



# REMEMBER THIS?

MEMORIES FADE? IMAGES BLUR? NOT LIKELY.

— **ADRIAN DAWSON** —

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I'm a single guy at the moment. Two cartons of green yoghurt and a dead lettuce in my fridge. You know the kind of thing.

You don't even want to look in my freezer. Really you don't.

I got the idea for the imaginatively titled 'Phase One' when I split with Jenny. Or rather, if I'm gonna quote the truth for once, when Jenny split with me. Which was, and I know this for a fact, five years, fifteen days, thirteen hours and three minutes ago on a desperately cold Friday evening, just over a week before the Easter Break. Like everyone else that day, especially those who were dressed more for the bars and clubs than for the rotten weather they'd endure in-between, I felt pretty damn cold when I entered the pub.

I'll tell you something for nothing, I felt a hell of a lot colder on my way out.

As a meeting place before heading into town, The Sportsman offered us just the right balance between empty and heaving, eerily silent and yet deafening, cool and crap. It was one of those pubs that was perpetually 'on the way somewhere else', in every sense, and it therefore did its best to cater for both the locals (big screen TV sports) and those who might happen across it when passing by on the ring road (family menu). Everything was an unhealthy attempt to merge faux-antique with even more faux clean-and-bright and I believe that - until seven in the evening - they even allowed families with kids into the main bar. The main bar, for God's sake. Given my hatred for anklebiters and every grating sound they are capable of squealing, that only served to make me thank God that Jenny and I never chose to meet before seven-thirty.

It was pretty central for us both. The mock-Tudor frontage, surrounded by ample parking and numerous wooden assault courses for the under-tens, was on the same road as my flat. Five straight miles, an easy and cheap taxi distance, and only three from her parent's house. It was the kind of place where we weren't exactly regulars but our faces were 'known', certainly to the Friday and Saturday night staff. On a good night one or two of our mutuals would be meeting up there too. All of which made it that bit easier for Jenny if I happened to be running late - which I did my best to avoid - and she arrived first and had to wait alone. At least she didn't have to feel alone, or if she did she could at least feel safe. Safer than she might in the sardine tin that was 'The Portman' anyhow. Personally it doesn't bother me one iota being alone in pubs, but then I'm a bloke and I guess that, even in today's world, it's a little different from my side of the fence.

It was pretty much in the first instant that I turned, just to check that the rain was still holding off outside, my free left arm running the length of the sofa back and my fingers drumming the eight month old 'antique oak', that I knew something was wrong. Even in lighting the wrong side of dusk the headlamps from her VW were instantly recognisable, especially with one permanently fixed at half strength from a faulty bulb she was always having way too much fun to replace.

We weren't going out tonight.

If we were she'd have left the car at home. I mean, this was Friday Night for Christ's sake, and nobody drives on a Friday night. When the door opened to my right at seven-thirty-three and she stepped into view; long blonde hair dry but blown all-ways by the wind, I caught the look in those beautiful eyes and saw that something had suddenly gone AWOL; the fun. I could see now that Jenny and I weren't going out at all. Not any more.

Three quarters of a very awkward hour later I was on my own again.

This time I did mind. I minded a lot.

To be honest it wasn't really the breaking up. I mean, I was twenty-two at this point and she was my fourth 'longer-than-a-week' girlfriend so it was nothing I hadn't been through with varying degrees of pain before. What did bother me, as I sat there draining my Guinness and trying not to look as dumped as I felt, was that I would never see her again. She was, after all, going to take that job in London next month, long before her course finished and had decided that, as we 'weren't working' (for an impressive number of reasons that she didn't have the decency to spare me) it would be best if she ended it between us now.

There would be no chance of any reconciliation - ever - she said, so there would be no point in me trying. She did her best to make sure that whatever else I might choose to forget from that final meeting, those two facts stayed limpeted fast to my mind. J, just so that it chastise my hand each time it made even the slightest move toward the phone.

There was somebody else. She hadn't had the nerve to admit it to my face, but there was. I was sure of it.

Shit happens.

So why, given that I was capable of such a criminally philosophical statement, did I feel so crap? And why did I spend almost three hours inviting a long procession of Guinneses to share the table with me so that I could drink myself further into an abyss? The drinking was broken up, sure, but only by long bouts of interminable staring in which I probably looked more vacant than a toilet in the ten minutes after my dad has used it. Despite the single-minded attack her words had made on my sense of pride Jenny had, in truth, been right. We weren't working. We hadn't been working for months. So what did I feel was missing? What did I feel I had lost?

What the hell chance of finding it again did I stand if I didn't even know what it was?

One glance at the slender brunette now chatting to her boyfriend at the bar told me exactly what it was that I had lost; memories. And not just the ones that had gone, either, but also those which I now knew I had no chance of ever creating. Everything that had happened in the last eighteen months of my life had just walked out of the door and whilst I trusted myself to remember it all I did not, in truth, trust myself to remember any of it accurately. Not even the things that had happened that night.

The girl at the bar was Kate - or Katie - or something that may or may not have begun with a 'K'. Either way she was one of about eight girls who'd been in my final year at art college, and yes I'd fancied her like crazy. She had breasts and that was pretty much as far as my list of prerequisites extended at that point. I'd never done anything about it, of course, short of the odd 'Hi' in which I did my best to come across as both 'cool' and 'casual'. The response, as I recall, was usually 'lukewarm' and 'uptight'. Nevertheless, her face had made a curtain call in my mind on the odd occasions when I was so bored or lonely that I'd reversed my car over some of the chances I'd missed in life.

But... had her face entered my mind? I mean really?

Sure, 'a' face had entered my mind, but it was one which in reality had little or nothing to do with the girl now chatting and drinking bottles of Grolsh not twenty feet away from my pissed off scowl. It seemed to me that, like my inability to recall even her name correctly Kate's, or Katie's, true image looked nothing like the one in my mind.

Nothing at all.

So who was wrong, her or me? Had she really changed so much in the three years since I had seen her last? Was it a different girl? I didn't think so because the longer I looked at her, the more familiar she became. She actually looked like I remembered her looking, now that my system memory had been updated. So if this really was her in her true form, and she had supposedly been some 'untouchable beauty' hidden away in the depths of my brain, why the hell had that same organ been singly incapable of keeping her image 'untouched'?

The human brain is reputed to be the single most powerful computer system in the known universe, and probably beyond. Except, perhaps, for that of a squirrel (you tell me, do they ever forget where they buried the nuts?). It is capable of storing terabytes of data including everything from high resolution images to the telephone number of the nearest Chinese that delivers. It can perform astoundingly complex calculations, is capable of logical deduction, has real-time software updates in which the broadband connection rarely fails and it also has the ability to demonstrate true non-artificial intelligence including learning from past mistakes (although that particular piece of third party software is, I gather, still being beta tested in most walking hardware units). So perfect is the human brain, in fact, that it is reputed that billions upon billions of pounds, dollars and yen have been invested in trying to understand and emulate the way such a complex system actually works.

