

The Science of Spirits

When my husband took his last breath, I distinctly remember the profound feeling that the world paused – just for a fraction of a second, an indiscernible glitch – in anticipation. His hand was held in mine, and though weak and fragile, though the grip was negligible at best, when his life extinguished, it loosened – a twitch, a hint, an echo – which though almost imperceptible, shook my world like nothing ever had before. Then, there, I knew I was alone. I knew, never again, would I feel that familiar and ever-welcome gentle stroke behind my earlobe as he planted a delicate kiss on my lips.

And my heart shattered.

There was no chaos afterward, like you'd see in the shows and movies. No shrill beep of an ominous flat line. No alarms blearing for extra assistance. No nurses rushing, or doctors shouting in the hopes of resuscitation. It was as if the clichés knew there was no hope. All that was offered to me was near silence, broken only by the soft metronomic footsteps outside, the raspy breathing from the other bed in the room, and the dull rapid racing of my quiet, timorous heart.

I waited in that position, frozen and hollow, holding that limp, lukewarm hand and trying to placate the tumult of grief stirring within, like a tamer fending off a ferocious lion with a rickety old chair – grossly outmatched - just waiting for someone to check in on him. To find us there. Some catalyst to invoke the next step, to restart the world. To guide me away under the guise of perfunctory care, when really, they begin processing the corpse who could once upon a time, when my fairy tale was still being told, put the blush in my cheek with a brilliant smile or terrible pun. And they *were* terrible.

That moment on, my life was to change, and the reality had been looming for the longest time; peeking at me from the corners of my nightmares, sleeping next to me in his deafening absence, taunting me at the appearance of any smiling respite I'd stumbled upon. Deprivation of him was almost as tangible as the presence of him, but it twisted everything into a malcontent of the original.

We had missed the early stages, so by the time the diagnosis came about, well, there was little left for us to do but 'keep him comfortable,' as they said in their trained sympathy.

Gosh, all those years ago and the memory alone still anchors the horror I felt on that day. And it was a strange feeling, because, as much as I was distraught by the loss of him – the things he'd miss, the anniversaries and holidays, the children we never had and achievements we were destined for - I was as equally scared for the terrible loneliness that would follow.

The two of us had met in our hometown, and though we didn't become an item until our university classes, by sheer providence, joined us together, we had always been involved – though, that doesn't particularly mean amicable. A lot of our youth was competition, you see. And, oh, that man, what a competitor he was.

The first time I remember us battling is when I learned to tie my shoelaces before him. The two of us tragically feral toddlers; our uniforms peppered with dirt and play, a tooth here and there proffered unto the tooth fairy, and bright eyes of constant great excitement. My hair brown, wild and bushy as a brisk winter briar. His, golden and bright as a warm summer dawn. I got a glimmering sticker for the feat, and he, who had been closest before me, bawled his eyes out and pushed me, so I bawled mine out (though, the memory differed in his version – but he's not here to write, so, take the biased version). Alas, my rise to the top of infant brilliance was bruised and humbled when he mastered cursive before I did.

Though, I feel I should put forth this question to any reader: When was the last time you wrote in cursive, and when was the last time you tied your shoes? Practicality is paramount in achievements of worth, surely?

Then, the years ticked on and the competition grew. Every school year, our grades oscillated, usually within three marks of the other in each and every subject. One year, I was the smartest, no contest. The next, he was. Some, I would excel at English and Math, whereas he took the helm in History and Science. The year after, it would flip. In retrospect, I imagine we put more effort into studying the areas we fell short the year before (either to better ourselves, but more likely to beat each other), which allowed us to propel ahead in those, and fall short in the others.

We were so focused on these spinning plates of academia, something the teachers and peers encouraged (a cruel thing to curate competition) that we didn't much consider the kindred pressure. If we could take a brief moment during those years, to realise that the one person who had more in common with us than any other, was the rival, perhaps our story may have started earlier, allowed me more happy memories to dwell on – but, 'ifs' and 'buts' are rarely a healthy anchor to stabilise one's thoughts around.

And so, because we were both the tops of our year, we were polished, pruned and displayed as the poster children of our school for events and extra-curricular competitions; forced to talk, smile, shake hands and pose for photographs depicting us holding award after award after award, when, in sooth, we were at loggerheads. The finest show dogs at Crufts. The two roses on show, carefully dethorned for all, with nothing but scorn for each other. This went on up until we embarked on our higher education journey, both achieving a scholarship for the same University, in which we were to study Molecular Physics.

During our further studies, we put aside our battling, thanks to maturity almost dousing the petty need for accolades and feats (of which there were still many), but we kept up the competition – just allowed it to develop into a healthy alternative. Then, one of our tutors took note of our aptitude, our propensity to undertake the assignments and not only deliver, but above and beyond – often before the other students, and always with a greater level of concision, professionalism, and accuracy. She, too, took note that it was separate of the other, rather than in tandem. So, when a joint project came along, she devised a scheme, an experiment of her own to test a theory, and did what no-one else before ever thought to do: place the two of us together.

Oh, it was artful to see him at work, he was brilliant... but so was I. It turned out, alone, we were competition for the other, but together, no-one had a chance against us.

And from thereon out, we were almost inseparable.

The stock of photos together bloomed, no more thorns, no more scorn. The smiles were real, the handshaking was now hugging, and awards weren't needed to join our names together. We sought each other out in lectures, we integrated ourselves in the other's circles, we stayed in each other's dorms, we sat next to one another in the library. We motivated the other to finish this trying essay, or compile that tedious research when we were tired, and proofread or analysed the other's the day after. We raced through books and quizzed the other to test our understanding. But, most importantly, we took away the veneer of this expected brilliance from others, and shared the truth from behind the scenes – it was tiring to be shoved on a pedestal, but wobbling and restabilising was exhilarating.

And, soon, our connection spilled from the container of education, into gifts we thought the other would like, and trips to the cinema after an arduous week, trying to cook for the other before giving up and ordering in, reading the same books, walking the same trails, sharing the same thoughts, and, perhaps most miraculously, if one of our papers did better than the other – well, we would *congratulate* the other without a hint of bitterness.

Though, perhaps that was because it was rare we didn't have input in the other's work by this point, leaving no room for any bitterness... well, perhaps a mote.

Our first kiss snuck upon us without any practice – our brains taking a break from reading about biology and chemistry, and instead, practicing it in a way that no experiment could match.

