

March 2004

Well, there I was thinking that I couldn't have a better month than February and I have another action-packed month – not quite in the same way but it certainly ended pretty strangely for sure... and one thing that I have not done this month but I will take up as a future suggestion : a brief synopsis of the amount of miles covered – I think it'll surprise even me.

So – beginning of the month was pretty quiet on the whole – the first weekend was spent helping Marla get her house ready to put on the market – this mostly involved 'yard work' as we call it here and I spent a great deal of the day in her hot tub clearing out all the remainder of the water and algae that had developed since the pump broke down – nasty smelly job but somebody had to do it. I even got her blower out and spent a happy couple of hours blowing leaves off the deck to watch them being blown back on by the wind. In the evening I went to Blind Willie's with Rick and we chilled out watching 'Houserocker Johnson' who was pretty good despite insisting on playing with his teeth at one point – and he was not as good as his buddy who got up on stage and did a couple of numbers.

Sunday was spent sorting out all my paperwork, which I have been meaning to do forever – infact the whole of the next week was spent sorting out paperwork.

Saturday I drove out to Birmingham to see Kate in her new house – I haven't seen her since her wedding in September and felt dreadful about not having been over since it's only 2 hours away – but then she's not ever come to Atlanta to see me so I felt it was OK. We had fun and caught up – I got to see her new house which is huge and has a large number of decks (yes – plural – made me feel very small about my little deck now...) – we went for a walk in the woods behind her house – it's amazingly in the middle of nowhere to be so close to a city – but that's one of the things that I like about the US there are plenty of places where that is possible. Anyway – around 3 I bailed as I had to get back to pick Carla up from the airport – scooped her up from the airport and dashed off for a very nice dinner. Sat up for a few hours just drinking wine and catching up with the world – it was fun. Sunday we didn't do a great deal really – meandered about and sat on the deck eventually catching up with the usual suspects for dinner. Now this was a big deal since Ilana wanted to go to a hole around the corner from her and we wanted to go for pizza – I voted to just let everybody do whatever they wanted to do – no big deal but Ilana made a big song and dance about it and joined us but made it clear that it was reluctantly. Oh well. Monday I had the day off i.l.o. a day that I had worked on a weekend so we went shopping and met Sheena for lunch, which was great fun as I'd not seen her for awhile. Then back to the airport and waved her goodbye – I miss her – we are unlikely friends as we are very different, but nonetheless we get on really well.

The rest of the week was mad – Tuesday was Deb's birthday dinner – another occasion where too many people had too many agendas – but she had fun and that was all that mattered. Wednesday was bookclub and we had it at my house – it was interesting talking about the first political book we had tackled – I personally found the Paul x book pretty lightweight but was curious watching some of the people's reactions to it. I actually managed to get food cooked and everything ready before they all came – which was a total miracle considering my week. It all went without a hitch and I managed to survive 12 people all around at once.

Thursday I flew to Santa Barbara – all politics – the Field Technical Manager of California is in court and we had a very hot case with a radio issue where the customer was threatening to make us buy the car back if "an engineer" didn't come and look at it. Well, to cut a long story short I volunteered to go out there and fix the car – I strongly believed that I could get the Technician on the phone and fix it with him but, well it got political. No worries – I flew out to Santa Barbara late on Thursday evening and landed around 9pm. It's supposed to be very pretty but it was dark and I couldn't find anywhere to eat – that's all I know about it. Following day I got to the dealer and the car. I was very diligent and read the entire repair history before getting to the car – just to be sure

that I had done my homework. Anyway – long story short I diagnosed and fixed the car in 10 minutes flat. So there I was 10am and nothing more to do . . . I had decided to stay in LA for Friday night and fly late on Saturday since it made the flight so much cheaper and I had no idea how long it would take me to fix the car – so I dawdled down the road to La, past all the amazing beach homes of Malibu – now I had no idea that they are fundamentally on a main road – but still worth several millions of dollars. How weird is that ? So – into LA and headed for the dealer in Beverly Hills as I know the shop foreman – we had a long chat, looked at a couple of cars and chilled out really. At the end of the day we even slugged a beer out back (it's not allowed) with the service manager. I drove to my hotel getting suitably dis-oriented and was amazed that the traffic was actually no worse than Atlanta. I stayed at the Grafton on Sunset – a nice hotel – it would have been nicer if I had had a pool view instead of the a/c unit but it was a great location. Having been laughed out of the restaurant for not having a reservation I ate in the bar – got talking to some sports presenter (probably famous and probably very disconcerted that I had no clue who he was) about cars and had a very nice steak.