Which is all a bit silly really. As creatures go, the pursuit of such a thing is an elephant. As far as colouring goes...? Well, it's a rather light shade of white. Because, as good computers, brains suck lemons. Why? because they have this annoying habit of pissing about with the data you input, pretty much whether you want them to or not. And it's not just that they make changes without asking either, it's that they never bother ask you whether or not you want to do a 'save' before you proceed.

Billions of pounds? Shit, even Photoshop keeps a pixel-perfect record of the images you input and takes the time and trouble to ask you if you want to 'save changes?' and that comes in at a little under five hundred quid.

So here was a girl who, in actual fact, looked pretty much the same as she had always looked. Just not as my mind (without my written permission) had chosen to remember her. Which I suppose is one of the downsides of being both a human and, in my case, a graphic designer. One who, it seems, was blessed with an unhealthy dose of imagination (a piece of software that should come with a 'back-up all data before running' warning plastered on the box in six inch high yellow letters).

Don't get me wrong, imagination is a great piece of software when it does its job correctly; worth every penny. When it's trying to create the best advertising campaign that Pizza Place had ever seen, for example? On such occasions it takes something good and keeps working on it (in those blocks of time it's not too pre-occupied with the day-to-day crap) until it has steadily moulded 'good' into 'perfect'.

Ok, I'll level with you... 'better'.

I once did a 'Welcome' pack for the aforementioned Pizza Place, designed to be handed out by estate agents to those who were just moving into the neighbourhood. Inside it had such fantastic (?) offers as a free pizza on your first night (save you cooking), some sachets of coffee, tea and milk (no kettle, though), a book of matches (probably for locating gas leaks) and a key-ring (because they had 20,000 of the little buggers in stock and couldn't shift them any other way). Given that this was a pizza firm, my tagline for the pack was 'Now that you've found your perfect base...'

Which is what imagination is supposed to do; come up with great ideas. Or rather crap (but quirky) ones like that.

Yet the human psyche has no password-protected folders, ones in which you can place images and recollections that you don't want anyone to fuck about with. Which is precisely what my brain had done with Kate. Or Katie. It had taken my memory of her image and done what I did with all my ad campaigns, even the bad ones. It had dug out the file whilst I slept, opened it up and kept on tweaking, very subtly, each time it was called onto the screen. So subtle were the changes it had made, in fact, that I had never even noticed them. Each time I asked my brain to call the file up I couldn't see anything inherently wrong with it. Which I suppose is like watching a fat friend grow old or an old friend grow fat. It's all done so delicately that the full transition is barely noticeable at all. Not until you see an image of the way things once had been; a moment like this, when the original drawing is dug out of the file and placed drinking in the same pub. That's when you realise just how many hours of unnecessary tweaking (given that Kate/Katie was still just as beautiful as ever) my mind had actually put in over the past three years without slapping me with a hefty bill for overtime.

So caught up was I in this amazing world of subtle change that I didn't actually notice that I'd been staring directly at her either that little bit too long or that little bit too hard. Either way, I may not have noticed, but she did. So much so that after a while she got pretty pissed off about it and came stomping over, face full of thunder, to snap me out of my thoughts and ask me what the hell I was staring at. I did my best to cover by narrowing my eyes inquisitively and telling her that I was simply trying to work out if she really was that girl I had gone to college with or whether I was mistaken.

I knew damn well she was.

Anyway, breaking with my own time-honoured traditions I'll make a long story very short. When Katie (it was Katie) finally threw some recognition back at me, her initial reaction of 'what the hell are you staring at?' went through a similar sequence of subtle changes until it became 'what the hell have you been doing these last few years?' and the embarrassment I'd felt when the entire pub had looked straight at me slipped quietly back into the shadows.

She, it transpired, had been working as a freelance illustrator in Bristol, mainly children's books, but had come back only the previous week. Which was why she was now meeting her brother (authors note one: not boyfriend.) (author's note two: heh, heh, heh.) for a few drinks and why she couldn't stay chatting to me for too long.

It was good to update my memory, however briefly.

By the time I left The Sportsman, perhaps ten minutes after Katie had retreated to the family fold, the world had finally made good on its promise and started to rain. God loves to add finishing touches to my moods wherever possible. As the antiqued door swung heavily behind me I looked to where Jenny's VW had been parked not an hour earlier and it suddenly struck me just why I had felt as pissed off as I had.

I had no pictures of her, not one, and no home videos. Not even a handwritten note. It just hadn't been that kind of relationship. We met up, we drank way too much, we went back to mine and we went at it like industrial sewing machines. Drunk, clumsy, fumbling sewing machines. For the most part that was all we did, and was pretty much all we had in common. If we stopped we shopped, but that was rarely my idea. We never went away together and I don't think we attended so much as one party. If and when we did than I sure as hell never thought to take a camera.

Which meant that whatever images I had left now were not committed to paper or tape, they were encased solely in that untrustworthy piece of equipment I carried around in the untreated leather case hereafter known as my skull. They had become images that might, if I was not careful, alter significantly over time. They might even disappear altogether. And that, as far as I was concerned, wasn't fair to either Jenny or myself. What is life, after all, if not one long series of images and the emotions they provoke? Take any of them away and you take away who you are. Alter them even slightly to suit some romantic ideal and surely your life starts to become a lie? Even the bad times should be committed to file as accurately as is 'humanly' possible, just so that when you sit back on a lonely night and say to yourself 'Hey? Remember this?' you know that the recollection is correct. Even if the image had changed in your mind, the frame or frames you view on screen have instantly thrust it right back home to the place it belongs; truth.

Yet I had no accurate, truthful, images of a girl with whom I had shared almost eighteen months of my life. Which meant that, unless things changed pretty soon, I'd ultimately be relying on blurred recollections to lie to myself about all the things my life might once... possibly... perhaps... have been. Or perhaps not.

I didn't sleep that night. Instead I stared, broken-minded, at the ceiling and analysed every crack in the plaster. I didn't sleep because I couldn't sleep. Slowly the white vista which faced me became a cinema screen, projecting a series of trailer-like images of times gone by. Blonde Jane, Petite Emma, Crazy Nicola and Way Too Conservative Jen. All the girls I'd loved to varying degrees, and lost to just one - permanently.

