

## Full Circle

‘My God – it must be years since I’ve worn a tie!’

I wrapped it round my neck, jiggling the ends, trying to dredge up from memory how much lower one end has to be than the other so that, hey presto, they both end up the same length when the knot has been tied.

‘If I can remember how to do the bloody knot’, I thought.

The suit was the same. Every shiny pin-stripe in my rickety old wardrobe turned out to have shrunk two whole sizes whilst they had languished in the dark, accumulating, by the by, those strange undefineable odours that darkness and lack of air seem to encourage.

Or was it merely the extra two stones that I had put on, one for each year of easy living. Funny how you never notice how the slow progression of time takes its toll on the old bod – how the avoirdupois accumulates, little by little, without you noticing. I’d developed quite a nice little pot

to hang over my belt – which, incidentally, I'd had to let out a few notches without even registering what it was telling me.

Now I had to tart myself up for this bloody interview.

'You can't just wear jeans and a T-shirt' – Fiona had warned scornfully. 'Everybody else will be smartly dressed'.

'But it's....'

'But it's what? Your last chance at getting a decent wage, instead of pottering around with all that clay – that's what it is. Especially now that we're going to have another mouth to feed.'

Pottering around with clay, indeed. You're looking at the next Bernard Leach, I said (Under my breath, of course).

Or was, until I discovered that the world was not beating a path to my door. A bad metaphor, that aptly described, however, the reluctance of the public to share my vision of impending celebrity, and bad metaphor could, I suppose, be used to

describe my attempts to recreate the freshness, style and utter beauty of the pots that the aforementioned had effortlessly produced.

So here I was, with my first child on the way, and a pressing need to replenish the old coffers. Fiona's been an absolute brick about my artistic aspirations – but – her advanced situation had brought her motherly instincts to the fore. 'Me Jane! Me with Child! You Tarzan! You go Hunt!'

Her devastating transformation of attitude led her directly to the recruitment pages of the Financial Times, where she deftly sifted the impenetrable jargon used by minions of the assorted agencies to pick out one that she deemed particularly suitable.

'Here we are', she blithely announced, damning me with faint concern to spend the next twenty years or so in a life of servitude – that I had previously thought I had escaped. 'This one sounds just right'

She looked me up and down. 'They appear to be looking for a slightly portly individual, just

shading the callous, indifferent years of youth, slightly balding and wearing half-moon glasses to provide an air of serious intent – and shoulders stooping from a newly awakened sense of responsibility – or burden. That’s you to a ‘T’.

I grabbed the paper from her. Saw where her finger had been pointing. ‘It doesn’t say that at all! I said. I read further. ‘Oh Hell!

You guessed it! It was the old firm that I had unceremoniously dumped a couple of years ago to further my selfish ambitions. It was a good job, though – my old one – and one that I could do standing on my head – and it paid well (where did you think I got the money from to spend a couple of fruitful years off!). And it was the only real opportunity available.

Sure, they were glad to hear from me. And they would love to see me again. Only trouble was, I would have to stand in line with all of the other aspirants – some of them much younger than me, and all bristling with superb degrees and other qualifications.

So I had this interview with their Mr Dalgety arranged. Funny! Wasn't that pimply youth we used to send out for bagels and hot dogs called Dalgety?

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“Ah, Thomas, great to see you again!”

“Tom, actually” (T-tom to you mate – always has been, and always will be – I added mentally)

“Er – Right, T-tom”, he came back, on cue, a brief bloom on his cheeks suffusing his pallor, without quite reaching his John Lennon specs. Alex Dalgety hadn't changed much in physical appearance over the last couple of years – his round head was still topped with a wispy fuzz of hair, and still resembled a lollipop perched on his scrawny stick of a neck.

I shot the cuffs of the neat little DAKs number I had fortuitously bought, but with great reluctance, from Oxfam, for the interview.

“It really is nice to see you again” he iterated. I thought the inflexion he used in ‘really’ was a bit over the top, but remained silent.

“How’s the clay-bashing going?” he asked.