Saturday I got up really early and went for a very long walk the weather was warm but horribly overcast – I walked all the way down sunset – it was very odd since it was really all just waking up so not as described. I then hung a left up to Hollywood Boulevard and walked down it – strange place – the Premier of Scooby Doo II was playing that afternoon so it was all cordoned off and the famous movie theatre was covered in Scooby Doo posters – quite surreal. It was overcast and foggy-ish so when I went up to the view of the Hollywood sign it was just a faint outline in the fog.



Anyway there I was on Hollywood Boulevard and realised that Rach would kill me if I didn't get a picture of 'Frankie's' star so I went to the information counter to get a list of the stars and their locations and to find out where the Frank Lloyd Wright house was – they had no clue and I had to use their computers to search for it – they had never heard of it – honestly.... To cap it all of course Frankie had two bloody stars miles apart . . . so I dragged myself to both in the increasing heat and took a picture of each one (one for films and one for songs apparently – so they look different – spot me in one of them !). I passed a huge anti-war rally and then decided to hop a but back to the hotel.



Picked the car up and then went to the FLW house on top of a huge hill in a very seedy area of town (actually I found the whole place pretty sad and run-down and seedy) – the house is being restored so the 'tour' only takes out around the outside of the house – it's going to be quite stunning when it is finished as the outside was pretty interesting of itself. At the end of the tour I inquired about buying a postcard and came across the worst "not my job" I have seen in a long time – the older woman who sold me the ticket told me that they did have postcard but she couldn't sell me one as they belonged to the trust and not the city – apparently she worked for the city and she would not be flexible and take a reasonable sum for one (infact she refused point

blank to sell me one at all) and then got very stroppy and rude with me when I told her that I thought it was bizarre.



So – onwards and upwards and I decided to go to the John Paul Getty Museum of art which involved me trying to get past the part of town where the anti-war protest was going on and that was interesting negotiating a strange town with random diversion for the protest and then the film release. The museum was amazing though – what an astonishing group of buildings – you park at the bottom of a huge hill and there is a monorail which takes you to the top. I left my camera in the car as I assumed that you couldn't take pictures but when I got to the top I realised that you could so I went around a very interesting history of photography exhibition and then walked the mile down the hill to the car - the queue for the down monorail was humongous and I actually got down quicker than I would have if I had waited. Went back up and took as many pictures as my camera battery would allow before looking around at the other exhibitions.



I actually went to the museum originally as I had read in my (as it turned out – very out of date) guidebook that it had some Hockney paintings but they were long gone. The rest of the exhibitions were average at best so onwards again.

I drove down to Venice Beach which was a very odd place – I got there just as it was getting dark and everybody was packing up so I didn't get to see much of the strangeness that is, allegedly Venice Beach but it was odd anyway. Dropped the car off and got a huge discount as the A/C hadn't been working and went to the airport – had the random – “I have a crap-paid job so I am going to be an authoritarian bitch” security guard (better than the German one who felt me up I guess so I should be grateful) who made me take my running shoes off despite the fact that she had let the 3 previous teenagers through without them having to take their shoes off. Now if they beeped then I could see why I would have to put them through the machine but they don't and wouldn't but she just wanted to pick on me and I got pretty pissed off with her – last time I fly out of LAX if I have my way. Flight home overnight was fine and I got into bed around 6am. It was Amanada's hen party on Sunday – brunch at some fancy hotel, which I was horribly late for as I set my alarm clock wrong and then to see “The Full Monty” at the Fox Theatre which was fine if a lot average – then we all parted company at 5pm – it was all very subdued and pretty low-key not what I have come to expect from the UK but I guess it's the way over here. The rest of the week was very quiet and understated and I hardly went out at all – I guess I needed time to catch up again.