With the exception of Jenny, whose image for now was still fairly clear in my mind, I wondered just how accurate my recollections of the others actually were. Was the screen before me showing me the original actresses and supporting players in the scenes I was watching or, like Dallas or Roseanne, had it chosen to substitute some fresh faces who looked similar enough to do the trick whilst I wasn't looking? I laid there for many an hour, flicking through the channels of good and bad drama, finishing on the look in Jenny's eyes as she'd finally called it a day. What had I really seen in her eyes? Disappointment? Relief? Cold reserve? Why couldn't I see those eyes as clearly now as I had seen them only four hours previously? Why were such important, life changing images already starting to fade on me? The unfaltering hardness of print and digital technology ensured that everything I did in my work survived in its original form, no matter how long the passage of time, and yet everything I had ever done in my life seemed as though it was being subjected to a gaussian blur filter, its strength increasing with each step my life carried me away from it.

Saturday morning I took the 9:12 train into Leeds to buy myself a high-resolution digital video camera. It showed up at 9:21.

The salesman (cheap suit and even cheaper smile) did two things, both of which took at least twenty minutes apiece. The first was to try and sell me the top model, as opposed to the one I actually wanted. He took quite a bit of persuading that, at £150 more, such a frivolous purchase was a little too steep for my wallet. Even if it did possess enough letters after its name to qualify it for the medical profession.

His next twenty minutes were occupied by the almost painful inability to accept legal tender. He asked me how I'd like to pay and before I could respond with the nice four letter word that begins with 'c' (the one that ends in 'ash'), he proceeded to run through his commission-led pre-programmed list of 'payment options'. These began at 'Buy Now Pay Later', ascended through 'Interest Free Credit' before ultimately (and desperately) heading into the dizzying heights of the two combined - 'Four Years Interest Free with Nothing to Pay for Six Months'. My laboured attempts to convince him that even the most up-to-date technology does not retain so much as scrap

value after two years (so I sure as hell don't want to be forking out for it after four and a half) probably cost me at least ten of those wasted minutes.

By the time I finally got him to accept the cash, which was just after the discussion where he tried to convince me that it could be earning interest whilst I was paying the instalments (Wow, about twelve pence per annum... get the travel agent on the phone, Maureen, we're going to Acapulco!), interest was the one thing I had already lost and I was using the other four letter 'c' word. Just not as audibly as I would have liked.

I'm fairly good where hardware and software are concerned; I guess you have to be in my profession. Long gone are the days when a graphic designer simply 'designs'. I've always found that this seems to be the case with Mac 'gurus' (as we love to be called), as opposed to PC 'geeks' (as we love to call them). We love our machines. They're designed so much better than PC's, on and off screen, that they almost make us love them. So we play with them. Constantly. As such we know exactly how they work, inside and out.

Besides which these days, in order to cut down on costs, more and more studios were looking for people who can be a 'hack of all trades', able to use the computer systems for anything and everything from knocking up cheap night-club fliers to complete systems management. After all, what boss actually wants to spend money finding out why the workstations can't download old files from the server, and suffer the downtime of waiting for an engineer to arrive, when they can simply employ someone who can fix it in-house instead of taking the lunch they're entitled to? So, in order to stay employed wherever possible, I can now design (obviously), create finished (press-ready) artwork, illustrate, 3D model, design and code fairly good looking front-end websites and, because I've been involved in various CD and DVD ROM projects I am also capable of limited animation, video and music mixing.

So you'd think that rigging something as simple as a digital camera up to my comprehensive home system would be a piece of proverbial?

Yeah, right.

First of all they'd supplied the wrong lead - PC instead of Mac. Then the software I use for my video editing wouldn't recognise the data input from the camera in real-time and the final image stuttered like a bastard. In the end I cursed, swore, cursed some more and eventually took a walk down to the poxy little computer repair place about a mile from the flat and bought a high-speed firewire cable instead of the USB2. By the time I'd actually got everything working as it should the battery on the camera was pancake so I had to wait another four hours for it to re-charge, during which I ordered a pizza and watched more mind-numbing TV. Blue-haired ladies trying to sell me stairlifts (in a uni-level apartment!) and a succession of ambulance chasers asking if I had suffered some highly trivial (yet ultimately profitable) accident at some point in the last five years. I had, of course, but had chosen instead to smack the person responsible firmly in the mouth. I felt this to be a more satisfying option to dragging them through the courts for compensation; something which might well have reduced my overdraft but done nothing for my own sense of twisted pride.

Eventually, by around 7pm on Sunday night, having devoted pretty much all of the weekend to a system described on a set of discarded instructions as 'plug-and-play', I finally had some decent images both on my computer screen and filed away in a folder called '\_tests'. It's worth explaining at this point that by 'decent' I mean in terms of image quality as opposed to image content, because

most were just me pulling stupid faces in front of the camera and some high-zoom close-ups of next-door's chocolate Labrador licking itself in places we humans can only dream of reaching.

On ourselves, I mean, not on the dog.

The question was; when would I get the chance to put some real memories on the system? After all, Butch the Labrador is a smashing dog and all but I couldn't see myself sitting back with a few bottles of beer and reminiscing over his remarkably intrusive hygiene rituals in the years to come.

I was just sliding into the realms of gentle depression over this little quandary when my mobile phone rang. I'd kind of been living like a slob over the weekend, being as I was an awkward combination of 'dumped', 'miserable' and 'new toy to play with', so it took a while to find the phone. Knowing that I was probably in no mood to take calls it had deliberately hidden itself inside the bubble wrap that came with the camera.

I'd honestly forgotten I'd given Katie my number. Christ, I must have been drunk.

She obviously hadn't - at least not at the point I'd volunteered it - because she'd actually written it down. Correctly, I might add. And now (still sounding completely sober, I have to say) she had actually chosen to ring it. She almost sounded excited to speak to me again.

We arranged to meet at The Sportsman the following Friday, where we chatted for too many hours about how the place had changed since she'd been away. Of course because it had been so subtle I hadn't actually noticed any of it. Then, without thinking, I asked her if she fancied 'going off somewhere' on Saturday. Bugger me if she didn't say 'yes'. (She did say yes so you can put that away right now). So with the world's tiniest boot in my convertible MG laden with picnics, maps of scenic areas and all the other kind of crap that women seem to like, we sped off up to a village called Hawes in the Lake District. I know a joke about the place but it doesn't work well on paper, on account of the spelling. The top on the car stayed down all weekend, because so did the rain and the camera came on the trip with us. Any new memories, I had decided, were going to be committed in pixel-perfect high-def Technicolor, filed on my computer in a password-protected folder and retained in such a way that even my nefarious brain couldn't access it without written permission.

