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“Great another bloody rainy, wet, miserable Sunday evening” I said under my breath as I locked the front door to my first and second floor maisonette. The communal lobby shrouded in darkness just emphasized the miserable night outside. Exiting the main front door the bleak cold air hit me, like opening the door to my freezer. I opened an old golfing umbrella I owned in the hope that this would at least protect me from the worst of the rain.

A typical ‘English’ winter’s day for Southend-on-Sea. I was not looking forward to the 20 minute walk to the theatre for rehearsals, pelted by the rain, buffeted by the stiff breeze that usually associated with it. Normally in these conditions I’d take my car but my dad was servicing it for me, he’d hit a few snags so would not be able to return it until the morning. Thankfully I’d wrapped up warm in the leather jacket bought on a trip to Tunisia the previous year, happy memories. I pulled it tight around me, doing the zip up to the very tip of the collar, thrusting my hands deep into the warm pockets, tightly holding the umbrella, letting it rest on my shoulder. I let my mind wander to the sun, sea, and good company of Tunisia.

I’ve walked this route many times. Through the back streets which lead from my road, William Street.

Typical of many roads in the area, William Street consists of lots of terraced houses, in blocks of about seven or eight, alleyways running in between, weaving intricate paths around the back gardens sometimes allowing access to unwanted guests. People often attempted to fill entrances of these

alleyways with debris and rubbish to help keep out these visitors, but there was always one who wanted access and would spend their days clearing the strategically placed obstacles.

Not particularly an affluent part of town, many of the houses had been converted into flats, tiny little pokey places barely room enough to swing a cat. Two front doors now occupy the same space that was originally designed as an ornate entrance hall for one. Refurbishment is what a lot of them need, no one cares though. The gardens give the characters of the residents, rubbish scattered about them, piled high in some cases, smashed TV sets, fridges, cookers, settees – over the course of time all had become part of the ornamentation. Given long enough they eventually fade from view, covered by weeds sprawling their way over the hills like arteries in an arm, and smothered by leaves that have fallen from the few trees that co-exist in this concrete jungle.

Most who live there can barely afford to pay the rents, the owners live nowhere near, choosing to ignore them as long as they still receive their money, they don't care. The few that have mortgages have little or no spare cash for the luxury of 'tarting' up their dwellings and they leave them to decay year in, year out, praying that they won't have to face a heavy repair bill in the future. Knowing full well that that won't be the case but still hoping that life will deal a different deck of cards with a brighter future where they will be able sell up and move to a nicer area.

I'm one of the lucky ones I own my flat, two bedrooms (one on each floor), living room, kitchen diner, bathroom, and direct access to the forest which is my garden. The bank strictly own it, at the moment, if everything goes to plan I'll take possession of it in about 22 years from now.

I've been in the street about three years. Don't talk to many neighbours, I like to keep myself to myself. You get to

recognise faces though; the same ones appear day after day at similar times. My face has appeared in advertising for various shows over the last couple of years, so to some who take an interest in local theatre, it is probably one of the better known ones, for the right reasons. I don't know if that does me any favours or not.

It can take me an eternity to get to the theatre if I'm in browsing mood when I hit the High Street. This particular night I wasn't, wet and cold it was not a time for standing like a statue in front of closed shop grills, spending the imaginary millions that I would like to have, I just wanted to get under cover and in the warm as soon as possible.

Though, I always had time for one shop. 'SoundZZZ'. This was my favourite, having one of the best collections of musical instruments in the area. Over the years, since I left school at 16, 10 years now, I have managed to spend the majority of my earnings as a carpenter, on guitars and saxophones. A hobby. Another dream of mine to be a rock star or some kind of musician.

I think that's what led me to the theatre. I'd seen an add in the paper, open auditions to anyone interested in doing West Side Story at the newly re-opened New Empire Theatre, just off the main high street. I had nothing to lose. Went along, not knowing what to expect, as nervous as hell. Before I knew it I was busy in rehearsals, I got the part of Action, not a main role but a very prominent supporting one.

An interesting experience, met loads of new friends, was taught to dance, some feat for someone like me with two left feet. I had such a good time, I stayed to do the next show. Then again, maybe that had a little to do with the after show parties, every night.

I was now in rehearsals for my fifth show with them, The New Empire Theatre Players or just The Empire Players for short.

The theatre is an interesting building, over 135 years old and steeped in history. It's had many roles to play over its life time, Movie house, Dance hall, Night club back to Cinema, and then sadly it closed down remaining empty for nearly 16 years.

A decaying monument of history, ignored by passers by, including myself. Choosing to walk past, without even raising an eyebrow to glance at the marvellous detail, hidden by years of vandalism, eaten away by the weather beating against it; a crying shame. This building had become just another empty skeleton joining the ranks of the other empty facades that were starting to litter the high street and the many side streets.

About five years ago the doors suddenly flung open again, without announcement, a vacuum filling with air, life pulsed through it's old rotting timbers and crumbling plaster work, lights blinked dimly beneath years of dust as the electric current trickled through the ancient wiring, every now and then a bulb blinked just before it spluttered it's last particles of light, dissipating out of existence.