And that first kiss, that contact of his lips on mine – my hands on his cheeks, his arm around the small of my back pulling me toward him, and his free hand offering that devilishly endearing stroke behind my earlobe – his signature move which I grew to love more than any sweet nothing... well, that kiss was a seed which cultivated an endless crop of more, and I enjoyed reaping. It led to kisses in the street, cuddles on the couch, and tireless conversations well into the small hours of the morning. It led to our lives together.

In our final year, before we received our degree, I had already been applying for jobs in prestigious institutes around the country and he was doing the same. I had managed to get an interview with one of the top researchers in the field who happened to know the professor who placed us together. As proud as I was to have the opportunity, I couldn't help but be a little happy I was the one in this position over him.

Yet, as the interview was coming to a close, and the job seemed all but secure, I was told that only three positions were available there, and, well, fortune favours the audacious. I told her there and then I knew a perfect candidate who not only was a brilliant mind, but, 'he can even write in cursive.'

We started our first day two months later. And, the two of us, with another colleague and under the leadership of a fantastic woman, achieved more and more and more than we could have ever dreamed. Our projects were primarily focused on the accumulation of specific particles, in which we tried to amplify or moderate energies for varying purposes. To put it into simple terms, imagine sunlight through a magnifying glass. We were the magnifying glass, and, simply trying not to burn everything. It was a magnificent starting point into the world of molecular physics, and we couldn't be happier of the advancements we championed and achieved.

Though, of *all*, my proudest trophy was the golden band he placed around my finger.

It's nice to think back on such things. When you get to a certain age, all you have is memories and imperfect nostalgia.

And I am at a certain age. An old one. I'm an old woman.

The mirrors stopped being kind to me a long time ago, yet, I stare in them all the same. Why shouldn't I? The bushy winter briar I spoke of before still rests atop my tired old head, but the wintry element of it is now the stark whiteness – like a snow caked bush. My colouring has retired in its old age, allowing a greyish hue to claim hold of me, that is, where you can see it through the wrinkles. The only gentle stroke behind my earlobe is that of my hearing-aid.

And he- well...

You see, after he passed, everything felt grey. And, yes, I'm aware of the melodrama. How pitiable? How morose. I'm aware this is a symptom of co-dependency, but I don't care – I *was* dependent, as was he. It was symbiotic. My house, my love, my life, my work, my future was a product of his companionship. We were navigating this planet and its secrets together.

All seasons were void of beauty, because, there was no-one to behold and share them with. Everything we loved about each one was now tainted with an immense misery, because I couldn't speak to him about it. We couldn't point out how the sun bathed upon the distant hills and imbued their colour with surreal vibrancy. Nor how the chilling fogs culminated around those same hills, concealing all beauty and definition in its hushed wisps.

The dazzling summer mornings, in which the nearby river scintillated with a thousand brilliant diamonds, now, was just a blinding rushing affront. The chill autumn days in which the trees were ablaze in lambent oranges and yellows, soon to be disrobed as winter's herald, were all just repugnant triggers for me to break down. To crumble, fall and wither like one of those detached leaves.

Our favourite bar was just a painful constant of a frozen past. Our favourite foods seemed nauseating. Our morning routine destroyed. Our- *my* bookshelf was nothing but a taunting display of all the worlds we travelled to together when curled and comfortable on the couch, and each page now was steeped in agony. Even new books I tried were just torturous, because, this character, that event, this beautifully crafted sentence – they were mine and mine alone, and I hated not being able to share them. I've always believed beauty in this world was amplified by, multiplied by, the more people who could enjoy it; what is a magnum opus, or natural wonder but a sad secret without minds to perceive and appreciate it? Beauty should be mused and mutual, not selfishly harboured.

After his loss – everything paused. For me, at least. It seemed as if that inhalation of anticipation the world took before his last breath, his last heartbeat, was enough to keep *my* life on hold. And though the world trickled on relentlessly, all my joys and pleasures were stuck in that moment – a tableaux of a once-happy woman, framed and glittering in memory only. And it was impossible for me to reignite them, to reach into that frame and hold them to my heart.

To cut a melancholic platitude short – I was struggling. A lot.

Following that day, of course, there was a flurry of activity in regard to cremation or burial, funeral proceedings, reshuffling of bills and leases so that, step by step, the gravity of being in the world without him was forced on me, one dotted line at a time.

It was clear to all those around me that I was failing to cope. The first time they'd seen me fail, and oh, how I'd throw out every cold trophy, every published piece, every vast achievement, just to do any of those things we loved together again. Even for one day. One hour.

I'd never been one for displaying emotions so freely, preferring to repress and unload my doubts and worries on him and him only. He had the mind to receive my woes and sorrows, or frustrations and fury, then to dissect it, analyse it from the outside, and help me glean it from a different perspective. This would usually satiate my trouble, or conversely, reinforce that I was in the right all along and, often to his dismay, have me fiercely double-down and *defend* my perspective. Oh, the dinner parties I tore asunder, it makes me smile to remember the awkward sips of wine I'd inflicted on friends, foes and fickle affiliates alike. But, without the one person to whom I'd speak- in fact, to have that very person's loss as the provenance of the storm within, and unable to have it tempered – well, I suffered breakdown after breakdown.

I had a lot of time off work – something I initially refused, but having spoiled an entire batch of specimens after (taking away the complexities) falling asleep at the desk, I realised it was necessary. I was incredibly grateful to our third colleague, as well as the temp (whom we hired to help not long after the news of my husband's diagnosis) and the research leader for allowing this. In fairness and justification to myself, we had far exceeded projections handed to us by our contributors prior to his passing, and thus had some flexibility to slow down the progress for a while.

But, with this time off, I didn't do anything at all. I slept on the couch – unable to face our room. I woke from unmarked sleeps, foggy as those bleak hilltops, and as soon as a tincture of lucidity took hold, it was instantly clamped by the devouring grief. I found myself listlessly gazing at specs of dusts, or the whirling wooden whorls on the fireplace for inconceivable amounts of time, only realising when tears blurred my vision and demanded my attention. And

more often than not, I found I had lost stretches of days – impossibly numb, and pleased for the time passed without tax. And, then, I repeated this process.

The lounge gathered dust, the bread grew mould (I could tell I was grieving, because there was not even a jolt of joy in this), the house robe I wore, exclusively, began to sport its own miasma of sweat and grief as the only thing left to hug me. I stopped answering calls. I refused to reply to texts. I shrunk away when I heard a knock at the door, or a call of a familiar voice through the letterbox.