We got on great Saturday morning, got on even better Saturday afternoon and then, ultimately, we got on the phone to a hotel and got on top of each other Saturday night. Sunday we stopped off for lunch at one of those 'Taverner's' places and then I dropped her at home. Before she left she agreed to come over on Wednesday evening and watch our 'mini adventure' on the silver screen. It's actually more dark-grey-black than silver, but I think you get the idea.

I cooked a stir fry, which involved opening two jars, one packet and the culinary ability to keep stirring something on a stove without it caking itself irremovably to the pan. She either loved it or was still too deeply ensconced in that polite stage of our blossoming relationship to tell me otherwise. And we talked a lot more. About her work in Bristol, my work anywhere that would pay me even poor man's money and any stories we'd heard about the ups and downs of those with whom we'd attended college.

One was dead. Shocking, sure, but completely irrelevant to my story, so I'll not bore you with any of the details.

My flat is decorated fairly tastefully, even though spatial design has never been a strong point of mine. It's on the top floor, overlooking the rest of the converted mill complex, and has rich-oak laminate flooring throughout. The living room is not huge and is dominated by my immense TV/DVD/SKY+HD/MP3/DAB/SurroundSound system and an oversized black leather sofa. Not only am I a bachelor, I'm also (it would seem) a desperately clichéd one. There's a damned ugly mirror over the mock fireplace and a green-glass coffee-and-telephone-table matching set - but they're usually hidden under copies of 'Empire', 'Macworld' and more remote controls than it should be legal for one man to possess.

The kitchen's just a kitchen. But then I'm just a bloke and if there's workspace enough to open wrappers, microwave doors and bins then I'm more than happy with my lot. At the back of the kitchen is a kind of tiny larder affair, although I only have a chest freezer in there, which my mum bought me before she saw how small the flat actually was. Above the freezer was a bar for hanging jackets and stuff. Because it's directly above the freezer I tend to find that I'm colder before I go out than I am once I get outside.

The bathroom is, well, big enough for bath, sink and toilet. Just. The main bedroom looks more spacious than it actually is due to mirrored wardrobes (one of the previous occupant's more salacious ideas), but most of my time in the flat is usually spent in the spare bedroom. There's no bed in there because I rarely have (or want) people staying over. Not ones that aren't going to spend some quality time in the same bed me at any rate. If I do have a night in with the guys, Marcus and Benny either crash on the floor or the couch, but that's only when they don't have long-term girlfriends, which is becoming increasingly rare.

The spare bedroom (as I still refer to it, because 'the office' sounds way too pretentious even for me) has every piece of computer equipment it is safe for the electricity supply of the building to direct my way. Even now I figure that if I ever turn everything on in that room, the picture on Flat Five's television would instantly dim to half strength.

And then explode.

In addition to a TV I have two computers, one for working on and one for playing ripped DVD's and MP3's. The workhorse machine has an awesome Apple letterbox format cinema-screen (pause for breath), a slimline keyboard, a mighty mouse and two graphics tablets (one of which I once used, I think. If I did, then it was a long time ago). The other has a smaller screen but is attached full-blown five channel speaker system which Mrs. Coriata (Flat Five again) loves so much that she tries banging on her ceiling in time with the music just to let me know she digs the beat. I have a scanner, two printers (laser and inkjet), a zip drive which looks cool but I never use, a bigger and better pocket drive which doesn't look as good but I do use, a 7 port USB hub, an external 2Tb hard drive full to busting with MP3 files and music videos skanked from illegal internet sites and finally, a combination CD/DVD burner for backing all my hard work onto disks that don't fuck up without making at least some numeric attempt to offer me a good reason. 'Error of type 103' is its message of choice at the moment.

It was with this machine that I did two DVD copies of the digital camera footage, one for myself and one for Katie. We watched one after we'd finished the chicken I'd very carefully peeled off the base of the pan.

And that's when it struck me.

Over all the time that we were sitting, watching, drinking beers and laughing at the movies (with Katie periodically brushing long brown hair from her eyes) I realised that, in some minor way, these memories we were watching on-screen were just as much a lie as the blurred recollections I referred

to earlier. Which isn't to say that they were not a true representation of what had happened whilst the camera was rolling because I'd have been demanding nearly £600 back from CameraWorld if they were, but they were not a true representation of either Katie, myself or indeed the time we spent together during two wonderful days. They were like nervous little 'first night shows' comprised of us 'trying to look our best', 'smiling for the camera' or 'being slightly embarrassed' - not at an event which might have happened, but at the fact that a perfect copy of said event was currently being etched to disk in real time.

There was nothing pure about the scenes, no gentle expressions about which the wearer was unaware and sure as hell no spontaneity. Nothing was natural. Nothing was unaffected.

When I looked at Katie now I saw her at her most honest and relaxed, her knees pulled close to her chest, her head resting on my shoulder. She was wearing tight fitting black jeans, a loose white Eminem T-shirt with a wide neck, white ankle socks and just enough make-up to accentuate without crossing the border into illegal burial. Her smile was not even full-blown, it was just gentle and authentic, a million miles from those worn by air-stewardesses or the young girls behind counters who risk being fired if they don't paint it on and bid you a nice day.

It just very natural and very, very beautiful.

In my chosen career I've retouched just about every image that ever appeared on my screen, whether it needed it or not. I've taken lamp-posts out of otherwise unsullied vistas, dropped in sunnier skies, repaired damaged brickwork and once even stopped an otherwise perfect Russian model's nipples from looking oval. A long time ago, when retouching was still an almost unheard of art form, I even convinced five of my friends that I'd been to New York by placing myself in an image of the city. In reality the only York I'd been to at that point was the one in Yorkshire, about forty miles by car from my flat.

And yes, the camera (if and when I've done my job correctly) doesn't just lie, it places its hand on the bible, swears by Almighty God and then commits the most outrageous perjury since Clinton's "I did not have sexual relations" speech at the Lewinsky hearings. Every photo of every dweeb or company employee that appeared in any leaflet or brochure I have ever designed has had acne removed, teeth straightened, hair tidied, wrinkles smoothed or the whites of the eyes, well, whitened. All with a few double-clicks and the flick of a mouse (I never did get the hang of the cordless pen). I even duplicated a girl's left eye once, flipped it and dropped it over the other on the grounds that God had forgotten to make them quite as symmetrical as they should have been on her behalf.

Yes indeed, I've corrected God's myriad practical jokes on many occasions.

The images that never needed my skilled retouching of the human form, however, were those of the 'unawares'. Those who had simply been 'caught on camera' without the posing and preening that such an act usually promotes. Sure, I'd colour balance or drop a new sky in place of the old, but the people themselves always looked just how they were supposed to look; real. They did not look 'posed' or 'awkward' or 'embarrassed' because they weren't trying to look perfect. Consequently, the removal of any of God's inherent design flaws was completely unnecessary because no-one was trying to make them look like something they weren't, which is what staged images so often tend to do.

