

The Stag Do

By Simon Waltho

1. “Let’s Party!”

I’ve never been much of a photographer. As with pretty much anything I couldn’t master straight away with the minimum of practice, I stopped bothering to try pretty quickly. I’ve always had shaky hands anyway, and it’s amazing the effect half a lifetime of substance abuse has on one’s fine motor control.

At that moment, on Saturday night, sitting in a bad bar, drinking bad beer, listening to bad music, surrounded by people who, if not bad, only ever seemed to do anything good under the impetus of some dumb social clockwork, I was regretting my laziness even more than usual. Big Pat would’ve made a good subject for a picture at the best of times. And these were not the best of times for him.

Saturday had been hot, probably the hottest day of the year so far, and we’d spent a lot of the afternoon outdoors. The Activity had been a recreation of some Seventies game show. Essentially, it boiled down to us and a bunch of other Stag and Hen do’s being forced to do PE in an atmosphere of braying, retarded sexuality, with everyone trying to keep the jokes about paedophile presenters just to the “cheeky” side of off-colour.

I’d always hated PE, and I’d hated most of the afternoon, too. In fact, it ended up pretty much the same way PE always used to end up, with me sneaking off to the back of the field to smoke fags and judge the shit out of anyone actually having fun.

And was I still a little jealous, perhaps, after all these years? Well yeah, obviously. But *they* were still a bunch of dickheads.

Big Pat, on the other hand, had been in his element. He was as bad at everything as I was (anything that didn’t involve not being knocked over, that is). But he liked it: he was secure, he knew his role, and people were happy he was there. Skinny and shit at things? That’s just ugly. Fat, and shit at things, however: that’s *fun*.

He was not having quite so much fun that evening, by the time we reached the first bar of The Joyless Pub Crawl. We’d offered him sunblock, even encouraged it, but his response had been: “No, I’ll just burn!” And, of course, he had.

Pat wasn’t – isn’t – stupid, by any means – even if his mouth tended to treat words in a manner that always put me in mind of the thick corded fingers of some Steinbeck farmhand mangling the bunnies he was trying to play with – but this had proved to be a monumentally stupid decision. *Especially* given the fancy dress.

So there I was, in the bar, sipping strong, gassy lager that tasted only of the promise of tomorrow's headache, and at that point, I could think of no image I would rather capture for the ages and place in a gallery as a permanent record of this whole stupid pantomime of bullshit hedonism than Big Pat, in his current state: a morbidly obese man, sitting miserably by himself, skin as red as the tortured lycra trousers of his Mexican wrestler's costume, wearing a T-Shirt that declared: "I'm Fat – Let's Party!"

2. Fear and Loathing in the Contact Centre

The morning of the Friday the Stag Do began, I had woken up feeling the way I feel most mornings, which is to say as though Satan himself had taken a fiery, sulphurous dump in my soul. I hacked up some phlegm the colour and consistency of hospital food, peeled off the sweat-crusting t-shirt I had blacked out in, and staggered uneasily from my bed to the grimy sink.

Shivering in front of it, dabbing at my fetid armpits and flaccid genitalia with a tepid flannel, I took a moment to check my eyes and tongue in the mirror. The tongue was a red-black smear that put me in mind of the guts of an eviscerated pigeon. The eyes were small, and bloodshot, and beaten.

By the time I'd packed my bag for the weekend and headed out the front door, I was already twenty minutes late for work. I suppose that it should have worried me slightly that I'd come to think of that as being early. Half an hour later, as I sat blearily down at my desk, a red light was already winking on the office 'phone.

A complaint was waiting.

The advert for the job at the Contact Centre had promised a role that was "varied, interesting, challenging, and with many opportunities to progress, in an environment offering the highest levels of customer service possible on behalf of our client".

Every single word of this description was true.

There really *were* an astonishing variety of ways in which their client – a market-leading tabloid newspaper – managed to screw over their readers, who would themselves, on occasion, offer up a truly fascinating array of gripes.

If you knew better than to answer a call with "What a g'wan, blood?" and demonstrated – even once – that you knew to type "should've" rather than "should of" in an e-mail, you would be marked as promotion material and whisked swiftly upwards from the humble rank of *Customer Service Agent* to the heady heights of *Customer Complaint Analyst*, the job title in which I currently happened to rejoice.

