

Faux pas

An amusing wet afternoon pastime is for each of a group to relate one very embarrassing anecdote about themselves. Here are some entries:

Tripping the light fantastic - Oxford al fresco

At an investment conference at Wadham College in Oxford, 1995, everything was intense: the lectures were world-renowned. The quality of the debate amongst the 50 or so participants was rarefied - in fact the annual event was so well known that experts who normally demanded speaking fees of tens of thousands of dollars would attend at their own expense. Social activities were of a commensurate standard, including a formal dinner, punting on the Thames and an informal post-punting event.

In keeping with the rarefied ambiance, the tradition was to stop in college. Most of us were housed in the new wing, consisting of blocks of twelve rooms on three levels, sharing a bathroom and two toilets, though each room was equipped with its own wash-basin. I had remarked to one of the organisers that the doors did not latch, which would make it easy to lock oneself out of one's room. She said not to worry, as each block had a resident student with a master key. Mine was a Japanese woman in Room 11 on the third floor.

Following the formal event, a band of excellent Somali jazz musicians had been engaged until quite late on a perfect August evening we danced until the early hours.

Back in my room I had decided to take off all my clothes, rinse them and hang them to dry. Then I went to bed.

As normal for me, I woke at 5.00 or so needing to go to the toilet, which was two steps away across the corridor. Still half asleep, I didn't bother dressing, but took a newspaper to wedge in the door to stop it closing behind me. Sitting on the toilet my wits started to revive: more so when I noticed the newspaper on the floor in front of me. I closed my eyes again, hoping it to be a dream but to my dismay, when I opened them again, it was still there.

This was a problem that would get worse as time passed, so with only the newspaper, I mounted the stairs and knocked at the door of Room 11. A voice responded drowsily that she was not a student and did not have a key to my room, and suggested I go to the College Lodge. The Lodge was in fact the street entrance to the college, at least three quadrangles away. I said I wasn't wearing anything. What do you mean? I'm not wearing anything, not even a smile - which was true. A T-shirt was dangled out the door, and I remarked to myself that this was the tallest Japanese woman in the world. I accepted the offering and, stretching it as low as I could, went dancing toward the Lodge. The Porter was quite unruffled, averting his glance and declaring: Easily done, easily done, and gave me a key.

I returned the T-shirt, adding a chocolate that had been offered at one of the up-market hotels I'd stopped in in Boston or London.

But I later came to realise that the Asian woman had in fact been a conference attendee, and by elimination could only have been an important adviser to my prospective clients, who I would almost inevitably have to impress back in Australia.

Technical assistance

As Director of European Sales at QUANTEC, then a leading provider of investment risk systems, I was called on by a colleague to pop in to a client of his, to do a re-installation. Re-installations were in fact very simple and routine: indeed, I had done my own each month for at least two years. My colleague warned me that it was a network installation, meaning that it was on the firm's central server rather than the user's desktop. But, though a bit more complicated, it was not difficult, and I had successfully performed many over the years.

The IT manager was a bit surprised to see a middle-aged woman come to provide what amounted to technical assistance, so was already suspicious of my mastery of the task of inserting a CD into a CD reader and clicking on the Install button - a fool-proof operation. Almost.

When shown the server I noticed that it was a Compaq, many of which models at the time did not have a drawer to receive the CD, but a simple slot, which would suck in the disc ready to be read, and eject it on a command from the computer's directory manager. I inserted the disc, but just as it disappeared from view, I noticed the little drawer just beneath the slot. Oops.

The IT manager opened the computer's directory manager and was surprised to see that the CD drawer reported itself to be empty. He opened the drawer manually and there the disc wasn't. "Where's the CD gone?!" "I think its in there." "Where?" "Inside the computer."

To retrieve the CD from its cavity entailed pulling the machine out from its storage place and, with screwdrivers and the help of a colleague, removing its casing. The CD duly fell on the floor.

As he saw me out, I remarked that now he had something to talk about during the long weekend. "I promise I'll wait until you've left the building before I tell everyone." He said.

Broken glass

Ben, Ophelia and Margot, Ben's mother, had converged on my flat in Paris to help prepare for the impending wedding of Ben and Ophelia, which was to take place in Las Vegas in October that year.

It was a great opportunity to show them around my newly-adopted home town, and given the celebratory nature of the gathering, I took us to a smart bar in a smart hotel in the very smart sixth arrondissement.

A defining feature of this bar was its “honesty system”. You poured your own drinks and later declared to the concierge what you had consumed.

That was nice, but the best thing about it was that it was intimate and quiet: no “music” and conversation was generally kept at a very low volume.

We sat at a configuration of four armchairs arranged facing each other around a low table. Beside us, against the wall, was a radiator connected to the hotel’s central heating system. It was enclosed in stylish cabinetry, with what appeared to be a shelf under its “roof”.

On the table was a heavy glass ashtray, which I decided to put out of sight on the “shelf” below the top of the radiator cabinetry.

As I let go of it, I realised that there was no shelf there, so the ashtray fell and smashed very noisily on the flagstones under the radiator.

A moment froze in time, as one of the hotel staff stopped and looked around to find the source of the crash. Ophelia had seen exactly what happened and we looked at each other, both understanding that the best strategy was to feign ignorance. Margot exclaimed loudly: What was that? What? What?!! I distinctly heard a loud crash!” we shrugged, then, when the hotel man was out of sight, collapsed into uncontrolled giggles. Ben was looking around: What’s going on?? Margot continued: What was that crash? I distinctly heard a crash!!

Tripping the light fantastic - More broken glass

Ophelia must have had nothing better to do that evening, which was pretty unusual for her. But for that or some other reason, she had agreed to accompany us to the theatre. It was theatre “in the round”, as was the mode of the 1980s. On entering, you crossed the “stage” in the centre to take your place.

The reassuringly numerous audience was seated and ready, the actors waiting to begin and all eyes were on the stage as Ophelia, the last to take her seat, tripped over a tangle of cables, plunging the whole place into darkness.

Ophelia had Arrived. Torches were sent for..... eventually the show went on....

Yet more broken glass

Sometimes aviation technology moves too fast. Passengers can hardly be forgiven for not keeping up with the ever more sophisticated entertainment systems, seat adjustments and reading light technology.

On a flight from Sydney to Melbourne, Ophelia noticed that this was one of those systems where you tap the glass to turn the light on. Sometimes it demands more a prod than a tap, and sometimes a good poke. This one was particularly stubborn

though, so she gave it a really good punch, shattering the glass all over her hair and clothes. Her neighbour said nothing, but kept very much to himself for the duration of the flight.

Don't you just hate it when....?

One of the problems with mobile phones is that they're mobile: you can leave them anywhere.

So it was when Ophelia, juggling an eighteen-month old, a few bags of shopping and an urgent work phone call, sought a short-term fix to her arms-full problem by placing the phone against the windscreen of her car, just above one of the wipers.

Then her attention was taken up with the child and the shopping and the imperative of getting home in short order.

A few days later, Ben, her husband, remarked: Isn't that your phone there on the windscreen? Just as she braked to retrieve it, it fell on the road and was run over by a four-wheel-drive. It didn't survive the impact of course, but she marvelled that it had sat on the windscreen for a number of days without coming adrift.

She marvelled this aloud to a number of her friends, at least two of whom empathised: Yes, don't you just hate it when that happens?

Errmm??

It turns out that phones are routinely run over by cars. One friend had, for obscure reasons, left hers on the front wheel of her car and then ran over it.

Another had become so frustrated with the thing that she threw it on the road and ran over it several times.