day, as such a quick decision could mean trouble and plenty of pixelating, but I'm delighted to say that it went really well. I couldn't believe I'd been given permission so readily, with the only proviso being that I would send them a couple of copies, as it was a subject in which the artist had more than just a casual interest. Being a Tuesday, I wouldn't have to wait long to tell the others as they already knew that this was the final hurdle I had to negotiate. Although they all seemed moderately impressed by my news, I could sense that trigger fingers were starting to get itchy so we fired up the shooting game and I took a bathroom break after successfully completing the first mission. It felt like a re-run of April Fools' Day as the floor was definitely dry before I started to rinse my hands, but about thirty seconds later when I stepped back to grab a towel, I found that this peculiar design had appeared and why not zoom in a fraction for a closer look. ([210-PIC](#))

If you'll excuse the oxymoron, which fortunately for those celebrating their birthday today doesn't mean a dim-witted Taurean, this minor tour de force was far more bullish than her last one and it narrowly missed my toes. They



would have been level with the claw and ball foot of the bathtub, so it's a fine testament to Géraldine's targeting abilities that she didn't give them a thoroughly good soaking in the process. If we discount the other types of leakage, this makes eighteen in total and all but three have coincided with multiplayer Xbox nights, so perhaps that's what the celebrity psychic had been referring to when she told me my friend was loving the games. I knelt down to check the underside of the basin and trap, but couldn't find any sign of moisture so once again the drips had materialised out of nowhere. However the thing which surprised me most was sharing the photo with my pistol packing pals, who must have been suffering from puddle fatigue as they failed to fully appreciate the timely significance of what had just occurred and couldn't wait to get back to despatching desperados.

Now that I had been authorised to use my photos of the print, this signalled a definitive cut-off point as it looked like Géraldine had also given me her blessing, with what I interpreted as a besprinkling of bovine symbology steeped in mythology and astrology, with a possible "Cowgirl" reference thrown into the mix. Though I might be confusing Underworld with Theseus and Orpheus with Labyrinth, or was that David Bowie? This wasn't exactly the show-stopping finale I'd hoped for and that's the problem with a factual account as you have to work with what you're given, but from my first reported enigma of a cold bath to our latest anomaly, the book-ending with a water issue made a certain amount of sense. If you were after a rip-roaring page-turner, then you'd have been better off reading a novel as I can't deny that we've had more spills than thrills, but there again this is essentially her story not mine so don't blame me for the boring bits. Of course I never expected there would be such a plethora of puddle pictures for you to wade through, but in fairness most of them need no more than a cursory glance, although I probably should have mentioned that earlier. In fact you wouldn't have missed out on all that much by ignoring everything else and just concentrating on the text, which must come either as a relief, or a vindication to those old-school readers who didn't fancy a multimedia experience.

Anyway thanks for sticking with me on my journey of discovery, as I'm sure that there are many less discerning individuals who will inevitably have fallen by the wayside, but it's only a matter of time before we all know the truth and let's make a pact not to taunt them with remarks like I told you so. I have no idea about the specific nature or details of what awaits us, but from everything I've learnt so far I can assure you it's all good news and particularly for those who don't belong to a discriminating religion, as death for outsiders doesn't deserve the bad press they often attach to it. Though whatever you do, don't go rushing towards it unnecessarily as being late for your own funeral is usually a term associated with poor timekeeping, but in reality it's infinitely preferable to being early. Try to have as much fun as possible without hurting anyone's feelings, be kind to animals which

includes not stamping at pigeons and don't forget that it's never cool to leave butter in the Marmite jar. There is really nothing more to add, apart from if you want to come back for an occasional visit to your old stomping ground I'd suggest getting pally with someone who has already mastered the knack and I can't help thinking that when D-Day finally arrives, I'll have an unfair advantage.

