

FROM HERE TO PATERNITY
By Syd Operahouse © 2006

Chapter One: Opportunity

Everybody has a chance once in a lifetime to do something momentarily brave, daring or simply stupid. When the present Mrs Operahouse, known to many as 'The PMO', indicated that she was with child, I thought that any dreams of one final 'road trip' had passed me by and I was destined to a life of dirty nappies, Disney cartoons and disapproving of new boyfriends or girlfriends.

This is not to say that I haven't done anything reckless in the past; quite the contrary. There have been days when alcohol has played an important part in the execution of foolish acts and times when sheer luck kept me from a night in the cells. So, when I casually mentioned during the commercial break in 'Coronation Street' that I was never going to have a final opportunity to be a complete idiot, The PMO cleared the way for me to enjoy one last madcap adventure. With tact and diplomatic skills learnt from many years of studying the teachings of Attila the Hun, Joseph Stalin and Margaret Thatcher she said to me 'Sod off then, but make sure you're back before the birth. If you're not you'll be wearing your testicles as earrings.' Nothing can quite compare with the fine words of an eloquent and beautiful pregnant woman.

A few years ago I compiled a list entitled 'things to do before I'm 30' which was renamed the following year simply by crossing out 30 and replacing it with 31. This year, the list was renamed for the eighteenth time; this time with a whole new title, 'Things to do before I snuff it'. During its eighteen-year existence certain items had been added to the list whilst others had been removed. For example, I no longer want to 'bonk Kylie until my willy drops off' or 'superglue Michael Portillo's arse to his lips' but I was not going to go to my grave without having at least attempted to fart the French national anthem in C Major. Some things had actually been achieved. I have driven a steam train, ridden on a fire engine and walked along part of the Great Wall of China. However, there are the not-so-easily forgotten failures.

The frankly stupid attempt to sail round Wales ended in disaster when the Mumbles Coastguard was called out on their shortest ever rescue. After four nautical miles of impeccable navigation from Swansea marina, I'd inadvertently crashed into their boathouse and sank. Back on dry land a close friend told me that I'd never get all the way round Wales as Offa's Dyke was as dry as a North Walean Methodist Church on a Sunday. When interviewed by the local press I made the elemental mistake of saying 'The wind was all wrong'. The following day some anonymous local smart arse sent me a gift of 8lbs of radishes.

My friends are all agreed that the zenith of my idiocy was an attempt to ride a push-bike round mainland Britain. Commencing my journey from home, I only got a few miles before I started to feel pain in my backside, but I had taken precautions against this problem and undeterred I pushed on in the sure and certain knowledge that the piece of meat shoved down the back of my underpants would begin to do its work and ease the agony. It was not to be and it was a fundamental lack of understanding that was to be my downfall. From my research one Friday night in the pub, I didn't think it mattered much what kind of meat was used but I was later told that it was essential to use fresh fillet steak of the highest quality and not an unboned pork chop from Sainsbury's. In fits of barely disguised laughter the doctors at Carmarthen Hospital thought it a noble effort that I reached Kidwelly, a distance of nineteen miles before finally succumbing to the pain, slumping into a ditch and dialling nine-nine-nine. Two days and eleven stitches later I was discharged with an extremely bruised coccyx, only to find that some sod had nicked my bike.

With regard to the world trip, I'm sure that in the PMO's mind was the distinct possibility, given my previous track record, that I'd be back the day after I left with my tail between my legs minus my rucksack and having travelled no further than Bristol. But this time it was going to be different. I actually started to plan. I started to make lists.

List one was a list of friends who were going to help whether they liked it or not. It soon became apparent that there were a couple of people on whom I could totally rely to be enthusiastic, committed and totally inept. Firstly there was 'Annie', a close personal acquaintance who had the enviable pedigree of being both an ex-nun and ex-call girl. She had literally staggered into a job in Public Relations after an evening of unrivalled drunken debauchery in Edinburgh with a group of Finnish Advertising Executives. Then there was Reecy, my long time friend who also happened to be a Travel Agent and renaissance idiot. He has an enviable claim to fame that when looking after the Virgin Corporate Travel account, he booked Sir Richard Branson into economy on one of his own aircraft. It is unsurprising then to learn that Reecy has never been promoted.

List two was a list of locations forming a route which I drew up one evening in conjunction with the 'Things to do before I snuff it' list and at our first planning meeting (also known as the 'Great Leeds Piss Up') we immediately identified what could have been a major problem. There are no passenger ships across the Pacific and therefore we'd have to break the Jules Verne or 'JV' rule and allow a certain amount of air travel. Reecy suggested that I could work my passage across the Pacific as a deck hand on a container ship, 'A nice boy like me should have no

problems!’ He commented after his eighth pint. I reminded him that I was still suffering the long-term effects of Coccyx Shock Syndrome and that he could shove the idea up his own arse.

