Unfulfilled Potential

Neil Boss

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wonderful, amazing, beautiful children, William and Jessica. Through the pages of this book, you will always know how much you are loved. It was written for you. You now have this to share with your children and your grandchildren. Through this, they will always know me as your Dad and the person that I am.

This book is also a 'thank you' to all of the friends and colleagues I have met in my life and who have allowed me to share my good and bad times with them. Without our families and our friends, our lives are little more than an existence with little meaning and no soul. Fortunately, that has never been my life and it has been one full of the best things. For that, I am eternally grateful.

CHAPTER 4

WORKING LIFE

**"It is the working man who is the happy man.
It is the idle man who is the miserable man."**

Benjamin Franklin

"The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play."

Arnold J. Toynbee

There are hundreds of quotes about work and I have deliberated long and hard about which ones to select to open this chapter. We spend the majority of our lives working so it would be a miserable existence if our work did not make us happy and enjoy what we do. I count myself lucky that, for the most part, I have enjoyed all the jobs that I have done, not always lucrative or intellectually fulfilling, but usually fun. Part of this will be down to the person I am, a readiness to laugh easily and to attract people to me who enjoy my sense of humour, mixed with an ability to form relationships which bring out the best in me and the people I work with.

I have always had what is commonly described as a "strong work ethic" which probably means I have never been shy of getting up off my arse and earning some money. I think this is something that was instilled in me from an early age, watching both of my parents work to support our family through times which were hard in the early years. If I have no qualms about being described as "working class" then I think I have justified the "working" bit although I am now probably well entrenched in the broader band of the nondescript middle class. It is an achievement to have reached the age of sixty and never been unemployed which, in these days of cutbacks and redundancies, suggests that I may have some talents that are valued by my employers. Either that or I have just been bloody lucky, probably a mixture of both.

I can't remember if I had any particular desire to be an astronaut as a child, even though another Neil had been the first man to set foot on the moon, and the typical boyhood aspirations to be a doctor or train driver passed me by. Nowadays, youngsters probably aspire to be investment bankers or hedge fund managers in the hope of making a stash and retiring by the age of thirty. I probably had a desire to play for Manchester United and it was a major oversight by their talent scouts that they overlooked me. Perhaps a boy with bamboo legs and a limited talent for ball control was not what they were looking for. The dismal performance of my team during my teenage years suggested they could have made use of my talents but they must have missed me and I slipped through the net. My Dad once advised me that the best job is one that I would like to do as a hobby so, for a time, I wished I was a water bailiff and could spend my life fishing (see Hobbies) but this ambition was short-lived. Applying this theory of hobby/job to my Dad, who was a fireman, would have made him a pyromaniac in his spare time so I am not sure this theory holds water.

Fortunately, the days of sending children down the mines or up chimneys had come to an end so my first experience of work (apart from "Bob-a-Job Week" in the Cubs) was as a newspaper boy for the princely sum of £3.00 per week. Getting up at 6.30 a.m. to cycle to Preston Road station, pick up my bag of papers and get my round done in an hour before school was tough, especially when it was raining. Sundays were the worst day with a much heavier bag (Times, Observer, Telegraph) followed by Fridays with most of the houses on my round taking the Jewish Chronicle as well as their usual daily. I didn't last long in this role and the lure of another hour in bed cut my first career short.

By the age of fifteen, Mum was working at the Acacia Employment Agency in Harrow and was in the fortunate position of seeing temporary holiday jobs come in and she used her inside knowledge to get me and my friend, Mark Hyams, a job at the North Thames Gas Board in South Harrow, next to the gasometer, working for a fierce but kind woman called Pearl Trimmer. I can't remember my salary but somewhere around £40 per week would be about right and there is nothing wrong with a bit of nepotism. £40 bought a lot of LP's (vinyl) which was my main outlay at the time. The job was mainly administrative, filing, booking gas engineer visits to irate customers and sorting out complaints. In the days of being a state monopoly, British Gas had clearly never heard of customer service and I was amazed at how many people one company could piss off simultaneously.

The chief benefit of working in a state monopoly are the perks which mainly

came in the form of food. In the morning, the trolley would deliver tea and toast to my desk and, in the afternoon, would serve tea and a range of cakes and other sweet fancies. The loss of the tea trolley from the workplace to be replaced by machines which serve shit drinks has been sad to observe. Much of UK Plc's decline as an economic force can be put down to the demise of the tea trolley. One of my thoughts for my retirement is to resurrect the tea trolley in the workplace, enabling me to spend my time baking and rejuvenating the country's economy at the same time. Given that Deloitte has just spunked £140m up the wall on refitting out our new offices, a few grand spent on bringing back the tea trolley would be peanuts. I might even volunteer for the job myself.

Between the visits of the tea trolley, we would go to the canteen which served good wholesome food which came with gravy and the puddings were swamped in custard. My love of canteen food started at British Gas and it is always a benchmark to judge an employer by along with the quality of toilet facilities. The customer service at British Gas may have been shit but they knew how to feed their employees.

The other event of note from my time at British Gas was winning the weekly office raffle on two consecutive weeks. If you spend your life filing or getting it in the neck from angry customers as the majority of the women in our office did, the Friday afternoon raffle was something to look forward to. What you didn't want was the fifteen year old temp winning it!! Unfortunately, I was too young to collect my winnings, a bottle of Blue Nun or Mateus Rosé, and I had to be content with a box of mint Matchmakers. If winning it once was a novelty, repeating the act the following week just rubbed salt in the open wounds. I think Pearl found it funny and was obviously not too upset as she invited me back for another year of tea trolley frolics.

In the Easter holidays of my Fifth year at school, when I should have been revising for my 'O' levels, my Uncle Kenny got me a job as a roadie for Pink Floyd who were rehearsing at Elstree Studios in Borehamwood before going on tour in the UK. At the time, Pink Floyd were just about the biggest band in the world (a toss-up between them and Led Zeppelin) and whose albums *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here* are two of my favourites (see Music). My job involved spraying stencils on packing crates for each member of the band whilst gazing in awe at Dave Gilmour's collection of Fender Stratocasters and Nick Mason's drum kit. Occasionally I would tap around on Nick's kit until one day he caught me and told me to "fuck off". I took it as an honour

to be told to "fuck off" by Nick Mason. The chief benefit of enduring hours of solvent abuse stencilling (I know there was worse narcotic abuse going on behind the scenes) was waiting for "the Floyd" to turn up to rehearse which was usually at about seven o'clock in the evening. I have seen Pink Floyd three times in my life, including Knebworth, but nothing was as good as being about six feet from the PA system as Dave Gilmour played the solo from *Wish You Were Here* or Roger Waters played the opening bass notes from *Money*. Nobody comes that close to their gods, not even Jehovah's Witnesses. At the end of the last night of rehearsals, we started loading the packing crates on to huge trucks as the band were set to go off on tour. The tour manager, appropriately named Arthur Max, gave me a wad of notes and told me to go with a driver into Borehamwood and buy some "Wimpys" for the crew. Apparently, I was the only person who would not steal the cash to turn it into drugs. Prior to the burger invasion by Ronald Macdonald, the take away fast food of choice was a Wimpy, a series of franchise operations usually run by Turkish people. Although Macdonalds gave Wimpy a real kicking once they arrived in the UK, the product is infinitely inferior and there is nothing quite like the taste of a Wimpy burger. I turned up at the Wimpy in Borehamwood at 11.00 at night and told the man behind the counter

"I would like 120 cheeseburgers and 60 portions of chips please!"

The man with a greasy white overall and oily hair to match stared at me in disbelief.

"Are you joking?"

Once I had reassured him that my request was honest and sincere, he set about flipping patties like his life depended on it and it was probably the biggest order that the Wimpy in Borehamwood had ever seen. Dave, Roger, Rick and Nick tucked into them with the rest of us before setting off to blow the minds of the UK with the new album. Unfortunately, I was too old for the lazy teacher's opening lesson of term, "What Did You Do In Your Holidays?" which was always an easy get out and delayed any actual teaching. Saying that I had been a roadie for Pink Floyd would have been a Top Trump over "I visited my grandparents in Broadstairs" or "I watched my Dad try to relay our drive for the fourth consecutive summer."

By the time I got to the Lower Sixth, I had made my decision to be a marine biologist, heavily influenced as I have said, by the programmes of Jacques Cousteau. On a routine fire prevention visit to Northwick Park Hospital, my

Dad walked around the Clinical Research Centre and saw the laboratories and rooms full of rodents being subjected to experiments that would have animal liberationists foaming at the mouth. He enquired about a summer holiday job for his son who was studying Biology for 'A' level and helped me with my application. I was readily accepted and, in the summer of 1975, started as a lab technician at the Clinical Research Centre. My mornings were spent cleaning out rooms full of rodents and afternoons were spent cleaning laboratories, making agar plates for testing poo for nasty bacteria or assisting the vet with minor surgery. There was a clear ranking system within the CRC and your level of seniority was denoted by the animals you looked after. As a result, I started on mice and aspired to be on monkeys. Every other day I would change boxes and boxes of mice and would marvel at the more bizarre ones with no hair or enormous ears. They were probably being used to find a cure for baldness or a radical new design for hearing aids. I didn't have a moral stance about experimentation on mice and I was just doing my job. I am sure that people with a different view would say the same about the guards in Nazi concentration camps but I only saw them as mice and ones that bit me at that.

After three weeks on mice, I was promoted to guinea pigs (which are roasted as street food in Peru so a cosy bed in the CRC was probably a cushier number) and soon afterwards continued my upward trajectory to rabbits. I reached the zenith of my career as a lab technician by spending my final two weeks on monkeys and farm animals. Apparently, piglets suffer from Respiratory Distress Syndrome in the same way as human babies so a lot of research is done on pregnant sows. Probably like most mothers to be, sows are incredibly bad tempered and, on a couple of occasions, I had to jump over the wall of the pen to avoid being savaged by a demented pig. The other main highlight of my time as a lab technician was witnessing the breakout of a crazed rhesus monkey, driven bonkers by months of caged confinement. Having bitten through the Wellington boot of its keeper, it charged around the room from cage to cage whipping its compatriots into a frenzy until it was finally shot by the vet.

In the afternoons, I assisted the vet with some minor operations and was amazed at the variety of fauna kept by the local residents of Harrow and Wembley. As a slight departure from the theme of this chapter, I shouldn't really have been surprised as the people who backed on to the Grunfeld's in Vista Way started off keeping ducklings, moved on to an otter and finally ended up by keeping a fully grown puma in their back garden. When our football went over the fence, we were not in a rush to climb over to get it back. For a while, I contemplated being a vet and performing cataract operations on iguanas but

the lure of the ocean was pulling me in a different direction and my devotion to joining Jacques and the mini-sub boys was absolute.

