

Trouble on oiled waters



It was like a modern day version of Hansel and Gretel but without the romance, the wicked witch or even the charm. Alright, it wasn't like a modern day version of Hansel and Gretel. All the same I could have, if I had wanted to, found my way back home by following the oil trail that I had laid on my way there. Not a trail of rose petals, but the same principle.

In a week when an engine on the world's largest passenger jet exploded, due, apparently, to an oil leak, I felt some affinity with the head of the airline as he struggled to explain why his prestigious Airbus A380 had given the passengers the fright of their lives and had showered the citizens of Indonesia with bits of engine. One of the things he claimed afterwards was that his engineers had found oil leaks in the engines of other planes.

As I write this, sitting in an Airbus A380, I am thinking that 35,000 feet is a hell of a long way to fall if anything goes wrong. It is like falling the distance between Trunch and Sloley (meaningless to those of you who do not do Norfolk, but very roughly it is seven miles). Most of us would feel pretty sore if we fell seven feet, so I am hopeful that our engines on our A380 will keep their oil to themselves.

"No worries," said the features editor of *SJ*, when I told her which plane I was flying on, "we will just use the back page for your obit, if you don't make it." I should be grateful that I might merit an obituary, but I would rather, given the choice, live to write another tale.

Departure demands

The reality is that we were far more likely to come to grief on the way to the airport than at 35,000 feet. I was even more prone to murder, or be murdered by, my loved one as we struggled to get away at all. Working from home puts you in direct conflict with the demands of departure. You know the kind of thing:

Me: I just need to finish this letter. We have just had a part 36 offer. I cannot leave things dangling.

Her: You said we would leave at 2pm and it is already nearly three. Have you got your passport? Did you pack enough socks?

Me: Yes dear, just one more telephone call and then we will be away. Where are all the socks anyway? I keep buying them. Does someone eat them?

Her (through clenched teeth): Unless we leave NOW we will miss the plane. You know what the M25 is like when there are a few drops of rain. Well, it is pouring. And there are plenty of socks. You are just not looking in the right place.

Me: Yes darling, just popping down to the post. I will pick up a few pairs of socks at the same time.

Her: We will miss the plane. I know it.

Me (icy calm): There's heaps of time. I just need to enter my time recording for the morning.

Her: You do that and you will be history. Then on the journey:

Her: Can't you drive any faster? You are driving like an old man.

Me: I am not going to risk our lives in this rain. And I am an old man.

I don't know what the fuss was about. We arrived two hours 59 minutes before the flight was due to leave. Actually, don't tell her but when the radio announced that there was a serious accident just short of the turn off to Heathrow I began to see all my life appearing before me.

Now, up in the air, all is calm. It is four o'clock in the morning. The plane is in darkness. I am thumping out these words as we race towards Australia at ten miles a minute.

Back down to earth

And so it is time to come down to earth and talk about those things that really do ooze oil – old cars.

Time was when solicitors in the country earned a decent crust and could afford to demonstrate their wealth by driving around in brand new Mercedes Benzes, BMWs and

Porsches. I once bought a new car – only once. It was Italian and was manufactured in an era when cars after two years of existence were as full of rust as a dirty British coaster. You had to get rid of them or the floor would fall out and you would find yourself driving around clinging onto the steering wheel to stop your bottom being rubbed raw by the road surface.

Over the years as my fortunes have declined, so the average age of the cars I drive has risen. You cannot get sentimental over a car (at least I can't) but, like cats and dogs, car years can probably be measured by multiplying by nine. Thus in human terms my present car is now reaching the ripe old age of 72. It has rheumatism and creaks like an old carriage whenever it goes over bumps. It even sighs when it is parked.

I had thought that I was the only one in this predicament but I was greatly heartened to enter into correspondence with a solicitor after my own heart. I will spare his blushes, but I will just say that he comes from somewhere up north and drives an elderly Ford Escort. We now happily exchange experiences about our old clapped-out cars – each striving to outdo the other with heady descriptions of famous dents and disasters we have known.

So, Chris, let me have the latest word on the subject. It was cold. The council had not cleared the snow properly and as I pulled into a layby I noticed too late that the snow concealed a raised kerb separating it from the road. There was a hell of a bang underneath the car and my first thought was that I must have ripped the engine out. To my surprise the engine kept running. Ten miles down the road the oil light came on. The sump had cracked. That night I poured more oil into (and out of) my car than BP spilled into the Gulf of Mexico.

At least there are no hidden kerbs at 35,000 feet.

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