The following weekend was Stacey, Marilyn and my trip to Chatanooga to work out what we are going to do there for the Morgan Fall Meet. We drove up and meandered into town for lunch and to check it out – I have never seen a place so dead on a Saturday lunchtime – it was astonishing. We were trying to get to a guesthouse up Lookout Mountain to check it out for the meet and were given the most appalling directions by the flake who ran the place. Eventually we found it and it's pretty cool for the meet and a great location. We checked out a couple of potentials for the dinner and on the way we even saw people hang-gliding off the mountainside – it was quite a sight and we have convinced Stacey and her dad to give it a go in the Fall ! So – drove around a bit more and then we went back to the hotel – we were staying in the Holiday Inn Hotel – otherwise known as the Choo Choo – yup – we had a train carriage as a bedroom – it was a riot as it was a train carriage split into two so we had a long thin room with a teensy bathroom. At this stage I was really struggling with a bad back – not quite sure why but I could barely move so I lay down for an hour – then we were up and out to dinner – we had reservations in a great place overlooking a sculpture garden and the river in the artsy part of town. A great meal and some wine and I was good for a great night's sleep. The following morning we went back to have breakfast in the next-door coffee house to the restaurant and then meandered back to Atlanta. I spent the rest of the way in bed as my back was so sore.

Now this is where the surreality sets in – September last year I had to decline my school 20-year reunion and I was being 'Maid of Dishonour' in the Bahamas but somehow I got put on an e-mail list which was circulated. Anyway, Alice Beer suddenly contacted everybody – she's a minor celebrity and was going to be on 'Celebrity Who Wants to be a Millionaire' and needed some 'phone-a-friends' for science and ancient history – I thought it was hilarious as we have not spoken in 20 years but volunteered jokingly since I didn't think that she could call the US. Anyway – I got an e-mail from her telling me that she was going to put me on her list and to be ready between 2-6pm UK time on Wednesday 9am – 1pm my time – no worries – I was going to Cincinnati that afternoon but was free in the morning so was fine. At this stage I still thought it was an early April 1st joke so paid no attention to it at all. I was dashing around at around 3.30 pm getting all my equipment together for my trip when I get back to my desk and see a 'Voicemail' light on. Before I can pick up the message the phone rings and I answer to "Denise" of . . . 'Who Wants To Be a Millionaire' – it appears that Alice was indeed that desperate! Next thing I have to do is to put the phone down and let it ring 3 times and answer to Chris Tarrant (all US readers – Chris Tarrant is the ORIGINAL Regis Philbin) – I dash over to Ken to get him to man my computer to google the question and then the phone rings "Hi this is Chris Tarrant of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire in the UK" – we chat briefly and then Alice asks the question :
What is the name of the NASA space mission in 2003 that took photographs of the surface of Mars ?

- Star Gazer
- Star Seeker
- Star Dust
- Star something or other (I've slept since and can't remember)

Well, my natural instinct was to say "Hey Alice – I am an engineer – not a rocket scientist" but I resisted and um-med and ah-ed as she repeated the ENTIRE question – I didn't get much thinking time as she finished with 6 sec to go – and Ken is not the man to be on the computer googling – he didn't even get to the Nasa website in 60 seconds...

I said "it's a guess – but Star Dust"

Chris said "good answer" and put the phone down.

Anyway Ken **then** told me that he was sure that it was Star Seeker (so why didn't he say it when I was on air as I had it on loudspeaker) – I got onto the NASA website and checked out "Star Seeker" and found that it existed so I gave up looking. I was then hoping that Alice had not heard me. I sent her an e-mail saying 'Oops' and got a quick one back telling me that NONE of her 'phone-a-friends' had had a clue so I hadn't let her down.

So – all I had to do next was to pick up my Voice message and go to Cinci. The Voice message was Chris Tarrant saying "Some friend Alice – she isn't even there".

Oh well – I doubted that it would go out on air but was thinking it would be amusing for the entire UK Millionaire-listening public to hear “This is Eleanor Nabney of Porsche Cars of North America ..”

Well – the end of the story is that she didn’t hear me, but she eventually guessed “Star Dust” and it was correct – I re-checked the NASA website and there was a Star Dust also – so I was correct and I am glad Ken didn’t say anything after all.

Oh yes . . . then I flew to Cincinnati and **that** was my March.