

The Sailing Trip

Monday, and I'm trying to look forward to it, I've taken the Friday as a days leave and I've carefully planned the work to maximise my efforts and, hence, minimise the overwhelming feeling of guilt. Why, at the age of 41, I should feel bad for taking a well deserved day off, I can't explain, but, deep inside me, the ever present guilty feeling persists.

I have crammed the remaining four days of the working week with vitally important meetings, planning sessions and even a 121 with my boss, and to top it all I'm spending the Thursday evening in town entertaining an important customer. No one could have done more to set the scene for a totally guilt free long weekend of sailing.

I thought of cancelling, this would make my wife happy, she represents the flip side of my life coin, work on one side, wife and family on the other, which ever way the coins spun it always lands guilty side up.

'You can afford to take a day off to go sailing with your mates then?' not a question, a accusation, delivered with maximum force from behind clenched teeth. I thought about cancelling but then I'd be letting my mates down and then they would make me feel guilty.

Why am I going? Why am I creating all these emotional hurdles? I don't even like sailing! I like the company of the lads, not more than the company of my wife, that's different. Their friendship is unconditional - no strings attached, my wife's company brings with it baggage, lots of heavy, wheeled suitcases full to bursting with problems and guilt.....

On the home front, the on-suite is too small and in need of repair, the ceiling has mould growing on it, the electric shower needs replacing - the temperature fluctuates between a spine numbing luke warm and a heart attack inducing cold, the

taps on the wobbly basin spin round, the loo seat creaks and smells of wee (previous owners). The small doorway which leads from it into the attic space is the gateway to a dark and unpleasant other world, mice live here, I saw the droppings when I was hiding away the Christmas decorations for another year, but I can't tell my wife or she would have to move, instantly, we've moved ten times in eighteen years of married life, I really couldn't face moving again. The house is too small, it's like a dolls house, a very expensive dolls house which I will have to work until I'm 65 to pay for.

We bought the house because of the location and forgot about the eight occupants that would have to squeeze into it; me and the wife, our three teenage children and the three dogs. Fortunately the two boys, long haired, multi-pierced aliens are seldom there, they're too busy finding places away from the home where they can drink and smoke and probably take drugs and God knows what else. My talented, but dizzy daughter, a constant source of joy, is on the verge of going the way of the boys. Nice things like spending time with her Dad are being replaced with nasty things, like spending time with boys who look and probably act like her brothers. Of the three dogs, the puppy shits in the lounge on the new carpet (three years interest free credit) and rips great holes in the new three piece suite (three years interest free credit). The big, old, dog farts a lot, the persistent smell fills the room and is only slightly more odorous than his breath and the middle dog smells OK and shits outside and is small enough to make the house look in scale and he is, hence, my best friend and companion. Whenever possible I escape with him to the local pub where he is more popular than me.

The sailing trip has come at the right time, I need the break and it won't cost much. Just as well as Christmas is over and needs paying for and summer holidays are being talked about and will need paying for - more things to feel guilty about. I've told my wife that I won't be going to France again, to emphasise the point I tore the French

section out of the travel brochure and used it as floor covering for where the puppy is meant to pee at night, but never does. To my surprise the following day a large brown turd had found it's way onto a short break in the Dordogne - I could have sworn the middle dog did it - a show of solidarity with me over the French.

I've been on many such sailing trips in the past, in the winter when the seas are mountainous, black and icy cold. Sometimes, we've been the only sailing craft for as far as the eye can see and the endless hours of monotonous 'bobbing about' have been willed away by thinking up new ways to keep warm and comfortable. Why is it, that sailing craft, where by their very purpose it is not possible to escape, afford no on deck comfort?. The glass fibre moulded cockpit is computer designed for full size 'Playmobile' people, who are able to sit bolt upright without the need to wriggle and squirm for the optimum position and who, once comfortable, don't then have the need to instantly pee, a ritual for anyone non plastic that involves the removal of thirty layers of theoretically waterproof clothing to reach a frozen and shrunken penis.

Wednesday and I'm finding it harder to look forward to the sailing trip. As expected, my highly planned, meeting packed, week is collapsing around me. Unexpected demands are being forced on me and deadlines, which at the start of the week seemed somewhere in the distant future, have been dramatically brought forward - Friday is now the deadline for everything that is important to the company, the universe and me.....

'Of course you will be on hand in case of any last minute hitches with the 'Bluebird' bid' my boss had barked at me, having completely forgotten I had booked (well in advance and following all the correct procedures) the Friday as holiday.

I thought of cancelling, this would make my boss happy. There was never a good or acceptable time to take a break.

'How could you possibly take time off when.....'

Insert any of the following:

It's the end of the month/quarter/year

Half the company is sick

Redundancies are being discussed

We need to work on a project, tender etc.etc.etc.

..... but then I remembered that I had planned to take a customer out on the Thursday night.

On the previous occasion I had taken this particular customer out I had been in no fit state to work the following day, plans of a quiet drink and a brief discussion of work with a light meal and the last train home had, inevitably, degenerated into a full on drinking session. During the session the customer, getting loud and more aggressive with each round of drinks (I bought), harangued me with talk of the inefficiency and general uselessness of me and my company, when we eventually broke out of the pub, fell into a cab, and arrived two hours late at our very expensive (his choice) and totally inappropriate restaurant. He was surprised that the staff were somewhat less than welcoming (my fault), I had tried to make a break for the train and freedom, only to be told by the customer that he would like to go somewhere else, somewhere with girls!.

This time I've planned ahead, we're meeting for drinks at 9.00pm, no meal, and I've told him that I have to leave at 11.00pm to get to the airport in readiness for a fictitious early morning flight.