And we really did, given the environment, offer the highest level of customer service possible, which was, of course, close to none at all. Agents were not there to admit to the client's mistakes, nor did they have any appreciable way of taking ownership of customers' complaints.

Their job – aside from a vanishingly small number of closely-defined exceptions – was, at root, to be shouted at, for decisions other people had taken, by a readership actively courted from (and

encouraged by the newspaper to be) the most paranoid, reactionary, self-righteous and entitled segment of the population.

The company's hope was that, having been allocated their two minutes' hate, most customers would feel sufficiently unburdened, hang up, go away, and carry on buying the 'paper anyway. As the volume of repeat callers who would ring week in, week out to complain about *different issues* testified, this was, as it turned out, a highly effective business tactic.

Agents were paid minimum wage and worked forty-five hour weeks and after a little while they hardly ever cried any more at all.

Particularly vociferous complainants, however, *especially* those who threatened to take their complaint to social media (the prospect of which company management regarded much in the same way everyone on Earth throughout the Eighties had regarded the prospect of nuclear Armageddon) were passed through to the Analysts who, at least, had some discretion to offer small inducements that might avert such a disaster.

As to the complaints *themselves*, they were sometimes – however made – not entirely without merit. True, on the infrequent occasions customers called in about the actual *content* of the rag, they tended to approach it from an angle so bizarre as to be quite breathtakingly inventive. On the day every other 'paper in the world had led with news of a drone strike accidentally killing twenty-seven civilians at a wedding party in Afghanistan, for example, our client had led with an intrusive piece on the unhappy home life of the parents of a sex-worker brutally strangled six weeks before.

The result of this was my having to attempt to placate a reader absolutely incensed, not by the editorial decision over the lead story, nor by the lurid prurience of the article itself, but on the 'paper referring to the woman's murderer as a 'ripper'. He was *not* a 'ripper', damn it, he was a *strangler*, and he was probably deriving some kind of sick satisfaction from seeing himself described in a *quality* newspaper as such.

After forty-five minutes I ended up getting him to go away by giving him a free twelve-month subscription.

By far the biggest source of complaints, however, were the 'paper's promotional campaigns. These ran frequently, at least once a month, with headlines so misleading and terms and conditions so obtuse it was virtually impossible for anyone buying the 'paper on the strength of the promotion to claim what was being offered. Said headlines, terms and conditions were carefully worded by a specialised team who worked in a shiny, spacious office in central London and, whispers had it, were paid so well that they could actually sleep at night.

The times this team failed to make a promotion absolutely watertight to any challenge constituted those rare occasions on which the Agents were given some very limited leeway to admit that the client may have made an unfortunate oversight and to offer something to the customer as a token of their regret for having done so.

The previous week had seen one of those rare occasions: readers – on jumping through a series of increasingly inconvenient hoops – had been offered the chance to purchase an exclusive

paperback edition of a popular new novel. Said novel being particularly sought-after at the time, a higher-than-usual number of customers had jumped through those hoops and paid for their books. Which led to something of a problem when it emerged that, somehow, no-one had noticed that production of the exclusive paperback run had been cancelled by the publisher, and what the customers had paid for *didn't actually exist*.

This was a cock-up so obvious that the client had had little choice but to swallow the loss and offer each customer a copy of the hardback version of the novel for the price already paid. In an astonishing show of generosity, they had also agreed to waive the postage costs, which had been wildly inflated so as to ensure a healthy profit. This was such an obviously reasonable offer that not one single complainant had been passed beyond Agent level.

Until that morning.

The complainant was put through to me by Aleksandra. I liked Aleksandra. Not like *that*, you understand. I liked Aleksandra because, despite everything her job entailed, she somehow retained a serene aura of geniality that made being around her feel like basking in the presence of a diminutive Polish bodhisattva, albeit a diminutive Polish bodhisattva wearing gargantuan quantities of eyeliner and with leopard paws tattooed on her breasts. *Really* not like that, I swear.

As Aleksandra patched the call through to my 'phone, she was sobbing.

I missed the name of the complainant she had put through. He had a voice that the snob of a left-wing student still lurking somewhere inside me automatically associated with a retired colonel living somewhere in the Home Counties. I didn't really pay much attention for the first five minutes or so. I'd found it was generally easier to let the customer blow off some steam.