List three was not produced by me, but was the product of exhaustive and extensive research by Reecy. He produced a staggeringly comprehensive chronicle of the countries I was going to transit, including visa requirements, currency regulations, shipping timetables, car hire places and injections I’d need. Indeed, he’d done such a good job that amongst his quire of paperwork he’d printed out a list of all the cash points in Moscow city centre. However in this comprehensive mound of research there were demons waiting to pounce. At our second meeting and before any alcohol took effect, Annie pointed out that the route around the world did not take in Moscow and more importantly Beirut is not the capital of Egypt. Startled by this revelation Reecy grabbed a nearby atlas to check.

‘Bloody close by.’ he calmly said and handed the folder back. Being a big cheese in the travel industry, Reecy should not be expected to know things of a political or geographical nature but given his genius the course of world history could have been so very different.

Over the following weeks and after countless phone calls, we all became aware that the trip was actually possible but there was a mountain of paperwork to be filled in, submitted to the relevant embassies and the replies copied and filed. Annie created what can only be described as the world’s most comprehensive incomprehensible filing system and she was the only person who could use it. Instead of being filed in an alphabetical order or relevant to a particular leg of the journey, it was filed chronologically on date sent. I spent two hours one afternoon trying to find a copy of a visa application form for India, I gave up in the end. Annie ridiculed me for being such a ‘thicky’ and then spent ten minutes searching to no avail. We then emptied the entire filing cabinet and eventually found it under ‘October 29th, Italy’. Despite such small but annoying setbacks, planning was going extremely well and a fairly detailed itinerary had emerged giving me the opportunity to achieve at least half of the items on the ‘before I snuff it’ list.

Three weeks before I travelled, I started to pack the relevant paperwork and let me tell you there was a lot of it. Firstly, as I was going through many countries including the United States, I needed to take several forms of identification. When I phoned the American Embassy to enquire which documentation they’d require at a port-of-entry, I’m sure they had ‘Clyde the Oran-Utan’ answering the phone.

Polite as I always am when talking to foreigners, especially when English is not their native tongue, I asked the chap about the entry requirements. After thirty seconds of unintelligible babble in a deep Southern drawl, I came to the conclusion that this man had only learned the art of walking upright the previous afternoon. After ten minutes of his 'utter shite' I was ready to cut my wrists. I thanked him politely, surfed the Internet for the Embassy contact details and sent an email instead.

Not that I have anything against Americans but why does everything there have to be so big and loud? Do they suffer from 'small willy complex'? Some months ago when checking a batch of homebrew, I watched a TV programme where some incredibly enormous chap who, if they'd strapped a basket to his arse and painted some stripes on him would have made a truly excellent hot air balloon, was tasked with making the world's largest barbeque. It was so massive that to cook food on it, someone had to get dressed up in a 1970's BBC Prop department Cyberman outfit and walk across the griddle. If I'd had been there I'd have added a couple of hundred gallons of Ol' Ma Clampett's Hickory Flavoured High Octane Diesel and that would have been a 'real' barbeque.

It is also my sincere belief also that it should be mandatory for all Americans to attend child naming classes. I recall that a few years ago the Speaker of the House of Representatives was called 'Newt Gingrich'. Why saddle an otherwise charming chap with the name of a small amphibian of the genus 'Triturus'? It's the newt's name. He got it first. If I was a newt I'd be straight down to the courts and suing him for millions. The upshot of this all was that the weight of paperwork that I'd have to take with me was almost double that of my clothing. Something had to go.

A close analysis of the 'suggested travel necessities' gave rise to the thought that some things could be 'forward shipped' and others could be thrown out completely. I simply had to take a dress suit. Dining on the Orient Express was going to be the first of my pleasures. However, the rest of the clothing was whittled down to the absolute minimum with the notable exception of pants.

Women have shoes; lots of shoes. Shoes for gardening, shoes for shopping, shoes for coming down stairs and shoes for hanging out the washing; in fact shoes for every conceivable occasion. I bet some women even have special shoes just for farting in. Me, on the other hand, I have pants. I have big pants which hold my stomach in, curry pants with a specially strengthened gusset for those 'Vindaloo' moments, work pants and of course 'VPL' pants for those times when a new nineteen year old with a huge chest and short skirt starts on reception. After several hours of long deliberation I decided to take one pair of each and a spare pair for Sundays. Then there was a long discussion about taking my yellow plastic

duck. I felt this was essential, giving me a link with home and a feeling of security when facing adversity. Annie thought I was being a 'complete idiot' but my arguments, pleading and uncontrollable sobbing finally persuaded her and consequently, 'Yuck the Duck', became my official mascot, confidant and Passepatout.

As October the 26th approached the atmosphere at home subtly changed and the PMO started to make furtive phone calls. Several times the phone rang and I picked it up to find no-one there. I tried 'last caller' but the number had been withheld. Then I noticed big dusty footprints in the back bedroom. This was getting serious, should I confront the PMO directly or be sneaky and furtive. I decided the latter.

