

Paper Chase

In the year of 1998, I learnt something that was to change my life forever. Having recently been dumped by my girlfriend in favour of a statue, I had been struggling to find much joy or purpose in life. When I say a statue, I don't mean a lump of rock carved into the likeness of a dead military hero. I of course mean one of those unemployed bums who somehow 'earn' money from idiot tourists by standing still for hours on end. This guy had a spot in Covent Garden and was raking it in. Being replaced by a guy who's specialty is to stand still and not say anything is a whole new way of being told you're inadequate; 'you're such a shit, I'd rather spend time with a slightly warm, inanimate object'. Come to think of it, it maybe says more about my ex than it does about me, but at the time it was really making me very miserable.

I had spent the morning scraping the mould from the grouting in my bathroom, listening to old Led Zeppelin records. Neither the activity nor the soundtrack were doing much to improve my mood, so instead I headed in to town to see what mischief I could find. I wasted little time, and could soon be found in a small pub just off Chancery Lane. The Red Lion is one of those old school boozers full of dark wood, gloomy lighting, a disturbingly sticky carpet and nicotine stains that almost completely fail to mask the damp on the ceiling. It suited my mood perfectly.

I was drinking with Alfie, the half wit brother of my ex-girlfriend who could usually be found in the neighbourhood. Apparently number three on the list of reasons why I was dumped was because I "lead Alfie astray and take advantage of his good nature". This was to completely misunderstand the nature of our relationship, which was actually one based on mutual contempt. Alfie couldn't stand me and thought I was dreadful for his sister; in his warped and confused little mind this meant he should spend as much time with me as possible to prevent me from having sex with her. For my part I thought he was a complete idiot, with a disturbing fascination with the concept of incest. But he seemed to have an endless supply of beer money, and could be easily parted with it. The break up had had little effect on my relationship with Alfie. It's possible that contempt had bred familiarity, and was slowly giving way to friendship, but actually I just think we were very lazy and habitual people.

Anyway, we were several beers in, and Alfie was enjoying mocking me about Yvonne's new man. Bored of the conversation, my attention drifted aimlessly across the smoky room. The table on my left consisted of three chain-smoking estate agents, who were thoroughly enjoying themselves, and wanted everyone else to know about it. Which worked out well for me, given that my own drinking companion was such a tedious arsehole. Their conversation had begun in the depths of the barmaids cleavage, moved (eventually) onto an analysis of the current state of the Premiership and was now slowly meandering into the world of male bullshit and bravado. Alfie and

I were soon drawn into their conversation, and the drinking got serious.

After a bizarre conversation involving the average height of a giraffe and telegraph poles, I staggered manfully to the toilet, and dozed off on the toilet seat for a twenty minute power nap. I woke up with a slightly heavy head and a sandpaper tongue, Alfie hammering on the cubicle door. He'd grown concerned that I had left him with the tab, and come to check I was still on the toilet. I was tempted to ignore him, but the noise was insufferable, and there's only so long one can spend in a toilet cubicle before the smell starts to permeate into your pores. I came out and Alfie excitedly told me about a bet he'd been offered by the goon squad.

Mildly intrigued and desperately thirsty, I returned to the bar. Drinks had been bought for me in spite of my prolonged absence, so I quickly necked them to appease my heckling companions. One of the guys - I'm not sure what his name was, but I had been calling him Barry for a good couple of hours, and he'd long since given up correcting me - had a piece of paper on the table, and he was betting a pint that I wouldn't be able to fold it over itself more than seven times.

Intrigued, I snapped Barry up on his bet, and got to work folding the paper. My first attempt failed, as did my second. Alfie, not to be outdone, tried it as well, convinced that I was being completely incompetent. In fact, he was so convinced that I was an idiot, it didn't occur to him that it was actually impossible, and he just kept on trying. And trying. And trying. In the end he had to pay for everyone's beers for the entire night. After much paper folding, shots and promises of phonecalls and repeat evenings out, we all went our separate ways, weaving our merry, confused paths out across the tube and bus network that is a drunkards best friend at the end of an evening in our fair capital.

The next morning, I woke early, my mind on fire with the possibilities of paper folding (and miraculously, not even a hint of a hangover). Surely, I asked myself, if you can't fold paper more than seven times, then once it is folded seven times, you must have something really strong. Right?

Right?

I started off small, building miniature models of chairs, bridges, and shelves. But really my fingers were too small for such delicate work. Efforts to utilise the smaller digits of the neighbourhood children ended badly after an accident with some glue and my video camera. I cleared my name, but still had to move home after continual attacks on my home by well meaning vigilantes.

Over the course of the following two years, I sunk every spare moment into experiment after experiment. To get around my size limitations, I turned to

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larger items, I first developed stilts (thanks to a brief interest in clowning), but then moved on to more practical items like chairs, bedside cabinets and desks. Soon my work started to suffer, and eventually I was fired. I barely noticed; my obsession with paper construction was building faster than the furniture I built was collapsing, and I only had eyes for the future – a world constructed with paper.

In February of 2001 my recently finished paper house was washed away in a torrential downpour the like of which I had never seen. Rivers burst their banks, trees fell down, and cars were swept away by the dozen. As the thunder rolled across the swollen sky, I screamed out in anger and shame. I slumped amongst the piles of sodden paper, the remnants of my dream dripping down my face, and I wept.

After a brief spell as an accountant, my love affair with paper began again. I now knew the folly of my earlier misadventure, but I missed the smell of it, the feel of it, the excitement of it. In the course of my experiments I had learnt everything there is to know about paper, and here I was, moving numbers around on a screen. I had taken to spending time in the stationary cupboard, just stroking pieces of paper, enjoying the smell and the feel of it. It was one miserable lunchtime in the cupboard that I realised I could still put it all to good use.

Three months later, and I had become a paper miller. And today, I supply over two thirds of the country's paper needs. My house may physically be made of bricks and mortar, but I have still fulfilled my dream.

Everything I own is built from paper.

The End