

TAP ONCE FOR YES

Messages from beyond death

Jacquie Parton

Jacquie Parton © 2013

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A record of this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-907203-62-6

Typesetting by Wordzworth Ltd
www.wordzworth.com

Cover design by Titanium Design Ltd
www.titaniumdesign.co.uk

Printed by Lightning Source UK
www.lightningsource.com

Cover images by Jacquie Parton and Nigel Peace



**LOCAL
LEGEND**

Published by Local Legend
www.local-legend.co.uk

Acknowledgements

With deep gratitude to my partner Clive for his unwavering support and love, and to my brothers Tim and Chris, and their families, for being there.

Special thanks to my counsellor Simone Brookes for her sensitive approach to a most unusual case, and to Mary Collinson for her time and effort, inspiring my confidence as a writer from the very beginning.

Thank you Karan Palfreyman, and Jean and Jack Williams, for never judging me. Thank you Penny for listening, and Will and Carly for being Andrew's friends.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Andrew, for giving me the courage to go on by his constant reassurance that life continues.

About this book

You will read in these pages a hugely inspiring and joyful account of survival.

This narrative presents extremely strong evidence that the human spirit lives beyond physical death and is able to communicate with and genuinely comfort those who grieve in this life. It is evidence that demands to be taken very seriously.

But not least it is also a story of human courage in facing life's often terrible difficulties, and coming through them all with spirit unbroken and uplifted.

About the author

Jacquie spent her early years in Scotland and the West Midlands, before joining the British Army at seventeen. She has had a life full of considerable challenges, from serving in Belfast through several career changes including running her own businesses and retraining as a social worker.

But even more than this, her personal life has been marked by great sadness. Her son Adam died of cot death. She then separated from his father and brought up her first son Andrew alone, proudly seeing him grow into a fine young man who served in the Royal Navy before suddenly and unaccountably committing suicide.

However, Jacquie's story then took a strange and wonderful turn, as from 'the other side' of life Andrew decided to show her that they were still connected...

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1 That Day

'Love knows not depth until the hour of separation.' ~ Kahlil Gibran

“Andrew, can you give me a quick call? Ok if you’re busy.” This was the fourteenth time I had tried to reach him with no response. I was now more than a little anxious because Andrew always either answered or returned my call soonest, however briefly, to allay my concern.

As I tended to my client, I pondered all the occasions in common with many mothers when there had been a delay in contact. The inability to rest or concentrate until the familiar voice of your precious offspring resounded over the phone, followed closely by the swift abatement of stomach-churning anxiety and frazzled nerve endings settling comfortably back into place.

Andrew lived in a beautifully furnished flat located in one of the more salubrious areas of Buxton. He lived alone, which always amplified my concern because no-one other than him could answer, but to date my fears had been unfounded. This morning was different. Abruptly, I decided against visiting my next client, feeling compelled to set out for Buxton immediately. As I started out on the familiar route from Stoke, driven by something intangible I could not quite fathom, I reflected on the night before.

In the early hours of the morning I had been awoken by a vivid image of Andrew’s face seemingly lying flat against something white with his eyes closed. This was then superimposed by the melodic tones of my phone jolting me awake. Scrambling to answer it, I was extremely relieved to find that there was no missed call. Thankfully, I wrote it off as a nightmare, as I had thought it to be Andrew calling about some crisis that might have occurred. I went to replace the mobile back on my bedside cabinet, missing the side, delivering it unceremoniously onto the floor.

The next morning, my partner Clive came in to bring me an enlivening cup of coffee (we have snoring issues, so sleep separately). He asked why my mobile was on the floor. I told him of my disturbing nightmare and the relief I’d felt when I realised that there had been no call.

The morning continued as any other: hair, clothes, breakfast, more coffee followed by a brisk walk with the dog around the block and setting off for work at my usual time of 9.30 a.m. ready for my first appointment at 10. I enjoyed my work as a mobile hairdresser, a refreshing change from the dysfunctional world of

social work I had left behind some years before. Greeting people with a smile, sharing a chat and a coffee and leaving them with a fresh look and a further booking.

The time that Andrew started work determined the timing of my first daily call. I first called him at 11.50 a.m. At 12.40 p.m. I left him a message, and the time now was 12.55 as I left the outskirts of Stoke. I rang Andrew's father, happily settled with his new wife Sheila of seventeen years in Buxton.

"I can't reach Andrew, have you heard from him?" I asked anxiously.

Sheila, rather surprised at my call, responded that she hadn't but whilst I was driving over she would continue to try and contact him. Clive then phoned enquiring after my day following my disturbed night. He sounded a little perplexed as I informed him of my abrupt change of plan for the day; I would speak to him later.

Driving over the somewhat barren moorland hills, its bleakness to me that morning was temporarily made beautified by the warmth of bright sunshine. As I entered the familiar outskirts of Buxton, still not having had a relieving call from Sheila, I tried mentally to articulate why I didn't feel the infant churnings of rising panic. I did not feel I was reacting in the familiar way I felt accustomed to, but neither did I feel normal.

As I drew up to the yawning gateway of Andrew's four storey Victorian building of newly refurbished flats, my eyes fell upon his neatly parked motorbike. Fleeting relieved at the fact that there had been no accident, my gaze then focussed on his second floor flat as I parked. His spare room light was on, his lounge curtains still drawn. Now, the haunting recollection of last night's possible foreboding premonition played through my mind.