I soon developed ulcers from stress. I withered in weight and strength. I began to look sallow and skeletal, worn and fading. Emaciated. I barely ate, just what was handed to me from my family, his family, our friends – who visited sporadically, all dressed in respectful blacks and furrowed frowns. They came to visit his urn, as much as they did me. And I was always embarrassed to tell them it was still in the closet, amongst all his stuff, because to see it would be to force myself to accept it all over again, as a child who sees the source of blood will then feel the pain, to reconfirm the man who stole my heart was a mound of ash in an intricate ornament.

And I do believe I went half crazy.

There was one day, when overwhelmed by ennui and listlessness, that I mustered up the courage to sneak into his drawers – perhaps the most productive I'd been in a long time - and began shuffling through his aftershaves and toiletries. With the scrutiny of my scientific leanings, I began spraying them on separate towels until I found the one I most associated with him – the run-of-the-mill one that he wouldn't save for special occasions. The one that was, by default, only really used around me. The others were for dinners and events, outings and holidays. I always thought that was strange, that, the one he didn't much place on some aromatic pedestal, was the one in which I preferred the most.

Once I was certain, I spent nearly a thousand pound on ordering a bulk of bottles – for fear they may run out, or soon cut production, and, then, I'd spray it wherever I was. So, it felt as if a part of him was still there. I'd always spritz my wrists, which looked pallid and elder even then, with electric blue veins bulging out due to lack of sustenance. Then dab either side of my neck with it. But, that wouldn't suffice. I had to have it at certain points within the house, and use it as some sense to bolster the constantly failing fortitude I was trying to cling onto.

It wasn't until I did this, perhaps three or four months after he'd gone, that I could sleep in the bed again. I sprayed it on the pillow, and though I neither spooned nor got spooned, though I lay in darkness as I couldn't cope with seeing the bed empty, and though the tears stung as if acidic, that smell was a small comfort offered to me. The first comfort I'd felt.

This desperate and tragic mania only grew.

Soon, I would have only his favourite TV shows sounding about the house, or his favourite albums playing. I would drink only his coffee blend, even though I'd always complained about it being bitter to the point of acrid. I would make his favourite foods. I was by no means trying to adopt his life, in a fashion pertaining to Norman Bates, but, instead, attempting to compensate for his absence as best as I could. To, in as much as was in my capacity, reassemble the faint echoes of what a life with him left me.

And, though it didn't so much as even, by a fraction, reduce the void I felt, it did make things a little easier; marginally, but notable. In retrospect, perhaps forcing all these triggers acted to retard the process of closure, but, I'd never grieved before, I had no previous criteria or analysis to use as a metric... this was my first experiment, and I had to trust my own process.

One day, when I was feeling particularly brave, I decided that, perhaps... I'd go for a walk. Our favourite trail, down by the river.

I showered, the solitude of which was enough to have me doubled over weeping, as if the glass formed an echo chamber for my misery, but I was adamant. We'd walk nearly every second day, and I hadn't left the house in *so* long. I sobbed through drying myself with the towel. I sobbed through drying my hair – scraggly and wild as ever, the winter's briar, stark without the golden tonic. I sobbed through dressing myself in actual clothes for the first time, as if this was some form of infidelity, some affront to his memory. I wept, uncontrollably, as I opened the closet, and plucked out his own bottle of aftershave (I promised myself I'd only use *his* last bottle on special occasions) and spritzed my neck directly. Then selected his prized golden pendant, and placed it around my neck which now, championed his scent. Then a scarf of his, to help fend off the brisk autumn air I knew would be there to greet me as an old friend when I stepped out– but, I realised as I wrapped this around my neck, in his fashion (doubled up, looped around and tucked in), that the tears had halted.

I was immensely confused by this, because the anguish was still prevalent. But, I felt as if, with his aftershave, his jewellery, his scarf – all focused and aggregated around my neck – and I know this is insane, but as if *he*- his arms were there. The forearms languidly resting atop my shoulders, as if any moment I would feel that delicate stroke below my ear, and then be pulled close for a painfully pined-for peck.

I froze for a moment, to embrace that feeling – like a faded caress from beyond the veil. And, as soon as the sensation began to fizzle, I swiftly selected one of his thicker coats, wanting to amplify the focus of *him*, and donned it, feeling the fleecy embrace, and, shaking, I smiled. The sensation stopped fizzling. In a frenzy, I grabbed a hat of his, and placed it atop me. Then a pair of gloves. And, I felt comfort. Diluted to near imperceptibility, yes, but the shadow of an echo *was* there. I felt a long-abandoned vestige of happiness tingle back into life.

I felt him.

And in this bout of strength, I found it in myself for the first time alone to look upon his urn. Such a marvellous piece of work, crafted by some fantastic artist, no doubt – ornate, varnished walnut with intricate patterns painstakingly carved into it, and adorned with looping flowers of filigreed gold. Yet, it was strange that of all that beauty, it compared nothing to the mound of grey ash within that still, in spite of everything, commanded all my love.

I knelt before it, genuflecting with a reverence I'd offer no monarch or leader, and as I did so, I whispered words of love, and agony - none of which I was in control of, nor can remember – perhaps I didn't utter a single word, but allowed them to whizz about my head in a silent maelstrom. But, I did lean over, and planted the driest, most skittish kiss, as if it were my first all over again, on the tip of the golden gilded rose.

And, in that moment, I felt truly like I was kissing my husband. The air, in a sudden spark, felt different, it felt transformed and electric. But, there was one huge difference in the kiss, that I didn't even realise I was about to rectify. Gingerly, with my left hand, snug in his glove, I reached around to my right ear, and just behind the lobe, offered the gentle rub that, though a minor action, had the most immense, significant and profound surge of feeling loaded within it. I never realised just how much I missed such a simple thing, a tickle of the flesh.

Well, the higher the climb, the further the fall.

I woke up an indiscernible amount of time later, my eyes red raw from more crying, my lips slimy with gross sorrowful slobber, and feeling absolutely exhausted – a marathon daren't compete. A scene that even the most dramatic series would label 'too much', for certain. But, still in his belongings, I didn't feel alone.

I didn't go on that walk.

Now, let me offer a caveat before I scrawl on. I know how the above sounds. But, being a woman of science, I had long ago abandoned the need for supernatural musings, because I found plenty on this dreary little planet to keep me fascinated. Why should I teeter on the veil of the ethereal, when I could find months of information and data to be giddy about in a spec of algae? The two of us could talk about mould or fungi, with as much fervour and wonder, as other people would talk about their favourite TV series or movies.