It was incredible how this side street, Great Street, suddenly came to life, like the street had never existed before, almost a grand unveiling amid a fanfare of jubilant trumpets.

Shops had always struggled to get their audiences down this lost valley in the high street. Now the colours seemed to come alive as if a magic brush had just put a new coat of polish on them.

I rarely visited this part of town, not much of anything had caught my interest. I wasn't going to explore the far reaches of my universe unnecessarily. I deemed it therefore a waste of my time. The high street had more than enough of what I wanted.

A gust of wind caught me as I approached Claret Street; reminding me how cold I was, the alley I usually took was down this street, it leads its way along the side the theatre.

I knew I would soon be in the warmth of the theatre, well

at least out of the cold. The truth was that this was an old building and the Copperstone family who now owned, and ran it, could only afford to do essential repairs. The heating system, although ancient, still worked albeit inefficiently, and there was a large area to heat so didn't always do a great job. Especially on cold days like today.

The glass double fronted doors stood towering in front of me. Audiences had for years transcended through these into the theatre for their night of entertainment. A sign had been hung on the inside of the door saying 'use STAGE DOOR'. This often happened if you were late and I was five minutes late. The stage door was near the entrance of the alley that I'd come down already.

There was always an insistence on punctuality, one thing I wasn't good at, I seem to have this 'I'll get there eventually' type attitude, therefore, not endearing myself to the directors and choreographers of the group. Come opening night though, I'd always know my lines and moves, this is how I justified it, and I tended to think that that bought me a little leniency. Truth probably was, they were very often short of young men in my age range. Either way, I was there and they allowed me to stay.

Facing the stage door I gripped and turned the handle, the big heavy steel plated door inched its way towards me. Only the sound of the fire handle banging against the inside would give me away.

I walked through, the sound of music, dance steps, and singing reached my ears, the opening number. If I sneaked on from the wings maybe they wouldn't notice that I was late, I thought to myself. Wouldn't work, they're so eagle eyed I'd be spotted straight away. I put my jacket and umbrella down on the nearest chair, deciding not to conceal my entrance and strolled out onto the stage to join my dance partner, Michelle. She was early twenties, taller than I, dance figure, gorgeous to look at, and she had a great personality. We got on well. We'd been partnered a

couple times, she didn't seem to mind, except when I stood on her foot, or if I didn't quite lift her correctly. Michelle would get me back though. Probably Saturday afternoon, the matinee show. The time when cast members would play little jokes on each other, almost anything was allowed, on the proviso that it didn't detract from the show, ruining it for the audience.

Immediately I was spotted "Daniel."

'Shit' I thought "Sorry Matthew just lost track of..."

"Can you give the other men a hand upstairs?"

"OK" taken aback.

I hadn't observed that just the girls were on stage. The boys were out numbered three to one, we could easily be lost in the sea of female dancers.

I walked down the steps at the front of the stage and hastened my exit to the back of the auditorium, through the double doors into the foyer, up the elaborate staircase that wound it's way up to the theatre upstairs, which used to be the 'Gods' when the theatre was originally built and before it was made into two cinema screens. Each new adventure had gripped the building changing the layout to suit the new escapade. Walls taken down, floors put in, staircases removed, new doorways made, old ones blocked up, corridors sealed up lost in the mists of time.

I bumped into Adrian as I reached the halfway landing, exiting a door on the left "Wooh, what's occurring?" surprised by the figure appearing in front of me.

"If you go in there, Mark wants these seats taken into the upstairs theatre."

"Whereabouts in there?" he was carrying seats similar to those in the downstairs theatre.

"Just follow the corridor they're on the left, you can't miss 'em, they're about half way up."

"No problem."

I walked through the door; it slowly closed behind me.

Barely enough light shone from the naked lights bulbs strung along one wall.

I made my way up the passage and took the chance to take in the full extent of this corridor, wondering on the use of this passage way 135 years ago.

Other cast members had had the chance to explore the theatre fully, all the hidden chambers, dead end corridors, disused basements. I hadn't been around at those particular times, but had heard the recaptured stories. I found it fascinating, to think that some of this had not been touched for over a century. This particular area, I was led to believe, had rarely been used for any other purpose than storage throughout its entire history. It had not been decorated to any degree of grandness like the rest of the theatre had been at the inception.

The door I had entered by was only discovered about two years ago, hidden behind a breeze block façade then hidden under plasterboard. There seemed no logical reason why it had, so surreptitiously been locked away out of sight for so long.

Access was available in the youth of the theatre judging by the graffiti on the walls. I thought that was just a late twentieth century invention, but no, our ancestors seemed to enjoy defacing property as well. I started to read some of it, finding it hard to comprehend, the time and effort made to place a mark on the surface of the plaster. Why bother, simply to put 'Albert Lancaster 1905', 'Harry Smith 1923'? Further along, the inscriptions read like hieroglyphics, more care being taken like a dare set to see who could align these walls with the most intricate of incisions without being caught. The deeper and farther you got into the passageway, the darker it got, out of sight, obviously made it easier to spend longer periods making the marks. They started to make the walls look like someone's jotter, full of doodles. Some poems, a good forty lines long, cartoon caricatures, stick men, and love hearts.