Unfortunately, I was distracted by the sight of Aleksandra shakily snuffling her way across the office to the break room, and missed how insulted he'd somehow been by the offer our client was making to him. So, when he gave me pause to reply and I began to emolliently roll out just what a generous settlement this was in my very best RP, he cut me off almost straight away.

"Weren't you listening, man? That's completely unacceptable. *Completely*. I want what I paid for."

"Sir, you do understand that what you paid for doesn't, and never will, exist? And that what we're offering instead is of significantly higher..."

"Not to me it bloody isn't. Principle of the damn thing. You'd better find a way to make it happen."

"Sir, I really can't just make the publisher..."

"I want this call paid for, too" – it was a freephone number – "And something for the distress this has caused. Fifty pounds should be about right."

For one of very few times in my life, I was literally struck dumb. He took this as an opportunity to continue.

“And I have to say, given the good work your investigative chaps did highlighting how many bloody Eastern Europeans are over here taking jobs from decent English sorts and scrounging bloody benefits” – he wasn’t the only one who’d missed the inherent contradiction in *that* particular piece, which had been the ‘paper’s lead the day after seventy-three migrant workers had suffocated to death in the back of a lorry in a traffic jam somewhere near Antwerp – “How disappointing it was to have to deal with that useless Polish bint before I got put through to you.”

I looked over at Aleksandra, in the break room; she was sniffing rather than sobbing now, dabbing at the eyeliner running down her cheeks with a tatty scrap of tissue.

It occurred to me I had not once before ever seen her not smiling.

Sometimes, something just snaps, doesn’t it?

“Sir,” I began

“I’m not finished...”

“Yes, you are. And now you are going to listen to me. You’ll notice I haven’t once raised my voice. And I’m pleased that I haven’t. And I won’t. Because it means that, in a few moments, when I call you a fucking cunt, you’ll know that it’s not in anger. You’ll know that it’s because you are, indeed, a fucking cunt.”

“*What* did you call me?”

“I haven’t *actually* called you anything yet sir, but now I will.”

A pause.

“You sir, are a fucking cunt.”

His outraged, outward splutter sounded like a candle guttering in the wind.

“In fact, such is the magnitude of your fucking cuntery, that to call you a fucking cunt may be considered a statement of objectively verifiable scientific fact.”

“How *dare* you...”

“Dare, sir? There’s no daring involved. After all, it is a truth universally acknowledged that you are a fucking cunt.”

“*Stop saying that!*”

“I would, sir, but frankly you’re being such a fucking cunt about it that it’s rather hard to. I’m finding it tremendously amusing.”

“Now listen here, I’ll speak to your manager about this. I’ll put it in writing. I’ll put it on *Twitter*.”

Since our 'phones are automatically monitored to summon a senior company manager to oversee the call as soon as that word is uttered, I knew I had five minutes at most to wrap this up. I didn't need them.

"You're free to do so, sir, but I'm afraid you're assuming that I give a shit about firstly, my manager or indeed *anyone else's* opinion and/or, secondly, my job. And at the moment those may not be safe assumptions for you to make. Also..."

"Yes?"

"You're a *fucking cunt*."

I placed the handset gently down in its cradle, took a few moments to close down my computer, and stood up from the desk. Smiling, I picked up my bag, walked over to the break room, and gave Aleksandra a hug and a fresh tissue.

I did not look at her tattoos, although a horrid little part of me, the part that I always feared was perhaps the real one, the part that still expected a fucking biscuit for behaving towards people the way we should behave towards them, *might* have felt entitled to.

I headed out of the office onto cobblestones slicked by light early summer rain, the strap of my bag already beginning to razor into my collarbone, and began the walk to the train station.

3. An Agreed Shape

I spent the first train journey resting my brow on the cold glass of the window, staring placidly outward at the meanders of a narrowing, muddy river as the hangover continued to gnaw half-heartedly at my innards.

Once in a while, in the distance, beyond blotchy damp fields dotted with soggy sheep, I would catch sight of a white horse etched into a hillside, and twist and turn in my seat to keep it in view for as long as possible, clutching tightly at the thin wisp of wonder and elation in my breast, at the sharp, exhilarating splinter of nostalgia for other, older journeys, and for the futures they had seemed to promise.