But, there was something about that moment that really struck a chord in me. How could the simple act of wearing clothes, a smell, an action, induce such a reaction? Of course, I understand it is possible, and I could perhaps even explain why it happened, without the need of a psychiatrist. But, that's not what I'm asking. I mean, stepping beyond the logic of emotion and memories – I mean *how* could such a series of events induce such a state? Just as simple as a chemical reaction. It wasn't grieving emotion manifest, it was a powerful energy despite a frail disposition.

And, the entire experience suddenly flipped my thoughts on what was, what is, and what could be...

Perhaps? *Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps?* Perhaps an afterlife wasn't so farfetched? Perhaps in this world, there was something beyond what we understood about spirituality and the 'soul' after the body ceases to be. And, perhaps, in that closet, my husband, in some form or other, was present. When water evaporates, is it not still present – just in a different state? Energy transference is, well, a core reaction; the process is ubiquitous. So, why not? Why should I not question such a theory?

There was a furious duality in my mind at this. Because, how ridiculous – I knew there was no such thing. It was impossible to even conceive of such madness. The two of us had enjoyed horror stories and movies, of course, but purely as fiction. We enjoyed the stories and tales of religion, objectively - as much as we threw ourselves into ancient mythology. We were entertained by the afterlife as a concept, but never once believed there was any substance to it.

On our walks, we'd often see people waddling into the community centre on 'psychic night' and just couldn't grasp how anyone could *believe* that there was an actual possibility that there was something after *this*. And, even if there was, why their dearly departed would be hanging about in the local community centre in the hopes of some half-mad 'medium' channelling their vague messages. It made zero sense to us. Unfathomable. But, in that moment, I understood.

To these people, it wasn't that they believed they could contact their deceased loves, it was a necessity – it was a desperate hope that, even if they can't reach *their* loved ones, others could, others might. That somewhere, beyond the curse of mortality, in the mysteries kept secret from the physical world of science and all that is seen and known, their husbands and wives, their mothers and fathers, their brothers and sisters, their children or best friends, they existed in some form. That, as they watched the funeral shroud eviscerate the last physical evidence of a sweet, pure face that contained in the etching of a dimple, infinite warmth and welcome... that it wasn't the last. It wasn't all for naught.

It can't be all for naught.

And perhaps many of them had the same thinking as we did, that it was impossible – but they were clinging on, with such a hypocritical duplicitousness, hoping they were wrong. Just because they didn't believe in an afterlife, doesn't mean it didn't exist. Who were they to decide that? Who was I to say that?

As a scientist, I'd spent my life up to that moment, trying to discover just that – the unknown, the undiscovered. I'd read papers, and studied reams of papers scribbled by other minds that

had happened upon a revelation that turned the understanding of our world upside down. The atom itself is a prime example, never mind the ability to split it.

Science is about expanding the mind, about realising that the world is an amalgamation of myriad mysteries, seen and unseen, and all it takes is one individual, fuelled with a fervour and- then I'd come to my senses... *You're talking about an afterlife!* It was absurd. Ridiculous. I couldn't be a scientist, and still believe that somewhere, my late husband existed, separate from the world, yet anchored to it. Those terrible puns adrift somewhere in the ether, ready to whisk on the wind, bringing joy to some stranger on a moor. No, there can't be. At least, in that form- No, any form- Unless- No.

I became obsessed with this inner debate, until the two sides of my reasoning were near schizophrenic in their vehemence that *they* were right. One specific week, I could feel myself getting so agitated with the argument homed entirely within, that I was experiencing hot flushes, and physical irritation that no deadline or stress had ever had me succumb to before. I broke out in a rash one day- which is something that only happened when my stress consumed me. My final papers and exams were always married with red raw itching.

I decided I needed to remedy this; an antidote, to clear my head from it. And that was, that walk I still hadn't taken. Today it felt right, it felt obvious, it felt as if everything, with fear of hyperbole, that had ever happened in the world made no sense except for this walk.

And so, I got ready. His stuff and my stuff, and I didn't weep. Because - not to delve into the realms of fatalism when you no doubt think me half mad - it was meant to happen.

Stepping out that door felt magnificent. Gosh, I certainly was weak considering. The welcoming gust, eager from my absence, almost toppled me back inside the house, but I felt it blush my cheek with an icy kiss – and, I thanked this autumn wind, because it was the first kiss I'd received in a long time. It tugged at his coat, eager to yank me forth like an excited toddler. I, its willing tourist. I set on, beneath the early dusk in which those infinitely distant stars began peeking from the wispy, purple clouds. I felt reborn. Released from a prison of torment and solitude. I was free to explore a world that had forgotten me, or, rather, that I had forgotten.

I pulled his coat tighter around me, hugging to myself, and feeling the comfort of familiarity with each footstep. I nuzzled my nose between the thick fabric of his scarf, and inhaled to the depths my lungs permitted, hoping at least the faintest tendril of his scent may venture within. True, it was torture not having the ability to speak to him, but, as of late, the only things that had my attention were my own notions anyways – so even if he had been there, he'd be lucky to have a word in edgewise.

I'd get like this, every now and then, when we were met with a particular problem. I would obsess over it, furious that an obstacle had presented itself which wasn't instantly scaled or cleared by my mental capacity. And sometimes, I'd find I had stayed three hours later in work, because I was fervently in my own mind, and withdrawn from the world. Sometimes, I'd be sitting at home, and not realise I was hungry until he'd place a plate before me, and then the smell of the food would remind me that sustenance was more important- just as important, as the problem at hand. It wasn't a bad state of mind, it just meant that I was focused on trying to navigate the impossible. I had an impressive track record thus far.

And, like those days, the fierce focus quickly took the beauty of my first walk away from me, because after the gust of wind and the gem-speckled dusk, I missed the rest of the world, as I continued with this question of an afterlife. So much so that, without thought or effort, I was only broken from my disputed reverie by a large, crude sign that stood before a small building, inside of which I could see pale, almost clinical lights – and a few heads tottering about.

The sign read:

TONIGHT – PSYCHIC NIGHT 7PM – 9PM. £5 ADMISSION.

Well. This wasn't the end of the usual walk, but it seemed right and obvious that it was the end of my walk.

And so, as if slipping into a back alley ready to participate in the more insidious practices of life, I slowly advanced up the path. I was smiling in shared shame, and all thoughts quickly began to mock myself, in spite of him, at just how silly I was being by even entertaining these people.

I kept shooting nervous glances around me, as if at any moment, the townspeople would explode from the well-kept bushes with torches and pitchforks, ready to hunt the scientific infidel down.