Reading a couple, I was losing track of how long I'd actually

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been in there. This was so fascinating. A particular one caught my eye, drawing me to it, like a child to chocolate. I started to read out loud...

*Here in death I lye
Never fearful of the final goodbye
Time will see
Me rise and return to thee*

*Ever so sweet
Revenge will be neat
Make the ends mine
Blood runeth like wine*

*My shadow will rise
To the sound of human cries
Ash from the ground
I will scourge this town*

*Rid it of all ill
O' such a sweet pill
Be the cure
Death thee endure*

*Carry me from night
'Til the time be right
Steal the breath of life
Cold steel, the knife*

*Rise I say and breathe
Be flesh and bones that are strong
Rise I say and take your place
Once again setting right and wrong*

*Hadien contien nadya fortrey
Kootra dietra feil hoodray*

There was a carved symbol below hidden by years of dust. I brushed it carefully with my fingers and let my eyes wonder over the words again, I started to recite them following their patter. As the dust fell away I noticed a red blotch below, I looked closely caressing it with the tips of my fingers, tracing the edges trying to decipher the mark before deciding it was probably just a blotch of paint or something.

Just as I read aloud the last two lines of the inscription the air around me turned cold, sending shivers down my spine, goose pimples on my arm, every hair on my arms standing to attention. The little light there was spluttered as if about to go out, a breeze came from nowhere sweeping round me like a mini tornado twisting and turning, brushing my ankles first, my clothes rippled, my ears became like radars, picking up any little noise, sound, movement, my hair flurried then all was still.

Was this my imagination? Was I making a situation exist, that didn't really. I couldn't tell reality from my kaleidoscope of thoughts.

Then nothing!

Stillness soothed my imagination. Warmth returned. The hairs on my arm laid down, going to sleep after the excitement. I looked again at the inscription, there was a signature below H Hi.....

A suffocating tightness gripped my body. My breathing became intense, restricted, a cramp contorting my throat. I wanted to fall to the ground, I couldn't. Fingers and toes started to feel like stalactites on my hands and feet, stiff and hard. The sense of sight seemed to fade briefly as tears formed in my eyes.

Every organ became lead, heavy, solid but pliable. Everything I tried was an effort like nothing I'd ever experienced. I felt alive, yet immobile, for what seemed an eternity, could only have been seconds. My skin seemed to come alive, tightening, dancing over the flesh underneath.

Nerve endings twitching, so many at the same time my brain was overloaded with electrical signals. Pounding against my skull, a hammer on rock. Any second now it would breakout into the freedom of the world beyond, ready to explore by itself.

A force penetrated my body like a hand entering into a semi-solidified substance, oozing around it, filling every empty space that had been created, sucking out the life.

I couldn't tell if I was screaming in pain or not. I felt as though I should be. The intensity was too great to make any sense of the sounds I believed I was hearing. Were they internal sounds? Sounds you hear when you put your fingers in your ears, joints moving, and bones creaking against each other.

My heart felt a cold grip, two hands round a ball squeezing, half expecting it to be squashed into oblivion. Instead I felt it being pulled in two directions. My lungs, ready to give up, making one last valiant effort to take in oxygen. No use, the central muscle had been extricated.

With the force of a bullet being shot from a gun, I was thrown against the wall behind me, feet leaving the ground. I know I hit it before slumping down to the ground and falling face up on the floor. A crumpled mess barely conscious, the light fading out.

I saw something looking in my direction. Studying me. Making sure. It wasn't clear.

Trying to move, I failed. I was going. Images fading. I twitched once more then fell motionless where I lay.

2

When I came round there was complete darkness, absolute, I felt I'd lost my sense of sight. Trying desperately to re-orient on my surroundings, I used a trick taught to me in drama; close your eyes after a blackout, count to two and then re-open, this normally allowed your eyes to adjust to the sudden lack of light, making moving round stage easier, especially when exiting into the wings.

Two attempts, still no success. I laid there motionless, not sure what to make of my situation; Was it a strange dream? A nightmare where I just needed to wake up to end it.

Slowly I sat up extending my arms hoping my hands would find something solid, anything. Reaching, feeling in the blackness that seemed like a massive void where I was just an infinitesimal spec of dust. I couldn't find a solid surface to identify. A familiar material, anything. Nothing.

Panic threw its blanket over me, my breathing became laboured and heavy. I knew I had to keep calm, yet it was all too overwhelming, consuming. I was fighting a losing battle my strength scattering. I had to refocus, control it. I closed my eyes, not even sure they were open, I felt confused. I thought about my breathing, talking to it, reassuring it, slow, deep, meticulous breaths. My heart's pounding subsided, returning to a regular constant beat.

I contemplated my surroundings, thinking back to when I entered the corridor. Recalling what I had seen before this event had unfolded. I concentrated hard, imagining my fingers were now my eyes, willing them to find something. Moving my

hands slowly around in a big arc either side of me. I caught a glance of an object. There it was again. It was large. The more I believed the larger it became, a wall, I sighed with relief, placing both hands on it reassuringly. I relaxed further.