Think about it. Isn't it always the images where people are looking at the camera and smiling awkwardly at which they say 'oh my God, that's going in the bin, I look positively awful'? It's never the ones where they're trotting off up a hillside with a hefty backpack and a thermos of coffee, completely oblivious to the fact that the moment is being committed to film. To memory.

Which is, I guess, where I got the idea for 'Phase Two'.

The previous occupants of my flat didn't leave much, but then... why the hell should they have done? There was a novelty toilet brush holder which I binned almost immediately - I'm funny about things like that - some cutlery in one of the kitchen drawers which (being yellow-handled) matched the walls - the mirrored wardrobes which were, let's face it, built in - and that mirror over the fireplace which I mentioned earlier. The reason the previous occupants left this particular gem, I figure, is that it is the biggest, ugliest piece of Art Deco trash you have ever seen, and that's even if you haven't seen it. It has a thick dull silver frame that would have looked big and ugly enough in the twenties and thirties, let alone in a flat that was built within spitting distance of both the new millennium and the local branch of IKEA. Two years ago, when I purchased the flat, I promised myself wholeheartedly that it would go the minute I found something - anything - to replace it.

It's still there.

Before the following Saturday morning had reached an end, with Katie due at 7pm for 'a quiet night in', I had learned two very valuable new lessons. The first was that two-way mirrors are far easier and cheaper to get hold of on the internet than you would ever imagine, and the second was that bricks only fall out of walls when you don't want them to. Worse still, when you do finally coax them out - maybe three or four of them - word spreads that it's some kind of group holiday and the select few you did invite try to smuggle an excessive number of their friends along.

Like I say the mirror, ugly it may be, was also very big. Big enough at least to hide the kind of devastation I had now created behind it - the kind that has builders tutting, scratching their chins and dropping phrases like 'supporting wall' into sentences that end in '...cost you'.

I built a small wooden box - badly - wedged it into the hole, and slotted the camera in. Then I set the lens to the highest resolution and the widest angle available and... voilà. There were other places I could have secreted the camera in the room with far less hassle, such as in the media centre or behind one of numerous tacky ornaments I seemed to have accumulated, but none that seemed to offer the two most vital keys to the plan: no risk of being discovered at all and a full view of the sofa where I guessed Katie and I would spend most of the evening to come.

Once the mirror was back in place and covering all traces of my handiwork I figured that, save for the fact that I had pretty much buggered my vacuum trying to pick up rubble, it wasn't such a bad morning's work.

Katie arrived early, about ten to seven, and we ordered in from the Indian takeaway on Boothby Grove. Then she selected a DVD (chick-flick) and we settled down to an evening of moving will they/won't they/of course they will drama. This was accompanied by chips 'n' dips interspersed only by wry observations on life, the world in general and what we might get up to the following weekend when she wasn't working.

The more we talked the more I fell for her in a big way, and that was desperately unplanned. She was everything that Jenny had ceased, over time, to be. Perhaps Katie herself would fall off the same way in the months to come but this time, at least, I would have moments such as these permanently committed to approximately 160Mb of disk of space apiece.

She had the most beautiful eyes of any girl I had ever been out with; full of sparkle and life and completely expressive of her moods. Eyes that, like those memories, were incapable of lies. They were the kind of eyes that, even if the mouth was forcing a smile, showed any viewer who cared to

look just how she truly felt. Place a hand over the lower portion of her face and her mindset became as real as the world in which we all exist.

She spoke of her late grandmother that night, apparently a dear old lady whom she had truly adored and, as I played the footage back on the Sunday afternoon, she smiled as if in acceptance of the loss she felt. When I zoomed in to the eyes, though, and obliterated the mouth, there was no hint of a smile on that face. She hated the fact that her grandmother had been taken from her and it showed. She just had those kind of eyes. No lies. Truth.

Just how I like the world to be.

By the time the movie had finished she was half asleep. Because she had her head curled across my lap I couldn't actually tell at the time, but playback of the hidden camera images filled in the blanks for me. She woke as I stirred, looking up at me with those eyes full of genuine love. I ran my hand gently along her cheek and she smiled gently, then I leaned down and kissed her softly. She pulled back and we just looked at each other for exactly fifty-eight seconds (playback again) then we kissed again. Longer this time, but no less delicate. As our lips moved against each other, her hand reached upward, rested on the base of my neck and she turned fully toward me. Over the next few minutes we undressed each other with no concept of time and no reason to plough through it at any great speed. Then the coolest thing happened.

We made love.

Not hot, passionate, wild sex you understand, which - trust me - has a very distinct and relevant place in this world, but genuine lovemaking with the emphasis slotted very firmly on love. Right there on the sofa, in full view of the camera. Recorded digitally across millions of high-resolution red, green and blue pixels to be saved to disk for future reference. It was magical, luminous, scary and exciting all at once.

Now I have never, to the best of my knowledge, been a pervert. My blood is no more or less red than it's supposed to be, both for propagation and for personal enlightenment, but I've certainly never viewed sex as one of the better spectator sports. And yet it seemed that I watched this footage so many times over the coming week that, had it been on VHS, then I believe that I would have worn the tape to Sellotape-like transparency. If I'm honest it wasn't just the lovemaking that caught my eye, either.

It was more than that. So much more.

Whether or not it's become as apparent as it might from my story, I really do have a thing for the honesty contained within the eyes, and the most honest emotion I can imagine is the kind of helplessness found in the climax of true lovemaking. Everyone wants to be loved - I've certainly never been an exception to that - and whilst I do favour very strong and very independent women, I firmly believe that one of the reasons for that is the complete contrast visible in the eyes in those final moments. All independence is lost and in its place comes a sheer loss of power that even the most fiercely self-reliant human being can experience. Suddenly and unexpectedly, a woman who is completely in control of her life, her finances, her schedules and her health finds herself hanging by her fingertips from a cliff edge, her eyes staring straight at the man before her (or indeed above or below her), begging him to pull her up and offer her the complete elation of genuine salvation. Begging, pleading, longing.

I don't know, it just makes me feel kind of important. Wanted, if you like. A bit more 'needed' and a bit less 'throwaway'. Generally it is the catching sight of that moment burned into the face of the one I love that sends me into a similar moment of my own.

Only now it was no longer a moment I would see 'on occasion'. Now I had it on camera and could see it whenever I damn well wanted. Knowing that it was 'all my own work', if you catch my drift.

On Thursday evening, about ten minutes after I had placed the phone down to Katie with the usual warm and somewhat inane smile etched across my face, there was a knock at my door of my imagination. I opened it up and there, standing in the rather ornate doorway, was Phase Three. It had brought some beers along and was just begging to be implemented.

