

## THE PAPERS

By Jim Chapman, EIT

Fred liked his new office. It was a small cozy place packed with bookcases. He had just started with the company after many years of working as a structural engineer for several other firms. The work was challenging, and he usually arrived early each day. He threw himself into the existing project, which required all of his earlier experience and training. Like most people starting in a new place, he gave no thought to the office's previous occupant.

A month flew by. Then one morning as Fred walked in, he suddenly realized that every morning, his trashcan contained several sheets of calculations. Fred had worked late often enough to know that the trashcans were regularly emptied each night by the cleaning crew. Curious, he picked up the night's addition and leafed through them. He noted that they obviously weren't project-related; they looked like student practice calculations, done on scrap paper. He also observed that they were all on hydraulics. He thought for a minute. Everyone in the office was a degreed engineer; none would be doing this type of calculation. Then the phone rang. He dropped the sheets back in the trashcan and was immersed in his project.

The next morning, the usual collection of papers was waiting in the trashcan. Now his curiosity was aroused. He picked them up and shuffled through them. He saw more student-like calculations, this time on economics problems. His curiosity began to rise. Who was doing these, and why?

Each morning he checked the trashcan. It always contained several sheets of calculations, always on a different engineering related topic. He began to inquire about—at first casually, then with a subtle thoroughness. He found that no one routinely worked in the offices at night. Almost all of the workers were fairly new, and nobody could provide anything to help solve the mystery. After about a month of asking around and getting no clues, he just accepted the nightly additions and went on with his business each morning.

One Monday morning, the new desk lamp he had ordered arrived. He eagerly unpacked it, uncoiled the cord, and crawled under the desk to plug it in. There, against the back wall, was a small, well-chewed piece of rawhide dog bone. He wanted to pick it up but hesitated, not knowing what had had it earlier. He wondered how he could have missed it when he first moved in and went under the desk to plug in his clock. Then the phone rang. He quickly plugged in the cord, backed out, and resumed his routine. On Friday, he again remembered the stub of dog bone and briefly considered getting it. However, he had a meeting to attend and didn't want to get dust on his good suit by crawling under the desk.

The next Monday morning, he was more casually dressed for a site visit. He took a tissue and crawled under the desk. He stopped short and stared. The bone was gone! In its place was a small, well-chewed stuffed blue bear. Now he was really mystified! Tuesday morning, he bent down and looked—the toy was still there. On Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday mornings, it was still there.

On Monday morning he plunged into work. About 3 PM, he paused, and the thought entered his head—the toy! He quickly looked. The bone was back! What was going on?

He checked every morning all week. Each day the bone sat there unmoved. By now his curiosity was burning. He had business near the office on Saturday, so he stopped in then and checked. The bone was still there.

On Monday morning, he rushed in and bent down. The stuffed bear was back! Lying next to it was half of a small dog treat. Now he could hardly wait to get to the office each morning and check. The toy and dog treat were there, untouched, all week. He came in on Saturday just to see; they were still there. On Sunday, on his way home from church, he wondered about them. He pulled into the empty lot, put the key in the door, and went into the silent empty office complex. With a mixture of fear and curiosity, he bent down and looked. The rawhide bone was back! Now he had a clue!

On Monday, he checked with office security. Anyone entering during off hours had to use a magnetic card to open the lock on the main door of the office building. This left a record with the office security system. On this particular Saturday, his was the only entry. He muttered something to the security officer about probably just leaving his calculator at home, and quickly left. He would keep this to himself, he decided.

Every morning the rawhide bone stared back at him from under the desk. It was still there on Saturday morning. As he cut grass on Saturday afternoon, he mulled over the mystery. Who—or what—was visiting the office on Saturday? He also wondered if the papers had any connection to this. As he pushed the mower round and round the back yard, he formed a plan.

He waited until his wife was dressed for bed, about 10 PM. Casually, he told her he had a craving for a chocolate-covered cream-filled doughnut; he just had to go out to the 7-11 and get one. She laughed and told him to bring her one too. This was a frequent joke between them.

With a sense of dread and burning curiosity such as he had never felt before, Fred turned the key in the ignition, put the car in gear and headed through the dark streets to the office. At the corner where he turned in, he stopped for the light, and scanned the building. The entire second floor was dark, except for a faint glow from the corner where his office was located! The car horn behind him blasted him back to life and he hurriedly

pulled into the silent, dimly lit parking lot. The only vehicles there were the fleet of company trucks sitting in a row, glowing a ghostly white in the darkness.

