

The Boy's Club

The main office was a rather dreary, four-storied building in the Waterloo road, opposite the very dreary railway station and next to the Old Vic theater. It housed the editorial and advertising staff of Mercury Publications, a company that churned out dozens of low-quality trade and technical publications. They were all designed to the same basic formula and most of the work was done by poorly-paid, junior staff. Nevertheless it was a winning formula and more office space was needed for more of the same. Our particular group of "new product" journals was therefore going to move to the boy's club as soon as the conversion was complete.

This building was not unlike a large scout hut and it sat, somewhat incongruously, in the equivalent of the company's back yard. It must have come with the site and had nothing to do with the main office. Most of the staff didn't know of its existence until talk of the move started to circulate. Then we discovered that it was used as a boy's club in the evening. The generous proprietor let the local community use it rent-free until he found a better use for itself. Then it was converted, with no expense spent.

It could have been turned into a nice, two-storied set of offices, but that would have cost real money. Instead there was a lick of paint, improved toilet facilities, a series of office dividers for the editors and advertising managers, and an attic conversion for the editorial and advertising directors and their secretaries. Of course they weren't real directors, they didn't sit on the board of the publishing company, but the title no doubt helped compensate for their low salaries, just as their second-floor status made up for the lack of windows and the sloping ceiling. Everyone else worked on the ground floor. The senior staff sat in open-topped glass booths, the rest of us were in cramped, open-plan corners. But downstairs had natural light and a wide, symbolic central corridor

between the editorial and advertising sections of the business. We also had dirty, stained windows that looked out onto the dreary backyard, and we could look up to a second-floor ceiling, see last year's bird's nests, and anticipate the problems that would come next Spring.

None of the junior staff in our group of publications took their jobs seriously. There were three journals and we therefore had three assistant editors, for whom Mercury House represented nothing more than a first step towards Fleet Street and real journalism. In the meantime we (the assistant editors) made up for the boredom and frustration by going to as many press conferences as possible in order to drink as much free booze as possible. We rarely came back to the office in the afternoon, and were never sober if we did. Nevertheless we all did our jobs and got our publications out on time.

It was an easy life.

I could go to more press conferences than my colleagues because I worked on an electronics journal and that was the growth industry at the time (the mid '60s). Alex worked on an electrical journal and often we went to the same press conferences and therefore got drunk together. David worked for a very slim, mechanical engineering publication - slim because it wasn't successful and didn't have many advertisements. He hardly went anywhere.

None of us were well paid, (that was part of the publisher's winning formula), but David was positively impoverished. Alex lived at home. I shared a house with several friends. David paid too much rent for a single room in Highgate. We managed, David didn't. He belonged to the genteel poor; he'd been educated at a lesser public school followed by an even lesser University. His parents had separated, but not divorced. His mother wrote novels, but didn't make any money. He had to pay for his booze, we didn't.

David's second big problem was his clothes. Because he didn't have any money he only had one set. One dark blue blazer, one pair of grey trousers, one pair of black shoes. His underwear and socks may have been similarly restricted; one didn't like to enquire. If a serious accident ever occurred to one of those external garments then he was going to be in serious trouble.

The third problem was girlfriends ... the lack of. Without money and looking like an penniless bank clerk he hadn't much of a chance. And what money he could muster up would go on booze to compensate for problems one and two. It was a viscous circle and a subject of much lunch time discussion and hilarity.

One Friday afternoon we all came back from the pub at 3.20 or so. Our bosses, the so-called editors were all away, so we had more than our usual share of good-will towards mankind in general and mini-skirted secretaries in particular. David was particularly amorous (randy) that day. He stood by the glass doors and made a series of sweeping bows as he opened them for the girls. When micro-skirted Christine - the Advertising Director's secretary came downstairs - David did a particularly low bow, attempted to look up her legs and split his trousers.

Now he was in serious trouble.

Alex and I took him to the toilet, together with our staplers. Between hoots and giggles we stitched him together and it seemed to work, provided he stayed erect. Sitting down or bending over were out of the question. However, he could stand for the rest of the afternoon and would have to do so on the Underground anyway, so it would be enough to get him home.

Around 5.00 our alcoholic glow became to fade and the staff started to leave. On Friday's most of the junior staff went to the pub next to the Old Vic theatre; it was called The Vic. But that night it was pouring

with rain and close to Christmas; the others wanted to go home or go shopping.