I had no key; I rang all of the six intercoms to gain entrance, with no response. I raced round to an adjoining property, remembering a kind of caretaker, a man Andrew shared his bike interests with - again, no reply. The time was now 1.10 p.m. and Andrew was due to be on duty at the hotel immediately behind where he lived at 2 o'clock. He could just be out, stayed at a friend's house, lost his phone; but no, prompted by my dark thoughts I rang 999.

The operator answered in perfunctory fashion. Still a bit perplexed and a little embarrassed at my requesting assistance to locate my twenty-eight year old son, not as yet missing his arrival at work, the word 'police' presented itself.

A young male police officer, his vehicle parked at the bottom of the awkward driveway, meandered towards me. His face was a little quizzical as to why I'd called the emergency services out as I somewhat awkwardly but nevertheless with conviction expressed my concern that something was very wrong. It was difficult conveying the enormity of my fears as there was no apparent precursor as to why anything would have happened. I did, however, continue to consider that just maybe he had had a brain haemorrhage or stroke, or that maybe his recurrent serious migraine had transposed into something more sinister.

The time taken to decide on breaching the door turned into a good tormenting, teasing forty minutes. I spent most of it tailing the officer as he exchanged radio communications. A female officer joined us, exchanging glances with her colleague, indicating almost indifference to my plight as I implored them to breach the door immediately. It was very apparent to me that my growing distress was quite frankly falling on deaf ears.

It started to rain, a passing cloud compounding the misery of my impotence. The freshly painted green hardwood door was unremittingly impervious to my feeble attempts to slip the lock with my bank card – damn it!

Eventually the control centre had located the caretaker who furnished them with the access code adjacent to the door, releasing master keys. This was it, as with much trepidation I ascended the carpeted stairwell to Andrew's flat between the two officers. The sunshine through the window illuminating our three shadows step by step to the fire door heralded our arrival at my son's flat. Hopefully he would be aware of the commotion that had been caused and remonstrate with me for having caused such nuisance; after all, he had just slept in! On the other hand, the flat could be empty because he had stayed somewhere else.

The three of us stood before Andrew's flat, another delay as the keys failed to open a door barred from within. Exasperated, as my official companions considered retreating to get their 'bunny' (apparently, a term used for a battering ram), I urged the male officer just to kick it in. Without undue hesitation, and probably aware that I would have done it myself now at any cost, the boot of the officer thudded against the unresisting blue wooden door.

The inside bolts, now broken, fell to the floor. The familiar scent of Andrew's favourite plug-in diffuser permeated and accentuated the silence of the flat within. I cast my eyes left, the doorway open to his spare room, the light on, his bike jacket and helmet neatly placed amidst the tidy chaos of temporarily redundant objects and keepsakes. The bathroom adjacent was empty. Slowly, myself still between the two officers, we edged our way up the narrow hallway. His bedroom was next left, his bed turned down as though he'd arisen in the night; 'probably out after all', I thought. The kitchen... straight ahead... door open... nothing was amiss... but then my eyes were pulled directly to the scarf trapped purposefully over the closed lounge door.

"My God, he's hanged himself!"

The dream, his face against something white with his eyes closed, the phone call in the night announcing his leaving this mortal coil... it was all true!

"He's hanged himself," I stated again bluntly. The male officer stood looking at the back of the door, seemingly stunned and temporarily immobilised. He appeared unsure as to what to do next given that the mother, if right, would face her worst nightmare. I was oblivious to the reaction of the female officer behind as I pushed the door, inviting assistance to overcome the weight of what I guessed to be Andrew's now lifeless form heavily leaning against the other side. The scarf now released, my heart lurched as Andrew's body ricocheted against the door followed by a reverberating thud as he hit the floor.

I appraised the macabre scene from the doorway, unmoving, unnaturally devoid of feeling, a numbness. His now rigor-mortised body, still unblemished. Aside from the scarf tightly wound around his neck, he looked peacefully asleep, clothed in his dressing gown revealing his night garb of white tee-shirt and boxer shorts. God help me. The marble-like stillness of death, the energy of his life now dissipated. I turned and walked slowly back to his breached doorway; standing

there, everything looked calm, peaceful and yet nothing could be further from the truth. The two officers, exchanging muted tones, hastily pulling on their blue rubber gloves, standing miles away down the hallway and yet, in actuality, only twenty feet away. I called to them asking if it was too late, though I knew it was more an attempt to make contact as my mind balanced precariously over a mental void.

That morning, my heart died alongside my beloved son.

The policewoman materialised in front of me. “Go and sit in your car,” she said. I turned, starting to descend the stairs as I couldn’t think of anything better to do; in fact, I couldn’t think. Clive called asking me if Andrew was ok, and flatly I told him that Andrew had hung himself. He set out immediately on the forty minute journey from Stoke to Buxton with haste. I considered, in my somewhat stupefied state, that I ought to ring Andrew’s place of work and inform them.

“No!” shouted Andrew’s colleague as once again I repeated the same distressing line. I rang my brother in Birmingham who started hyperventilating, assuring me he would call back. I rang Andrew’s dad and Sheila answered; his dad passed out with shock. I so desperately wanted to reach out and wanted everyone to hear and share my pain. Who else could I ring?