As a young child I enjoyed playing hide and seek, becoming so adept that, in what my Father and I laughingly called the 'World Championships', I managed to elude him for a whole two hours. He finally found me along with our cat, in our coalhouse under two hundredweight of coke. He dragged me by one ear into the kitchen and proceeded to thrash me to within an inch of my life. I'm fairly certain that it was at this point in my life that I took a dislike to coal, cats and hide and seek. I think it is obvious therefore to see why I approached this onerous task with some trepidation but I resolved to see it through to the bitter end.

At the bottom of our garden is a concrete coal bunker that is somewhat similar to the one at my parent's house. I devised a plan to secrete myself in the said bunker and find out exactly what was going on. The PMO had marked the calendar for the day when I was due to attend the Swansea and District Ferret Breeders Annual Dinner (Gentlemen Only) and I thought that this may well be an opportune moment to catch her out. Dressed in my finest dinner suit, I left the house but instead of heading to the dinner I drove round the block, parked my car out of sight of the house and climbed over the fence into the back garden. Getting into the bunker did not present a problem, it being evening and the failing light making my presence less visible. I simply raised the slide-up flap at the front and, although being somewhat larger than the last time I did this, crawled in. This, I believe, is when my troubles really started. No sooner had I got in and turned round in the extremely confined space than the flap closed with one almighty crash. I was trapped inside the coal bunker, in the dark and dressed in a dinner suit. For the next ten minutes I tried to escape. What was I going to say to The PMO?

Planning has always been my forte and as it was going to be one of those more memorable forgotten 'Ferret' evenings I had with forethought, brought my emergency 'Get Home when Paralytic' kit with me. This consisted of a mobile

phone, a big card with my name and address on it and a £20 note stapled to it. The phone was going to be my saviour.

The saying 'With Friends like them, who needs enemies' was exclusively written about my so-called friends. They are to friendship what Barry White was to hang-gliding. In search of assistance and a sympathetic ear I phoned my friend Glen. He was at the dinner and listening to my story he told me not to worry, he would get help to me as soon as possible. The bastard! Within ten minutes I heard the faint but unmistakable sounds of sirens belonging to the local fire brigade and I knew I was in trouble. What surprised me more though, was the sound of a number of cars pulling up in our usually quiet street. Unfamiliar voices approached, bright lights appeared through little holes and some daft bugger of a fireman banged on the top of the bunker with his axe. I tapped out SOS with a lump of coal in reply.

Within seconds up came the flap and in popped a bright yellow helmet with a smiling Smurf of a Fireman beneath. 'You alright? Don't worry, we'll soon have you out of there,' He said. With that the face disappeared.

I recall hearing something like 'Right lads, lets get the top off' but this was largely drowned out by laughter, raucous cheering and the chinking of glasses.

I'm sure you can hear a groin strain when it happens but credit to the Swansea fire brigade; the top came off in seconds with not a strain in sight. In a blaze of garden lights and to the rapturous applause of thirty Ferret breeders and a member of the local press, I stood up, brushed myself down, calmly stepped out on the now lidless coal bunker and fell flat on my face having tripped over the PMO armed with a high velocity digital camera.

To make the local paper once for making a bit of an arse of oneself is OK, but to do it twice only invites total ridicule. If I ever catch up with the sub-editor who came up with the headline 'Scuttle teach me!' I shall not be responsible for my actions. Revenge, in my book, is a dish best served when the bugger isn't looking. To her eternal credit The PMO saw the funny side of it all and later calmly explained about Graham the Builder, decorators and the new nursery.

My last day at home was spent in a blind panic of packing, checking paperwork, talking to the bank and ironing. Some weeks earlier during a night of Sambucca and Guinness followed by a £4.95 Doner kebab I had drawn up a 'wanted on voyage' list to assist me in packing. In retrospect I think it would have been better to have made this list whilst sober, my attempts to cram its contents into my rucksack became a task of mammoth proportions.

Some two hours later and with a feeling of immense satisfaction I had finished, but there was a high price to pay. 'Yuk the Duck' would have to travel alfresco. If 'Yuk' had any inkling of his fate over the next two months he would have pleaded to remain at the tap end and engage in philosophical conversation with a bottle of Head and Shoulders. To be honest, so would I!

I slept fitfully that night, dragged unwilling from my slumbers by startling dreams of missing ships, being marooned on a desert island and of being mistaken for Michael Palin. I gave up trying to sleep just before three a.m. and planted myself in front of the TV to watch a very interesting and entirely believable documentary about Americans being abducted by aliens. When I got there, I decided, I'd ask them about that.

And so it was on Wednesday the 26th of October at nine a.m., that I left the house with a spring in my step and a flutter in my heart, the PMO kissing me tenderly, wishing me luck and reminding me of my obligations and where I'd be wearing them if I wasn't back on time.