I was greeted by a rather bored looking teen, clearly here out of need, guilt, or favour than fun. I no longer nuzzled into the scarf, but had it near skirting beneath my heavily bagged eyes, so as to hide my identity. And when he asked if I'd already had my name down, I told him I didn't. He asked for it, and I gave a fake one, as if this was the height of unlawful activity. I paid the five pounds, and sidled into the small hall in which the weekly event took place.

The seats were set into two sections, with an aisle separating them. I darted to the furthest corner seat on the back row, hoping that nobody would notice me. Which was ludicrous, because we only knew people by sight and neighbourly nod, nothing more. Even if our- my next door neighbour were to walk by, they knew very little of character, and so had no metric to judge how bizarre my presence here was.

I checked the time to see it was ten-to-seven. A lot of the seats were already taken, and people were talking amongst one another, clearly as regulars to this event, to a point where, upon seeing someone new enter and make their way down the aisle, the others would stand up, knowing they were about to sit in a certain place.

And then, others arrived, looking haggard and defeated, looking lost and desperate... looking like me up until recently. They were the ones who'd just lost, I could tell. I was only slightly ahead in this bleak wasteland. And they were the ones who, whether they believed or not, were desperate to reclaim a relationship that the brutality of life and time had stolen from them.

I pitied them instantly, and realised, quickly, it wasn't my place to pity... I was their kin. The starved pitying the hungry, it's a morbid empathy. Even worse, I looked down on the entire concept of mediums and psychics, and here I sat still; an atheist in the Vatican. I was an embarrassment. I felt a sudden discomfort steal over me, and a creeping nausea. I needed to leave, to just finish my walk and get home. But, as much as I wished to eject myself from the room, I sat rooted and rigid.

I focused on my breathing, and before long, everyone was seated. I was disturbed thrice so others could shuffle into the back row. I caught eyes with the first one, who, upon seeing me alone and hidden beneath my garb, offered a pitiable smile which almost made me laugh at my position. I kept my eyes down for the others. Then, the lights dimmed, the door behind us closed with a gentle click, and as if a star of the West End, a lady dressed in bohemian robes, hair as lively as an unkempt bushel, each step clacking with the beads and braids which decorated her entire form, sporting innumerable rings on each finger, and carrying incense sticks, greeted everyone.

In a deep, rasping, resonant voice, she made a few comments, and well-meaning (considering the audience) jokes that seemed to break the ice. And, in spite of myself, I couldn't help but feeling a little lighter at the chance to laugh. Even when she mentioned that many of us have managed to save admission cost for a plus one. It was a morbid joke, but as many of the people here seemed familiar with the proceedings, perhaps she knew the crowd was already won. And

I laughed. I knew he would were he in this position, which he never would be, because he was sane and I, clearly, no longer could claim the same.

The two hours passed quickly, and it was very much what I expected. I never for a moment considered this lady, dressed for the part, could commune with anyone's deceased loved one(s), let alone my own. It was clear she was a quack, and it seemed as if the people who were clearly grieving and hopeful to be chosen were either disappointed, or annoyed at having come at all. But, there was one unshakable reality that took over me. As she was juggling through letters of the alphabet, and pulling names out of thin air to make vague statements of "loves you so much" or "says she hopes your sleeping pattern has improved" – universal things that could, in essence, relate to anyone or their dog... I felt something familiar.

Not my husband, of course.

But, I closed off all focus on her and just tuned into this familiarity, trying to attune to it. And it wasn't long before I realised what it was.

That same sense I felt in the closet that day, when I tried his clothes on for the first time. That electric sense. That feeling that something *was* present, that wasn't quite a normal atmosphere. The energy of something *other*.

Of course, it could have just been wishful thinking, or me applying a filter to my thoughts – but here, it seemed to be magnified. And this had me thinking, for the first time since he passed, that perhaps it was time for an experiment.

I remained after the readings had finished, just wanting to really imbibe the atmosphere. Quietly shifting to different parts of the room to see if, somehow, the sensation would ebb or flow depending on where I was. I could hear a few people complimenting the performer, or congratulating other audience members on having their loved ones connected, but I did as much as I could to tune it all out.

After about ten minutes of me pretending to read posters on the walls, or feigning appreciation of some poorly drawn pictures (Anthony, 8 and Marie, 6), or vacantly leafing through the pithy community magazines and leaflets, whilst in sooth, taking no information in, I was approached by the young man who sat at the door, who was offering monotonous goodbyes to the others as they left.

He tried desperately to strike up a conversation, asking if I had been one of the lucky few who had a loved one contacted, and if I was local, if I was hoping to reach anyone in particular so on, so forth. This was enough to break my concentration from this bizarre phenomenon I was attempting ruminate on, and ultimately, I lost any sense of it. I gave polite, but curt answers, until he realised I was a lost cause and began shuffling on to question the other newcomers – almost word for word the same course of questioning, almost script-like.

After I realised he was potentially a part of the act, trying to sleuth the backstories of audience members, their history, their losses and hopes, and then pass it onto the performer, I quickly felt it prudent that I up and leave before I strike up an argument, letting my anger at their audacity conflate with the frustration of losing the sensation that had enraptured my wonder.

So, pun intended, I gave up the ghost and shuffled out of the building. Once again, I felt that autumnal breeze, this time soothe the flustered anger and arid frustration. But I felt something else, too. Though I'd lost the feeling of that 'electric air' inside that room, out here, there was a distinct difference. Whilst in there, I felt like it was still possible to find it – like a weakened scent with an unknown source, a vestige, out here, I knew it was impossible to feel it.

Knowing that walking back in would paint me to be crazier than I already deemed myself, I decided that next week, regardless of dignity, I would do the same thing.

And so, with a week of further debating the possibility of the impossible, I found myself eagerly anticipating the next visit. Such a strange feeling, to have reaffirmed that mediums and psychics are baseless, yet still cling onto this weak intuition. I spent the week obsessing over other spiritual nights, hoping to find someone with the same reasoning as mine, or any word of atmosphere, energy, ley lines, near anything that would pick up the thread started pulling at.

Then, the day came, and I sat ready to go before noon hit. That specific day, I remember it felt as if seconds had fell through treacle, and each minute was a year within itself. But, lo and behold, whether we wish it to or not, time does what time does. And, once again, I was sitting on the back row, avoiding eye contact, averting my eyes from any possible conversation. I entered, feigning a conversation on my phone so the bored looking boy couldn't ask anything else, and just gave him the admission fee. And, I sat. And waited.