I wandered back up to Andrew’s flat, dazedly entering his bedroom to find the female officer going through his cupboards. “Do you know where he kept his clean sheets?” Then, almost embarrassedly, she encouraged me to go back to the car and wait for the ambulance. Directing the ambulance up the pot-holed driveway to the smart little car park, the sun squinting through the tall trees magnified my surreal minute by minute existence. Without introduction, the paramedics ran past me laden down with their equipment, barely acknowledging what they probably perceived as a kindly neighbour giving directions.

I felt like an extra on a film set as a forensic team in white overalls trooped past me, the police line tape fluttering in a now cloudless breeze. Could anybody

see me? My name no longer Mum, I felt discarded, side-lined and of no further interest to the automaton service providers.

Clive arrived, drawing close to me, a forlorn little black car in an otherwise empty car park aside from the hastily parked ambulance. He beckoned me in to his car; I slide in expressionless as my head, with somewhat constipated awareness, acknowledged his arrival with Penny the dog. He turned to me, stretching his hand out in tender contact with my leg.

“I’ll sort this out, whatever it takes,” he assured me.

“Yes dear, I know,” I replied, then once more retreated into my heavily barricaded mind.

Penetrating the silence, Clive’s voice interrupted, “The medics want a word with you.” In my haze, I expected they wanted perhaps to check me over. Wrong! Signatures were required for their paperwork and confirmation of Andrew’s doctor. Even within the numbed stupor of my mind, I considered the lack of humanity they extended to a mother’s worse nightmare scenario. I felt Clive’s apprehension mounting at the magnitude of what he perceived as his unfolding role and task, given the lack of empathy and support extended to us.

Calling at Andrew’s dad’s flat, no more than a mile from where Andrew lived, I pressed the buzzer of the intercom announcing our arrival. The door opened, my brain now automatically engaging my dulled functioning body, steering me up the tiled stairwell accompanied by Clive to the second floor. Alex, Andrews’s dad, his face drawn, pale and defeated, beckoned us inside into the lounge where his wife Sheila sat. Alex had suffered a form of debilitating neuropathy for years badly affecting his ability to walk, but still with as much mustered good grace he offered us coffee. Sheila, herself struggling with a severe chronic breathing condition, struggled to compose herself as we sat down. I had little to say, the morning’s event spoke for itself.

Alex chose the denial approach, insisting that Andrew was in fact not dead, but would actually be in touch later as usual. As he clutched his mobile in expectation of the call, Sheila decided on a novel discourse of her four year old nephew’s recent activities. Clive sat patiently, proffering polite noises and phrases appropriately. We were all in virgin territory. Time to go; Clive raised himself out of his chair having drained his coffee after we had all now exhausted our disjointed

conversations and phrases, politely executed. A family scene devoid of any appropriate narrative - but how were you supposed to act?

The journey back over the moors was in the main silent, as we both struggled with the enormity of the event and the yet to be dealt with aftermath. I could not cry, I dare not start, as this was too big, far too big to handle other than in slivers of a minute at a time. Concentrating on the minutiae that otherwise passed unobserved became my solo occupation. The spider retreating behind the wing mirror of the car, the hairs from the dog that needed picking off my sleeve individually and other such things kept my mind from shutting down as the clock ticked.

Arriving home, Clive grabbed the telephone directories, finding the number of an emergency walk-in centre, keen to stem the approaching storm of anticipated despair. My main preoccupation was to stay in the immediate present, considering neither the minute before nor the minute to follow. Sipping the coffee I had made, I considered its warmth, its sweetness, its comforting familiar taste, its coursing down my throat.

“Let’s go,” Clive’s voice came as an intrusion into the safety of my monosyllabic world.

It was raining. Following the coursing of two independent droplets down the window of the car, I pondered with unnatural depth which would win. Looking out through the metaphorical tears running down the windscreen, I saw glimpses of the past. A woman, toddler in hand, pulling him into a dry shop doorway. A mother with two children creased together as one under the relative safety of a small umbrella whilst a young man strode past purposefully with the vibrancy of youth. My eyes returned to focus on the dog.

I jogged back into real time as the noise of the handbrake announced our arrival at the surgery. Its miserable façade complemented my mood completely. An array of plastic chairs, some taken. “I’ll stand outside,” I tell Clive. Guided by some imagined agenda of things to do when you find your son hung, here I was. Life was still going on but my perception of it altered in line with my not wanting to participate. But, what option was there?

My mental health was quite tenuous just now; I could still consider Clive the only reason to continue with life's drama at this moment. I allowed myself to be guided by him from the car park through the drab reception area into an equally austere office. I felt no compulsion to talk as the doctor, weary from a troublesome city surgery, turned to enquire of my problem. Hearing none of the detailed exchanges between Clive and the doctor, I once more marvelled at the contours of the back of the medic's head as he, without pause, tapped out laboriously the events of the day. Satisfying himself of certain key points, dotting i's and crossing t's, a prescription of mind-numbing agents was presented before me. After all, there were people waiting.

Back home again, now early evening. I sit on the sofa which ordinarily felt so comfortable as I normally collapsed into it, kicking my shoes off with well-practised ease, but this time I set myself down as I would a fragile ornament. My normal rituals are abandoned as Clive now guides my schedule, watching and waiting, waiting and watching. With no means of access to my mind, he cannot gauge my contemplations. The phone rings, I answer, it's the policewoman from this morning. 'Interesting' would be an understatement as I monitored the content of her call.