I have already mentioned my job in the halcyon summer of 1976 as a Parks Playleader in Roe Green Park, Kingsbury. With my 'A' levels completed, a university place to look forward to and a love-life that, although complicated, was relatively harmonious, my job as Chief Funbringer to the latch-key kids of Kingsbury completed the set. This was not a job that came via either of my parents and I applied and got the job on my own merits. I did not have to go through a Child Register nor possess any qualifications for working with children which probably made me more qualified to do so. Nobody was suspected of being a paedophile. It was just child's play. The downside to the job was having to wear a bright red T-shirt with "PARKS PLAYLEADER" emblazoned on the back and having to walk along Kingsbury Road every day to be ridiculed by the unemployed oiks loitering outside the station. The upsides to the job were numerous. Start at 09.30 (not too early) and finish the morning at 12.30. Hour and half for lunch and start back again at 14.00 through to 17.00. If, as the quote says

"The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play"

this job had it all.

Brent Council provided us with a Portakabin full of sporting equipment, arts and crafts materials, games and other activities to pre-occupy the children rather than have them wandering the streets causing mayhem and upsetting old people. There were similar set-ups in other parks in the less salubrious areas of Brent where the Portakabins were set alight or broken into but nothing like that happened in sleepy Kingsbury. We had a team of five playleaders but I was the only one who wanted to do sport so I had a monopoly on the fun, playing football in the morning and cricket in the afternoon. It was really just an extension of my childhood growing up in Woodcock Park but with proper goalposts and no Brenda Baldwin to distract me. Perhaps, if the scouts from Man. Utd had seen me in my prime as a Parks Playleader, they would have regretted their decision not to snap me up as a schoolboy. I would score a hat-trick every game, brushing aside the feeble tackles of the six-year olds and smashing the ball past a terrified eight-year old goalie with learning difficulties. I saw myself in the mould of Franz Beckenbauer, the German captain, who strolled about the pitch, seemingly doing nothing but would then inject a moment of pure class to set up or score a wonder goal.

Lunch was either a trip to Diana Dover's house for a sandwich (see

Relationships) or a short run down to the Wimpy Bar for a burger. In the afternoon, goalposts were cleared away and the cricket pitch set up. In the true spirit of the game, I would open both the batting and the bowling, usually only retiring when thirsty or being caught on the boundary attempting another six over long-on. If my account of my time as a Parks Playleader sounds completely self-indulgent, it wasn't and I know we had some real fun with the children that summer before I departed for Bangor.

My self-enforced exit from Bangor pushed me into the world of full-time employment earlier than anticipated. I have already described my success and ultimate failure in the entrance exam for Express Dairies, a twist of fate which led me to becoming a petrol-pump attendant at Central Sports Cars, a BP garage and second hand car dealership on the Kingsbury Road. The operation was run by John O'Shea, a bearded, car dealer spiv in a sheepskin coat and his chubby younger brother, Tony. You just knew that John had bullied Tony for their entire lives and he wasn't stopping now. For the meagre sum of £37.50 per week, I got to be bullied by John as well as by Tony, got chapped hands from dispensing diesel and generally stank of oil. Apart from my nefarious schemes which I shall come to later, the only upsides were getting to drive John's customized XJ6 to pick up his wife and her shopping for which she was always more than grateful. As MILFs go, Mrs. O'Shea was pure North London trash but she knew how to recline the seats in a Jag.

I also got to work with George Bryant, a thick set man who was thick in all ways and had probably achieved a low rank in the Army at some point. I quickly came to realise from some of George's anti-Semitic and racist comments that he was not fully in favour of a multi-racial society and certainly not in Kingsbury. As it turned out, he was a member of the National Front, stood in the local elections on this platform and spent many an hour trying to convince me that the Holocaust never happened. In the spirit of being work colleagues and having to get along, I tolerated George's opinions without riposte but, deep down, I thought he was a total wanker. My stingy wages (£37.50 per week before tax and NI) were meant to be augmented from meagre tips coming from checking the oil, water and tyre pressures for customers who often took liberties by thinking this was a free service and would either give me nothing or a miserly 5p as a tip. I quickly came to notice that whenever a lorry came in to be filled up with diesel, George would rush out to serve them. This was usually followed by a token gift of 20p pressed in to my hand with a nod and a wink. I thought that George was just trying to build rapport with me in the hope that it would turn me into an overt Nazi but his game was soon blown when I was working

the late shift on my own and a lorry came in and I filled up the tank. As I was filling out the slip for his diesel charge card, the driver said

"Stick another ten gallons on that son would you?"

"Sorry, I don't understand."

"You put down another ten gallons on the slip which my company pays for. You take £8 out of the till and we split that 50:50 (petrol was 80p a gallon in 1976!!). That's £4 for you and £4 for me. Everybody wins. Geddit?"

I quickly calculated that £4 was more than 10% of my weekly wage and this supplement could be the difference between a good night in The Green Man and a great one. I processed the transaction and pocketed the money immediately realising that Gorgeous George had been shafting me all along and keeping the lion's share of the illicit money for himself. I set out to rectify this situation immediately and put in place a plan to redress the imbalance and give him a dose of his own medicine. In return for greater volume, I decided to split the takings 40:60 with the lorry drivers provided they came in during my shifts ("earlies" one week, "lates" the next) and suddenly my new fledgling side-line started to take off. By the time of my dismissal for being late, I was bringing in over £100 per week from this nefarious and illegal activity and the revenue stream for George had all but dried up. He would often scratch his stupid block shaped head and say ruefully

"I don't know what's happened to the lorry tips. They seem to have all dried up."

Every now and then I would let him have one and take the 20p from him gratefully. If only the stupid, racist twat knew he was being scammed. Abused and bullied by the O'Shea's, I set out to rip them off with as many dodgy scams as I could, from swapping wheels on cars in the showroom with those from cars owned by people in the adjacent flats, to winding back the counter on the car wash and pocketing the money. All in all, I think I was probably earning about £150 a week and my salary became my spending money and the tips were my savings. On emptying out my pockets at home with bundles of notes spilling out, Mum would say

"Wow, looks like you had a good day with the tips." If only .....

If I feel guilty about this now, it is only because it isn't a very good example to set my children and I hope they never adopt the same approach in their working careers. In my defence, I hate racists so I think George deserved to get shafted and the O'Shea brothers were stupid thugs who needed to be taught a

lesson, not that they ever noticed. They fired me for being fifteen minutes late on a Saturday morning so it showed the loyalty they had to me was nil. Same went for me back. I spent the rest of the summer living off of my ill-gotten gains and my need for employment did not kick in again until after my first year at Westfield College and my employment by Brent Council as a dustman.

My debut as a dustman in the summer of 1978 was temporarily halted by an administrative oversight in the council offices which meant there was not an immediate position for me. As a result, I had to take an interim, but no less challenging role as a road sweeper. If the technical qualifications for being a road sweeper are not high, I did not let this get in the way of trying my hardest to do the best job possible and I doubt if the roads in Harlesden, not an area noted for its cleanliness, have ever been swept so well. If there has been anything that has characterised my working life, it has always been a desire to do a job as well as I can and not to cut corners. To this end, even the corners of Harlesden's streets were swept so well they looked like The Mall on Trooping the Colour day. Fortunately, a position soon became available "on the dust" and I turned up at Alperton Depot the following Monday to take up my intended role. After signing in, I was immediately enlisted as a member of the Transport & General Workers Union (TGWU), told to go up to the canteen, get a breakfast and await further instructions. It turned out that we were in dispute with "management" over payments for working in the rain and we were on strike. It took a day to resolve the "Rain Money" strike during which time I got sent home on full pay but told to return the following day as the dispute would be resolved quickly which it was.

The next day I joined up with my fellow "dustmates" on a round in Willesden and Harlesden which I was informed was one of the best as it was mainly all shops and not too much residential. The significance of this was not immediately apparent but soon became clear when I realised that dust rounds are run like mafia operations where local shopkeepers are intimidated into making additional cash payments for clearing away their excess rubbish. One of my team members had the specific role of collecting the "protection" money and woe betide any shopkeeper who tried to welch on the deal. To be fair to my fellow dustmates, it was a highly equitable and fair process with all "tips" shared out at the end of the day. If you did the work on the day, you got your share, simple as that. This is in stark contrast to working at Deloitte where the people who do the most work get the least money. Working with my new mates also saw a change in my reading habits which changed on the first morning in the back of the dustcart.

"What's that you're reading College Boy?" said Mick the Gaffer

"It's The Guardian" I replied.

"Well you can fucking stop reading that right now. We don't have any fucking Guardian readers in this team. Buy a copy of The Sun tomorrow. In the meantime, here's some stuff you can read."

Mick tossed me a few copies of some tatty jazz-mags which were clearly not in mint condition and had been through several previous owners, not all of whom had been careful. It turned out that the public toilet attendants on our round gathered up the discarded wank-mags and gave them to our team when we stopped for a pee. Out of curiosity, I tried to look through my new reading material but was prevented from doing so by a number of pages being stuck together. Chastened by the experience, I made sure I turned up the next day with a copy of The Sun rolled up in my back pocket.

After my early newspaper faux-pas, I was accepted as one of the gang and went on to spend the rest of the summer terrorising the shopkeepers and residents of N.W.10 as we extorted more money from them. As the new boy on the team, I was keen to be accepted although we were worlds apart on many dimensions. However, I have the knack of finding the right level to get on with people and was able to work out the Lowest Common Denominator on which to engage my team mates in conversation. As long as we stuck to football (usually the merits of West Ham) or breasts (that day's "Page Three" was the subject of much debate), I never got into hot water or they felt out of their depth. For weeks I had admired the jackets worn by the dustman with the leather insert across the shoulders to cushion the impact of a 25lb aluminium bin colliding with your back and shattering your spine so I was proud to be given my own jacket before I left. I wore it like I had been awarded the Victoria Cross. What this taught me at a fairly young age was I had an ability to get on with people from all backgrounds, an asset that is not bestowed on all of us, and one that would stand me in good stead for the rest of my working life.

In my trophy jacket, I returned to my job as a dustman for Brent Council the following summer and picked up where I had left off the previous year. I bought my copy of The Sun, signed my TGWU forms and became a member of the union and went upstairs for a full English breakfast at a cost of 25p in the works canteen. I was pleased to see that the "in-cab" reading materials had remained suitably low-brow but with a few new titles added. Clearly, the perverts on our round had discovered the merits of Asian Babes. With a stomach full of the greasiest food imaginable, I re-joined my old crew and we set off for

Harlesden. The round had been changed slightly and our first port of call on a hot Monday morning was MacFisheries, a chain of fishmongers that was popular in the 60's and 70's. The heavy aluminium bins were full of fish and chicken guts left over from the previous Saturday which had stewed and fermented over the weekend and had the potency of Zyklon B. It took two of us to lift the heavy bins and discharge their contents into the rotating drum at the back of the dustcart. As soon as the fishy entrails hit the mixer, a putrefying stench assaulted my nostrils and I threw up my recently consumed breakfast directly into the gutter in Harlesden High Street. From that point on, I never had breakfast on a Monday morning until after MacFisheries and I pitied the person who had inherited my road sweeping round and had to deal with my vomit.

The *cosa nostra* of our team remained in full swing and we had now added the gathering of scrap metal to our list of side-lines which continued to include extortion from shopkeepers and local residents. One day we were flagged down by a man standing at the end of a drive of a large house in Brondesbury, one of the nicer areas in Brent. We all got out of the truck and the gaffer went off to negotiate.