Fred's heart pounded as he silently swiped his entry card through the downstairs main lock. The hallway was dimly lit by red exit lights. The tall tropical plants in the two-story foyer cast long grasping shadows on the floor. Gently he placed each foot on the carpeted stairs and noiselessly eased his way upward. Slowly he pushed his key into the lock of the upstairs office door, and with all the caution he could muster, gently turned the key. The tall wooden door silently swung open. Fred peered down the dark hall and saw the glow of lights coming through the full-height glass window of his office. With slow cautious steps, he crossed the office and crept down the opposite hallway, moving down the other side of the collection of dark offices and cubicles. Holding his breath, he slowly peered around the last corner, across the dimly illuminated work area and into his office.

At his desk sat an older man, intently writing figures on back of the scrap paper that Fred saved in a box under his visitor's chair for the same purpose. An old, blocky, brown HP 41 calculator like the one Fred had used fifteen years earlier, and a large, well-worn book sat on the desk before him. The man alternately smiled and frowned as success varied from calculation to calculation. Then Fred's heart leaped. There, sleeping blissfully on its side on a little afghan spread on the floor beside the man, was a small light-brown poodle. As Fred watched, hoping his pounding heart wouldn't be heard, the little dog's legs twitched, as it dreamed of closing in on that squirrel in the yard. Lying beside it was a partly eaten dog treat and the stuffed bear from last week!

Fred stared at the scene, not knowing what to do next. Suddenly, alerted by an unknown sense, the dog abruptly sat up and stared in Fred's direction! It barked once and wagged its tail vigorously. The man at the desk dropped his pencil and turned toward Fred. Time stopped.

Slowly, as Fred watched over what was a few seconds but seemed much longer, both figures faded into transparency. All that was left was the stuffed toy and partly eaten dog treat that lay on the floor. "Stop! Come back! I mean no harm!" Fred shouted. But all he saw now was an empty office. All he heard now was his voice echoing off the dark walls.

Fred rushed into the office. He felt vainly around in the air but touched nothing. He stared at the stuffed toy on the floor and slowly circled around it. He cautiously tapped it with his shoe—nothing happened. He looked at his desk. All that remained on it were the sheets of calculations. Fred looked out his office window at dimly lit walls of cubicles and other office doors. Other than his office lights, only the dim red exit lights glowed. Nothing moved. Fred heard only his rapid breathing and the pounding of his heart. Curiously, he felt no fear. Before leaving, he gently pushed the toy back under the desk. Slowly he walked around the second floor but saw no signs of his visitor.

Abruptly, he realized that he had been there for half an hour. He took one last searching look around the dark office, then went quickly out the door and down the stairs. He drove slowly home while his brain raced at light speed over and over the events of the last half hour. He stopped and mechanically bought doughnuts, numbly picking up whatever was in the case and stopping only when the bag was full. Tonight he didn't savor the aroma as he opened the case nor agonize over which type of chocolate to purchase. What was he going to do now? What could he do? Who could he talk to about this strange series of events?

He pulled into the drive and turned off the motor. As he opened the door, he heard a familiar voice: "Well, did you eat all the doughnuts in the store?" He left the bag on the kitchen table and slowly walked up the stairs to the bedroom. "You won't believe what I have to tell you," Fred started slowly.

His wife listened with wide eyes as Fred told her about the vanishing man and dog, and about the papers that appeared in his trashcan every morning. She could tell that Fred was serious and hadn't been just out running around. This was no late-night sneak trip to Walmart to look at the new calculators! When he finished, he said "Well, what do I do now?" If he told anyone in the office, they might think he was crazy; he was in line for promotion to project manager and didn't want to risk losing out on that. Fred felt that he had reached a dead end. He could think of nothing else to do. However, he knew that his wife did not think like an engineer. She was not always logical and could truly think out of the box. She sat silently staring off into space for a long time, but he could tell that her very original, free-thinking brain cells were in overdrive.

Abruptly, she flashed back to reality. "Who have you asked about the papers?" she said.

"Most of my coworkers."

"How long have they worked there?"

"About as long as I have," Fred replied.

"You need to talk to someone that has been there for quite a while," Mary said. "Find out who was in your office earlier. Find out if anyone died unexpectedly."

By the next morning, Fred had a plan. He remembered that his good friend Ed had worked there for several years before moving on to a larger firm across town. Fred invited him to lunch on Monday. At the restaurant, Fred opened by saying, "What I am about to say must remain solely between us and not be repeated." Ed gave Fred a strange look and nodded in agreement. Over the years, they had occasionally discussed serious business

and personal matters. but this didn't sound to Ed like either one. Fred asked Mary's key question: "Did anyone in the office die unexpectedly within the least few years?"

Ed thought for a minute and slowly replied, "Yes, Joe Jones was killed in a car accident." He paused. "He had your office."

"Tell me about him," Fred said,

Ed thought for a minute and started. "Joe was a good engineer but got a late start at it."

"Would he have any reason to be doing basic engineering calculations like hydraulics and economics?" Fred asked.