"Can you arrange to call in at Buxton police station anytime soon and make a statement? Oh, and you could collect some personal effects of Andrew's I've had put in a bag."

Flatly, I inform her that I have no intention of returning to Buxton, let alone the police station. As for his effects, she would have to send them. I sense she is a little put out as she has to consider obtaining her statement. She then decides to drive the twenty miles to Stoke the following evening. How thoughtful!

2 The Days After

‘Wisdom is oft-times nearer when we stoop than when we soar.’

~ William Wordsworth

Friday 24th June

Waking from the heavy dreamless sleep induced by exhaustion, I struggle to orientate my senses, the possibility of a waking nightmare swiftly discarded. Clive, my morning cup of coffee in hand, enquires of my night. Normally, a benign ritualistic exchange practised by most people, but on this occasion it feels loaded and I simply reply, “I slept.”

My brain is foggy as I enter the bathroom. Looking into the mirror I can barely see my image, instead the mirror becomes a blank canvas for the mirage of mental images that project before me. The explosion of intrusive thoughts of the events of yesterday, the questions, the whys of how it came to this compounded by the deepest of desires to confront him - at least to have been given the chance?

The `phone call two days before had given me no cause for concern. I had rung him directly as he finished work at 3 p.m. - he was just about to go up the road on his bike to get some shopping and would ring me later. At about 7.15 p.m. he called back quite relaxed and looking forward to a quiet evening in; we chatted about the dog I had just collected from the dogs’ home and he said he would be up directly at the weekend to see her. I told him I looked forward to his coming and knew he would be impressed with her. I now concentrate on every word he had

said, his intonation and inflection, anything at all that belied his state of mind. Too much, too soon.

How on Earth am I going to handle it? In my mind I go back to 1986 to the day I lost Andrew's brother, Adam; he was six months old and passed through cot death. I remember going into the Chapel of Rest at the undertaker's to visit him for the last time. I spent the best part of an hour in there, sitting contemplating outside the door of the room where his little coffin lay draped, inviting me to enter and reveal his still perfect form specially recreated by attendant staff. I spent most of the time in the adjacent toilets looking into the mirror, reaching into whatever depths I could seeking some kind of ill-defined solace. I remember the reflection of my face looking haggard and tired, eyes swollen with tears shed and the thought that came to me that if time were measured in terms of a 12-hour clock, then the time between losing Adam and my joining him was negligible; it would be within the flutter of a butterfly's wing, and we would all be together. With this I felt strong enough to pull back the drape to see my son for the last time, whispering into his tiny ear that I would be with him soon.

I now seek to reproduce some of that feeling as I continue to gaze into the mirror reaffirming to Andrew that I will be with him soon, within the flutter of a butterfly's wing, but not yet. My immediate priority at this moment is somehow to come to a kind of compromise with myself on this insane territory. A decision has to be reached: I either become ill or I get on with it. Sounds simple, but without preparation for this kind of catastrophe, it is!

Each individual has to decide how to negotiate such unknown terrain. They say time is a great healer, and oh how I wish it were five years down the line already. If I go down with it, then five years down the line would have added nothing to my life or anybody else's. Indeed, I would be a far less able person than I am even now, as I still peruse my reflection. Hard as it is, I decide that for now I will remain in the minute. My innate belief that Andrew survived death will keep me strong; I will not question it and I will not doubt it.

The events stand alone, but how you deal with them is something else. Do I let the events control me or do I try and control them?

I thank God for the automatic pilot that resides within me, for I hadn't realised just how capable it was. I allow it to complete my morning ablutions,

applying the daily rituals of self-care. Normally I would guide it and participate with interest, but for now I also allow it to manoeuvre me around the house, trusting it completely as it steers me towards the kitchen to make yet another cup of coffee. I glance at the unopened medical prescription, still not remotely interested in its contents or its promise of crisis management in a bottle.

I take over from the autopilot when I see Penny waiting, her little eyes aglow, such a special little dog. A week before when I had selected her, she had been in the first cage. She was howling, a scream that reverberated throughout the kennel complex, a cry from deep within her heart. I had paused, wondering what kind of dog gave rise to such an all-pervading noise. This would not be a dog that was top of my shopping list by any means. As I gazed at this almost awkward looking hybrid black and white dog, its ears creased back as it raised its little head in a piercing cry from the heart, I beckoned to it. The little animal immediately bounded over, her front paws attached themselves awkwardly to the inside of the metal grid, pressing her little chest against the barrier for some desperately sought kind and physical contact. She'd looked older than she perhaps was, and the blackness of her fur had that dusty hue that came from lack of care; she had such a story to tell. This animal was in emotional pain and I felt compelled to get her out. Clive, puzzled, encouraged me to look at the other dogs, but no - my mind was made up, my new companion would be ready within a week. I remember this as I bend down and hug her this morning, for today it is me who silently screams and howls and craves her contact.

Andrew loved dogs, in fact he loved all animals. He used to donate ten pounds a month of his meagre wages to the RSPCA. He had a hamster called Toni, his second after the first one Frank had been tearfully buried with all due hamster honours, wrapped in a sock in the garden. I remember how Andrew became embarrassed if I asked him in public how Toni or Frank was doing, in case anyone overheard; in his small town, people would assume he was gay!