It didn't feel cold, or rough as I was expecting but it was there, and that's all that mattered. I'd lost all sense of normality, reasoning didn't seem to matter, I didn't fully understand what was happening but explanations would have to wait 'til later.

Putting one hand against that wall and the other against the floor, which also felt strange, solid but not solid, I hauled myself to a standing position. I was slow and cumbersome, more through caution than injury. I didn't feel in anyway concussed or drowsy, nothing ached, and I could sense no bruising.

Sight was the only sense that I was really deprived of, lost in the coal like blackness. Smell, well, I never really had a strong sense of smell. It was now even blander probably the force with which I hit the wall nullifying it further. Hearing seemed fine, although there were no sounds to listen to, an eerie silence that at the same time felt calm and soothing.

Turning on the spot I tried to decide which way I should go. With visibility out of the equation, I was left with only touch to guide me, and I lacked the sureness which I was used to, but it was my only choice. 'My fingers are my eyes' I repeated to myself.

Using the wall as a guide I headed in the direction I was facing, gingerly taking each step cautiously sliding one foot in front of the other at anytime expecting to kick a solid object, or stub my fingers on a protruding obstacle. I didn't hear the sound of my shuffling feet and that seemed eerie.

An eternity passed in this space-less environment, inching forward, feeling the wall. My mind becoming more focussed utilizing the sense of touch in this void. Gradually things started to feel more real, more solid. I could feel the roughness, the

indentations of the plaster, some of the graffiti carvings from years before.

At the end of the corridor, there was no door. 'Damn' I thought. I turned through 90 degrees in one direction, hands out, feeling, searching, back through 180 degrees, still no door just walls. The door had to be at the opposite end.

Rotating my body carefully I tried to physically mark how far I'd turned but was unable to fix on a certain point. Making it almost impossible ascertain when I was completely opposing the direction I had come. I had to use guess work.

More confidently I made my way back to where I believed the doorway was, assured this was the right direction. I picked up my pace a little, every step gaining a little more confidence. After already walking this way and finding no obstacles, my mind drifted to the unanswered questions that filled my mind.

Why had no one come and looked for me? Surely they would have missed me? They knew I was here. After all they had directed me in here, I was meant to be helping carry some seats out. Also... the lights had been on. Maybe there'd been a power cut.

In the back of my mind something seemed wrong, nothing was obvious though. An uneasy feeling took hold of me. I pushed my way forward through the black blanket. Urgency gripped my furtive imagination. My pace quickened, not caring whether I hit anything solid, I wanted out of here, and fast. Panic was starting to take a hold.

'I must be near the door', I thought to myself.

Scrabbling around, fumbling in the darkness, this way and that as though my life depended on it. Maybe it did?

Panic was turning to fear despite trying to maintain a sense of logic and with everything I could muster I focussed my mind on my fingers 'these were my eyes' checking out any slight deviation or crevice that could be a door frame, hinge or handle.

Found it.

Then it was gone.

One second in my grasp, then it was not. Reaching into the approximate area, I made another play for the handle, found it. I pushed with all my weight, as if trying to open a thick six foot diameter steel safe door.

I was through, back on the landing halfway up the stairs.

To my disbelief this was also in darkness, although a little light filtered up from the lobby and the outside lights beyond. I'd hoped to find myself back in the artificial light of the stairwell amongst a throng of people milling about. Silence and darkness are all that greeted me. I questioned my sanity. Am I dreaming? Did I really go to rehearsals tonight? Today? What day is it?

Standing very still I listened. Listened to the theatre breathing; expecting to hear some sort of noise, people chatting. If there had been a power cut people would still be here, somewhere! Surely?

Maybe I had touched a live wire. Knowing how old this building is, and with so many places unexplored properly, I could have simply caught an exposed live wire. This would explain why I was flung across the passage against the wall, why darkness had taken over the entire place. But... it didn't explain the quiet and stillness with which I was surrounded.

There would still be voices, lost in the confusion of looking for the problem, making sure everyone was alright, locating the nearest torch, candle, or lighter as there were so many smokers in the group.

Mark knows this place like the back of his hands. It wouldn't take him long to find his way round, not even this blackness could fool him, he was far too clever for that. What of the voices? Or lack of voices.

Should I proceed up the stairs to the theatre or down to the foyer? The foyer would provide most light, as the front doors were glazed enabling the street light to penetrate into the

marbled floor area, glistening on it like the sea caught by the moonlight.

That was my best choice.

Step by step, I descended the stairs, feeling more and more relaxed with each step. Closer and closer. Turning left at the bottom of the stairs would put me directly opposite the sweet kiosk. Familiar faces was what I was expecting to see, people sitting around, on the only bench that occupied the area, or on coats upon the floor.

Nothing!