It was a dangerous game to play with myself. Those futures had long since turned to ash, and piss, and bile, and vomit, and I knew it. I had done it.

Later, having changed to the final train bound towards the dreary seaside town whose chief industry was playing host, every weekend, to roaming packs of pissed-up idiots, I met some of the other guys on their way to the Stag: Big Pat, his face a study in chubby, cherubic excitement; Greg, sporting a slightly panda-eyed suntan he'd picked up during two weeks' skiing in Ischgl and an "FBI – Female Body Inspector" t-shirt.

That evening, having checked into our lodgings and met up with the rest of the party – assorted friends of the groom from school, and University, and career – we headed to the nearest

Indian, where the Stag Do began (as every Stag Do begins) with The Quiet Curry: that is to say, a hopeless, desperate binge session for people who don't, in the main, drink very often any more.

It was sedate enough, to begin with. There was some swapping of photo's of new wives and new houses and new babies, a bit of "banter" about thinning hair and thickening midriffs, a lot of talk about how nice it was to "have the weekend off", about how we'd "really get on it" on Saturday. I was asked how work was going a couple of times. I shrugged, and smiled, said "pretty well" and changed the subject.

But, as ever, somewhere after the seventh pint of lager but before the first round of shots, it had begun to get out of hand.

My last coherent memory of Friday night was Big Pat, stripped near-naked – or 'Living the Dream', as he liked to put it – belly-butting a quiet, reserved nephew of the bride invited along as a gesture of impending familial solidarity. The nephew seemed to be enjoying it, in a feeling-he-was-going-through-an-initiation kind of way.

The Quiet Curry meant that, by Saturday evening, even allowing for hangovers burnt off by the afternoon exertions of The Activity, most of us were still in a state approximating how I'd felt the morning before, the problem for the others being that they hadn't gotten themselves used to putting up with it.

Nevertheless, there was an agreed shape to these things, and so we had gradually, painfully, congregated in the bar-cum-games room of the off-season holiday camp in which we were staying, ready to head out on the town.

In the corner a DJ, in a brightly coloured "comedy" hat and a face on which dismal experience was finally beginning to win out over game optimism, had been playing dance music to the near-empty room for the best part of two hours.

There was a penny falls with tuppence coins jammed in four of the six slots, and an arcade machine with a broken joystick whose only apparent function was to play badly synthesized Eighties rock music interspersed with adverts for its manufacturer, who had long since ceased to make consumer products.

On the walls, a succession of black-and-white photo's captured tableaux of the glory days: chubby-armed Fifties housewives calling house at bingo, ration-thin-ribbed kids in Speedos building sandcastles, stubbled workmen sitting in deckchairs with quartered hankies on their heads and newspaper-wrapped fish and chips on their laps.

In the photo's, everyone was smiling, some without a full complement of teeth, but none with any trace of irony or insincerity, and it was always sunny.

None of us were smiling, and it had started to rain.

Big Pat was the last to join us.

Eventually, having hauled his lycra wrestler's trousers over the ham-raw skin of his legs with some help from a Herculean quantity of talcum powder and even more from the ever-less-endearing

yet still unshakeably firm belief that despite days, weeks, months and years of evidence to the contrary, tonight was still going to be the night that something exciting, something wonderful – something as yet unspecified but something most probably involving ill-defined squishy noises and sensations in the company of giggly willing smiley nice young ladies – was going to happen to *him*, down he came, and out we went.

I say “Joyless” Pub Crawl, but perhaps that was just me. Everyone else brightened up after the first few pints, even Big Pat, especially after he’d been persuaded to get up at the karaoke. He couldn’t sing, at all, but hey, fat and shit at things, remember? By the time he came offstage to much raucous cheering from the crowd, he was living up to the promise of his T-Shirt, grinning from ear to ear and downing proffered shots of sticky-sweet stunt liquors from strangers who posed for photos and patted his belly, as if for luck.

And so we bounced our merry way from bar to bar along the seafront, finally ending up in a sweaty, gummy-carpeted provincial nightclub of the kind none of us would usually go to, other than when on a Stag Do. We’d been there about half an hour when I noticed Greg wink at me as he nipped off to the gents. A few minutes later, I followed him in.