"Yes mate? What can we do for you?"

"Would you empty my garage of all the rubbish in it?"

We took a look in the garage which was full of bundles of newspapers and a couple of wardrobes. The gaffer stroked his chin and sucked in air through his teeth.

"That's gonna be fifty quid mate."

"Fine, let's get on with it."

For half an hour, the five of us set up a line to empty out the contents of the garage and with the job done, the gaffer went to collect our fees. From the back of the cab, we heard raised voices and went round to see him having a heated exchange of views.

"Look mate. We agreed £50 and that is what you have to pay."

"No, we agreed £40 and that's all you're getting."

"I know what we agreed and it was £50. Now don't be a cunt and pay the other £10 or I will sort it out for you."

"I'm not paying any more."

These would be the five words that the 'customer' would come to regret as the gaffer instructed the driver to reverse the dustcart, open the back and tip the entire contents over the drive. It wasn't the height of customer service and he didn't have much room for negotiation but I bet he won't fuck with the dustmen again. There were no repercussions on us as the union would have had us out on strike quicker than you could have said "Solidarity" but it showed that we were not going to be messed around by members of the public trying to get one over on us.

To earn some overtime (time and a half for Saturday and double time on Sunday), I volunteered to clean the gents public toilets in the more gruesome areas of Brent. This may sound suicidal but it was certainly lucrative and I got to have free use of a Mini-van for the weekend. This meant I could drop round and see my friends provided they were happy to put up with the strong smell of disinfectant and urinal blocks. Although I was paid for four hours work on both days, I could get round in two so it was hardly arduous. It was certainly eye-opening and the sight of the gents bog in Kilburn after a Friday and Saturday night left little to the imagination. I think that Bobby Sands, the Provisional IRA MP and protester, must have been practising in Kilburn before he went for the real "dirty protest" in The Maze prison in Belfast. Equipped with boots, gloves and protective overalls, including face mask, I set about making the toilets sparkle and my mantra of doing the best job I could was even applied to this unsavoury task. The inebriated residents of Kilburn and Willesden must have thought they had stepped into The Ritz once I had finished. From that point on, any career moves I have made could only be upwards and, whenever I have been faced with a job or tasks at work that I didn't relish, remembering cleaning the bogs in Brent brings me back down to earth and I count my blessings.

Unfortunately, my plan for a hat-trick of years as a dustman came a cropper due to council cutbacks on student labour (the Tories were now in power). My good run of the previous two years had come to an end and my leather-backed jacket would have to be moth-balled. Fresh from the disappointment of not having a job and facing the prospect of having to sign on the dole, I ventured into Harrow to visit my Mum who was now the Personnel Officer for the S.S. White Dental Company having blagged her way through the interview and being economical with the truth about her qualifications for the job. In reality, she could have done the job standing on her head. When I was in her office explaining my recent demise as a dustman, I bumped into the Sales Director, Denis Eaton who had given me the book-keeping work as a temp job for the

previous two summers. Denis was knee-high to a grasshopper and had a liking for whisky which he consumed in large quantities every lunchtime and evening in The Gate pub across the road from the office with anyone who would drink with him. He also had an unhealthy disregard for the drink-driving laws and would have failed a breathalyser test on any given evening. He would probably have failed on any given morning as well.

On learning of my newly unemployed status, he immediately offered me a job sorting out the Service Department which was in a state of disarray. Although dental equipment may seem very sophisticated, the combination of air, water and electrics conspire in equal measure to make it go wrong with great regularity leading to a backlog of irate dentists all requiring attention to their problem and preferably immediately. If there was any nepotism at play here, it was only circumstantial and, had my job as a dustman come to fruition as planned, the next step in my career would have been a whole lot different. Taking the easy option of immediate employment seemed preferable to joining the growing ranks of Thatcher's unemployed. I took Denis up on his offer and joined S.S. White as a Management Trainee. It might not have been an internship at Merrill Lynch or a job at McKinsey & Co but it was full time work and gainful employment which is more than could be said for a lot of my friends who left university at the same time as me. Then again, at that time, I thought Merrill Lynch was a female Irish folk-singer.

It didn't take me long to sort out the problems in the Service Department despite the best efforts of a gin-swilling lush by the name of Jill Clack to derail the changes I wanted to make. By putting in some basic process changes, sorting out the filing and making sure the engineers were not parked up in a layby sleeping, we got there. Most of the engineers were supportive of the changes and I was soon ready for a new challenge. This came in the form of the Alloy & Precious Metals department which was in a similar state of disarray as the Service Department although this was due to theft rather than incompetence. I put in place some basic stock controls like locking the door to the safe and a tracking mechanism to identify the best time to buy gold and silver to make the best margins. The only other attraction of the job was that the gold safe was located in the Tooth Department, run by Stan Feathers, an old dental technician with a pipe and his gloriously attractive assistant whose name escapes me. I found countless excuses to go the gold safe in the hope of engaging her in conversation but I think she thought I was off-limits being Mrs. Boss' son. There were some downsides to working in the same place as your Mum.

I made some good friends at S.S. White and enjoyed the company of a lot of

the other young people who worked in the Sundries Department such as David Marchant, Janet Parsons, Susan Leaver, Princess Karen, Beverly Root and Elaine Kennerley. The company came with a good social life and my appearance at one of the Christmas fancy dress parties with an "advertising theme" as a box of Benson & Hedges fags was a legend. I should have learned my lesson as an ice cream cone when I was six and the necessity to combine theatrical effect with practicality i.e. being able to use the toilet passed me by again. Locked in a cardboard box which had once contained a washing machine and had been painted gold, I soon realised that I was neither mobile (which limited my dance moves) nor able to go for a piss without taking the whole thing off to reveal my skinny body in its underwear. Since then, I have always made sure that any fancy dress has to offer both mobility and practicality.

In any organisation, there are a group of people who are looked up to by others as "gods" and who people aspire to imitate. They may be traders (posh barrow-boys), bankers (posh money lenders), and consultant surgeons (so posh they revert from Dr. to Mr.). These are the people that underlings want to be. At Deloitte, it is the partners who sit at the top of the pyramid exhorting their slave-driven underlings to be like them. A futile activity if ever there was one. At S.S. White, the gods were the "reps" or field sales representatives to give them their proper title. They had better suits, flashier cars and a confidence about them which said they earned more than anybody else and spent most of the week on the golf course. When it was the monthly reps meeting, it was as if the Magi were coming to anoint the infant Jesus and a star had appeared in the night sky to guide them to Harrow.

My chance to prove myself as a salesperson came with the arrival in the UK of the Panorex-2, a pan-oral X-ray machine which takes pictures of a whole mouth in one shot. S.S. White had the sole agency to sell the machine in the UK and a new technical salesforce was needed to sell it and I was asked to join the team. We were trained in the technical aspects of the machine by Steve Hutchinson, a stocky, chain-smoking Yorkshireman with a tight perm which made him look like he had been electrocuted by one of his devices. With leads being fed in by the field reps, I went on to sell 47 machines across the south of England which at £6,500 a shot was good business. My bonus incentive was £60 a machine so an additional £2,800 that year was a real top up to add to my £13k annual salary. The other main incentive was that I got my first company car, a Talbot Sunbeam, no great shakes but fairly nippy and it was free. To have a company car at 24 was quite a big thing in 1982. Now the taxman has made company cars a financial liability and there is not much incentive to

have one but they used to be a real perk and could consume hours of thought about the choices for the next one.

The other main benefit of selling the X-ray machines was that I also got to install them, not on my own of course given my limited technical and practical skills, but under the expert leadership of a properly trained engineer. In my case, this was Nigel Hopkins, a dope smoking dude with a Mexican moustache who was so laid back he was supine. Nigel and I shared many an expedition to the far flung corners of the South East to install the machines, getting up at the crack of dawn and often returning after midnight having stopped off for a spliff in a corner of a service station. The highlight of these escapades was being marooned in a surgery in Eastbourne late one evening with Nigel struggling to get the machine to balance and take decent pictures. I went off for a nose around the surgery and discovered the fridge in the staff room was laden with ready meals for the dentists and nurses. I put two shepherd's pies in the oven, laid the table and thirty minutes later summoned Nigel to the staff room and presented him with a fully laid table and a piping hot evening meal. We enjoyed a sumptuous feast, Nigel fixed the machine, we had a celebratory joint and set off back to Kenton at midnight.

After my success selling Panorex machines, I was keen to continue my fledgling career in sales and persuaded Denis Eaton to let me set up a telesales operation to target dentists who weren't existing customers. I developed my own marketing materials and mailshots, co-ordinated dial outs with the van delivery schedule and "Telespeed" was launched under my own rep number, Territory 29. If telesales was in its infancy in the UK in 1983, it was embryonic in the sales of dental materials. My new baby went from strength to strength and within 12 months was bringing in over £100k which was pretty good for a start-up from bugger all. When Trevor Shaw left, Denis asked me to take over Area 30 as well as my existing customers and I went out on the road as a sales rep in my own right in my new company car, a Ford Fiesta XR2 which was sporty even if a bit of a hairdresser's car. My territory stretched from Croydon and South London round to West London so I came to know how to get around London pretty well, a knowledge which has come in useful on many occasions. I got to attend the monthly reps meetings and felt that I had now joined the elite. My elevation to field sales representative coincided with my moving out of the shared house in North Harrow with the neurotic nurses and into my own two bedroom flat at 14 Byron Court, Harrow. As I have already mentioned, this came my way on account of Denis Eaton's plan to move in with his secretary coming a cropper leaving him with a fully decorated flat and a

company lease on his hands which was now superfluous to requirements. The thought of independence and freedom was compelling and the prospect of a flat in central Harrow on a cheap rent was too good to pass up. Denis' misfortune became my good luck and I spent two very happy years there before circumstances forced me to hand it back.

My first experience of being on the wrong end of an acquisition came when S.S.White was taken over by Baxters of Bradford, a bunch of sour-faced Northerners who had benefitted from implementing computerised stock control which gave them the financial muscle to expand in the South. S.S White was a good financial and strategic fit for them but, unfortunately, they were not a good fit for us and meant a change in the culture of our firm which was for the worse. Although S.S. White was probably very unsophisticated and stuck in the dark ages of manual systems, it was a happy company with some great people. It soon became clear that it was going to be the Baxter's way or no way, an exit route which a number of people chose, including me.

One of my best customers was Mr. Amarjit Singh Khambay, a Sikh who had arrived in Southall from Tanzania aged ten with limited English but who had got himself through a comprehensive education and graduated from dental school. Amarjit set up the first Sikh dental surgery in Southall so making a success of it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Open all hours and weekends, he rapidly went on to build a practice with seven surgeries, bought the pub next door (he loved Guinness), then the snooker hall and the medical centre. He is now one of the big bhajis in the Sikh community and, fair play to him, he deserves all his success and he was a nice guy too. Through Amarjit and over a number of pints of Guinness, I was introduced to a number of other Asian dentists and, being quite entrepreneurial, we came up with the idea of forming a buying consortium to buy dental products in bulk and at a discount to the list prices. The rationale was that I got all their business and they got cheaper materials, a win/win all round. Unfortunately, the miserable gits from Baxters didn't see it the same way and would not support my new venture. I decided it was time to leave Baxters and left on a high note. Returning to the office on a Friday afternoon to formally leave and hand back my company car, the Fiesta XR2, I misread the flow of traffic, thought the car in front of me had pulled away and accelerated forward. Unfortunately, the car in front remained static, had not moved and my XR2 ploughed nicely into his boot causing my bonnet to crumple and demolishing the grille. I limped back to the office and went to see the Sales Manager, Phil Mathers

"Ok Neil, last day and all that. All the best and hope it goes well for you."