I stood transfixed, surveying the scene. I began to convince myself that I was in one of those nightmares, where just before you wake up you realise that you are the only surviving person at a party, everyone else has been murdered or disappeared and the host's body has vanished. They were the first to die, however, it was all a set up and now with suspicion off of them they are free to kill, and you are the last one left alive, and it's up to you to beat them at their own game.

Disbelief. Incoherence. What was going on? Why had everybody left? I took deliberate, hesitant steps and examined the front doors more closely, the wire grills that protected the glass when the theatre was closed for the night, they were firmly in place, padlocked, signed and sealed, from the outside.

Thoughts circulated round my head so fast I thought it was going to explode. So fast they came into focus then spiralled away in a myriad of other ideas. Not one remained in focus long enough to fathom an answer. Then one thought shone like a bright light in the fog 'I was stuck here for the night'.

I looked at the clock which had hung upon the wall for nearly a century; one of the original features left, demonstrating the craftsmanship with which time pieces were once made, to still be working 97 years after it was constructed and put in place. It read 3.35am.

I didn't understand; Why hadn't someone looked for me?

Surely they must have noticed I hadn't made it to the upstairs theatre and then back down to the main auditorium for the remainder of the rehearsal. I'd seen so many people. Wouldn't it seem weird to turn up and not be seen again? Am I in some sort of parallel universe?

Rational thought was rapidly making a hasty exit. I didn't understand what was going on, and I wasn't sure that I ever would. I decided to find some way to leave this place, despite it being like a second home, it was becoming uncomfortable. I walked to the auditorium doors, if I went that way I could leave through a fire exit. So the alarm would go off, but hey, they locked me in here.

The grand double doors that opened up to allow you to take the journey into the auditorium and the evenings entertainment were locked. A massive chain secured them.

Now what was I supposed to do?

Turning on my heels and throwing my arms up in exasperation I caught sight of the box office. 'Yes' it has a phone, I could ring one of the Copperstone family, Mark or Fiona, I knew their mobile numbers by heart. They insisted on people having to ring them if you couldn't make rehearsals.

The foyer was almost L shaped, the sweet kiosk at one end waiting to serve the clientele, box office at right angles to this. To the left and a little away from the box office, opposing the street entrance were the auditorium doors. The stairs I had come down earlier were segregated by a wall, with a large double width bland archway cutting through the stonework.

Entry to the box office was by way of a door between the kiosk and serving hatch of the box office. Proceeding with urgency I thrust my hand towards the handle, fingers at the ready to make contact and pull the door towards me with force, not because I was angry, merely filled with unease that I wanted to dispel as soon as possible. I expected to make contact with the solid metal handle, yet was taken a back when my hand seemed

to pass through it, as a stone passes through a piece of tissue paper, as if it were just a figment of my imagination.

I froze, blinked a few times, as if trying to get a piece of grit out of my eye; not sure whether to believe what I'd witnessed. With some trepidation I tried again. This time slowly reaching for it and closing my grip.

Again it passed right through. I staggered backwards, studying my hand, unable to equate what I'd seen. Again, and again, and again I tried, believing this was someone's sick joke and that they were laughing at me as I played right into it. One hand! Then the other! Both hands! Still, I remained there, not being able to grab a hold of this supposedly solid object.

Panicking I examined the things protruding from the sleeves of my sweatshirt, deciphering, contemplating, like a scientist might study a new life form that had just been discovered. Were they still there? Had they been cut off in some horrendous accident that I'd forgotten about, and my imagination made them seem real to my eyes.

This is a nightmare, it has to be... my vision started to blur.

Outside. I could see the pavement glistening from the rain. I could see the warm breath exhaled, like on a winter's day.

My view changed, slowing panning left, this felt like an out of body experience, the sort you only participate in, in a dream, although I've known people who have had them, described in great detail what it was like. This must be what it feels like.

Where was I? The place looked familiar. I wanted to look around but couldn't. Only viewing it from the direction I appeared to be looking, straight ahead. My peripheral vision seemed to be limited, as if I was wearing blinkers.

The cold night air didn't seem to be affecting me. I didn't feel it. I tried to look towards the ground, but couldn't. I could see the arm of a jacket outstretched in front of me, in the nearby street lamp it looked similar in colour, texture and design to the one I had been wearing earlier. I was standing in the shadows somewhere. It was a garden, a

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public garden. I couldn't make out much more detail in the poor night light and limited to this viewpoint.

My vision changed direction sharply, there was young girl walking..

...Back in the foyer. Looking round in every direction, questions rushing round my head like bees round a honey pot. Too many to answer! I lost my footing, my legs turned to jelly, they couldn't support my weight any longer, I slumped to the ground, weary and fatigued.

3

Putting my head in my hands, I tried to rub my eyes, clarify the bemusement. There was no contact. I couldn't feel my face. Nothing. Then, like watching a speeded up eclipse, a realization of the evening's events replayed in my mind. Every little snapshot. Arriving at the theatre, entering the passageway, reading the graffiti, the suffocating pain, being thrown against the wall, then coming round in the darkness. The haze that shrouded me was beginning to clear.