Bedroom.

Mirrored wardrobes.

An ability to buy and fit two-way mirrored glass.

If you still need me to spell any of this out then perhaps you should find another story to read, because this one isn't going to get any simpler than that. What I did need, however, was another HD camera, otherwise I'd be perpetually fighting 'will we/won't we go to bed', coupled with 'should I/shouldn't I place the camera in the living room? Or the bedroom?'

(Or the living room?)

Take that Saturday, for example. After the sofa episode, Katie stayed the night and we went to bed. We didn't make love again that night, but we did the following morning and as an act of love it was no less magical. But it lost something for me, because it wasn't being recorded. One day it would start to fade from my memory and on another it would pack its bags and leave me forever. If I'd had a dog, it would probably have taken that too.

Let's face it, it's bad enough stopping and ruining the moment to place a condom on, so I genuinely doubted that I would be doing 'the moment' many favours if I stopped mid-kiss and asked permission to move my hidden camera from its hiding place in the living room to a similarly covert location in the bedroom.

As the software was already loaded onto the Mac, and as it had taken me almost a full weekend to get the previous camera to behave itself, I plumped for the same model for the same £600, much to the thankful bemusement of the shop assistant. I would have gone somewhere else, but they were over £80 cheaper than any of their competitors. Sensing that it would be a waste of his well-honed spiel this time around he didn't bother to have the 'cash or credit' argument with me on this occasion. Instead he did his best to inform me that my previous purchase could have been protected with the additional warranty he'd gone to great pains to tell me about. The one that covered even accidental damage if I had - as I'm sure he believed - managed to total my previous purchase. I made up some bullshit about it being so good that I was now buying one for a brother I don't actually have, and he soon shut the fuck up and took the money.

Cash.

The camera was placed behind the newly purchased frontage of the middle wardrobe door, angled to catch anything that happened on - or indeed near - the bed. Just in case.

One of my favourite 'non-bedroom' moments came unexpectedly knocking about three months into our ever expanding relationship, two weeks after Katie and I had watched my favourite film; Highlander. I'm not a big fan of blood and guts movies, but I do like the time travel aspect, the constant contrast between thirteenth century Scotland and modern New York, and the sadness in the eyes of Rachel (the middle aged woman whose life Connor McLeod had saved as a child) when he leaves her and she says 'you're not coming back, are you?'

Ah, call me an old romantic (without the word 'old' if at all possible), but it cuts me up every time.

As a designer and sometime movie editor I also love the scene cuts in the film, especially the Mona Lisa merge and the way a camera pans up the fishtank (in the apartment I always wanted) to reveal the gently rippling surface of a Scottish loch.

Don't ever get me on to the subject of the other Highlander films, mind, because they are truly abysmal and a waste of good film stock, not least Highlander II which totally contradicts the plot of one.

Anyway...

Two weeks after we'd watched the film, Katie did what she always does; she arrived at the flat and blew me a raspberry through the entry phone. We'd decided to go out that night - meet some of my friends early doors and close the night with some of hers. She came dressed for the evening, very tight, very black, but she also carried a long gift-wrapped package under her arm. Apparently it was an early birthday present - three weeks early to be precise - but she had been unable to wait to give it to me. She gave me another present on my birthday anyway, a fantastically trendy blue LCD watch, but this is my point; this was the kind of girl she was. This was how special and thoughtful she could be.

I opened the gift, in full view of the living room camera (obviously), and this time it was my unexpected expression - one that screamed 'wow' at the top of it's tiny voice - that was permanently recorded. Not only had Katie carefully noted how much I loved the film, but she had also gone to the trouble of uncovering the vast amount of related cult tat that was available to buy over the internet. There were videos and DVDs of the films, the TV spin-off series, books, posters, paperweights, pens, letter openers which were miniature replicas of the swords used in the film (including Connor's claymore) and, you guessed it, full size replicas of the swords themselves. She had decided, quite rightly I figured, that a replica of a double-edged Scottish claymore would have looked even more ridiculous adorning the walls of my flat than the mirror - the one I would never allow her to take down and dispose of - so she had instead plumped for the second most beautiful set-piece in the film; the Toledo Salamanca broadsword with which the bit-player Fazel had tried to remove Connor's head. Unsuccessfully, of course, given that there was still another hour and a half of the movie that the director needed to fill.

So now, at great expense from the woman I seemed to love just a little bit more each day, I had an almost perfect replica of a very ancient and very ornate Japanese sword, complete with smooth ivory grip, polished brass scabbard and rich velvet sheath. It immediately found a home hanging almost ceremonially on the wall behind the sofa and Katie secured a similar home in my heart.

Nobody has ever done anything even remotely as special as that for me. Never before and never since. I knew in that first instant that my eyes widened, marvelling at how special I must have been in her life for her to do such a thing, that I would do all in my power never to lose her.

Ever.

The other thing Katie did for me, over time, was to learn and respect my weird habits when fixing my favourite drink; brandy and coke. Tall glass, full of ice, then a special cupful of brandy over the ice, topped up with coke. In that order. It's a strange quirk and I'm sure you'll think I'm lying, but I swear I can tell if the ice has gone in after the brandy. I also make sure that I never run out of ice, which you can now buy ready made from the supermarket. I always make sure I have plenty of bags, and very little else (sorry about that, mum), tucked away in the chest freezer.

Brandy over ice; that's the way I like it and, without question, that's the way she did it. Probably because she loved me.

Katie was, to me, beautiful in every way that it is possible for a woman to be.

I stepped up my recording process over time, downloading her voice into my computer from any answerphone messages she may have left either on my home phone or my mobile and running a simple audio filter that enhanced the clarity and reduced any background hiss. Plus, I took single-image photos at every available opportunity, carefully uploading these into my system as well. Everything was catalogued in a file I called memories and subfoldered '\_Kt'. Edited versions also found themselves being burnt to DVD so that I could view them in private on the big-screen TV and, when there was sod all else in the schedules, Katie and I would often sit and watch the 'official' disks, most of which had been captured outdoors or at parties where Katie knew full well that the camera was rolling.

Often we'd end up playing sofa tennis with the ubiquitous 'Remember this?' line.

For quite a while, that's how it went. Every moment we shared in my flat was captured with an undeniable digital truth and a good many more that we shared in the outside world were added as a watered down and badly rehearsed version of it. As Katie lived with her parents we never, ever stayed there so that pretty much covered the full gamut. It was enough to make me happy, knowing that there were now some very special moments in my life that could neither be erased nor amended without my express permission. No matter how many years slid away beneath my feet, these multi-frame snapshots of time would remain unsullied and as clear and sharp as the blurb on the box had promised me they would be.