Friday, the day of the sailing trip, I am in a small room in an hotel somewhere near Paddington, I am unable to lift my head from my pillow and the alcohol induced pain is, unfortunately, not obscuring the memories of the previous night. My last meeting on Thursday, a 4.30pm put back to 5.30pm had a venue change to a nearby

pub, where my customer found it more conducive to vent his anger over an early evening drink. He ordered vodkas, doubles, popped two brightly coloured pills in his mouth and swallowed them down with the spirit. He ordered another round of double vodkas and kept his hands in his pockets expecting me to pay for all the drinks, which of course I did. An hour later I knew more than I wanted to know about his company and him and was glad when he drained the last drops from his glass and disappeared into the night, leaving me with four double vodkas on board and two hours to kill before I was due to meet my guests for the evening.

What do you do when you're on your own in London with nothing to do for two hours and you're feeling slightly pissed? Obviously, you go for a drink, or at least that's what I did. I know when I've had too much - I buy cigarettes. I've never been a proper smoker, but, with sufficient alcohol I am quite capable of puffing my way through a packet of Marlboro Lights in an evening.

Having drunk a pint of Guinness and smoked two cigarettes from my overpriced packet of 16 from the pub vending machine I decided to walk to the rendezvous pub, stopping for liveners at other watering holes on route. When I eventually arrived at my destination, my guests for the evening were already there, my usual contact had been joined by two others a guy and a girl. I remembered attempting to order a round of drinks and offering them cigarettes from my heavily depleted pack, beyond that the rest of the night was still a blur.

Lifting my head gingerly off the pillow and easing myself off the bed I searched the small hotel room for clues. My wallet, lying open on the dressing table come desk, was empty of notes and I remembered there had been £80 in it at the start of the night, £80 between four people over the entire evening was probably about right, I doubt if the customers had offered to fund so much as a packet of crisps. The section which had previously contained crisp £20 notes was now crammed with

crumpled receipts, I emptied them on the bed and nervously unravelled each memory.

Bar tab from 'Duke of Wellington' for £62.80 bearing my credit card number, two taxi stubs one for £20 and one for £30 at least I would have paid cash for these.

'New Dancing Lion' name at the top of a very long till receipt, I let my eyes follow the lines of Chinese food and drink, judging by the numerous repeat entries for Ting Sau beer and endless dishes we must have been joined by half a dozen other people at the meal. This would certainly have been born out by the £280 total which included a £35 tip - over generous behaviour - another sign of me being drunk.

I had no recollection of the meal or any uninvited guests, but was feeling the after effects of the bottles of Ting Sau.

I felt sick and ran the three steps to the tiny on-suite where I knelt down on my shirt and trousers, discarded there the night before, and threw up into the toilet. Running total £482.80 I thought as I splashed cold water on my face and tried in vain to get the smell of Chinese food and cigarettes off my nicotine stained fingers.

I picked up my trousers, two crisp £20 notes and two more slips of paper fell out. Relief at the running total falling by £40 turned to panic when I examined the first scrap of paper, a coat receipt from a nightclub. The second, an advice note from a cash dispenser, I squinted at the number and winced, £200. The running total including the £160 spent on, God knows what at the 'club', stood at £642.80, of which I could legitimately claim reasonable meal expenses for myself and my three guests - £100 max. I felt sick, this time mentally, I thought of all the good honourable things I could have spent £542.80 of my overdraft on.

'Knock knock'

'Room service'

'Eh, just a minute, hold on' the master key turned in the lock

'Hold on please'

'Oh sorry'

'Sorry'

In the car and on-route for Southampton and sailing. My mobile phone is on the passenger seat, I haven't turned it on since I left the office for my 5.30pm meeting. I put the earpiece in my ear and call in to collect my messages

You have five new messages

Beep

'Hi Mike, just to let you know we haven't received the faxed order for 'Bluebird' yet!'

Message left at 6.30pm yesterday

Beep

'Hi, it's me, the puppy got into the loft through our bloody on-suite and brought out a dead mouse - I can't live like this I want to move. When are you coming home?'

Message left at 7.43pm yesterday

beep

'Mike you old tosser, thanks for a great night, although it probably wasn't a good idea to insist Anne our head buyer come to Strigfellows - you should have left it at Chinese, she enjoyed that, I don't think she was very taken with your references to her pole dancing in the club! Ha ha'

Message left at 8.45am today

Beep

'It's 10.45 - where the bloody hell are you, I've had a call from a very uptight woman saying we can forget getting any business out of Bluebird - says you are a

disgrace to the company - call me as soon as you get this message'

Message left at 10.45am today

Beeep

'Hey me old mate, sorry about this - I tried calling you last night but kept getting your voice mail. Anyway leaving you a message now - I've had to cancel the sailing trip - there's a force 10 blowing up - we'll reschedule in the next few weeks - sorry to let you down'

Message left at 11.10am today

You have no more messages

The quay was deserted, only seagulls, being flung about by the strengthening breeze and halyards slapping against the aluminium mast of the yachts, for company. On the rain spattered deck of 'English Rose' the engine key was in it's usual hiding place in the locker with the broken padlock, clipped through the clasp for show.

I left the shelter of the bobbing yachts on their pontoon berths, the cold wind cut through the thin cotton of my business suit, the mobile phone in my inside jacket pocket rang. Who would it be?, my boss, phoning to sack me?, my wife calling to say she had put the house on the market? an irate customer? I tossed the phone, still ringing into the water, pointed the nose of the little boat at the white horses dancing around 'The Needles' and prepared to set a course for France - no one would think of looking for me there.