4. Fear and Loathing in the Toilet Cubicle

Cocaine, if you’ve never tried it, is regrettable sex in powdered form: it’s never as good as you’ve tricked yourself into thinking it’s going to be and, in my experience, leaves you physically, emotionally and spiritually fractured for at least the whole of the following week. Nevertheless, I had come to find myself sharing a toilet cubicle with a sizeable amount of it, together with a sizeable amount of donkey-voiced, office-Gym-toned City Boy.

If there was anyone who should know a lot a lot about regrettable sex, it would be Greg. I say *should* because the magnitude of his entirely misplaced sense of self-worth was such that *that* dubious pleasure was in all probability reserved for the legion of horribly insecure women he all-too-frequently managed to con his way inside of.

Greg, you see, is a “PUA”, or “Pick-up Artist”, or – not to put too fine a point on it – a hateful, manipulative, predatory, misogynist bellend. You know, the kind of person who used to buy *Nuts* magazine.

It’s amazing how many excuses we’ll make for a friend. I knew a guy once who asked me for a character reference, but he wouldn’t tell me what for, so I didn’t write one. I felt pretty bad when I found out he’d gotten divorced and it was for the custody hearing for his kid, but that swiftly turned to relief and anger when I found out his wife had divorced him for giving her a black eye.

I spent the next couple of weeks being all good and self-righteous around those of my other friends – not all of them – who’d said she’d “pushed him to it”, that he “really wasn’t like that” *et cetera* and *ad nauseum*. I even coined a nice phrase to the effect that anyone who raised his hands to a woman in a violent way was off my Christmas card list forever.

I felt a lot less self-righteous when another friend reminded me I’d known for years that the guy wouldn’t let his wife leave the house unless he came too. Of the sudden rages, of the slammed doors, of all the tiny little signs that were there, and all the tiny little lies I’d told myself so that I

didn't have to confront him, or who he really was, or what my telling myself, what my *deciding to* believe those lies said about me.

And the next time I saw the guy? I smiled, and made small talk, until I could take my beer somewhere else.

And so we made excuses for Greg. He was a "laugh". He was a "boy". He "liked the ladies". Because as long as he was all of those things we didn't have to admit that one of our friends was one splintering, slippery rung up the moral ladder from being a rapist.

As with most people who have a hobby that takes up a lot of their time, being in Greg's company meant hearing all about his: about "the Game"; about "Alpha Fucks" and "Beta Bucks" and "Cucks"; about "Hypergamy" and "HB8s" and "HB9s" and "dimes"; about how to "neg", to "isolate", to "escalate", to "kino" and "go caveman".

It was like listening to the uncle of a girlfriend you don't particularly care for describe, in exhaustive detail, his passion for fly-fishing. Only creepier.

And all the while, hoovering up his coke, I wondered at the doublethink that allowed Greg to remain so proud of being such a mighty cocksman whilst revealing in such excruciating, forensic detail that *none* of these women, *ever*, had actually wanted to sleep with *him* rather than the strutting, peacock persona he dangled before them.

When he tried to "put me on the right track" (he remembered I was single – oh, who ever didn't, or just presumed it anyway?) I didn't say anything. Not even a snappy "games are for children, Greg; I'm a man". I didn't even *lift*, bro, and wasn't going to start any time soon, so what did I know? Right at that moment, I didn't want the hassle. What I *did* want were the drugs. And listening to Greg was the price I'd chosen to pay.

Anyway, what could I really have said? That even if it wasn't morally wrong, or bullshit, or just plain pathetic, it was all pointless to *me* anyway because I knew someone so luminous that every time she walked into a room everyone else became a shadow? That every time I closed my eyes to these godawful surroundings, all I could see was a shock of jet-black hair like a magpie's wing concealing two pale sapphire eyes above a sad, sweet smile that made me want to stick the shattered remnants of my heart back together, with sellotape and bits of old string and discarded chewing-gum if needs be, to make it whole again, even if just to have it broken one last time, if only it could be broken by *her*...