Reality was close. I examined the evidence in my head, the door on the landing. The one I'd gone through, not remembering seeing it close behind me. Not really feeling the weight of it as I pushed it open. I was anxious at the time; my mind must have played a trick on me, made me believe I had felt its presence, that I had met some resistance during my exuberant exit. At that time there was no reason to believe it was any other way.

But what now? Was I dead? Questions rattled round my head making me feel sick, sick to the core, but with no substance. I hoped I would be sick. I wanted to feel that uncomfortable feeling, it would make me feel real. Was I dead?! It was more a statement than a question flashing like bold neon light, flashing away in the darkness, illuminating the surrounding area for everyone to see.

The more I thought, the less I could get my head to come to terms with it. It didn't seem right. This was a bad B-Movie, I was the star, I didn't have a script, I didn't know the plot, or how it was going to end. Would I be saved by some miracle?

Or, was I not the star? Just some movie extra, playing the first character to leave the set.

None of this seemed wrong. Rational thought had left long ago. I was caught up in my furtive imagination writing the script as I went along. A ghost. Maybe that was it? Still with some mission to fulfil, before I could finally depart this world, and rest for all eternity.

Had I died? This question appeared like a spike of lightning in the sky. Up in that dark side corridor had I left this planet without realizing? Not wanting to go.

I rotated on my heels and faced the street doors. I was lost. I didn't know what to do next. Where to go?

I must have stared at the doors for an endless moment my whole life cascading before me. A bus passing the theatre broke my concentration. Yet I couldn't remember a damn thing that I'd been thinking about, a trance, a frozen second. The time was lost. Gone. Just like my life.

My life – gone! Just like that.

I became gripped by the notion that I was still able to think clearly which seemed to contradict everything I ever thought about ghosts and their continued role to replay situations, again and again, without comprehension or thought to change the act. A sudden strength and sobering rationale took a hold of me and with an iron hand that was not going to let go, a determination to do something and not just let my time be wasted. What though? I had no clear idea, but something, there had to be a purpose.

Leaving the theatre was the first step and judging by earlier events, if I was thinking clearly and all was true I should be able to pass through these doors without a problem. I wasn't going to go gingerly. I was going to charge at it, a raging bull to a red rag, either successfully exiting the building, or spectacularly failing. "Here goes" I said aloud. Taking a deep breath, for all the good that did, but it felt natural, gave me the

strength I needed.

Screwing my hands into little fists, normally if I did this I'd feel the tension of every muscle in my arms and hands, nails digging into my palms. Nothing. I could see them clenched yet not feel the tension. I took one last look at the doors, rocked on my heels and pushed forward with the thrust of a big cat making a strike at its prey.

Bam.

Less than a split second later I was out in the early morning air, studying the familiar surroundings with a new interest. Expecting to feel the cold remembering how it had been when I arrived for rehearsals. I couldn't feel it. In a strange way, I was relieved as I'd left my coat at the side of the stage.

Although I'd seen the bus go past, everywhere now was quiet, totally at rest. Street lights brightly lit this side street.

I pondered, which way to go? Should I go home? Should I go to a friends house?

Truth was, I didn't know what to do. Being dead, if I was, left me with no purpose.

Work? What about work? My family? What were they going to say? This will kill them!

So much to consider. So much to take in. I couldn't change anything. My heart sank again and I began to feel alone and helpless.

Wearily, thoughtlessly, I wandered towards the high street. I'd lost the dogged determination I had gained only minutes before. No reason. There just didn't seem any point in heading anywhere. I was completely dumfounded.

At the junction of Great Street and the High Street I turned in the direction I would if going home, out of habit rather than reason.

Time neither went fast, nor slow. I mulled around lost, looking in shop windows, as I had done many times this time not registering what I saw. Nothing held my interest

anymore, Why should it? My eyes followed the ground, trying to find some magic line that was going to lead me somewhere! Anywhere...

This whole situation was perplexing me. I was dead. I was really starting to believe it. Yet, I didn't want to. Something didn't feel right, a strange sense of foreboding. I had a sort of consciousness that belied that. I'd seen many programs on the paranormal, none of them ever explained what I was experiencing now. Is this what death was really like? Contrary to all my beliefs'. There is a consciousness afterwards. No purpose though. A living hell! An inexplicable existence, an eternal view of the world with no participation allowed, watching from the sidelines.

Without realizing it I found myself standing outside 'SoundZZZ'. This was my church. A place that encapsulated everything I was, my hearts desire, a place where nothing else mattered, I could go and forget my troubles. I went to hold the silver plectrum that hung around my neck, a gift from my parents on my 16th birthday, it had become something of a lucky charm and security blanket, I never took it off. It represented everything I held dear to me, my parents and music, I couldn't feel it or see it, my heart sunk and I just stared in through the window at the array of musical instruments inside.

A sense of intrigue enthralled me and this helped me forget. There was nothing to stop me entering the shop out of hours, not any more. A chance to explore without the following, questioning eyes of the assistant wondering if I was going to buy anything.

Out of habit I looked around, the coast was clear, not that anyone would be able to see me anyway. Or could they? Slowly I approached the chain-mail type shutter, with its many links crafted by machine. I braced myself, unsure whether my presence would set off the alarms, cringing with anticipation.

