

# RETURN OF THE DEAD RINGER

"HELLO, can you hear me?  
*Is there anyone there?"*

My desperate yells into the battered receiver of an old black telephone were met only with the thick silence of a pitch-black Irish night.

The ornate contraption in my Dublin residence had always been dead: disconnected, numberless and cableless – or so I thought. But it suddenly gave out two piercing rings at midnight, the moment I turned 50.

It was one of my life's spookiest experiences, which I recounted back in issue 11. At the time I appealed to the learned *E&T* readership to help me explain that seemingly inexplicable episode.

The feedback has exceeded all expectations, and my email inbox – which, unlike the haunted phone, is very much alive – has been chirruping merrily away at the influx of readers' versions of what might have happened on that dark and rainy night.

## BERIA EXPLANATION

"Dear Vitali, I am so excited. I had always thought that every one of those 'Beria' phones had been destroyed," wrote David Cawsey from Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, referring to Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria, the chief of the Soviet security under Stalin. "You were too young then, but I well remember those days in Russia in the early 1950s. Ordinary people did not have phones, which were reserved for the apparatchiks, especially for hearing orders from the leadership.

"I now know roughly how the system worked. The early phones were basically crystal set radios, though the arrival of transistors resulted in a single-stage reflex receiver version. But the clever part was the ringer. The power source was a spring, with an extremely

delicate and sensitive latch actuated by a high-Q resonator. Quite incredibly, the energy in the radio transmission was enough to trigger the latch, releasing the spring which rang the bell. The slightest knock would trigger it. Of course the Beria was receive only – the leadership did not want anyone to talk back!

"But its days were numbered. Beria himself was condemned to execution and the anti-Beria hysteria led to orders that everything connected with him – including the phones – was to be destroyed.

"Your father must have been disobedient, and the phone remained in your home, waiting for calls which never came. If you look at that phone of yours, you will find that the handset rest cleverly serves as a winder for the spring. Perhaps you and your son hurled those drinking glasses into the fireplace in the traditional way, and the vibration was enough to trigger the phone..."

Well, what a story! The only discrepancy is that the dead ringer was in Dublin, not in Kharkov. Nor had it ever been in my possession, but was merely a mantelpiece decoration at my son's rented flat.