Initially, I felt nothing at all. It was as vacant, as distant a hope as it was outside. But, as the hall began to fill, I put all my effort into focusing, like putting out feelers for something intangible, but, soon, I could sense it once more. Growing and growing. The audience sat, the performer toddled on stage, and with minor changes to the opening, began the 'readings'. Again, I ignored her, ignored the people replying – filtered them out as white noise, present but irrelevant. And focused wholly on this air. And, shivers ran up and down me throughout the two hours. Goosebumps stormed across my flesh in raging armies. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. It was during the show the anomaly was at its height, and even that was barely noticeable. But there. Definitely there. Without a doubt, there was something to study here.

There was no *meaning*, no *reason* or *rhyme* to what I was feeling. I didn't believe I was acting as a conduit for the beyond, no more than I believed the woman whose livelihood was based on such a lie was capable of doing. I didn't for one second think that I could mentally reach out, and like a hopeful angler, capture some wriggling sentience in my net. But, there was an unmistakeable difference to this room.

And once again, as the show finished and people began shuffling out – the sensation waned. I built up the courage to move closer to the performance spot, as if the incense and candles may have some bearing on the potency of this feeling, but they didn't. It grew weaker, and weaker until I was certain that anything I could sense was purely imagined. And this time, I had a hypothesis as to what caused the strength, and in keeping, the weakness. So, I began the experiment.

That month, I had visited psychic nights all around my area. And outside of my area. I decided to attend the largest and most prominent psychic night in the heart of the city, in which an eccentric individual who had garnered a great following, and achieved some small success on television had charged an extortionate amount to an impossible number of hopefuls.

Though most of these were much of the same, in essence, as the local psychic night, it was very clear that the larger the audience – the more in attendance – the greater I could feel this electric air. And, to prove I wasn't getting myself wrapped up in the state – a la mass hysteria, or group think - as was so probable, in the same way familiar coffee shops induce a comfort and warmth, or dentists induce a sense of unease, or a clean, organised lab offers a clarity... I stayed sat in my seat. And waited. And waited.

Because, for each one, I made sure I was at the front of the queue. And as quickly as possible, I sat in my seat, and tried to attune. And initially felt nothing, but that's what I wanted. That's what I expected. Then more people would arrive, and take their seats, and though I'd ignore the individual, I'd crave for the mass. Because the more that arrived, as I'd expected – as I'd noted in my hypotheses - it seemed the more I could feel the spark. And during the larger night with the low-ranking celebrity, in which the theatre was filled, it felt almost as if I was sat

amongst a thunder cloud, with great, vibrating and blinding fulminations (compared to the weak signatures I usually felt).

I deduced, that, when there were more people present, the feeling was stronger. When there were fewer people, it was weaker. And, of course, as it sprung upon me for the first time when I was alone, it all seemed to work on a ratio.

It seemed as if, whether sentient or not, this strange force *knew* that these nights were a connection, *knew* that the people here wanted to be in touch with those departed, or was at the very least compelled and pulled to such events, like wildlife to a watering hole. The larger collection of the living, amassed a larger collection of whatever *it* was! Or perhaps, if it wasn't sentient – there could have been a link that persisted beyond death.

That, there was some tether that held taut connection of the living and the lost, and because there were so many of us in one place, all seated about and waiting, perhaps they, on their side, were corralled into much the same situation. Think of each widow holding a balloon; alone, it was one single entity that offered very little reason for notice. But, a theatre full, the balloons gathered and bumped and rubbed and bounced like a giant cloud. The difference was, I was trying to look at the cloud rather than hold tight onto my string.

I knew I had abandoned all rationality by this point. Oh, I was painfully aware. Or, if not, I had at least contorted logic and sense to this bizarre twist of concept. Executing such magnificent mental gymnastics that I was, for the first time in my life, allowing the cold hard facts to take a little relaxation, and trying to retroactively apply them to what I could feel. I'd all but lost touch with my friends, my family, my colleagues and myself. Because, I was once again consumed by a problem I needed to solve. And, in a fit of madness, I believed I had the answer. I believed I knew what to do. I had to find a way to reach out, to speak to this electric air in a way that it, or they could respond.

And, I was so resolute in my conviction that, by all means, I had half convinced myself that after all this time, I alone was about to prove that there is some form of life after death. So, the next local psychic night, I made my way in, paid the admission fee but before taking a seat, I had 'slipped to the bathroom', and waiting for a moment when I thought I could go unnoticed, stole out of the toilets and unlatched the back door to the community centre which led to behind the stage.

Then, under the pretence of a phone call, I left through the front door and made my way halfway down the street. Impatiently, and full to the brim with anxious excitement, I waited until ten minutes past seven, which is when I entered the grounds, upright and confident, adopting the hiding in plain sight notion, in case anyone noticed me.

Then, as if I had every right, thank you very much, veered around the corner of the building, snuck up to the backdoor, and as silent as a shadow, entered.

I could hear the medium beginning to pick people out of the audience, and hushed gasps of surprise as someone had been singled out. The audience pausing in anticipation. And... the spark. The electric air. It was here. Perhaps I was practiced in attuning to it, or perhaps it was aware of what I was going to do, so rushed to greet me. But, regardless, it was present and it was almost tangible compared to the first night.

I snuck over to a comfortable corner, and knelt, timorous and shaking as if a prisoner attempting escape. From my handbag, I carefully conjured an item that I was immensely ashamed of purchasing, but also incredibly excited about. After all, how is one supposed to partake in experiments without the appropriate equipment?

A Ouija Board.

I unfolded it before me, and with a small torch I had affixed a cloth over to dim the glow, I allowed the cool light to disclose the bold and calligraphic letters that, I genuinely believed, were about to allow me to converse with it, with them, with *him*.

And, my gosh, how I wanted to speak to him.

Oh, I'd give the rest of my time on this earth even to have received a nod, a whisper, an iota of acknowledgement that he was there. To know he was amongst me. To know that this electric air had something to do with him. Even to discover the weakest current was orchestrated by his thought would be enough to invigorate my future. To know that, when I felt him with me in that closet that day, when the embrace around my neck felt familiar and wonderful – the first glimmer of happiness I'd managed to breathe in through months of drowning despair – it was true. It was real. I wasn't alone.

And so, I placed the planchette, as delicately as a new-born on the board. And, bending low, I whispered in a shaking tone, uttering, "Are you there?"

And waited.

And then...

Nothing.

"Are you there?" I repeated, with a little more force behind the whisper.

Nothing.

I could feel the tears coming back to my eyes. I could feel the air heavy with this electric sense, but also with futility. And, soon, my heartbeat began increasing rapidly. This was my chance. This was the time to disprove the side of my brain that told me I was being ridiculous.