I had often mused about how the autopilot could take me from one location to another destination without me having noticed the journey. I considered this to be a waste of life, and pondered that for our ancestors survival depended on personal focus, as any inattention would have had far more dire consequences than today. I would ask myself who is actually in the driving seat when I have to

negotiate each and every minute or the days ahead. Is it the me that steers me through the schedule of the day, or the other me, the 'riding passenger' that interjects with alternatives or objections, interrupting the flow of events unfolding?

Clive busies himself with the practicalities; there are going to be people to see, the flat needs to be emptied and much, much more. There are many things that have to be resolved and there is the funeral to organise. All these issues require my attention and Clive knows it. Like a soon to be shown drama production, he manipulates the setting, the scenes, the schedule, the diary of events and the characters that come and exit the stage. On occasion, he is rather like a well-seasoned P.A. bringing issues to me requiring immediate attention.

They say the eyes are the windows to the soul, but for me they are only the windows to an outside world that now appears so distorted. There is more to do inside my head than there ever was outside of it. Looking down, I have obviously got dressed but did I have breakfast? I can't remember, but I'm sure I must have as Clive would have reminded me had I not, and for now I am heavily reliant on him. An appointment has been booked at the doctor's, another on the list of things-to-do. I decide I will take the dog for a walk before the things-to-do list commences. It is a lovely sunny day and just momentarily the thought comes to me that Andrew would have enjoyed this day out on his motorbike. I put this thought aside as reality calls me back.

There is something strange about this morning, I didn't cry yesterday and I don't feel tearful now. There is certainly no shortage of love for Andrew, he was the most precious thing on this Earth to me and there was nothing that I did not do or would not have done for him. Everything I did for him I did with a passion, as he was my only son. I just feel that he is walking with me, so I decide to follow my instincts and I speak to him.

I say, "What a lovely day it is," and that is where the dialogue starts. I suggest that he might have found it a good day to go for a bike ride and that he could have come up and seen the dog as he had promised the night before on the phone. As I continue this curious conversation, I notice the dog looking up, as part of the threesome I had formed in my mind. There we are on a family walk, me, Andrew and Penny, in a weird kind of way, but it feels right! It doesn't feel at all unusual and so I decide to enjoy this make-believe world with Andrew. I want just

to interact with him normally, not wanting to know why or how the events have come to pass because the future is certainly not up for negotiation. We will stay in the present and enjoy the moment.

Depositing Penny at home, Clive and I make our way to the doctor's surgery just around the corner from where we live. The surgery thankfully is an efficient one, as no sooner am I booked in by the receptionist than my name emblazons itself across the resident television screen, announcing passage to the inner sanctum. I notice first the eyebrows creasing upwardly together in the middle as the doctor turns sympathetically towards us, punctuated by a short intake of breath through her pursed lips as she reads the comprehensive input of notes made the evening before on the computer. It soon becomes apparent, through no fault other than a system that is impotent when presented with anything other than broken bones or severe haemorrhaging, that there is little to be done. Outside exploring the possibility of throwing myself through the surgery window, laughing and foaming at the mouth to highlight the open emotional wound and its toxic contents that have spilled into my life, nothing can be done, although the counselling service will be in touch.

"How long?" Clive enquires.

"Can't really say," the doctor responds, but possibly within two weeks, and of course not to forget the pills.

Again we return home, and at least that one is crossed off the things-to-do list for today. I make us both a drink. I stand in the back garden, visualising Andrew as scenes from the past vividly dance before my eyes. Andrew inspecting newly acquired flowers, and by the garage with his bike, tools in hand as I share a coffee with him.

My mobile sounds as I stand smiling at various recollections. Again, I retreat swiftly behind my autopilot, expecting it to be the police, as I frantically frisk my pockets to take the call. I disengage the autopilot completely as the realisation hits me that my `phone was actually not on me, but still on the windowsill of the lounge. I stand there, a warm feeling accompanied by an eerie intuition. I rush into the house, past Clive lying on the settee, grabbing for my `phone and, inspired, I looked at the call log of the day before. I scan quickly down the numerous attempts of the morning to contact Andrew. Exactly as I had intuitively

known, the time I had left him the message “Andrew, can you give me a quick call? Ok if you’re busy” was 12.40 p.m. My eyes dart to the mantelpiece, the time now is 12.40 p.m. - absolutely amazing, and one heck of a coincidence! I gush to Clive that I had thought the mobile had rung but that obviously it hadn’t, yet the time had uncannily correlated with yesterday’s request. I feel sure that Andrew, who had always responded to my calls and rarely let me down, has somehow returned a quick “Ok” call!

I recall this morning when I was taking the dog for a walk, feeling that Andrew was actually with me and looking for an opportunity to confirm to me that indeed he was there. I feel temporarily lifted and my imagination a little exonerated. I stand immobilised by these thoughts, desperately considering possibilities. I feel like I had earlier, rather like entering a room when playing hide and seek with a child - you perceive the presence, but until they are revealed you don’t know where. I decide to give in to this sense of presence, because through this I will find a way of going on. I determine that now the choice has to be made, either to ‘be ill’ or to ‘carry on’. With a profound sense of support from Andrew, a new chapter in life will have to begin.