A barb, and a bit of humour with it too.

“Not too well, as you bloody well know...”, I thought to myself “...else I wouldn’t be sitting in this chair”.

“Oh, fine”, I responded, quite untruthfully, “Food for the soul, and all that!”

He had changed, though. Looked a lot less like a sack of spuds. Got rid of that awful C&A suit for a start, and had on something a lot smarter – something that appeared to have made some attempt to fit his gaunt frame. His shirt, too, no longer looked as though it had to serve double-duty as a pyjama top.

I remained silent. As an interview, it was taking some time for lift-off. Somebody had better kick-start this prime event into some action.

“Actually, Alex, the pottery is fine – but it’s not a cash cow, and I’m going to have to put my nose to the grind-stone again to earn some real money – and – we’ve got a kid on the way”

“Oh! Congratulations! To you and to Fiona..... We’ll have to see what we can do!” He looked down at my CV, his jughead ears appearing to scan the document as avidly as his eyes.

“Fiona”, I thought, “How did he know my wife’s name was Fiona? Been swatting up a bit before the interview, has he? Well, full marks for that, then”.

“So what qualities.....exactly” - just the right amount of a pause here – “do you think you will bring to the job?....”.

Bloody cheek, but I suppose he has to say that to all of the candidates.

“...besides your obvious artistic talents” he added, looking me straight in the eye.

“Hang on a minute, T-tom” I said to myself, “You’re playing this all wrong. You’re going to walk out of here without a job if you don’t savvy up fast!”

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“My obvious artistic talents, Alex”, funny how I had never considered this in my earlier incarnation in the job. .”are exactly what are required for this role!”

Alex’s gaze, already magnified by the circular lenses in his glasses, widened perceptively.

“In fact, I would go further, and state that a certain amount of ‘creativity’ is a pre-condition for success.”



“Tom..”, Alex replied in a dry monotone, “..in this industry we count numbers, we don’t paint by them”.

“Explain”, he added, unnecessarily.

“OK, “ I thought to myself, “Contentious marker put down – got his attention – now, all we have to do is to justify it. That, as the actress said to the Bishop, is the hard bit!”

“A brokerage...”, I began, “or indeed, any outfit that hopes to deal profitably from the ebb and flow of money, bases its philosophy on what might be, rather than what, actually, is”.

I leant back, pushed my PVC upholstered chair away from Alex’s desk and draped one leg over the other – not only to adopt a more suitable body posture for elegant discourse, but to give myself a bit of mental space to promulgate my argument.

Echoing my actions, Alex slotted his skinny rump in the back of his leather armchair, its ample proportions accentuating his slight frame, and waited.

I wondered whether his feet actually reached the floor.

“What”, I asked, “is the precise purpose of an investment company?”.

Alex gave me a blank look, not divining immediately that I had set out on the stock salesman’s ploy to get the customer to supply the right answers.

“Oh!”, he eventually replied, after he had twigged the role he was expected to play. “...to get people to give you money in the hope that you will increase its value for them!”

I liked the simplicity of his reply.

“And what promises, or assurances, do we give them that we can do just that?”.

“Well”, he said, after a few moments thought, “I suppose it all comes down to the past successes of the funds we already manage, and the expertise of our analysts to predict the future performance of the Stock Market”. His Adam’s

apple jiggled up and down as he cleared his throat a couple of times – uncomfortably aware that he might be losing control of the interview.

“And how do we do that?”. Note the implied assumption that I was already considering myself part of his future team.

“We spin them a line about the factors that affect the market –and how we will take advantage of them”.

“Oh, Alex, my boy!” I reflected, “Banal, but how true!”

“Precisely!”, I concurred, magnanimously,  
“...and the more creative and outrageous we make our forecasts, the more they are swallowed wholesale, and the more our investors seem to want to pile into our coffers!”

“Preposterous,” he snorted, coming to life! “We base our forecasts on the soundest mathematical and statistical principles”.