Now that my book was complete, I transferred it onto a memory stick which I took to work and printed out. This was the first time I'd seen a hard copy and it made a pleasingly thick stack of sheets, which admittedly would have looked twice as impressive if I hadn't been shown how to use both sides of the paper. Having it holed and spiral bound was the next step, before skipping through to correct the odd spelling mistake or grammatical error. Obviously I'd leave some in, as it's a widely held belief that only God is perfect and being risk averse, if there is a Judgement Day then I'll have enough to account for without worrying about getting penalised for my impeccable prose. Whenever the weather was nice I'd be able to sit quietly outside in our back yard and re-write any sections which required a quick polish or slight adjustment, while the others took care of the customers. Surely no one could begrudge me a little time-out every now and then. However a few sunny days later with the red pen in full flow, the pages resembled the aftermath of a bloodbath and it was clear that this would take immeasurably longer than I'd anticipated if I wanted to come up with anything worthy of putting my name to, even anonymously. I'd wrongly assumed that being a seasoned and accomplished reader, my writing age would be on a similar level, but in all honesty I couldn't rate it any higher than awkwardly adolescent so I braced myself for a lengthy overhaul. Rather ironically it turned out that there wasn't a single sentence which didn't need changing, apart from this one and whole paragraphs had to be shuffled around in order to make any sort of sense of my chaotic ramblings. The first edit turned into a second, then third and so forth, which felt like painting a bridge as it could have gone on forever, but you've got to stop somewhere haven't you. This explains the huge delay before the eventual release date, as whether or not you believe that Géraldine is looking over my shoulder, why wouldn't I want to do the very best I could for her considering all she's done for me. The hardest part was not allowing any elements from the intervening years to sully or post-date my narrative and aside from one transgression, which will be a play on the word "selfie", I promise I haven't succumbed.

August 2011

I know that we've already said our goodbyes, but the girl had other ideas and although it was blatantly a couple of weeks beyond the strict three month non-disclosure waiver I'd allowed her, she couldn't resist furnishing me with the big finish after all. The date was Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> of August and looking back, I wonder if it ever would have happened if Andy hadn't been too busy to come over on Monday night. As my closest friend by an accident of geography he's been an unwitting accomplice throughout, so I'd like to take this as an opportunity to thank him for his invariably reluctant, but invaluable contributions. We were discussing the Higgs boson controversy, which had been all over the papers recently and even though I wasn't even vaguely aware of the physics behind it, anything that challenged accepted beliefs could provide a springboard for my arguments. I'd latched onto the somewhat emotive term "God particle" and knowing that the established world of science was his oyster, this could well be the irritating grain of sand which produced a pearl of wisdom. Unfortunately they're indiscernible to the naked eye, so it was impossible to solve this contentious issue before bedtime without a hadron collider and had Ron had one, we could have phoned him up for his input but I'm certain he didn't. Andy's cab arrived at a quarter to twelve and there was nothing in the bathroom that warranted my immediate attention apart from a toothbrush. As I was drifting off to sleep, I heard a loud muffled bang which sounded like the cats had knocked over something heavy, but there were no repercussions so it could wait until morning. We all know the phrase "Things that go bump in the night" and perhaps this was a prime example as skipping ahead a little, I would find nothing which could have caused it when I remembered to conduct a quick recce before leaving for work.

The alarm went off at 7.30am and I made my way downstairs to have a bath. I had temporarily forgotten about the almighty thump I'd heard, as there are plenty of likely possibilities to choose from when you live in a terrace, but the noisiest and naughtiest of all of them is Bunny so he's always top of my list. The first thing I noticed when I opened the door was a curious mark beneath one of the wooden cat's legs, which looked almost like a protruding claw. I carefully lifted it up and this revealed further scratches in the dust on the shelf, together with the four distinct patches where its feet had been standing. [\(211-PIC\)](#) Instantly I could make out two letters which appeared to be a J and a P. What's odd is that while the J had been formed outside the paw print, the P was mostly underneath and here's a close-up for you. [\(212-PIC\)](#) Recognising this style of penmanship and drawing from previous experience, it's easy to see that there's good evidence which indicates the direction of movement. The J starts at the top, as you can spot residual signs of white powdery debris at the bottom and tip of its curve. However the P begins with a sharp hairpin bend which continues from left to right, before looping over and ending in a confident

down stroke. There was another scraping at the back which I could only identify as some kind of mystic rune, or perhaps the dead need extra letters in their alphabet and maybe this is one of them. (213-PIC) Like the J it's connected to the imprint, but drawn beyond the periphery and also heads downwards, leaving a similar dusty deposit before deviating to make some complex twisting manoeuvres. If you focus in on the fine dark line above which runs parallel in an easterly direction, it abruptly turns from horizontal into vertical, so in theory whatever implement she used must have neatly pirouetted ninety degrees before briefly going northwards and stopping.