Nothing! No sound and I felt nothing.

Inside I was a kid in a sweet shop with endless amounts of pocket money to spend. Floodlit by the street light the sight was awe inspiring, light reflecting off the shiny instruments that hung so perfectly on their stands. Even if I couldn't touch, there was nothing stopping me from gently caressing the instruments which I adored, normally from afar. Imagining what they felt like in my hands, the Fender Telecaster I always promised one day I'd buy. Beautiful. This was heaven, yet it was also torture.

Wandering round, I took in every detail of the finely crafted guitars. If only I could play them all.

Hours must have passed without realizing. The noise of the shutters woke me from my revelry. They slowly rose, allowing access to the front doors of the shop. My church.

I had to get out of there. What if I was seen? Still not sure if I could be seen.

A shop assistant brushed past me, through me. Now I knew I wasn't real anymore and somehow that made me feel scared. Before it had been supposition, now I knew. Although the events from earlier should have compounded this anyway. I needed reassuring that this was really happening.

I exited the now open doorway, giving way to a person in the opposite direction, habit and I wasn't ready to experience another person passing through me if I could avoid it, it seemed too weird to comprehend.

I heeled my way home for want of a better place to go.

Fascinated by ghosts; I always believed they weren't able to go just anywhere, tied to the spot where that person had actually died. 'The Dead Spot' held by some invisible chain destined to replay the final scene of their life, until the Earth dissipated in a spectacle of explosions. If that were the case was I an exception to the rule? There has to be exceptions. Rules are made to be broken. I firmly believed that. Then what was I?

Heading up the High Street I avoided making physical con-

tact with anyone, preferring to make for the big open spaces, as if I had some contagious disease. A couple of close calls, but at the last second I managed to evade it, much to my relief.

Closer to home I started to wonder. Why? Why was I bothering? My pace slowed, there was nothing there that could help me, I was sure of that. I didn't know what els...

Where was I? I recognised this place. It's my flat. I'm inside my flat. But I was still on my way home, here, How?What?... No, this isn't me. No this is someone else. This is what happened last night. Vision restricted by the fact I was relying on the person to look in the direction I wanted to look, which was not going to happen.

They were exploring each room. My rooms. Trying to uncover... my life, I guess who I was. But why?

Up in the bedroom on the second floor they opened the window seat, lifting out blankets one at a time, putting them neatly down on the floor beside themselves. They seemed to be searching for something, with purpose, not a random exploration, they knew where and what to look for. I didn't have any notion what it was they were trying to find. I tried to think what I would have placed where they were looking, what was so important that I'd hide it away.

Removing the bottom of the window seat and then lifting out a box from under a loose floorboard. Opening the box slowly...

Back out in the street again.

Whoah!

What was going on? One minute I'm out here, next I'm in there. Why was I seeing these things? What did it mean?

I was beginning to feel even more disorientated than I did the night before.

Nearly home though, just a couple more streets and I'd be there.

What did I keep in that box? This should have been obvious. Try as I might I couldn't remember. What was in the box? I repeated the question hoping the answer would show itself. This started to bug me. "What was in that damn box?" I said

aloud to myself. No, it just wouldn't come and I continued my journey puzzling over it.

I stood on the opposite side of the road looking at my flat, the building towering upwards, not sure what my next move was.

"What was in the box?" I said aloud again trying, believing the more times I asked myself this question the more likely I would get an answer.

"Hello" came a voice that broke me out of my thoughts.

Glancing round I could only see one person, a girl with a dog. A guide dog judging by the special harness the girl was holding onto.

"Hello" she repeated. The dog had sat down looking at her.

She couldn't be talking to me. No one else around though, unless she speaks to her dog. She was brunette about 5' 7" with an encapsulating smile that I found hard to retract my gaze from. She wore trendy designer sunglasses despite that it was not sunny, her dog sat patiently and obediently by her side, it was a Labrador, sandy coloured, just like one we used to have at home when I was a child.

"Hellooo" she re-iterated elongating the 'o' sound as if trying to make a point that I was being rude, which I wasn't, intentionally.

"Hi" I retorted, not expecting to get a reply.

"Are you lost?"

"Sorry" this was more a question than an apology.

"Are you lost? You seem to be lost, I can't help but sense you feel lost."

"Mmmm... No... I... don't...", this was perplexing. No one had paid any attention to me in the shop or on my way home, no eye contact, smiles, anything or had I just not noticed. Now suddenly I'm having a conversation with a complete stranger, who seemed to know I was there.

"Why are you just standing there then? Don't you have

somewhere to go?” she said with a voice as sweet and soft as I had never heard before.

“Are you a ghost?” my next question was the only possible explanation that came to mind, why else could she know I was there.

“No. I’m blind. I’m Ann-Marie, this is my dog Mojo, he knows you are there too, he can sense you” she stated so matter-of-factly.

“How? Why are you talking to me?” This sounded rude to me but was not meant to be.

“You felt lost, as though in an abyss.”