By 5.20 the Boy's Club only contained myself, Alex and David; the glow had faded still further and the rain was at monsoon level. David suggested a brave dash through the rain to another pub, one that was really awful but close. Then Alex and I produced our invitations to a hospitality suite piss-up. It was a cruel trick, but one that David was used to.

"Shit," he said. And that precise moment it seemed that God intervened personally to complete David's misery. One second we were standing talking - remember that David had to stand - a second later and he was drenched in water. Drenched. For a while none of us had any idea where the water came from; it appeared that the All Mighty had decided to drop several buckets of water over his head all at once.

Alex and I at once dissolved into hysterical laughter. We literally fell about. When we got round to looking at our colleague it was clear that he was in a state of shock. He hadn't moved; the deluge had abated to a steady pour under which he still stood. We looked up and saw the gaping hole in the ceiling that the publisher had been too mean to fix properly. More hysterical laughter followed and I pointed out that the cleaners didn't come on Fridays, so if we didn't report the incident, then the office would be in a total mess by Monday and we'd be unable to work. That seemed to gird David into action and he stepped out of the narrow circle of rain.

For the second time that day we took him down to the toilet where he undressed. Then we spread his clothes across various radiators in the toilet and offices. Alex made a brave dash to the awful pub and came back with a few bottles and we sat around drinking and laughing for a while. It was clear that we couldn't abandon David, but Alex and I were determined to go to the piss-up; we'd been looking forward to it all week. I proposed that

David go with us and that I'd sneak him in as my assistant. I actually had an assistant, but he was Jewish and didn't drink. I went to upstairs and picked up a few of young Cohen's business cards. That would be enough to get him in.

When the beer was finished we felt David's clothes and they were decidedly damp. They also smelt. David argued with some persistence that many people at the reception (smart word for the piss-up) would have got wet in the torrential rain. Therefore he would not stand out from the crowd and embarrass us, so we gave in and ran to my mini van. Alex took the passenger seat and David knelt in the back, holding onto the back seats. In that position he wasn't sitting down and his staples would hopefully stay intact.

It was still pouring when we got to Earl's Court, so were not the only damp arrivals. Getting David in was no problem; we hastened to the bar and got outside a couple of very large gin and tonics. Slowly we mellowed; stifled our giggles as we recalled God's visitation; had a few more drinks and then began to look around. The place was full of micro-skirted dolly birds (that's what they were called in the '60s). But ... it was equally full of serious sales and marketing types who actually wanted to talk to the journalists ... talk seriously that is. I had no problem, Alex could hold his own, but David would be totally lost. Normally those "types" would get just as pissed as everyone else, but that evening they were strangely sober and serious. David could become a problem, and their company was a big advertiser in our electronic and electrical journals. Maybe they would complain about us bringing along a "freeloader".

After the first, semi-serious conversation I devised a plan. As soon as a serious type approached we would split up and regroup in the opposite corner. We would then move clockwise to the next corner, ready for another split up and regroup and so on. And along the way we'd chat up the girls.

The plan worked for about an hour. Then the place started to heat up and David started to dry out properly. His dark blue blazer gradually developed a pattern that eventually turned out to be a series of large, off-white blotches. Alex and I realised that plaster and bird shit had fallen from the heavens as well as rain. His appearance rapidly became quite bizarre. And the smell suggested that shit had been in the ascendancy.

We suggested leaving, but David was deaf; he was double-mellow and surrounded by lovely young girls; his first and third problems, booze and girls, were over for the moment; his second, clothes, could be ignored: the drunken moment is eternity. More drinks came; the circles got whiter; the pronounced smell of bird shit got stronger. It was definitely time for Alex and I to go.

And then.

One of the dolly birds dropped her napkin. David made an exaggerated bow and swept low to retrieve it.

The noise could be heard loudly and clearly above the cocktail chatter. It was like a short burst of muted machine-gun fire and several staples fell conspicuously to floor. But David was too far gone to notice the noise, the staples or the giddy laughter that followed.

Alex and I left.

We looked back and saw David still in full chat-up flight; expansive, arms waving; self-confident; unaware of the stripe of off-white, slightly stained underpants; unaware of the serious types that were moving in from several directions.

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