Clive takes me out around the shops for some fresh air and I have no opinion on the matter, but I do know that the contemplations of this morning seem to have stretched endlessly. What normally would pass as a few hours seems like twelve. I decide to leave Andrew behind; he never used to go shopping with me if he could avoid it, unless of course it was for him.

I have become adept at switching off my emotions, just allowing myself to become an observer. Like a closed circuit television camera swivelling left and right without determination or forethought, just capturing images. I spend a lot of time looking up at the sky, as I just know there is something, but not what it is. This plane of existence doesn’t interest me, not now. I really want to know where

Andrew now dwells. We enter one of two large bookshops and I make my way to the Spiritual and Philosophical section. I have always been interested in the more esoteric aspects of life, but never with such acute necessity or urgency as I skim over the bookshelves examining one book and then another. With my choice in one hand and my purse in the other, I make my way to the ever-resident bookworm behind the till; this will be the first of many forays to add to what will become quite an extensive book collection.

My brother Tim rings. He doesn't know what to say, but I can tell he has found it a struggle to ring me back.

"When is the funeral?" I don't know at this stage, I have yet to have contact with the undertaker - in fact, I have yet to make contact with a lot of people. There is nothing to say, the stilted exchanges and pregnant pauses hang heavily in the air. I understand. He offers his services in helping to empty Andrew's flat which I gladly accept, though the details in relation to the day and the time I have yet to arrange.

I look up at the clouds again. "For God's sake, if you are there you must help me."

As we return from town, we pass a little Methodist chapel and I search for the name of the pastor or preacher, and then another small church appears, this time Church of England. Again there is the typical board outside the church, and on it a lady vicar listed which I think would be good, so I make a note of her name and number.

Later I will open my door to more sympathetic eyebrows, framing the face of the vicarious angel above a white collar, the badge of religious office.

"Come in, vicar..."

Saturday 25th June

We always go to Newcastle on a Saturday. It has a nice market town feel, and today would be the first time I would not be looking for additional supplementary items for Andrew. It's difficult to understand why we find ourselves replaying our familiar routine. I expect it is because neither of us have extended family immediately local enough to proffer support, but then grief is a solo activity for the individual. Everyone retreats within the limits of their own comfort zone, with intermittent attempts to interact with sensitivity to the bespoke emotive, arousing and disturbing memories and issues relating to each and every one of us. So, Clive and I find ourselves sharing a coffee in our usual café, when my now irritating mobile alerts me to an incoming call.

Andrew's best friend John has managed to obtain my number, his voice tone incredulous as I temporarily leave the café to take his call. He desperately wants to know if it is actually true, the modulation and inflection of his voice magnifying the sadness of his now changed world. Andrew was to be the best man at his wedding only next month and final preparations had been made, excitement rife with the expectation of this, his most memorable of occasions to date. They had gone for fittings for matching suits, reflecting both the solemnity and of course the splendour of the event, intending to impress with every attention to detail his soon-to-be wife and family. I know that Andrew had looked forward to it eagerly, spoke of it often, voicing various possible amusing anecdotes to sprinkle into his speech, discarding one only in favour of a potentially more embarrassing one for his dear friend. John is still in shock as he offers any assistance he can. I am grateful to accept; the irony for John is that now he will be Andrew's best man.

A whole three-quarters of an hour has passed as I re-join Clive, now more reflective even at this early stage on the many people that will have been left floundering and struggling by Andrew's sudden demise and the circumstances around his death. So many things to think, people to consider, so much pain all round. I defer to my autopilot - just allow one thing at a time, and just do as I say or we will both be in trouble!

Walking into the charity shop, I am lost in thought as I merge with the other shoppers, skilfully presenting a façade of normality. My phone rings - the police. Apparently, they need to see me about Andrew's life history, a normal practice in these cases. It will only take a few hours. I do not consider three hours as good

value for twenty-eight years, and I am thinking quite facetiously, less than impressed with the police this past two days. In fact, I instruct my inner pilot to consider complaining at some more appropriate stage. I make an appointment for next Tuesday, somewhat begrudgingly as I perceive it to be more of an inconvenient interruption. I turn my attention to an old pair of shoes, red with worn heels, and I look at them intensely with animated interest.

We leave the shop and the phone rings again. The undertaker introduces himself. Andrew is en-route to Chesterfield to the coroner's, he will be autopsied there, meanwhile the coroner's officer will be in touch and they will issue an interim death certificate until the full findings are made available. He asks me if I would like him to administer the funeral. I am taken aback as I grapple with the obvious practicalities of death in the coldest of light. I tell him I am unsure, but I think this is borne out of some desire not to face up to this evident necessity. He offers to ring again – I agree...

“What the hell have you done Andrew, what on Earth were you thinking?” I articulate to Clive a passionate mixture of anger, sorrow, love, guilt and ardent desire to have Andrew answer.

Clive responds, “I know, but there were no clues.”

Sunday 26th June

I went to bed yesterday evening offering up my nightly thoughts and prayers, asking for support and solace from whatever source would listen. I requested that if it were possible, could I but hold Andrew in my arms once more, please...

I dreamt this night that Andrew had come to the top of the driveway. He was a boy of thirteen or fourteen years of age, dressed in familiar clothes from that time. I recognised his slight form as he came towards me, a finely striped red and white tee-shirt over his jeans. He looked healthy but dismayed as he closed to me. He put his arms out to me as I reached out to hold him, and I held him tight, reluctant to let him go. My heart was full as I urged him to come with me into the

house. "I can't, Mum, I have to go," and with that our grip loosened as he turned and walked away - I knew I couldn't follow, I just knew.