"Phil, there is just one small thing to sort out before I go."

"What's that then?

"Have you got a Car Incident Report Form?"

"Why?"

"I stuffed the front of my car on the way back to the office."

"Are you taking the piss?"

"Take a look in the car park?"

Phil looked out the window at the front of my crunched Fiesta which I had parked facing the office so he could get a prime view.

"You fucking idiot, I suppose you did that on purpose!!"

I filled out the claim form, said goodbye to my friends, left S.S.White's behind me and walked home.

I had been offered a similar position with a smaller dental company, The Dental Supply & Engineering Company, run by a smooth, oily man called Tony Botton and his father, based on a trading estate in a backstreet of Merton, South London. In hindsight, moving to DS&E was a good move as it moved me out of my comfort zone, away from my Mum and forced me to stand on my own two feet. For some reason, I was never comfortable at DS&E, perhaps it was the North vs South of the River Thames thing. Having grown up and lived in North London all my life, I don't really feel comfortable south of the river for reasons that I cannot explain. Although I have lived in Richmond which is south of the river, it isn't like Tooting or Balham which are truly horrible (but now becoming very trendy). The downside of changing employers was that I had to hand back my company flat in Harrow and find somewhere else to live. I resisted the temptation to move in with the Iranian dentist in her mansion in Northwood and moved into the house with Jane and Sue at 716, Hanworth Road, Hounslow (see Homes). I lasted for twelve months at DS&E but I was becoming disenchanted with the milk-round of dental "repping" and, although I was quite successful at it, felt that I had more to give.

It is funny how your life can turn and change with one simple event. Sitting in the reception of a dentists in Taplow, Berkshire in the summer of 1986, I picked up a copy of The Daily Telegraph and browsed through the job section. I saw an advert that was to have a critical influence on the direction of my career and my whole life in a number of ways. The advertisement was for Field Sales Managers

in London for a new company called Yellow Pages Sales Limited. Although I had no formal sales management experience, I thought I would be able to blag my way through, sent off the application form and was asked to attend an interview at The Holiday Inn in Slough. At the interview I was greeted by a man in a sharp suit called David Uppington who had his feet on the desk and was eating an ice-cream. Pretty laid back guy I thought. As it turned out, David was one of the laziest people I have encountered in my career and was early proof of my theory that not all the people at the top have worked hard or are blessed with astonishing intellect. It became clear early on in the interview that I did not possess the skills nor track record to be a sales manager but, with a good track record of being able to sell, I was asked to come back for an interview to be a Field Sales Representative for a growing sales team in London.

I passed the interview and was offered a job with on-target earnings of £21,000 per annum and asked to attend the Initial Sales Training Course, an intensive two and a half week course based in Sevenoaks, Kent. Ivor drove me down on the Sunday night and, for the next two weeks, I had some of the best training I have had in my career drummed in to me along with product knowledge and a lot of paperwork. Still scarred by my sub-optimal performance in my degree, I set out to come top of the course which I achieved. The sales skills I was taught at Yellow Pages have been an asset to me throughout my career and even though what I do now at Deloitte is nothing more than "posh-selling" I am amazed at how bad some of my colleagues are at it.

I was discharged from the IST course, picked up my company car (light blue Ford Sierra, C277 ARU), and became Rep. Number 658. I was thrown into the welcoming arms of Rachel Head who was to be my sales manager and would be responsible for my ongoing training and development. Rachel was stick-thin, chain-smoked Silk Cut fags and behaved like she was on a constant drip of adrenaline. Street-smart and savvy, Rachel was obviously on a fast-track at Yellow Pages and, if I could hang on to her skirts, I thought she might drag me along with her. I did four weeks in London Central and acquitted myself well by doing exactly what Rachel told me to do. If this sounds slightly robotic, it worked. Our sales team moved on to London North West, pretty much my home turf and an area I knew well. My accounts and prospects were based around Chiswick and Acton, trendy and wealthy areas and with businesses which were booming. It didn't take me long to tune in to the vibe of Chiswick, lots of landscape designers and luxury interiors and my ability to "walk with kings nor lose the common touch" meant I was soon on a roll. I was desperate to prove myself and was prepared to work on Saturdays and Sundays to produce

the results. Coupled with a creative flair. I designed some innovative adverts which sold themselves to the trendy businesses in Chiswick and, by the end of the campaign, had won the prize for Best Field Sales Representative, an award which still stands in my office. It may not be the Nobel Peace Prize but it was important to me at the time.

Our team moved on to London North, a campaign based out of the Holiday Inn in Swiss Cottage. This meant my first extended stay away in a hotel and came to be a feature of my life that continues to the present day. Having your bed made and room tidied every day seemed like a luxury to someone who had limited experience of hotels and they would even bring food to your room. Although life with Mum and Ivor was pretty cushy, it was nothing like staying away in a hotel. The other bonus was that I was staying away with a lot of other single, fun-loving twenty-somethings and our evenings in the bar were always enjoyable and often raucous. My new area was Enfield, built up, working class and with more than its fair share of builders-bums. It could not have been more different to Chiswick. Initially I struggled but I soon adapted my accent and approach to fall in line with my customers and more success followed. One of my more embarrassing incidents in my working life took place during this sales campaign and is worthy of recount here.

For some reason, I had become constipated and had not had a crap for three days. During a sales call, I started to sweat and feel very dizzy. It was evident to the customer that I was not looking good and he asked why and I told him about my symptoms

"You need to get yourself some laxatives and sort yourself out." he told me.

That night on the way back to Swiss Cottage, I stopped off at a chemists in Golders Green and bought myself some laxative. For some curious reason, I was embarrassed to do so thinking it was on a par with buying condoms or thrush cream but it was relatively straightforward. I have never been one for following medicinal instructions too closely so, having got back to my room, I thought a swig from the bottle would do the trick. Trick is an understatement and, within three hours, the world and my evening meal was falling out of my bottom at some speed.

My first call the next morning was to a plumber in Enfield. He could only see me at 8.00am which I was keen to make as plumbers always bought large ads and I arrived promptly outside his small semi-detached house. After we had concluded the sale and I had had a cup of coffee, my digestive system once again went into overdrive and I could feel stomach cramps starting to kick in.

I asked if I could use the toilet, went upstairs and proceeded to repeat the previous evening's performance. I flushed the toilet and, as I was leaving to go to the bathroom to wash my hands, was greeted by his wife who was coming out of their bedroom in her dressing gown. Apart from the shock of seeing a strange man on the landing, she went into the toilet immediately after me and so entered a danger zone that must have been on a par with MacFisheries on a Monday morning. I quickly washed my hands in the bathroom and went downstairs to collect my briefcase only to bump into her again as I was leaving. We never exchanged words of goodbye but her look of disgust was sufficient to tell me exactly what she thought of me. Since this incident, I have never taken laxatives again and have preferred nature to take its natural course which has kept me away from incidents like this one.

I was pipped at the post for Best Field Sales Representative by Andrew Mostyn, a talentless but hardworking individual who only ever sold small ads but who managed to find one account which saved his bacon. If I was peeved at the time, I didn't let it show and was even more determined to win in the next campaign. Our team moved on to London East, based at the Woodford Moat House, where virtually the whole team was staying away on account of nobody wanting to live in East London. My area was close to the City which meant that most of my accounts required advertisements in both London East and London Central directories which gave my figures an instant uplift. I think that Rachel had a soft spot for me as her star performer and ensured I got a good area and not some war zone near Dagenham. I still had to perform which was never a problem and I had a storming result, winning the prize for best salesman in a canter. Mostyn was never in the running this time. By the summer of 1987, I was earning £30k per annum due to exceeding my targets, far more than I was earning as a dental rep and I had proved to myself that I could both sell and cope with hitting targets. This was important as Yellow Pages was ruthless when it came to dealing with underperformers. I shall return to this later. On the back of my stellar sales results, Rachel got promoted to become an Area Manager and I took over the management of our team to become a Field Sales Manager. It had taken me less than a year to get there.

On the Friday afternoon, I finished in London East as a rep and on the Monday arrived in Watford as the Sales Manager. The only change was an instant upgrade to my company car, a red Vauxhall Cavalier SRi, D519 BCG, which went like the clappers and was responsible for one of my four speeding fines in my life, on the A1 just past Durham. Rachel had the team working well and, apart from one or two duffers, all I had to do was keep the train on the tracks.

This was not too difficult, and we exceeded target by £35k in my first campaign. The last day of the campaign was always the busiest and when most of the orders came in. In this case, it was the 16th October 1987. The fact that I can remember the exact date is significant as going to bed on the night of the 15th, I knew we still had £25k to hit target. The night of the 15th October 1987 will be remembered for The Great Storm when large swathes of South East England were laid flat by 90 mph winds which brought down over 15 million trees and killed 18 people. You think this stuff only happens in Bangladesh not Watford. I woke up to the devastation and knew that my day was not going to go as planned and some "Dunkirk spirit" would be needed. Luckily, my team, fearing missing their own targets and the retribution that would follow, responded brilliantly and we got home with plenty to spare.

We rotated back to London North West and the familiar surroundings of the Wembley Hilton, scene of my personal sales success the year before. Two notable incidents happened at the Wembley Hilton and are worthy of recall and both involved my new Area Manager, Arthur Moore. Arthur had hunched, rounded shoulders and a trimmed beard which made him look like the love child of Richard III and Baldrick from Blackadder. He was a born-again Christian, never off his mobile phone (which had just been invented) and was a useless but well-meaning leader. Our offices were on the mezzanine floor of the hotel which meant there was a flat roof outside our window and the bedrooms were above us. At a meeting with my fellow Sales Manager, Richard Mackey, to discuss the performance of our teams, Arthur had his back to the window just as a recently pleasured guest lobbed his jazz mag out of his bedroom window landing on the roof outside our office. As the wind blew and the magazine fluttered, Richard and I were treated to a virtual movie of centrefolds and centrespreads which made Arthur's interventions less and less interesting. It quickly became clear he did not have our full attention.

"Are you two morons listening to anything I am saying?"

"Sure, Arthur. Just having a bit of trouble concentrating." said Richard

"And what the fuck could be more important than listening to me?"

"I think you need to turn around and look out the window Arthur" I said tentatively.

Arthur spun round in his chair to be greeted by the full centrespread of Miss October doing her leg stretches with a full anatomical close-up. Having being denied this view by Mrs. Moore for a good few years, Arthur nearly fell on his

knees to pray to Jesus for forgiveness at seeing the craven images. Our meeting was hurriedly shifted to the Account Execs office so Arthur didn't have his sensitivities upset by the outstretched Miss October any longer.