“Nonsense!” I countered, warming up to the task.  
“Not even the world’s most advanced computer

can make the synaptic leaps, the free associations, the mental somersaults that the average brain can – even yours – to make sense of this convoluted world!”

I shut my gob!

“Cripes,” I thought, “That’s blown it! You’ve just rubbished his entire industry, ethos and self-esteem. Goodbye, Job”!

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It’s not true that imminent death is the only occasion when your past life flashes before your eyes. Any highly cathartic experience can also stimulate your memory, and dredge up some related incidents in Fast Forward – a sort of revision exercise to show you why you are in the state you’re in!

“Put down that lump of mud – go and wash your hands, preferably in warm water – and come and feel some real clay!” Fiona sidled up to the door of Tom’s studio, draped herself seductively up

the door jamb and bade a husky welcome, he dark green eyes smouldering under her fringe of jet black hair.

“Well, what are you waiting for, Big Boy – Come and say hello to your own little Adam!”

Tom looked up from his wheel. He lost concentration and the plug of clay slipped from his fingers, collapsed sideways and rotated round the wheel until it shot, sideways, into the pan. He took his foot off the pedal and the wheel slowed down.

“Wow”, he said, “We did it!”.

“Yep, we sure did. You and me both!” Fiona patted her still slim stomach over her washed out jeans and sighed. “And you, my sweetheart, ain’t gonna know what hit you. So, come and give me a big hug, while you still can!”

“Wowie” Tom whistled again, “We’re going to be a Dad!” He stumbled off his stool, his legs caught in the lower rung, and fell flat on his face. He crawled towards her, pulling himself up by her legs, her arms, and then her shoulders, until

he stood against her, looking slightly down into her face.

Fiona was glowing. Her smile widened into a large grin that split her face in two, and she looked straight into his damp eyes.

“Well, my precious,” he said, “You’d better tell me all about it. The Doc, what did he say? How soon? No, suit down first! Don’t get yourself worked up!”.

“Hang on a moment! – It’s you that’s getting all excited. Everything’s fine – no problems. Doctor Williams reckons about the end of August – and I could do with a cup of tea!”

It had taken about a week of sublime euphoria before the implications hit home. Mostly spent rushing around various mums, dads, aunts and uncles before they started to realise how their life was due to change.

It all boiled down to money, in the end. And Tom wasn’t earning anything like enough to support a family by himself, and Fiona wasn’t

too keen on continuing to work after they had had the baby.

So here he was, with the best opportunity for making it all right in his grasp, and he was blowing it!

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“That was inexcusable, Tom, but I can understand where you are coming from.” Alex barely shifted from his position, pushed into the back of his black leather seat. “It must be pretty galling having to come back to your old job, and finding me, as it were, in your way.”

“Cripes,” thought Tom, “It did hit home, then.”

“But I forgive you! You were good at your job, once, and we can all afford to be a bit magnanimous.....”

“That’s even worse! That’s mortifying.” Tom was in two minds whether to voice his thoughts, cut his losses and drop out of the interview, or to

soak up the ignominy and see where it leads, but Alex hadn't finished.

"...but I must concur with your reasoning about creativity. There is more scope here for it than there ever was playing around with clay pots." Tom wasn't sure that Alex wasn't doing a bit of goading here, but he rose to the bait, anyway.

"I don't follow you!", Tom replied, agog to find out how Alex worked that out, in spite of having unwittingly delivered him the lead.

"Oh, I am not, for a single moment, disparaging your creative skills, but you must admit that there isn't much skill in mass producing thick and clumsy mugs, and solid vases, which is what most potteries seem to churn out."

Tom bridled, but kept his feelings under control all too aware that there was some justification for Alex's comments. "But there are some wonderful potters, producing some delicate and delightfully artistic pieces."

"I'm sure there are, but you must admit that the most artistic pieces," said Alex, "are those that are most divergent from their functionality."



“Never thought of it like that – surely art is already devolved from functionality – it transcends it, which is what gives it its value?”. Tom never thought that his job interview would end up in a philosophical discussion. He leant forward. This is going to be fun.