"Are you there?!" I uttered once more, allowing some hint of tone to colour the question. Stubborn nothing. "Are you- is anyone- are you there?" I pushed. "Please, be there. I need this. I need you." It remained mercilessly rigid. Cold, hard, unavailing, brutal, desolate, *nothing*. "For God's sake, someone be there- something- answer me!"

I stared at the planchette, my fingers atremble and blurred through my desperate tears. "Why isn't anyone there? Why aren't you responding to me? Why did you leave me? How dare you! How dare you abandon me- leave me- to insanity! You're cruel! You left me and-"

I felt a sudden force grip me, and I was hauled upward so suddenly that I was certain a demon had clambered from the cursed thing and was about to rip the life from my furious heart – and I welcomed such a vile end.

But, as it unravelled, I had very diligently cause a bit of a stir.

I hadn't realised, but, during my anger, I had begun shouting- I quite disrupted the show, and upstaged the psychic. I was guided through a screaming rage into some office, in which, after a coffee and three seemingly stable persons had allowed me to weep inconsolably and uncontrollably, my rage subsided and, throwing caution to the wind, I told them, "It was clear since my first visit that the psychic is nonsense, but I *needed* to speak to my husband."

They pressed no charges for the breaking and entry, especially when it unfolded I had actually paid admission. They also never banned me from attending the nights. But, that was a useless gesture as, obviously, I was never going to show my face again. Oh, the embarrassment.

After that, I fell into another immense depression. It felt as if I had been clambering up to the summit of Everest, freezing, exhausted and without safety equipment. Only to reach it, and see that I'd barely ascended at all.

The news got around the town, about the brilliant-scientist-turned-mad-widow-turned-amateur-occultist, and I'm not quite certain how it happened – nor shall I delve - but my team leader got wind of what had happened, and came to visit me.

She looked magnificent, poised and to herself. There was a time I looked similar. She asked why I had stopped responding calls, and ignored knocking at the doors. Even in the depths of my shame, seeing her was incredible, and a breath of fresh air. We spoke at length about what I'd been up to in my absence from work, and omitting the electric air, and the obsession with the afterlife, I just told her I was simply curious to see what others who were grieving saw in it, and then, in a fit of desperation and loneliness, I had attempted something I knew wouldn't work – just because I felt an immense loneliness, something I've never handled before.

As it transpired, she really wanted me to come back to work. She said it would still be fully paid, as they had continued to pay since his passing, but on a voluntary basis. That I'd come in, purely in a supervising capacity, to oversee what the new temp (my temporary replacement), the temp that stood in through my husband's sickness (now a mainstay) were doing, as well as assist my old colleague to whatever level I could manage.

With a look around the lounge, in which I could see her eyes dart from dusty shelf, to askew painting, to stained mug, all the time not betraying even the most infinitesimal hint of judgement. "We *want* you there. We are managing, we are fine, this isn't to say you're needed and that your absence is detrimental," she approached, and sat next to me with a reassuring, warm hand placed on my frail, near skeletal version. "But your brilliant mind augments operations beyond measure! This isn't a guilt trip, this isn't an imploration, this is simply an offer. If you can try it, I think it would give yourself a goal, some order- and, well, we would benefit immensely from it. If you attempt, and it doesn't work- then we revert, and try again when you feel a stronger resolve."

She went on, extremely conscientious to be very clear that this was an offer to have me back in a workplace and nothing more. She thought it would be healthy for me to be back with a routine, and if at any point I felt overwhelmed, I didn't need to explain myself, but just eject and go home.

And so, shaking off the soaking madness I'd allowed myself to drop into, I began going back to work. Once a week for the two month, for a few hours. Then a few more hours. Then a full working day. Then twice a week. Then three times a week. And in a few months, I was there nearly every day. This journey within itself could constitute an entirely different story, but, it's not the one I'm wanting to tell.

The pain of the loss was still overbearing, but getting out of the house on a regular basis was such a beautiful force. Of course, each night was lonely and trying, and I'd still sob in sudden bouts of sadness. But, I *was* coping better with everything, and, it seemed I had almost completely shed the madness that had overtook me regarding the afterlife, and this electric air. That is, until, his birthday came along. It wasn't too distant from the anniversary of his death. I collected a number of his things, I cooked his favourite food, I bought his favourite whiskey, and in essence, I tried to enjoy the day for him. Allow his memory to have a day in which he'd feel like a king vicariously through his living partner.

And, when I was half drunk with whiskey, wearing his dressing gown and slippers, wearing his underwear and vest, even. I, once more, brought myself face to face with his urn. Something I hadn't done since that time I collapsed, but felt comfort. And, I had a lengthy conversation with the artfully wrought roses on the urn, as golden as his hair.

I mocked myself for my madness in believing that he would speak back to me, and recited the entire plan and series of events as they unfolded, which was quite therapeutic to hear it out

loud, and from my own lips with polite derision. But, as I was speaking to him, I once more felt, with incredible potency, that air. There was almost a humidity within the closet, but heavy with that- that presence, that spark of electricity that suffused the air with something else. And, in that moment, I had a profound realisation about the entire phenomenon I'd experienced. Something that I couldn't quite place together before, with grief and despair clouding all that is logical. But, with the constant of work to ground me, it just unravelled itself.

The one thing that kept me from truly believing all of this, the anchor of logic and reality which brutally gripped and strangled any suspension of disbelief suddenly twisted. Because, as a woman of science, as I so often claim, I shouldn't be seeking for answers outside the realms of *this*. Because the answers, the truth, are always within *this*. Sometimes hidden away under an unturned discovery, or unexplored path of thought. And here, half drunk, speaking to a golden rose, and feeling the static air – it dawned on me, that the quintessence of everything, is particles. It was my job.

Everything. *Everything*, is matter. From this keyboard, to my coffee, to your dog or cat or gosh darn, I don't know, bed- to the air itself. Everything in this known universe is comprised of atoms and particles. And we, us, everything – we are made from particles that have existed since the start of *all*. And, when something ceases to be in its physical form, it simply is a transference of matter. They exist. They continue. My dear love, he existed still – just in a different state. And, in a fit of madness, or a fit of absolute clarity, I realised... all I had to do, was collect the energy that made him, well, *him*. That was all. It was rudimentary science. A simple theory.

Everything I've set out to achieve thus far, I did. In fact, I excelled. With him as my partner in life and career, we soared to heights that alone, we could not dream of. And if there is *any* sentience in afterlife, I knew he'd be working with me still. And so, I set out on the most ambitious project of my life – and once again, I felt purpose.