As I mentioned earlier, Yellow Pages was a very "up or out" culture, you either, hit target and became a hero or you missed and it was P45 time. With today's employment laws, you have to jump through a number of hoops to get rid of someone, review performance objectives, informal counselling, formal counselling, written warnings and then out the door. In 1987, and in a direct sales environment which had never heard of unfair dismissal, it was not unusual to leave a copy of The Telegraph job section in someone's draw as a hint to them to start looking elsewhere and the phrase "going for a walk around the car park" had little to do with getting some fresh air. All of these were surpassed by Arthur Moore and The Case of Colin Tebbutt, a disaster of a man who had lost his house and almost his wife through a chronic gambling habit, had the handwriting of a four-year old and wouldn't have hit target in a lifetime. At a meeting to discuss my team, Arthur turned to me

"So Neil, Colin Tebbutt, is he going to hit target?" said Arthur.

"I think so if I put a lot of training into him, some time on field accompaniment, you know?" I replied defensively. Arthur scoffed.

"Never in a million years will Colin hit target. He's a fucking liability and is dragging your team down. You need to get rid of him and quick. Get him in tomorrow night and I'll show you what to do."

I told Colin to attend the meeting and, before we convened, Arthur took me round the back of the hotel where there was some shrubs and he picked up a branch which was lying on the ground.

"What do you want that for?" I enquired.

"I'll show you later, just watch and learn." said Arthur.

At 5.00 pm that evening, a sheepish looking Colin, Arthur and I sat around the table in Arthur's office. Fortunately, the jazz mag had blown away by then so he had our full attention. Arthur then put the branch on the table between him and Colin.

"So Colin, you appreciate that this meeting is to formally discuss your performance?" said Arthur opening up the proceedings quite professionally.

"Yes, Arthur."

"So how do you think things are going so far in this campaign?" Good open question I thought.

"Well, I think I am going to get there by the end I'm sure. I know there's not much on paper so far in terms of figures but I've got a lot of people who will buy some big programmes by the end."

Arthur nodded and brought the branch into play.

"OK Colin, fair enough. Can you tell me what this is?" pointing to the branch.

"It's a bit of a tree Arthur" said Colin quizzically.

"I know that" said Arthur with a hint of irritation, *"but, let me give you a clue, what do you think it's made of"*

"Wood, I suppose?" said Colin. I should say at this point in the story that I was as bemused as Colin and was lost where Arthur was taking this.

"Good, that's a start. How would you describe this wood then Colin?"

"Err, is it oak?" Arthur shook his head. *"Elm?"* Another shake of the head. *"You might have to give me a clue here Arthur."* said Colin.

"Fine. Let me make it easy for you then Colin. Would you say this wood is living or dead?" said Arthur.

"Oh, that's easy, definitely dead." said Colin. At that moment, I knew that the Sword of Damocles was about to fall on Colin's neck as Arthur delivered the coup de grace.

"Exactly Colin. Dead wood. And that is what you are, dead wood. Now leave your car keys in your tray, you leave tonight and we will forward the cheque at the end of the month."

And with a swish of Arthur's metaphorical sword, Colin's head hit the deck and the pain was gone. I doubt whether this incident will ever make it into a manual of "How to Get the Best Out of Your Employees" and imitating it is more likely to put you at the wrong end of an employment tribunal and a hefty fine. But, as a lesson in the use of imagery and getting the job done, it is exemplary and one I have never forgotten.

Deprived of the talents of Colin Tebbutt, I had a set of three new joiners to train who hung on my every word like disciples sitting at the feet of Christ awaiting another parable. Peter Wheatley (Rep 677) who looked like a bank

clerk with a bad suit, Brylcreemed-hair and side parting, Samantha Clift (Rep 678), a smaller version of Vanessa Feltz and Victoria "Tor" Spencer (Rep 680), a petite, posh girl with an infectious laugh that some would say was smutty. I invested a lot of my time in these three rookies and they all repaid me by smashing their targets. I secretly had a crush on Tor but was aware of the Yellow Pages unwritten rule that "poking the payroll" was a no-no. I only found out some years later that she had a similar crush on me so our days on field accompaniment together must have been ones of mutual frustration and unfulfilled desire. Sam went out with Andrew Smith who was also in my team, got married and had two children together and then she tragically died in her thirties of a brain tumour.

Our team continued to perform well and hit all our targets. I was having a great time as a sales manager and I moved into my flat at 51 Pinner Road in the summer of 1988. During my time at the Wembley Hilton, I met and got romantically involved with the Conferencing & Banqueting Manager, a Scottish girl called Anne Scott (see Relationships) who had a nice smile and laughed at my jokes which I saw as a major plus. When the lease on her rented house in Sudbury came to an end, I took the radical step of asking her to move in with me which seemed very grown up the time. I know that everyone in my family liked Anne and the way in which our relationship ended is not something I am very proud of. Another case of me walking away from a difficult situation and burying my head in the sand.

After completing a cycle of successful campaigns as a sales manager, I was asked to meet the Marketing Manager, Mike Mason, who was based in the sales head office in Slough. He had a project that was being led by Yellow Pages Group (the real HQ based in Reading) that needed the input of someone from sales who could write articulately and add up without using a calculator. This ruled out the majority of my peers who were gifted salespeople and sales managers but were really only one missed target away from being bog cleaners. Mike offered me the job to leave Sales to work in Slough in what was called "Marketing" but was really sales support. It offered me regular hours, a nice office, two members of staff, an uplift in salary and a better car. Apart from leaving the world of Sales behind, it seemed to tick all the boxes and I left my team in the hands of my deputy who then proceeded to fuck it up. I arrived in Slough in March 1989 and was immediately viewed with suspicion by everyone around as I had "come from Sales" as if I had been beamed down from Planet Zilon in a capsule.

Mike was an ex-RAF big-wig who took his early retirement and got a

marketing diploma of sorts and joined Yellow Pages. With impeccable manners and shiny shoes, Mike may have survived in a world where his rank commanded authority and respect, but, in the politics of the commercial world, he was a fish out of water. To his credit, he always retained his dignity and poise and I am grateful to him for pointing out that I could do better for myself and should get another qualification, like an MBA. My two closest colleagues in Marketing were James F Lamont, a computer boffin with an enormous head and wonky hips who could do things with IT systems as if he was anointed by God himself and Paul Bristow, a Mancunian with a very dry sense of humour and a face that had been savaged by teenage acne. Like all teenagers, I had suffered with a few pimples but Paul's were like gobstoppers and you knew that when they went off, a cracked mirror could be a possibility. Of all of the people I have lost touch with since leaving Yellow Pages, Paul is someone I would like to see again as we shared a common cynicism and a lack of respect for authority, usually Mike's. Our weekly management meetings were always held on a Monday morning at 09.00 am which should not have been a problem for me except the M40 was being reconstructed at Uxbridge and my journey from Harrow was a nightmare. Always late by five minutes, Mike showed his usual tolerance as I rushed in and took my seat, breathlessly muttering

"Bloody Swakeleys roundabout again!! Nightmare!!"

Swakeleys became a euphemism for any delay to my arrival, even when I was on time and even when the roadworks were completed. Jim, Paul and I were all good mates and went for lunch every day in the greasy spoon in the High Street in Slough, double sausage, egg, big chips and beans. Big chips just meant double portions. I am surprised that I wasn't the size of a whale by the time I left Slough. There are enough people in Slough who are.

The two junior members of staff allocated to me were Ben Hamlyn and Lorraine Patterson, neither of whom voted for the job and I think they came out of a hat in the Unlucky Dip. They were certainly both very wary of this "man from Sales" who just turned up one day with a loud voice, smutty jokes and a mantra of "Just Fucking Do It" which came straight out of the Arthur Moore Book of Motivation. As it happened, both were very talented in a techie way which complemented my brash, arrogant, social skills and a complete lack of talent with a computer which was not something I needed to sell advertising space. Ben was a quiet, shy boy who I think came out of his shell working for me and emerged as a more confident young man. If he didn't emerge of his own accord, I simply dragged him out of it. He was talented in many ways, certainly musically, and was wasted working for Yellow Pages as I told him on

numerous occasions. Easily swayed by my infantile ideas, Ben developed a soundtrack of cicadas making their night time call which we transferred to a Dictaphone and hid in the banks of plants in my office. Whenever I had a meeting, we would turn on the soundtrack and wait to see how long it took the guest to pick up on the background noises and sense they might be in a jungle and not an office in Slough. Then again, there are parts of Slough which are a jungle.

Lorraine was an odd fish, hyper-intelligent but with the broad physique of a male butterfly swimmer. With cropped hair and no makeup, I had Lorraine as a nailed on lesbian and her nickname was "Cell Block" in reference to the Australian dyke soap opera, "Prisoner in Cell Block H". It was a total surprise when she announced her engagement to a wimp of a bloke and went on to get married. It was no surprise that Lorraine got divorced soon after and I suspect she may have been batting for the other team all along but I could be completely wrong here. She was never going to be on the front cover of Vogue though. What Lorraine did achieve was curing me of my technophobia and all things to do with computers which, up until 1989, I had seen as instruments of the devil. Armed with my new Compaq 386 which had the computing power of a digital watch, I set off on a journey of discovery from which I have never looked back. I wouldn't say that I am a wizard on a PC but I think of myself as more than useful. If it hadn't been for Lorraine, I would probably still be using a quill.

It was during my three years in Slough that I was sent on a series of training courses to develop my broader management skills which, up to this point, had been almost entirely shaped by Arthur Moore and were obviously limited. I was surprised to find that intimidation and coercion did not form part of the modern manager's portfolio and influencing skills and assertiveness were the buzz words. Arthur would have been completely out of place in the new world. The best part of attending the training courses was they were held in great locations, Chewton Glen (one of the best hotels in England) and Hever Castle (once the home of Anne Boleyn and haunted by ghosts). The latter was particularly memorable as it did not have a bar, just a table laid up with bottles with every type of booze imaginable, or so we thought. One evening as the porter left our party in the Elizabethan library he said

"Will that be all ladies and gentlemen? I think you have everything you need."

I had a cursory glance over the range of drink and noticed the absence of a single malt and decided to bring it to his attention.

"Err, I can't seem to see a single malt on the table. Any chance?"

"I'm so terribly sorry" he said obsequiously, *"I will sort this out immediately"*

and he shortly returned with a bottle of Macallan 12-year old malt. I think he thought he was about to be beheaded for his shortcomings but we let him off lightly. I spent the night playing snooker with Jeremy Hampton on an antique table in front of a roaring log fire as we drank the bottle of Macallan together. Life didn't seem too bad, much better than selling mouthwash to dentists who needed it. One of the other delegates on the training courses was a young telesales manager from Southampton called Julie Lambert who had just taken a role on a new product called Talking Pages, basically Yellow Pages down the phone. She caught my eye and I thought there was something about her. I looked forward to the time our paths would cross on the next course. Although I was still living with Anne at the time and Julie was living in a house in Chandlers Ford with her partner, we starting seeing each other, often under the cover of our training courses. I don't think it was the first time Hever Castle had seen infidelity and deception in its history. Our relationship grew during 1990 as we both let go of our previous partners and Julie moved into a rented company house in Windsor along with another couple, Ciara and Ian. As Julie and I went on to get married, our relationship is worthy of more than a cursory paragraph in this chapter, but to join up the dots between work life and relationships, this is where it all started.