Like I say shit happens. And, eight fantastic months after Katie and I first got together, whilst she was working as a storyboard artist for a studio in Leeds, it did happen. Again.

I should have seen it coming, especially as my suspicions had already been aroused. She stayed over one Friday night after having stayed on the Tuesday as well. I was out with the guys on Wednesday so I didn't review the footage until Thursday. We had made love in the bedroom and everything had seemed to be just as perfect as it always was.

Yet on camera, when she turned away from me, my arm still draped over her slender shoulders, there was a look in those eyes that puzzled me. It wasn't worry and it wasn't fear, but it nuzzled pretty close to both. I suppose the best way for me to describe it was that it was a kind of 'nervous apprehension', the kind where the eyes narrow very slightly at intervals controlled by the thoughts running through the mind. A series of possible answers to some great problem or other. It spooked me, sure, especially being so soon after 'the act', but we had spent the evening discussing one or two problems she had been having at work and I guess I just wrote it off to that.

I was right and wrong at the same time.

More wrong than right, unfortunately.

By Sunday morning I knew that something was seriously amiss. She didn't bring me a cup of coffee in bed for the first time in as long as we'd spent nights together and she didn't sit on the bed and talk to me as I returned to the land of the living; the way I had watched on so many of the digital files. Instead she placed my coffee on the table in the living room and sat there alone, the TV off, just staring into space. She was still there when I got up.

Katie was a pure soul, one with a heart cemented firmly in the right place, and she would never have been unfaithful to me, I was sure of that. But she wanted to. That was the problem and, try as she might, it was a feeling she had been unable to shake for weeks. She had found - and wanted to be with - another guy and she simply couldn't lie to herself about it any longer. For her to take her life in the direction she felt it should go there was no choice but for her to split with me. We talked, she cried, we were very grown up about it, and then she cried again. What I saw in her eyes then, though, was that her mind was made up and it was not going to be changed. It didn't matter what I said, did or promised to do.

Like my relationship with Jenny before her, it was over.

There is a feeling we all go through, even when we know something is for the best. It's a feeling of loss, like a part of who we are will soon be missing. In many cases we either get through it or get over it, and I know this might sound like an exceptionally cruel and heartless thing to say but sometimes the death of a loved one would actually make it easier to bear. When we know that something is over, that a fragment of who we are will be missing from here on, knowing that it will soon be a part of somebody else often serves to make the situation seem even more unbearable than it needs to be. Which is why, I guess, so many lovers lie during break-up - as Jenny had done - and vehemently deny that there is a third party involved. It softens the blow. It protects our pride to think that 'we were not right together' instead of 'someone else is currently being a better you than you are'.

Katie did nothing to ease my pain. She came straight out with it, but even now I'm sure that her reason was not the desire to hurt me or to hammer home some point about it being final. It was simply a desire to be completely honest with me right to the very end. That's who she was.

I didn't leave the flat all that weekend and didn't answer either phone. Instead I ate takeaway crap followed by reheated takeaway crap and cleaned every inch of the place that it was possible to clean. Then I took the sword she had bought me down from the wall and I hid it away. I couldn't bear to look at the damn thing any more.

I was alone, and that was exactly how I wanted to feel, thank you very much for asking.

For the time being at least.

These things pass. You never think they will at the time but they do, and often that's where true friends come into play; those who know that they've seen that bit less of you since you started seeing 'that girl' but are ever-ready to open their arms and welcome you back into the fold when it's all gone severely tits-up. They smile when they see you because they know what you're going through and they don't mention her name, just to protect you. I was out - and laughing again - with Marcus and Benny by the following weekend. Little by the little, the pain started to ebb away.

Five weeks later 'girlfriend-of-more-than-a-week' number six quite literally danced into my life.

She was called Emma and I met her in a club called 'MoneyTalks'; a reference to an old AC/DC song. As you'd imagine then, it's a rock joint and as such favoured more by Marcus than by myself or Benny. Still, we'd gone to all the bars I liked for a few weeks, just to settle me back into the pack and I guess it was time to give a little something back. So when Marcus suggested that heading off up 'the top end of town' might just 'make a change', Benny and I cast only the briefest of wry glances in each other's direction before agreeing without question.

For obvious reasons most of the songs were lost on me. I remembered of few of the oldies, those that kicked around in my nineties youth, but the Nu-Metal 'explosion' could have been wired into my car ignition and it would probably still have allowed me to step out of the still-running vehicle untouched. For a long time I thought that 'Blink 182', 'System of a Down' and 'Sum 41' were error messages I would one day have the privilege by being presented with by an Apple Mac that, after being put to sleep, had woken up at the wrong side of someone else's bed.

That all changed the minute my eyes tried to make sense of the blur that was Emma.

The lighting wasn't great, this being a rock club after all, but when a girl has legs as long and a red mini as short as Emma then trust me, the eyes don't take long to adjust. She had the longest brown hair imaginable, longer than Katie's, and she used it to good effect on the dance floor by whipping away any sweaty guy who got too close.

Half an hour later I was letting her get served before me at the bar, being the gentleman I am around particularly beautiful women, and half an hour after that she was bidding farewell to her girlie friends so that she could stay awhile longer and talk to me. She stayed the night as well and, though I've only had a couple of one night stands, this was the first time I had ever turned over in the morning, looked intently at a sleeping female face totally devoid of make-up and thought I was the luckiest bastard alive. This was one very hot, very beautiful rock chick.

So it all started again.

A new folder called '\_Emm' appeared on the system and over the next couple of months a few more gigabytes ate away at my disk space.

Emma worked for a building society, nine to five-thirty on the enquiries desk. I only ever saw her once at work, when I sneaked in one Friday to ask her whether or not me 'making a quick deposit and then instantly withdrawing would result in a sudden loss of interest'. In her regulation blue two-piece, white blouse and restrained make-up she looked nothing like the rock chick I knew her to be. She was just as beautiful, sure, but a lot more classic. That night she told me she'd been unable to concentrate on her work the rest of the afternoon after my comment, especially after one of the customers had spent ten minutes leaning over her counter and discussing the ins and outs of 'a hefty withdrawal he had made that was getting messy'.

I doubt I ever really had Emma in the true sense. She was too free a spirit for anyone to truly possess in her entirety but, like all my girlfriends, she became an integral part of both my life at the time and the memories I was so keen to record. Because she was still doing a Business Studies course at night school and she helped her dad most weekends, I only saw her twice a week, Fridays and Sundays. In the early days, still feeling pangs for Katie as I was, that suited me fine but as time rolled on I realised that I had started to gear my entire life around the next available Friday or Sunday. There were clothes I wouldn't wear to go out with the guys; I'd save them for Friday. There was money I wouldn't spend so that I knew I had some for Friday. I loved Indian food but so did Emma and I stopped ordering it in on a Thursday just so that we could order it together at the flat come Sunday.