“Yes. No..mmm..I... suppose, I am. But that doesn’t explain how you can know I’m here. I was in a shop this morning and no one gave me a second glance, or even a first glance. I didn’t think anyone could see me.”

“I can’t, I’m blind” she said sighing heavily “but I can feel you, or rather I can sense your presence Mojo can too. I can talk with the dead. It used to be scary, but now” She shrugged her shoulders and frowned. “I’ve had some really good talks with spirits, they don’t judge me.”

I was amazed, this all seemed bizarre “Oh true....I suppose” forming articulate speech was difficult. I was still unsure what to make of the whole situation.

“You seem too solid” she stated matter of factly.

“What?” I had no idea what she meant.

“I mean. Ghosts that I’ve spoken to normally don’t have any sort of substance, but, you do.”

I became even more perplexed, yet in a strange way it compounded my own thoughts.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

The door slammed and I could see a girl across the road from my flat, out with her dog. Ann-Marie and Mojo, no one else with her. But I was just talking to her.

Turning to face down the road I walked away from Ann-Marie, a

hundred yards, or so down the road, stopping in front of a blue car. It was my car! I was seeing everything and was there. Yet there was nothing I could do. I had no power, no control.

Maybe I would catch a glimpse of the reflection of the person who's life I was viewing in the glass of the car. The angles were all wrong. Sitting in the car, the person was familiar with everything, krooklock off, ignition on, into first gear, grating sound of clashing cogs followed by a thud as the gear found it's footing, foot firmly on the gas, turning the wheel sharply left, pulling away, glancing the bumper of the car in front, not caring just hurtling off up the road. Every gear change worse than the one before. The car careered faster and faster. I took a quick glance at the girl with the dog.

I was watching the car disappear up the road standing with Ann-Marie again.

"Hello. Are you alright?" I heard her say, but it took a while to register.

"You were gone. Now your back. You alright?. What's going on?" said the friendly inquisitive voice.

"I don't know" I said still not sure what to make of the situation.

"What happened?"

I looked at Ann-Marie questioning reality "I'm not sure" I paused, composing my thoughts "I get these visions. Well, they are not exactly visions, I don't know how to describe them really. It's strange, one minute I was standing here, then I could see you from over the road, but through someone else's eyes" I paused realizing how absurd this all sounded.

"What do you mean?"

This stranger stood there talking to me as if I was some old friend she known for years and was just going through a tricky spell. I continued "I came out of that door, my front door" I animated my speech with hand motion, not for her benefit she was blind but it clarified everything to me. "Not me, them, I think, I looked over here, then went down to my car" this was

beginning too sound even more bizarre, I continued anyway “got in and drove away. Like a maniac. Then I found myself here again, with you”. I half expected Ann-Marie to turn and walk away at this point, I would have done if it were me.

She stood thoughtful digesting all the information “I’m getting cold. Why don’t you come back to my place and tell me more. I don’t think I can help but I might be able to explain.”

I was stunned by the fact that she thought she could explain my predicament in some way she seemed nice and in the short time I’d been in this state I had tasted loneliness. Her company gave me a warm feeling. I walked with Ann-Marie and Mojo up the road.

I hadn’t thought about it being cold. The day had brightened up but all relevance was gone for me, the temperature didn’t affect me. This was how I could be sometimes when I was real, selfish. If it didn’t affect me then it was not important, although now I suppose I had plenty on my mind.

Ann-Marie seemed the opposite; warm and caring. She had a way. A patience about her a curiosity that wasn’t overpowering, she genuinely wanted to help. I found myself wanting her to. What could she do?

“Thank you” I said somewhat lamely.

We walked in silence for the most part, then she asked me to tell her what had happened, so I started relaying the events of the last 24 hours.

All the time I was talking, I watched her. Fascinated by the way her dog became her eyes. I wouldn’t have believed she was blind if I couldn’t see the dog, intuitively they acted together, pausing at the edge of a road until Mojo gave the all clear, so natural, a perfect partnership of trust. Occasionally this fascination of mine would break the flow of the story, just a split second then I would continue.

She appeared to have an awareness of her surroundings that most sighted people take for granted, after a while I realised

that she would wait until she felt we were not within earshot of anyone before asking me any questions.

Ann-Marie didn't live that far away from me, Clock Street, a ten minute walk for me on my own, so named because there used to be three clock makers in the road at the beginning of the century. One of them, Browen and Sons, had made the clock that hung in the foyer at the theatre. He started to make it before his death in 1883, whereupon his eldest son finished it and presented it as a gift to the theatre, a way of saying thank you for the good times his father had enjoyed there. Gradually the clock makers disappeared one by one; after years of the factories being empty they were bombed out during the World War II, then a row of terraced houses were built.

Ann-Marie's house was typical of these houses, various modernisations over the years had transformed it to its current state, a small porch now adorned the front door where there used to be none. Double glazing had changed the overall look of the place, the standard sash windows now gone replaced with modern openers. It went back a long way, had three good sized bedrooms, immaculately decorated, very warm and inviting – it felt like a home, if somewhat a little busy with patterns.