During this period, it became clear that I was starting to get bored at work. My boredom in the workplace often manifests itself by turning to writing, indeed, much of this book has been written at a time when I am getting bored with the world of corporate finance. At the time, Yellow Pages was going through a "sheep-dip" programme called Total Quality or "TQ" designed to improve customer service and business performance. Along with a friend of mine from Sales, Paul Plant, we decided to create our own magazine and called it "Far-Q", not the subtlest of puns but topical at the time. Together with our friends in the art studio and with help from Ben and Lorraine, we produced two copies of our underground paper which had the same look and feel as my college magazine. It was satirical, punchy, spiteful, honest, blindingly funny and lacking in bullshit, pretty much what you want from an underground magazine. The first copy was sent out anonymously in the internal mail on a Friday afternoon to hit desks on Monday morning. Within hours it became the talk of the business, both from those who had been affronted at being the objects of ridicule and those that thought it was bloody funny. There was quite a lot of heat to find out the authors but we stayed beneath the radar and avoided anything disciplinary. In fact, we felt confident enough to produce a second

issue which proved to be our undoing although I managed to avoid most of the fallout by being on holiday and Paul took the majority of the flak. I returned to face the music from Henry Wright, the General Sales Manager, a Glaswegian who had once been a drummer for Lulu, the elfish Scottish singer. I half expected Henry to start the meeting with

"Wee-e-e-e-e-e-e-ey-ell-ey-ell. You know you make me wanna shout. . . ."

But he didn't and instead sat me down and confronted me with the second issue of Far-Q which had obviously been well thumbed.

"*I believe you had something to do with this?"* he started.

"Erm, I might have had some minor involvement." I didn't want to lie to Henry but also didn't want to come clean on my full involvement either.

"That's not what I hear and, from what I can see, this has got the hallmark of Neil Boss stamped all over it."

I thought that Paul had really dobbed me in but Henry soon put me at ease.

"Look Neil, this is the funniest thing I have read in years. I cried with laughter when I read some of the stuff in here but there cannot be a third issue. Do you understand what I am saying?"

With that, Henry put Far-Q in his drawer and I'm sure he went back to it again when he needed a giggle. I nodded and realised that the star of Far-Q had burned brightly for two issues but was now being sent into orbit in a faraway galaxy. It did re-enter my galaxy later in the form of The Integrator, another scurrilous publication I initiated at Deloitte and received similar treatment from the voices of authority but with equal critical acclaim from my readers.

After spending three years in Slough, I was starting to get itchy feet again as it was becoming clear that the real power in Yellow Pages lay in the head office based in Reading. As the token "salesman with a brain", I had been asked to participate in a couple of projects with the more cultured and intellectual brains from HQ. I was asked to participate in a "job swap" with Charlotte Hitchings, the Strategic Planning Manager of Yellow Pages and, in January 1994, transferred to the offices in Reading with Charlotte going in the opposite direction to Slough. I think I got the better side of the deal and, as it panned out, never went back. Charlotte never returned to her role either and I ended up being appointed as Strategic Planning Manager in July of that year by John West, a

small ragamuffin of a man who looked like his shirts had never seen an iron, his hair hadn't seen a comb and his Mum tucked him in when he went to work. It was a shock to me that a couple of years later, John died of cancer in his mid-forties which was a sad loss.

I took over a team of ten bright individuals all with good degrees but with no common sense and the commercial nouse of five year olds. They all viewed me with a degree of suspicion coming from Sales and it wasn't until I formed a team which won the Trivial Pursuit competition that I truly won their respect. I knew that a photographic memory and a mind that is interested in irrelevant information would come in useful at some point. I also instigated the Fantasy Football League competition which stimulated a huge amount of interest and excitement in Marketing when the results came out every Monday morning. After three years of trying, I finally won in 1998 when my anatomically and topically named team called "Leboeuf Curtains" (football fans will work it out) triumphed on the back of a goal glut from Dwight Yorke. I achieved a lot in my time in Reading but winning the Fantasy Football League is right up there with the best of them.

Strategic Planning Manager is quite a grand title and, in the 90's, "strategy" was the buzzword in corporates with loads of books written on the subject, many of which I read. For an oik from Sales with a 'Desmond' in Marine Biology, it seemed like another universe. But I am a quick learner and I rapidly picked up the lingo, "SWOT", "PEST", "Porter's Five Forces", and I was soon able to communicate on a par with my new colleagues. To be honest, Yellow Pages was a monopoly with a 92% market share in the UK. The strategy for the business was not difficult, i.e. ensure we remained a monopoly and continue to make lots of money. The business generated huge profits for British Telecom and it was more difficult to hide the cash than earn it.

In those days, a chimp could have run Yellow Pages and still been successful and, luckily for us, we had a chimp in charge. His name was John Condron, the Managing Director, and I spent a large part of my time making him look better than he was. He was a very small man with a disproportionately sized head so I can only assume that his cranium contained a large brain. If it did, it spent most of its time sucking the better ideas out of mine. Condron was a nasty piece of work, rude to a fault and he ruled by fear. He was the sort of man companies set up Respect & Inclusion programmes to change, except he never would. The only person not scared of him was his secretary, Gill Harden, who could be more terrifying than he was. Gill opted for a full set of braces in her mid-40s

which made her look like "Jaws" from the Bond movies.

Being of some use to John, writing his speeches and presentations and not scared to speak my mind, he did cut me some slack and I was never subjected to some of the roastings he regularly dished out to his direct reports. After I left due to the boredom that comes from being a monopoly, BT sold Yellow Pages and it was bought by two private equity businesses. Condron went on a spending spree, buying directory businesses in the US and Spain. For a while the business boomed and all the directors made a pile of cash when it listed. Ultimately, Condron broke the company by buying more paper directories when the rest of the world was using this new thing called the Internet. This gave me a lot of satisfaction given a conversation I had with Condron in 1995. It went like this.

"John, I have been looking at the growth of online media and search engines. I think we should look at buying one of them."

"Can't see it happening. There is at least another 25 years left in paper. When a pipe bursts at four in the morning, what are you going to do, boot up your PC?"

"I know, but I have found this company that I think we should consider buying?"

"What's it called?"

"Google"

"Never heard of it."

I don't claim to be a visionary but we could all see what was going to happen. Yellow Pages shares are now worthless so I hope Condron went down the toilet with them. If he hadn't sat like King Canute defying the trickle to online information which became a flood, then Yellow Pages might still be around today. As it is, I don't think I even have one in the house and the business is now worthless.

The other main benefit of working for an organisation that is a monopoly and generating more cash than a Las Vegas fruit machine is that they are very willing to spend money on training and I signed up for as many courses as I could to address the shortfalls in my post-graduate education. This led to the funding of my part-time MBA at Henley Management College, a snip at £20,000!! Although I knew this would be my passport to a new career and life, I still needed to stick around for twelve months post-graduation which I was happy to do. I think I delivered a lot in my time as Strategic Planning Manager and my team took the business forward in many areas. It broadened my business

and commercial skills and enabled me to compete at a level that I hadn't contemplated twenty years earlier when my horizons extended no further than a job as a dustman. I wish that I had had the guidance and advice that many of the people I now work with got from their parents and had not turned up to the party when most of the drink had gone. However, this is only a minor regret and not a major disappointment. At least I will now be in a better position to advise my children with the benefit of this experience.

In my last year at Yellow Pages, I started the process of looking around for a new career armed with my newly acquired MBA. At last, I had a solid career background from a recognised corporate and had mastered the vocabulary that at least enabled me to have a conversation. I had come across management consultants during my time at Yellow Pages and on various courses and I was impressed by their lifestyle of moving from one assignment to the next and the idea of being an advisor to large organisations attracted me. I applied to Ernst & Young, one of the world's largest firms of accountants who were recruiting for their Strategic Advisory Services team within their consulting division. I was interviewed by Eric Benedict, a fat ginger man with freckles and a lisp who chain-chewed Nicorettes so I assumed he had a smoking habit he was struggling to give up. His office in Becket House overlooked the Houses of Parliament so his view of Big Ben meant he always knew the right time. E&Y offered me a job which I accepted and, in November 1998, I handed in my notice at Yellow Pages and started the next step in my career which leads us to where I am now. My boss at Yellow Pages, Paul Fry (one of Condron's lackeys) gave me a cookery book by Raymond Blanc in which he wrote:

"I'm not sure the life of a consultant will give you much time for this, but enjoy it when you can."

At the time, I didn't realise how right and prophetic these words would be and I left the security and safety of Yellow Pages for a new world I didn't know and didn't really understand. If I felt nervous about starting a new career, this was compounded by my recent separation from Julie and the children and the death of my Nanny Maisie, all events which coincided at the same time. If there was a time in my life when I felt at my lowest, this was it and it made my earlier ordeal at Bangor seem like a minor disappointment. Putting up with a few weeks of rain in a backwater of North Wales does not really compare with feeling like a fish out of water in a new job while trying to cope with the breakdown of a marriage and estrangement from my children and the death of someone who had been a large part of my life for forty years. I remember standing in the cold of a wet December night, outside the E&Y office near

Waterloo Station, trying to come to terms with what separation from my family would mean and then learning that Maisie had died. As has often happened in my life, I found some comfort in staying with Mum and Ivor in Ealing and the support they gave me helped my get through a time that was as difficult as any I have faced (see Relationships and Parenthood).

Despite the problems in my personal life, I really made a start to my career in consulting in January 1999. If I said I was a fish out of water, I soon realised that I was nothing more than a minnow gasping for air. I had gone from my own office in Reading with art on the walls, a sound system and complete freedom to do as I pleased, to the daily scrummage of "hot desking" and being at the beck and call of anybody more senior to me which was almost everybody. As I had joined as a Senior Consultant, everybody else apart from the secretaries and the toilet cleaners could snap their fingers and I would come running. I quickly came to realise that being in the office and not on site with clients means you get every piece of dogsbody work thrown your way. My visions of sitting at the right hand of the captains of British industry, passing on the insights gained from my MBA, were evaporating quicker than a piss in the Sahara in the midday sun. Fortunately, my rescue came in the form of one Jean-Pierre Bestel ("JP"), a stocky South African, who took me on to an assignment at BP which was in the process of acquiring Amoco, another oil major in what was then the world's biggest merger.

Not that I realised it at the time, but my interest in mergers and acquisitions started in 1999 and was to form the foundations of my current, but possibly not the last, career. I will always be grateful to JP for getting me out of Beckett House and giving me the chance to prove myself in the world of professional services. It was a chance I grasped with both hands and feet and, from this point, I have never looked back. Based in the old BP head office in Finsbury Square, I was soon immersed in my role, working fourteen hour days and enjoying the camaraderie and "work hard, play hard" culture which existed at the time. Nowadays, the "play hard" bit has almost been eliminated by the Fun Gestapo and strangled by the ligature of political correctness. At sixty, I am not so sure that my health and wellbeing can cope with the excesses that my body and brain was subjected to at this time but I survived and it was a welcome distraction from the collapse of my marriage and the chronic pain of separation from my children.