Despite scoring a pass on my cannabis recycling proficiency test, I don't know much about bush-craft as I'm no Ray Mears, but even I could detect an anomaly here. There are only three track marks which is unusual for a quadruped, but being hand carved you can tell which one of its rear legs is a fraction of a millimetre shorter than the others and doesn't make contact with the ground, so it always wobbles slightly when kissed. This strongly suggests that they were made by the rough undersides of its paws and we don't need to consider any other method or device. It also follows that the cat was never actually removed from the surface, but pushed along with sufficient downforce to scour through the tough layers of impacted dust. Although obviously they couldn't all have been made at exactly the same time without the legs being splayed out and bending in different directions, which would be a physical impossibility. This meant that it would have required three deliberate and consecutive actions to produce these results, which were all different but strikingly similar in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on. So I revisited the shelfies I'd taken back in July 2009 and May 2010 to look for clues.

On each and every occasion the most prominent dust marks either start from within a paw print or were at least touching it, but the cat was upstairs in my top room when the first ones appeared, so naturally I thought that they must have been created by some other means. Although on close examination, you can see how both sets seem to have been drawn with exactly the same nib and this made no sense whatsoever. (214-PIC) Perhaps Andy and I shouldn't have settled on the sprig of weed so readily without fully considering our options, as I'm the one who has always defaulted to it when trying to make contact, whereas we've learnt that Géraldine prefers a more subtle form of non-herbal communication. So her dust-busting techniques may remain a mystery, but I'm certain that anyone who can negotiate a couple of tight corners while shifting a pile of kitty litter a fair few yards away would be equally resourceful in matters like this. Once again by taking advantage of Elsie's absence she hadn't only pulled off another masterstroke, but a cryptic triptych of them and let's not forget that the ability to replicate results is a fundamental requirement of science. There are further correlations to be found here between this and the previous incidents, but it would involve taking liberties with chronological order then

relying on two of the events happening after midnight, so that I can count them as the following day. However the more I consider them, the less convincing they become so I'm not even going to go there.

Then all of a sudden it struck me that I had been looking at the component parts of a figure 8 in various stages of completion and there was something else afoot which provided further proof. As well as drawing every single one in the same direction and orientation, you can also see that the bottom loops would all have been located outside of the paw print perimeter. Needless to say it didn't take me long to realise that this was a very significant number indeed, as you know I always wipe down the shelf every New Year's Eve to present her with a blank canvas. A drumroll would be nice here, as last night was August 31<sup>st</sup> and precisely eight months later to the day. There's also the fact that when turned on its side, this symbol is used to denote infinity and seeing how the dead make no bones about the right way round, what could be more fitting than leaving me with one final message which sums everything up so perfectly. It also addresses any feelings of being left in the lurch when a book ends and not knowing what happens to the people you've been reading about. Well she's provided the answer to that as everybody dies, but we all live happily ever after in heaven. This explains why she had to push me beyond my boundaries one last time and go out with a bang, instead of that whimper we may, or may not have heard during a séance.

So here's where we must part company and of course there's more which has happened since, although it's rarely been as spectacular or wondrous as the strange but enlightening moments in time that I've had the privilege of sharing with you. She might not need a rest, but I certainly do and my conscious decision to concentrate on delivering an accurate account of everything that's occurred up until now has ruled out experimenting in favour of documenting. Who could have guessed that I would be the one to opt out, but it's a mutually beneficial arrangement as she now has the opportunity to go off and do her own thing while I do mine, like the best long distance relationship you can imagine. I still think of her every day and air-kissing the cat whenever I use the bathroom has become my way of staying in touch now the puddles have stopped, but that still hasn't stopped me looking for them. You may say that this is probably just a pigment of my imagination, but once in a blue moon she treats me to the odd happening, which is more than enough to keep the magic alive and the loss at bay. As a farewell thought I can't remember Géraldine ever speaking to me in French, but I know that the word "Adieu" would never have entered her mind as she was always an "Au revoir" kind of girl and I can't think of any better sentiment to end on.