"Why, yes," Ed replied. "He was obsessed with passing the first engineering qualification exam—the EIT. He took engineering courses part-time for many years, and getting all that info together at once in his head for the test was difficult. He studied after work every weekday and on Saturday evenings, too. But he was killed before he passed it. Why are you asking me this?"

Fred pressed on. "Did he have a dog?"

By now Ed had a very puzzled look. "Are you writing a book? Yes, he did. He had a small dog that he brought with him every Saturday. It chewed on toys and bones, and snoozed under the desk while he worked. They were both killed in that car accident, going home one Saturday night."

Fred looked intently at Ed. "They are both still there!"

Ed laughed. "You must be seeing ghosts!"

"I am," Fred said. He reached in his pocket, pulled out one of the calculation sheets, and pushed it across the table to Ed.

Ed picked it up and casually glanced at it. "You were always one for jokes," Ed said. Then abruptly he froze and turned pale. His hand began to shake. Sweat beaded on his forehead. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"He's still leaving them in my trash can." Fred said. "How can you be so sure that sheet was written by Joe?"

Ed spoke softly and slowly. "He had horrible writing. I would recognize it anywhere! What do you mean, he's still in your office? What is he doing there?"

“He’s still studying for that damned test!”

That evening, Fred told Mary what he had found out. They both agreed that at least now everything made a certain kind of sense. “What do we do now?” Fred asked. “I feel strange sharing my office with a ghost and his dog.”

Again Mary drifted off in thought. Suddenly she exclaimed, “We’ll get him credit for the test and then he’ll go away! Everyone will be happy—him and us.”

“And don’t forget about the dog,” Fred added.

“But how do we make this happen?” Mary wondered.

Fred thought a while. Finally he said, “One of our vice presidents had gone on to be state transportation commissioner. I’ll bet he knows the right people. And, knowing Phil, they owe him some favors.”

The next morning Fred called Phil and made an appointment to see him. Fred took Ed along, and some of the calculation papers. He explained to Phil about the papers and showed him one. Ed vouched that it was indeed Joe’s writing. Then Fred told Phil what he had seen that weekend.

“What do you want me to do?” Phil asked, somewhat incredulous.

“Get Joe credit for passing the EIT so he’ll stop haunting my office!” Fred said.

Phil thought for a while. “I know the board has never done this, but since Joe is dead, I can’t see where granting a passing score will hurt anyone. I’ll see what I can do. Some of those people owe me, anyway.”

On Friday morning, as Fred went out the door to work, he paused, smiled, and put a couple of dog biscuits in his pocket. At the end of the day, he carefully placed them back under the desk. He chuckled as he drove away. When he checked on Monday morning, calculation papers were still filling the trashcan and only crumbs remained from the biscuits.

Life settled back into a routine. Calculation papers continued to appear every morning. Dog biscuits continued to disappear every weekend. Toys and dog bones swapped places under the desk each weekend. Fred and Mary took frequent late-evening drives by the office on Saturday night and look at the glow from his office lights. Fred respected the occupants’ privacy and never went back in for another look. Two months went by.

One Friday just after lunch, Fred got a call from the front desk. “You have a letter here from the engineering certification board. Aren’t you already licensed?”

“It’s just a renewal form.” Fred hurried down to get it. Back in his office, he quickly slit open the envelope and pulled out the official paper. He smiled as he read, “Dear Joe Jones: We are pleased to inform you that, by resolution of the board, you are granted a passing score on the Engineer-in-Training Exam.”

Fred called Ed. “We did it! I’m going to get a frame!” He went out to Walmart and got a nice one; he didn’t even pause to drool over the calculators. Putting the certificate in the frame, he hung it on the wall right over the desk. As he left that evening, he wondered what the reaction would be.

Fred got to the office extra early Monday morning. The trashcan was empty. He quickly looked under the desk; no toy was to be seen. He called Mary. “We did it!” he exclaimed.

After about a week, Fred began to miss the calculation papers. As the weeks passed, he missed leaving dog biscuits on Friday and finding crumbs the next Monday morning. He missed the ever-changing assortment of dog toys that had appeared under his desk from the weekends. But all good things must come to an end, he thought. He was glad Joe and his dog could move on to better things and not have to worry with that pain-in-the-neck test.

One Monday morning two months later, Fred hurried into the office to start work. He froze—the trashcan was filled with calculation papers again! He dropped to his knees and looked under the desk—the rawhide dog bone was back! He took out the papers and scanned the figuring. This is strange, he thought. These are different. These are all civil engineering topics—concrete, steel, and geotechnical things.

Then Fred laughed aloud. Now Joe was studying for the civil professional engineering exam—the last exam needed for a license! Smiling, Fred made a mental note to buy more dog biscuits.