Our main client at BP was equally keen that the "play hard" element of our work together should not be understated so I came to visit some of London's best restaurants and lap dancing bars, mostly financed on expenses which was

an added bonus. My time at BP culminated in our leaving bash which had the following agenda:

1. Collection in a white stretch limousine parked in Horse Guards Parade.

2. Travel to the Fullers Brewery in Chiswick (journey made easier by bottles of Bollinger)

3. Tour of the brewery and a few pints of London Pride.

4. Limousine back to The Ritz in Piccadilly for cocktails and dinner.

5. Limousine on to Stringfellows for a night of lap dancing and more champagne.

6. Limousine home to my flat in Richmond

The early part of the evening passed off without incident until our arrival at Stringfellows. This is a transcript of the conversation that took place between me and JP.

"Bossie, you're in charge of funding tonight so sort everything out. Drinks and dance vouchers for the six of us. We deserve a big night."

"What do you want to drink?"

"Six bottles of Bollinger, one for each of us!!"

I ordered the six bottles of Bollinger, each with their own individual ice bucket, and we were immediately ushered to a VIP table as if we were the brothers of Pablo Escobar, the Columbian drugs baron. We were quickly surrounded by a swarm of eastern European beauties that looked like they had just stepped off the front cover of *Nuts*. With my credit card now worse off by £1,500, I went off in search of the vouchers that were the local currency to procure lap dances. On the basis that each dance was £20 (probably considerably more now), I worked on the principle of three dances per person, times six and purchased £360 in vouchers (plus commission). On returning to JP, I handed over my purchases which he looked at derisorily as if I had just offered to shag his sister.

"What the fuck do you call this?" he said.

"Lap dance vouchers." I said looking mystified. *"Do you think I've overdone it?"*

"Are you fucking mad? Bossie, go away and treble it!!"

"JP, that's over a thousand pounds. Have we got a charge code for this?" I said

worriedly realising that this night could possibly bankrupt me being in the middle of a divorce settlement.

"No problem, come and see me in the morning. Now get on with it."

Ever true to his word, JP came good as my total bill for the night was over £2,500 which had put a dent in my Amex but this was not as bad as the E&Y partner who had to stop the stretch limo on the Chiswick roundabout to be sick. If this is the sort of behaviour that Respect & Inclusion seeks to prevent, it's doomed to fail. It was one of the best nights of my life and fully worthy of inclusion in this book.

Life after BP was pretty dull with engagements for Abbey National Bank and a few other small clients before I was asked to join a strategy project for Samsung which would be based in South Korea. This brought me into contact with an E&Y partner called Belinda Richards, a small woman with a fierce intellect, dressed in an A-line skirt. Not only was Belinda incredibly bright, she possessed a devilish sense of humour and showed no respect for occasion and a healthy disregard for bullshit in all its forms. Our project in Korea required working eighteen hour days and survival on minimal sleep. We produced an outstanding piece of work which we presented to Samsung at their corporate headquarters in Seoul in the aptly named *Morning Glory* room. Clearly something had got lost in translation and the Koreans were unaware of the other connotation to this phrase. If the priapic reference was not enough to send Belinda and I into tears of laughter, the sight of the client yelling at a junior member of staff, Miss Chair, accelerated our disintegration in to hysteria culminating in Belinda and I spitting out our grape juice after finding unexpected solid matter in our cans of drink. It turned out these were pieces of grape but they took us by surprise. The client probably thought this was some curious British custom since we both did it simultaneously and they laughed along with us.

From that moment on, Belinda and I went on to share many great client engagements together and we have a shared basket of memories that are too numerous to mention here. She has waited for me in many hotel receptions as I struggled to get up on time and I appreciate her patience and good nature for doing so. Working together in Manchester for six months on the merger of the two largest Co-operative societies cemented our friendship and also set both of us on an entwined career path doing merger integration work which has been my bread and butter ever since. Much of our approach and methodology that we use today was designed on this piece of work. I should also add that it

hasn't moved on that much so it was either pretty good first time around and clients still buy it or we are too lazy to come up with anything new.

Around this time, JP left to build a team of his own at IBM and wanted to take me with him. They offered me a £20k pay rise and I was about to accept the job until Belinda intervened, persuaded me to stay, got me promoted to Managing Consultant and a bigger pay rise. My salary jumped from £80k to £105k in a month thanks to JP and Belinda. Once upon a time, I used to look at the job advertisements in The Sunday Times and wonder how anyone could earn £100k a year, now I was one of them.

Soon after our job in Manchester, E&Y sold their consulting business to a bunch of IT integrators called Cap Gemini. If I have a jaundiced view of anything to do with IT, it probably stems from my short exposure to Cap Gemini who were a French outfit specialising in big IT projects (dull) and process outsourcing (deadly dull). They made a monumental cluster-fuck of integrating the E&Y consulting business they had paid handsomely for and, within a year, Belinda and her fellow Partner, Angus Knowles-Cutler, persuaded me to jump ship with them and move to Deloitte & Touche (now just "Deloitte") with whom I have stayed to this day (apart from a brief sojourn at PwC). Belinda felt I should use the move as an opportunity to jump a grade and I joined Deloitte as a Director, one level below Partner. I joined with Belinda, Angus, George Budden, Najib Hashem, Sean Wheeler and Glen Witney. Out of this original Gang of Seven, five of us are still here at Deloitte and our friendships have survived for almost twenty years which says a lot about all of us. Working friendships that endure are rare so to have many that have lasted for this long says a lot about all of us, bound together by a bond that others in our team have found notoriously difficult to break.

As I have said, my working life has been full of good memories and experiences but my first two years at Deloitte saw three of the most memorable happen in quick succession, a bit like buses. I will recount all three here, building up to the crescendo that is Miss Universe and, more importantly, Miss Croatia. Based on my previous relationship working with BP, I was doing a piece of work on my own which involved me working in Swindon (not very glamorous) and Dubai (much more glamorous). We convened a meeting in Dubai at BP's offices attended by me (quite expensive), tax advisors (very expensive) and lawyers (hideously expensive) as well as senior members of the BP team. After an exhausting four hours spent discussing the minutiae of IT systems, legal and tax structures, I proposed a break to go to the toilet and to stretch our legs. This was my major contribution to the morning's proceedings but the suggestion

was welcomed by all and a line of expensive advisors trooped off to the bogs together. On entering the gents, I saw a bank of three urinals, the two outer ones were already occupied by urinating lawyers. Rather than sneaking into a cubicle, I sandwiched myself between them, smiled at both and undid the zip on my trousers. After thirty seconds of fumbling around, I realised that I was in trouble and I had put my boxer shorts on back to front!!

For female readers, I need to explain the next part. There is a protocol in gentlemen's urinals that you quickly become aware of. Is the person next to you pissing or not? If nothing is happening, they are either staring at your knob or having anxiety issues. Time was running out and I thought about trying to pull my knob out of the leg of my pants but thought this was a bad option. Boldly, I decided that honesty was the best policy and turned to the two expensive advisors on either side of me and said

"I'm terribly sorry but I appear to have my underpants on the wrong way round and I cannot piss like this. Please excuse me while I rectify the situation."

I turned around, went into one of the cubicles and sorted the problem, remembering to have a piss as well. When I returned to the meeting room, I was greeted by a round of applause as the client said

"£600 an hour and our advisor can't even put his pants on properly. Fucking brilliant."

From the client perspective, my wardrobe malfunction had probably cost them close to £150 in lost time but the damage to my reputation and ego was far greater.

After BP, I returned to the Co-op in Manchester who had bought a chain of convenience food stores called Alldays and they wanted our assistance to integrate them into their portfolio. I was able to persuade my client that the Deloitte team would perform much better if we were able to stay in the five-star luxury of the recently built Lowry Hotel rather than the shabby and dated Renaissance which was closer to the office. The client bought my productivity story hook, line and sinker and so we came to spend four months in the palatial surroundings of The Lowry where large 'Bombay Sapphires' were the standard round and we took full advantage of the generous expense policy I had negotiated. Apart from witnessing an amorous couple indulging in oral sex in a secluded corner of the bar (they had already been ejected from the restaurant for the same act), most nights it was just a case of drinking and playing to excess.

However, one night we surpassed ourselves and started a game of "Party

Pieces" where each member of the team had to perform a trick, stunt or impressive feat. I think I have already mentioned my talent for igniting gas from my bottom, a trick I learned at Cubs, and decided this would be worthy of the challenge. Lying on my back on a footstool, throwing my legs over my head and placing a lighter close to my anus, I waited for the right moment before producing a jet of flame that could have wiped out a small Vietnamese village. This act produced the laughter and nods of approval it deserved and I stupidly thought that the "what goes on tour, stays on tour" rule would apply. Unfortunately, one of my team had posted an account of the incident on the Deloitte intranet and, although buried deep in its bowels, this came to the attention of Belinda. By the time of discovery, I had moved on to a new piece of work in Barbados and was walking along a street with a coffee and taking in the Caribbean sunshine when she rang.

"Hi Neil, it's Belinda."

"Hi Belinda. Good to hear from you. What can I do for you?"

"Neil, I have just seen something on the intranet about someone lighting farts in the bar of The Lowry on your engagement in Manchester! What the fuck was going on up there? You were the bloody engagement manager, what the fuck happened? We are a professional services firm not a bunch of bloody football hooligans."

One good thing about a crisis or imminent danger is that time slows down almost to a stop and, as the memories of my stunt flashed before my eyes, I came up with a great answer.

"Well, it did get a bit out of hand one night but sometimes it's difficult to control the client as well as our team." I relaxed in awe of my verbal dexterity and quick thinking.

"Oh, so it wasn't a member of the Deloitte team then? So who the hell was it from the Co-op?"

"I'd rather not say but rest assured it wasn't one of us." I said standing with both sets of fingers and my legs crossed and looking upwards to God to give me a break.

"Ok, that's not so bad then but even so! Can you try and keep things a little more under control in future."

"Sure, will do. Valuable lesson learned there."

Immediately, I made a call and got the offending article taken down. It was

a few more years later that I decided that the temperature had cooled sufficiently to own up. I think Belinda secretly knew it was me all along and I am sure one of my colleagues had dobbed me in. By then, the stink created by the incident had gone and I am glad that the unfortunate event hasn't come between us.

I have mentioned that I was working in Barbados at the time of Belinda's call. As foreign postings go, this was as glamorous as it gets and has been the long-time envy of my colleagues as it comes as a Top Trump in the "great places I have worked" bragging competition. I was working for Cable & Wireless who had a number of assets in countries that were formerly British colonies, notably the West Indies. Deloitte teams were required on a number of Caribbean islands and I was unlucky enough to get Barbados which, compared to downtown Kingston, Jamaica, was a breeze. So I came to spend four months working on a tropical island, living in an apartment opposite the first hole of a golf course and spending my weekends on Accra beach sunbathing and playing beach cricket with the locals. If this sounds like the final aria to my stories, it is only the opening overture and the fat lady hasn't even warmed up her tonsils yet.