Stuff like that.

I don't even want to begin to tell you where my mind was during this period of my life but trust me, my design work seemed to get just that little bit more 'gothic' as time went on. As I lived closer to the college and the town centre than she did, I had even considered asking Emma to move in.

Then God, in his infinite and unquestionable wisdom, decided to metamorphose into an entire flock of pigeons, fed them to foix-gras proportions and offered them a bowl of bran cereal washed down with a glass of prune juice. They didn't just shit on me - they positively town-halled me.

Which is ironic, seeing as how I was sitting eating a burger on the steps of the town hall at the moment I caught sight of her.

It was Saturday afternoon. Blue-skied, flag-crackingly hot and only three short hours after she had climbed from my bed and gone off to help her dad. Yet here she was, in town. She wasn't alone and she sure as hell wasn't with her dad. At least, given the fact that her partner was still the better side of twenty-five and had hair longer than hers I assumed it wasn't her dad.

No, she was walking hand in hand with another guy and in the bright sunlight of afternoon I caught a glint of the one thing I hadn't noticed on my venture into her branch; a gold wedding ring. It had never occurred to me, until that moment, that in the three or four minutes I had been joking with her over the counter, her left hand had remained resolutely beneath it.

Emma, not even twenty-three, was a married woman and far from being 'the one', I was in fact 'the affair'.

I didn't do anything. I don't think I would have known what to do if I'd tried. Got angry? Caused a scene? Tried to stir trouble with a view to breaking them up? Walked past and thrown a knowing and sarcastic smile into her lap? Nothing seemed anything less than childish, so instead I just sat there, feeling as dumb as I looked, and listened to the whining of my heart as it almost begged me to allow it to start beating again.

Yet again, the memories were coming to an end.

She came round Sunday night and I set the camera rolling, ever-vigilant that I caught both good and bad with equal attention to detail. My mind had been on nothing else since I'd seen them, and still I hadn't worked out what I was actually going to say. At one point, earlier in the evening, I'd almost pictured myself as being cool and calm, perhaps even a bit 'understanding' about it all. When I saw her though, something inside me flipped and 'you're fucking married, Emma' was all I could manage. Even then the words were so fragmented as to be little more than a verbal jigsaw.

'Ah,' she said, eyes down, caught. 'You found out?'

'I saw you,' I said, as calmly as I could. 'In town.'

Like, you know, I'd been real clever and she'd been real stupid.

She nodded gently, as though to herself, and just said, 'Shit'.

I've heard that 'Shit' is the word used, in ninety-odd percent of cases, as the final statement of pilots captured on aircraft cockpit voice recorders. Not 'Help', or even 'Oops'. When the word is delivered by pilots, however, it is never screamed or yelled, just voiced gently - offered out to the world with a complete sense of resignation to an unavoidable fate. It was in that self-same way that Emma delivered the word to me. Her flight was going down, she'd read all the data, checked all the dials and there was fuck all she could do but place her seat in the upright position, brace herself for impact and hope that there wouldn't be too many pieces for the tin-kickers to pick up afterwards.

She'd married young, she said (too young perhaps), and her husband had no idea about me. She loved him of course, and she wanted to stay with him all her life but there was still some fun in her that kind of struggled to get out sometimes. She liked me too, liked me a lot, but no, she didn't love me and no, she never would. Not like she loved him. She had been keeping me a secret from everyone, even her friends, and she wasn't attending night school. Most nights of the week she was exactly where she was supposed to be - at home with her husband. That way she could stop out all night on Fridays if she wanted, stay with one of her 'girlfriends' perhaps, and he wouldn't hassle her too much about it. As long as she came home after the few drinks (and illicit sex) she liked to have on a Sunday.

She was sorry. Really she was.

If she wasn't, I figured, then she sure as hell would be. Soon.

Just as with Katie before her, I didn't want those memories to end. Not yet. I wanted them to be a part of my life forever, if they could. The look of the eyes when making love, the helplessness and the sense of being truly needed. I wanted all these things. That was why I had two cameras in the house, for God's sake. I didn't like being lonely and I never wanted to feel alone again.

I stared at her angrily for the longest time, then sighed and said, 'I need a drink.' I needed something. 'Want one?'

She nodded without words and I disappeared into the kitchen. Like I say, I'm funny about my brandy and cokes - ice first, always. Mind you, even though I took two glasses from the cupboard and put them on the side, I knew that my drink could wait awhile. Until I'd done what I needed to do.

I casually side-stepped from the open doorway and opened the door to the larder-cum-cloakroom. This, if you recall, is the one with the chest freezer containing huge stocks of ice so that, please God, I never run out. I reached inside, picked up a full bag and moved it to one side. Then I picked up the Toledo Salamanca, removed the long clear plastic bag in which I had chosen to seal it and used a piece of kitchen towel to wipe the velvet-red frozen streaks of Katie from the blade. Then, with Emma's guilty breathing still pulsing through from the other room, I turned it around in my hand and allowed the metal to glisten like salvation in the powerful downlighters.

Yes indeed, memories should stay with you always. And, if you know how to go about it, they should also remain as true to themselves as the day they are created and not be altered in even the slightest way. Words, smiles, expressions. Happiness, sadness, pain. Like those climactic eyes; helpless, pleading and begging to the one person from whom they believe they will very soon attain glorious release. There is nothing that makes me feel more needed in this shit-bag world than the eternal and truthful memory of those eyes.

Katie's eyes were like that so many times.

I guess they still are, but even so I like to check from time to time. If nothing else, just to refresh that imperfect memory I seem to have. With the razor-sharp blade clean and bright once more, I leaned back over the freezer and moved some more of the bags of ice and there - in the same clear plastic - was Katie's severed head.

Yes, those eyes were still pleading - begging and helpless all at once. All my own work. Only this time I had quite literally managed to freeze that moment forever. I guess the most suitable title for this little detour would be: 'Phase Four'.

Katie was already destined to be with me all my life, whether she liked it or not. Now it was Emma's turn. She had her own folder on my system and before the night was at an end she, like Katie, would have her own DVD locked away from prying eyes.

It would be suffixed '\_Dth'.

As soon as she had made those beautiful eyes plead on camera for me. Just one more time.

'Hey Katie,' I whispered, using my free hand to wipe condensation from the bag and looking gently and lovingly at the beautiful rich blue of her face. Frozen. Dead. Detached. Then I held her special gift in such a way that she could see the condition I had kept it in (before and since I had removed her head with it).

Quietly, and with the slightest smile, I said, 'Remember this?'