(The last time I looked into those eyes I had been struggling to make my mumbled mush-mouthed apologies heard over the howl of the siren and the incessant beeping of the ECG, the warm, welcome contact of her fragile hand holding mine frozen out by the cold hollow certainty in the pit of my stomach that I had lost a small yet vital part of her forever. It had not, on reflection, been the best end to a Valentine's Day)

Greg would have laughed at all of this. He would even have had one of his ghastly jargon words for it – "one-itis". Others – people with working, adult, human emotions – would probably call it "obsession" and worry a little for my mental and emotional well-being. I didn't know what to call it. It wasn't love. But by that point, it seemed the closest I could manage.

All I *did* know was that I needed to text her number to a friend for safe-keeping, and delete it from my 'phone. Which I promptly did, before going back to hollowing out my soul and my septum, each line another nail in the coffin of any hope I'd ever had of being someone who could ever offer anyone anything, and wondering how many days after the Stag Do it would take me to get up the courage to unfriend Greg on Facebook.

5. Sunday Morning, Coming Down

I didn't sleep well, that last night. It wasn't the cocaine. Well, no – *of course* it was the cocaine, a bit. But I hadn't slept well since I was seven years old anyway. Besides, everybody else's threshold for blackout drunk was at least two or three hours ahead of mine, and I wasn't going to sit in a shared hotel room drinking cheap red straight from the bottle. Was that through pride or shame, I wondered, as the springs of the thin mattress dug into my back?

I didn't look at the white horses on the return train journey, back much-patted and several "it's been too long" and "we should do this more often" ringing in my ears. I glanced a couple of times at group chats on my 'phone.

Everyone seemed to have had a good time. Big Pat was enthusiastically reposting all of the photo's girls had taken of him with his arm around them. He felt like a celebrity, he said, best night out he'd had in years.

It was nice.

He hadn't fucked any of them, by the way; mercifully, neither had Greg, although somehow they were still all slags to him anyway.

I had been standing on the platform at my destination, staring at a grimy sky through the grimy glass of the vaulted roof, for at least fifteen minutes before I realised I hadn't made any move toward the exit.

It was Monday tomorrow. They might take me back. I was good, most of the time. I could have an early night, maybe a bath and a shave. Get some chips, make a cup of tea, watch the football highlights. Turn over a new leaf. Take some time off the booze, even. Make some plans. Change things around. Maybe, when I was feeling more my old self, I'd be ready to get her number back off the friend. Give her a shout. See what she was up to, how she'd been.

I let the bag drop from my shoulder, left it where it fell, walked through the subway to platform seven, waited three-quarters of an hour, and boarded the last train.

The rain had stopped by then, as we began to roll westwards through the tower blocks and terraces of the inner city. As the washed-out sun fell lower and lower in the early evening sky, we continued lazily past Victorian townhouses in bohemian, gentrifying suburbs, then on and up between the grand, bath-stone homes of the wealthy.

At every stop for station and signal, through windows open to the moist, warm air, I could see people beginning to settle down for the evening in cosy amber living rooms. Groups of friends

uncorking wine bottles, chatting and laughing; parents watching children playing on rugs in front of first electric, then open fireplaces; elderly couples snuggling together on sofas in front of the telly.

Then, the sudden, total darkness of the tunnel, and we were out into the gorge.

At the docks, in the long shadow of a crumbling grey-brick warehouse, the tracks turned sharply northwards, along the coast. There were two more stops before I dismounted at the station at the end of the line, where the first raspberries and blackberries of the summer could be seen in the thick tangle of bushes pushing through the wrought-iron platform railings.

The streets were empty as I walked through the new-build housing estates and retirement caravans, the only sound the omnipresent hiss of tyres on the asphalt of the bridge spanning the estuary. The sun was setting, a pale gold band of luminescence above the dark green hills of the opposite shore.

I turned southwards, back towards the docks, and walked to where an effluent pipe from a long-disused factory threaded its way through the concrete bulwark of the promenade and out, over the sucking black mud of the beach, into the main channel.

Step by tentative step, like a tightrope walker on a rusty iron wire, I began to make my way along it.

The water was so cold when I first began to lower myself into it that I felt as though the skin was being sliced from my feet, but I can't feel it at all any more now that it's up to my neck.

The tides here have the third highest range in the world (not the second, whatever the guy running the pub quiz will tell you).

I wonder where they'll wash me up.

Perhaps they never will.