After that night, I began work.

Correction: after the cruel hangover following that night, I began work.

I'm afraid I'll have to turn forward the hours on the clock at such a rapid, uncountable pace, so that days pass by like seconds, because I would end up spending the next few *decades* tirelessly using what was at my disposal in the lab to further this project. The team leader didn't worry, because she said that my entire attitude and demeanour catapulted through such a blinding transformation, that she didn't care what I was doing outside of work hours, as long as I was happy.

I was arriving at work early, my productivity had erupted past what I'd ever managed before – and before, I was already pretty swell. I didn't have to worry about family life, nor kids, nor finances. I was purely dedicated to my job in the one hand, and my project in the other. I kept those plates spinning with never a hint of precariousness. I would work tirelessly to spear ahead of what was needed, so I could resume what I wanted.

And, without delving too deep into the specifics of my research, my experiments, my findings and outcomes (though, I have the entire project well-documented, annotated, and recorded for any wishing to read, study, watch, or perhaps even improve upon) my major experiments were collecting miniature forms of life, and studying what happened to them after death. I wanted to know just what became of their matter after decomposition, studying what happened when I'd cremate them. Did the transference still retain some, even an iota, of what it once was?

I also began studying how others of their species responded to the accumulation of energy, of particles, that once consisted of their kin. My thinking was the fact that we, as logical, reasonable, and intelligent beings could instantly elevate something as trivial as a plectrum, or

a pair of glasses - or a bottle of aftershave - amongst our most treasured and expensive jewellery because at one point someone we loved used it. Yes, there was a level of attachment – but was there something that caused this, fused this, *sparked* this? Was there something that connected us to these trinkets and articles on a molecular level? Does this keyboard on which I tap my excited recollections on, in some sense or other, hold a connection with me. Is there a reason why public toilets never feel as comfortable as our own? Why sleeping in your own bed is second to no other? Why discarding old, redundant items feels like giving a piece of your soul away? Why children snuggle into teddies and sleep soundly. Why heirlooms are treasured? Is there something in all of this outside of emotional connection?

I'd spent near four years on trying to capture remnants of DNA on what a mouse had touched, finding that even a year after its passing, a negligible trace of matter still remained on the bowl I fed it from. And this led to one of my largest breakthroughs, which I believe took the helm of my research.

Simply, I allowed one of my test subjects to feast on some food – but took it away before the foodstuffs was devoured. And, I placed the half-eaten item away. A while later, when revisiting the item, I found my hypothesis to come to fruition. The mould that had grown on the item had done so with the saliva of the rodent present, and thus, within the growth, actual matter from the animal had pullulated. Grown. I had cultivated DNA, allowed it to grow separate of its author.

The concluding results were incredible. Revolutionary. Completely fuelled by insanity, no doubt. I was, in essence, allowing the cells of the deceased to continue growth – even years after the subjects had died. And going forward, I could use those growths to create vegetation that had remnants - oh so minor and barely present, but present nonetheless – of the original within them.

The realms of science I ventured in for this side-project were so extensive, so varied, so uncharted because, they had very little application to any good in the world. But to me, they gave purpose, they gave some through line to the madness I suffered in my grieving when it was fresh. A cautious vindication.

Sometimes, I'd find myself in a frenzy, when I was close to concluding a series of experiments, especially when they seemed to be proffering data I desired. And, on one such occasion, the team leader hobbled up to me – she was old, now. Her aquiline and straight-backed demeanour hunched by time, but still no less striking in manner and mind. She placed a gentle, wrinkled hand on my dextrous, but wrinkling version, and with a tired, sympathetic look, leant in and said, "You really should be spending more time outside of these walls. Before you're old, and well, look like me." I stared at her, aghast and a little panicked.

She knew I had been running my own experiments all these years, and not only did she allow me to continue without question, but also offered me the freedom to order in all manner of equipment that I needed to progress it. I couldn't thank her enough for everything she'd allowed, but staring at her, with those usually sagacious eyes filled with plea, she spoke again, "I know the anniversary is coming up soon, and you usually take the day off. Withdraw. Shut off. But, there are many people who miss him, you know," she stated. Then, with a reassuring squeeze, "Why don't you invite us all over? Share this day with us. Do *something* with your friends and family. It'll help you more than you know."

I was about to refuse, giving the well-rehearsed excuses, but... of course! She was brilliant. Even incidentally, she was magnificent. And I accepted her advice. She was absolutely right.

I had spent decades focused on career, and these projects. I'd put my life on hold chasing some wild theory that no-one but myself was pursuing. I had replaced one madness with another,

and having everyone over for this day would be a wonderful thing. For me. For them. For my sanity. For my... theory.

So, as the day drew near and I had invited his family (two of which had passed, and I begged for some trivial belongings to place by his urn which was now in its own cabinet within my lounge), my family, friends from university, our team leader, our colleague, our old school friends and tutors and teachers, and basically, anyone who ever had any connection with him in any capacity.

I invited them all.

And, to my surprise and utmost jubilation, near all of them arrived.

Of course, it was near impossible to fit them all in the house. Especially since I'd taken, over the past few years, to decorating my home with an innumerable amount of plants (each grown in my own special way) – all different kinds, of course, that though beautiful, held not a candle to the golden gilded rose of which I'd learned to adore.

And, as I played his favourite CDs, the ones he bought and played and sang to awfully and forced me to dance to (rejecting the offer of more modern alternatives), and as we drank his favourite drink (my whiskey coming directly from his mug), as they all shared stories, and I felt merry amongst so much of his company, wearing his clothes, his pendant, his cologne, I tottered over to the cabinet. I smiled his favourite smile, holding tight the leaves of the winding, silky kept vine – the very first I'd grown in accordance with its proclivity for rapid growth - and had woven it neatly around his urn, and allowed a stem of it to slip beneath the urn, and rest peacefully, within the very ash that was the purest concentration of *him*.

I glanced at all his belongings within the cabinet, rings and bracelets, and razors and lighters. All of them had been touched and used by him. And, whether others watched or not, I didn't care. Because everything felt so right. I'd never felt more like he was present since his last day, when I felt his hands lose the grip of mine, when the world paused.

Savouring the comfort of this eternally missed, and constantly pined-for familiarity, I leant in to kiss the tip of the shimmering petal.

And I felt – a twitch, a hint, an echo – which although almost imperceptible shook my world like only one thing had before, the slightest, gentlest rub, just below my right earlobe.

And I wept, for I was no longer alone.