Prior to my arrival in Barbados, I had been on a tour of the Caribbean with Belinda visiting C&W's operations in each country. On the flight into Panama I noticed that Panama City was hosting the annual Miss Universe competition, a three week beauty pageant for the planet's most gorgeous women. At our meeting with the CEO, Jose-Miguel Garcia, on the Saturday morning, I dropped this item into our conversation

"Jose-Miguel, I see that Panama is the host for this year's Miss Universe competition."

"Yes indeed, it is a great honour for our country and Cable & Wireless are the lead sponsor for the competition which will go on for the next three weeks. Tonight is the opening ceremony. What are you doing tonight?"

"Probably having dinner with Belinda in the Marriott." I said, not looking forward to yet another dull and tasteless hotel dinner with my colleague.

"Oh no, I would be delighted if you would be our guest of honour and come to the opening ceremony."

Jose-Miguel swelled and puffed up with Latin pride at his grand invitation. I thought that God had smiled on me, chosen me as his second son and this was my Christmas and birthday present in one. I feigned embarrassment knowing that Belinda, as an arch-feminist, was never going to go along with this wheeze.

"I haven't got a dinner jacket with me so I probably won't be able to come." I said looking for a feeble excuse.

"Normal suits will be fine. It's so hot you don't even need tie. I insist you both come as our guests."

Jose-Miguel swanned out of the room to make the arrangements leaving Belinda and I alone.

"Neil, there's no way I am going to some beauty pageant. It goes against everything I believe in, treating women like sex objects for dirty old men to leer at."

"Sorry Belinda, I don't quite see it that way. I didn't want to offend him by saying that we couldn't go."

"Well, there is no way I'm going."

"Fine, and there's no way I'm going to miss the chance of a lifetime so I am. Enjoy room service in the Marriott."

Like a bull and bullfighter confronting each other in the ring, we locked stares waiting for the other to blink. Eventually, she relented and I silently whooped with joy.

"Fine, I'll come but I want you to know it is against all of my principles and I am only doing it under sufferance and for the sake of the client."

We arrived at the venue, walked down the red carpet like celebrities turning up for the Oscars as the Panamanian Army played their trumpet fanfares. I thought it was like a scene from Hello magazine (or "Ola" in Spanish). We met Jose-Miguel in the bar and we had a few drinks before more trumpets announced the arrival of the Beauties of the Universe and we moved to our table. Two seats at our table had blue satin sashes draped across the back and Jose-Miguel gestured that I was to take my seat in the middle of them. I sat down along with the other members of the C&W party and awaited the arrival of the mystery guests who arrived ten minutes later in the form of Miss Brazil and Miss Croatia who took their seats to my right and left respectively. The phrase "died and gone to heaven" does not do justice to my feelings of euphoria and it was as if I had taken a load of magic mushrooms after finding out I had just won Euromillions on my birthday. I gave my camera to Belinda and said

"Just keeping snapping and use up the whole film!"

I spent the evening with my head nestling in the intoxicating aroma of Miss Brazil's expensive perfume. She was probably on a mission to save the Amazon

rainforest in her homeland combined with a burning desire to wipe out child poverty, probably achieved by selling off her make-up collection. Judging by the number of visitors to our table, she was already a celebrity in Brazil and did not lack for male admirers so to be seated next to her for the duration of the meal was a boost to my ego but probably did little for hers. Miss Croatia was a different girl, very pretty but shy, lacking in confidence and a bit bewildered by the events taking place around her. To use a sporting analogy, Panama was a bit of an away match for a girl from Croatia and she seemed to be lacking supporters. Her name was Ivana Dulac and I felt sorry for her as this was the first time she had been away from her friends and family.

As I watched the other competitors mingling with diplomats and dignitaries from their countries, I felt she needed someone in her corner to give her a boost. I offered her my arm and escorted her on to the dance floor and spent the evening performing my usual 'Dad-Dancing' routine which had always served me well at weddings and family occasions. I have never sought the accolade of being a "good dancer" and would consider the compliment worthless. I would far rather be a recognised as a decent writer and raconteur so it is of little consequence to me that my gyrations may not be in sync with the music. This did not seem to matter to Ivana who just seemed glad of my company and the evening passed by quickly. I gave her my business card, found out what hotel she was staying in and said goodnight as the girls were chaperoned away by their minders. Belinda and I left Panama City for Miami in the morning but I found time to send Ivana a dozen red roses to decorate her room and wished her well in the competition. She got through a few rounds but was eventually eliminated by other girls who had probably drugged the judges with their perfume.

On my return to the UK, she got in contact to thank me for the flowers and informed me she would soon be coming to the UK to visit her brother. I extended an invitation for her to stay with me in Aldermaston, which she accepted, and we spent the weekend touring The Cotswolds and seeing *As You Like It* at Stratford. I have never told Jessica that Miss Croatia spent two nights in her bed so now she knows. Ivana and I remained in e-mail contact for a couple of years until she went on to be the presenter of Croatia's coverage of Formula 1 and to appear in Hello magazine in her own right. I think she is now a celebrity in Croatia which is a bit like being Miss Basingstoke over here but she was charming and I would like to think I played my part in getting her over her first night nerves.

If it had not been for Deloitte, I would never have gone to the Miss Universe

competition and experienced one of the highlights in my career. This story has become legend in our team along with my prolonged stay in Barbados but the fart-lighting story is rarely mentioned outside of those present at the crime scene. Since then, I have travelled the world as part of this last chapter in my working life and my career has gone from strength to strength. If I have been single-minded about giving my best at work, it has come at the expense of other parts of my life, most notably my ability to form a relationship which has stood the test of time. In this respect, I do have some regrets and would have wished for a better work/life balance but this has not been the case and work has generally won out.

I have worked with over one hundred of the world's largest corporations and seen the best and the worst of what the commercial world has to offer. If I am ever asked who my best clients have been, I answer Morrison Supermarkets and Glencore. Working closely alongside Sir Ken Morrison on the acquisition of Safeway in 2005 was more than an experience. Sir Ken was a caustic, blunt but very witty Yorkshireman who had built his business from a market stall in Bradford to eventually becoming the UK's 4th largest food retailer when it bought Safeway. He was an out and out retailer who knew his business from soup to nuts, always keen to speak with his customers and staff. If a few more CEOs adopted the same strategy, UK Plc would be in much better health. He was a billionaire who was proud of his Bradford roots and humble enough to have his lunch in the canteen alongside the warehousemen and drivers. At our first meeting in his office he said to me

"Would you like a cup of tea and a toasted teacake son? With jam on it?"

Ken was nothing if not down to earth. He was brutally frank and honest, probably too blunt for his own good but refreshingly clear in his views. On the Friday before the deal with Safeway closed, we were giving Ken some advice and coaching on what he should say to the Safeway staff at the town hall meeting on the Monday morning. In spite of our words of wisdom, he opened the meeting with

"Right then, let's be very clear. We've bought you because you're not very good!"

All of which was true but it didn't need saying so bluntly. Ken wasn't very good at diplomacy but he was a bloody good retailer. His habit of keeping his "To Do" list tucked in his vest inside his shirt was novel and any form of technology was an anathema to Ken. Unfairly, the City gave Morrisons an overdue kicking for the botched integration of Safeway which was someway off the truth. They did a great job on the integration but a lack of management

talent and the sheer scale of the task stretched them beyond breaking point. Ken died a couple of years ago and the tributes to him were fulsome and fully justified. I learned a lot from him about really knowing your business from the bottom up and always having time for your customers and the people that serve them. It saddens me to watch Deloitte spending more and more money on useless "innovations" that keep an army of non-client facing people employed whilst failing to properly pay the people that deliver the service to our clients. "*Wastage is our enemy"* was one of Ken's key maxims. He would turn in his grave if he saw the money that Deloitte pisses up the wall.

Although mining and food retailing have little in common, the similarities between the respective CEOs of Morrisons and Glencore, Sir Ken Morrison and Ivan Glasenberg are clear to me as someone who has seen them and their organisations at close hand. Both have an instinctive feel for their businesses having learned their trade from the bottom up. In 2013, when I worked on the $66bn acquisition of Xstrata, Glasenberg was worth $7bn and the majority of his senior team were all dollar billionaires. In all of my time in professional services, I have never come across an organisation with such a clear sense of purpose and direction, so many talented individuals at all levels and such a ruthless focus on value. At the time of the acquisition, Xstrata was a fat, bloated corporate whale with its senior executives taking the piss with its shareholders money. Glencore went through it with a machete, slashing out the fat and cutting straight to the value. I loved the simplicity of its strategy and its uncomplicated operating model. It hated corporate bollocks and complexity and I respected them enormously for it. In contrast, Deloitte continues to lose its perspective as it creates more complexity and wastes more money on vanity projects that have little chance of creating value, certainly not for our clients. Our current CEO isn't fit to clean the shoes of people like Ken Morrison and Ivan Glasenberg, let alone think he could wear them.

In the past twenty years, I have worked on some of the world's biggest and highest profile deals which have helped me build a reputation for being half decent at what I do. The rewards have been mainly financial and I am probably now in the top 1% of earners in the UK, something I never envisaged when I was selling dental materials. To go from cleaning toilets in Willesden to sitting next to Miss Croatia in Panama takes some believing. Not too bad for a boy from Kenton.

In our team at Deloitte I am probably now considered an elder statesman within our team. I still retain a childish enthusiasm for work and for my

colleagues, many of whom are my friends. I hope the recent "Mankini Incident" to celebrate my 60th Birthday is something that will live long in the memory of those who attended my celebratory lunch at *Rules*. It is comforting to know that I will leave Deloitte on my own terms and not be pushed out, still believing that I have a lot to offer and contribute to our team. My hosting of the annual PMI Team Quiz Night and the summer Awards Ceremony have become permanent fixtures in our team's social calendar, eagerly anticipated and enjoyed by the majority of people in our team. In reality, they are just a platform for me to lampoon and satirise our working environment and I am fortunate that the senior powers in our team have given me free rein to do so. On balance, I think I have contributed more of myself to my employers and my colleagues than I have taken out and, in return for the financial rewards on offer, have tried to bring some fun and humour to what is a pretty serious job.

I have made friendships at all levels and with most of my clients that I hope will remain with me beyond my time at Deloitte. It has provided me with financial security, enabled me to see places in the world I only thought Jacques Cousteau had been to and I have met some fantastic people along the way. In return, I hope they will remember me as a great memory in their careers too.

If I have set any example to my children from my working life, it can only be that working hard and trying your best in everything you do will bring its rewards. What I have achieved (or not) has mostly been down to my own efforts with a few nepotistic helping hands in my early years. I wish I had known at the start of my career what I know now for I think there is even more that I could have achieved but that would have denied me the fun and experiences that have made my working life what it has been. Along the way I have worked with a lot of people, many of whom I would call my friends and I think they would be happy to accord me the same. I have always tried to be myself and to bring the sense of humour and fun that was built into my character at an early age into my working life. If success is about making work seem like fun, then I think I got to the top of the ladder.