I am a little more buoyant this morning as I recollect my dream. I did feel as though I had held him. I had felt the texture of his tee-shirt and his familiar boyish scent at an age when we would still hug each other before the self-consciousness of adolescence set in, and which I had duly respected.

The literature that the vicar left me has a time frame of grief bracketed into three, six and nine month checklists. A common theme throughout is the propensity to hallucinate with feelings of presence, etcetera. If it happened, I thought, then I would welcome it and enjoy it. I did, however, ponder that even if one does hallucinate, it in no way invalidates the experience or negates its value, nor indeed does it disqualify the reality of the event... does it?

Sundays have always been the day we saw Andrew. Like a ritual we rumbled over the moors with the additional something for him from our Saturday shopping expedition. I always keenly looked forward to it, and depending on whether he was working or not we would often take him for a meal. Speaking every day to him as I did on the phone, I was up to speed with his recent activities and the ins and outs of his daily work, politics and social agenda. I was always excited to see him. Andrew loved his flat; it was always clean, neat, tidy and well cared for. He basked in comments people passed as they appraised his furnishings and newly acquired gadgets, or indeed his ornaments. He had an eye for beauty and detail which was apparent from the many paintings he laboriously worked on. Inevitably, along with creativity came sensitivity, hence Andrew required more intensive support than would normally be the case for a twenty-eight year old. As a man, he displayed naivety and innocence, struggling in this harsh adult world of ours. This was almost our secret. To his colleagues, friends and acquaintances he presented as extremely balanced, responsible and industrious, and was well-known for his creativity and intelligence. Most of all he was remembered for his kindness and his ability to put others at their ease.

Clive suggests we go for a walk over Barlaston Downs with Penny. The weather is bright and sunny, and its radiance almost feels mocking with its luminosity contrasting our melancholic dispositions. However, with the illuminating soft hues on the mixed foliage and trees you cannot help but stop and

wonder at nature's seeming contradictions, so beautiful and yet therein lies its darkness and its promise of shadows. We soldier on, carefully negotiating the aged stile which requires some thoughtful agility, onto the dried mud-laden track flanking a long meandering brook. No-one is about and this pleases us as we start up a small incline. Penny, well-mannered as ever, to which we have grown accustomed, walks dutifully at our side.

Suddenly Penny freezes, her gaze fixed keenly ahead, her ears upright and forward on her upwardly inclined head. We follow her gaze intently, unmoving as she herself has been forced to halt before... what? We are quite uncertain and startled. I am well used to dogs and aware that their sense of hearing is vastly superior to ours. Following her line of sight, the distraction appears to be immediately in front of us, and undeterred by our "Come on" requests, she remains solidly frozen to the spot. We stand, unwilling to break the spell, although with some hesitation I cannot deny the feeling that it is Andrew.

It is like time is suspended as I breathe inwardly "Andrew!" with a rising sense of excitement from deep within my soul at the realisation that he has, as he had promised, come to see the dog. Now, as abruptly as she had halted, Penny continues up the path as though nothing has transpired. Clive and I continue in silence, lost in our own thoughts. The glow created by this encounter persists. I wonder what Clive has made of it but I am reluctant to address it at this time, I don't want to spoil the moment – there are precious few as it is. I proceed to watch Penny keenly should she sense any further presence.

Clive's mobile rings – a family friend. Inwardly I muse to myself as to the nature of this enquiry, probably something along the lines of "Is she dead yet?" "Well, actually, yes," I respond with an imaginary retort! Some of the dead have the misfortune to continue to live, I ruminates, as I meander up the lane to the car to allow Clive some privacy. I never realised how long days could be.

Arriving home, we closet ourselves in the womb-like interior of the lounge. I decide I will surf the Internet for life after death studies and other related esoteric material on forums and websites of interest. Half an hour later, I close the laptop none the wiser or enlightened, and in the main left again to my own general critical skills of human nature and perception. It does however strike me that

reading books of a more spiritual nature sparks something deep within me, something very profound that isn't tangible, neither black nor white.

It is almost as though I realise innately that it is the very words we use that get in the way, therefore the truth I am seeking is there already in the shadows; it just has to be accessed in the right way. In many respects at this moment in time, regardless of the content or the esoteric nature of the books I am reading, the true meaning I seek to grasp inevitably conveys itself by hinting at something magnificently subliminal - yet nonetheless real. Their conviction is catching, their feelings contagious. I share my thoughts with Clive from time to time.

"I'm sure you're right," he responds, with hopeful and earnest intonation.

There is nothing remotely distracting on the television, and little of interest to distract me. A composition of brain-rotting reality programmes with a motley crowd of exhibitionists, certainly not a life-enhancing experience; more like fast food for the brain and just as innutritious. Besides which, a variety of world news channels complements our sad dispositions very well. In the absence of good reflective, thought-provoking documentaries, disaster on a worldwide stage is far more befitting. I make us a cup of tea and we retire to bed exhausted.

Tuesday 28th June

My memory is not too good lately and this is very much down to the demented world I find myself thrashing about in. As a direct consequence of this, Clive draws my attention to a folder brimming with paperwork, filed methodically with every phone call received and every visit and subsequent calling card marked and commented on accordingly. Every bill dealt with and paid for, and Andrew's bank statements also filed. As I leaf through it, he reinforces the importance of recording every interaction with its date and time before I invariably forget about them.

Today I am to see the undertaker to finalise arrangements, and the police, to furnish them with Andrew's history. The vicar is appointed to arrange the order of service and its contents. I take the dog for a walk before the day's activities commence.

"Come in, Neil," as I beckon in the sombre but pleasant-faced young man, his eyes averting downwardly as he passes by me into the lounge. I want to be as succinct as I can, it is difficult enough already. I offer him a cup of coffee as he sits down offering his condolences. Any insurance policy that Andrew had was invalid as he had taken his own life and, although we are dealing with the financial intricacies and complexities of his estate, at the moment this will fall far short of the funeral costs; but this is irrelevant providing it is sensitively and appropriately conducted.

I consider all sorts of formats, exchanging one idea for another. There is a particular piece of music sung in Hebrew called Now We Are Free, one I had earmarked for my own funeral and which I considered emotionally evocative. This is the one thing we will share when I join him from this mortal coil. I also opt for the just as haunting melody of Gabriel's Oboe, and of course the more melancholic processional composition as we enter the crematorium. I do not want flowers. I never really understood flowers at funerals, to be cut down in their prime and left to die with barely a glance of appreciation. However, I will have a rose on his coffin as I had for Adam, his brother.

I am not really interested in the fripperies of the occasion, purely the raw poignancy of a young life extinguished. There will be no additional cars, as I do not need to be marked out in any way as the focal point of this sorry day. The grief is shared. I have lost him over a week ago and the day is for those who have suspended their belief at Andrew's sudden demise, for their own closure and to say their goodbye. I make appropriate notes in my comprehensive folder as Neil respectfully withdraws, leaving me with a date and time, 11.30 on the following Tuesday.

The eyebrows of the plain-clothed police officer introducing himself at the door belie his official capacity. I gesture sweepingly with my arm towards the lounge door. An uncomfortable task for a greying retired policeman extending his working life as a file-builder for tasked officers. His gait and demeanour betray his

years, his eyes still animated with keen powers of observation. Sympathetically, he commences with his cup of tea in his hand.

“So, a mother’s intuition?” he asks. This question prompts in me an immediate recollection of the haunting vision of the night before, and reflectively I murmur “Yes” - which is largely true.

From here, I try to be as brief as possible, slowly painting a picture of Andrew’s character and disposition. Drawing upon my reserves, a collage of his young life soon emerges. I had striven to give him every opportunity, encouraging every project he undertook. At the earliest opportunity, given his age, he had embarked on a series of part-time jobs to supplement his pocket money as he completed his education. Wherever he went he acquitted himself well, always remaining popular with his employers. He had participated in the Air Cadets, the Army Cadets, and also a local contingent of Police Cadets involved with community support projects. He left education with above average qualifications culminating in a BTEC in Travel and Tourism from the local college. With his restless nature, he embarked on a career in the Royal Navy. He was never comfortable being away for long periods of time. He had a girlfriend in Buxton whom he liked to see as frequently as he could, traveling the length and breadth of the country every weekend, money permitting.

He dismissed himself from the Royal Navy, his sole intention being to settle in Buxton as he could enjoy more regular contact with his family. And yes, he did secure work from a local prestigious hotel. With a lovely flat and a comfortable lifestyle, keenly supported and assisted by us, we thought he was well settled. We were completely unaware of the storm clouds that were gathering until perhaps, by a somewhat chemical trick of the brain, the devastating drama was to play out – and the curtains would drop.

Only the week before, he had accompanied us on a visit to Warwick Castle. He would take any opportunity to go out with us. I had bought him a small armoured knight from the gift shop that he had been admiring as a memento. I cannot elaborate any further, neither do I wish to. No more to add, it is enough just living with it day to day, without having it recorded on police files.

I have not been at all enamoured with the police since the event thus far; however, I do make an exception for this kindly man. Never once deviating from

the job in hand, he proceeds both diligently and yet compassionately. It is strange that extending compassion is remarked upon instead of being taken as a given. These interviews, he acknowledges, can be difficult. I thank him for his kindness along with his departing condolences – the mandatory exercise now gently and respectfully concluded.

With one more meeting outstanding, I turn my attention to Penny and her obvious desire, given her reposed posture; I administer a full body massage.

With my empty coffee cup in hand I answer the door to the vicar, returning to the kitchen for a refill plus two. This will not be a cucumber sandwich moment, as I re-join Clive on the sofa. I am so exhausted with it all now, I cannot really think. Having furnished the vicar with the three pieces of music I have determined suitable, I field the remainder of the service back to the patient and receptive cleric to deal with. At this moment, Clive interjects, reining in my unreasonable address. The gentle man, sensitive to my weariness, offers to return at another time. Clive continues, reminding me that this is to be the final testament to Andrew. Both I and my now dimly flickering autopilot sit slumped together on the settee. I sit in a trance, trusting Clive implicitly to finalise the arrangements of the funeral, allowing the swell of conversing exchanges to wash over me like the ebb and flow of the tide as it washes over jagged rocks. Arousing me from a metaphoric screensaver, the vicar departs.

The date to be carved into my soul forever will be Tuesday the 5th of July, 2011... and so let it be.