

I used to be a plumber which was excellent training for my new profession. Every self respecting plumber knows that when you're looking at the previous plumber's labour, you never say, 'gosh, what an excellent piece of work.' It is part of the job that when you first see the work in hand, that you draw in air through your teeth, shake your head and say, 'Who did this? Must've been a REAL cowboy'. You then inform the unfortunate householder that the work will take forever, IF you can get the parts - and it will set them back at least four hundred quid, more if Christmas is around the corner.

But you get tired of the same old job, don't you? In my case, it was the smells that got to me. Not just the blocked toilets but the musty smell of damp which seems to be a problem in half the houses in Britain – or at least in the houses I was called out to.

Looking around for a new job wasn't easy. I was forty, not exactly the age to start doing an apprenticeship. I had one O' level to my name, a B in metalwork, so you've probably guessed that I'm not an academic high flyer. So what could I do? The idea came to me three years ago. It was just after Christmas and I had bought my kids their first computer. This was when the internet had just started and at first, the kids just wanted to surf all day. Within a couple of weeks they got bored of it and went back to riding their bikes and playing football.

Well, the computer was just sitting there and we had signed up for 20 hours free internet a month, so I had a go. I won't go into details of the kind of sites I visited, just to say that one afternoon when no one else was in the house, I was visiting a special French one. I don't speak a word of French but I could definitely enjoy the pictures! Anyway, suddenly, the computer screen just froze. My mouse wouldn't move, I pressed all the keys a hundred times trying to get something to happen, but it wouldn't. All I had was a big picture of 18 year old Sandrine stuck in the middle of my screen. What could I do? My kids could come home any minute. My wife would be back in half an hour after her badminton club. I didn't want to unplug it as I was sure that would do serious damage to my computer. In the end, I called David. He was a mate from the pub and I was sure he knew more about computers than me. Luckily he was in and agreed to come straight round.

"Wow, I wouldn't mind going down the Champs-Elysées with her!" said David, admiring Sandrine's prostrate body.

“David, my kids’ll be home any minute, can you fix it?”

David looked at me in a strange way.

“I can pay,” I said, taking out my wallet.

David leant forward and pressed three buttons. A little box appeared over Sandrine’s left shoulder. He pressed the same buttons again. Sandrine disappeared, the whole screen went blank, there was a beep and my computer started up again.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” he replied.

My first reaction was that David would make a lousy plumber. He could’ve taken an hour to fix my computer, taken the thing apart, told me some complicated names, charged me fifty quid and I would still have been happy.

“How did you do that?” I asked. I hadn’t realised what an expert David was.

He showed me. Control button, Alt button, Delete button, holding them all down at the same time. I tried it myself. Up popped the little window again. Control, Alt, Delete... BING, the computer restarted. I could do it! I was an expert like David. I had a new profession.

“Mr Whizz?”

“That’s me. At your service.”

“Thank you so much for coming round. It’s through here.”

The woman led me through her expensively-furnished apartment. Sitting on a large desk in the corner of her living room was her computer. A model similar to mine, probably bought from the same shop. “It just froze,” explained the woman. “I was looking for a recipe for tomato ketchup and suddenly everything just stopped.”

Isn’t it weird, that as we approach the Twenty First Century, people need to look on the internet to find a recipe to make ketchup? Of course I didn’t say that to the woman. I drew in air through my teeth, shook my head.

“Is it serious?”

That made me smile - inside of course. I felt like a doctor. ‘Is it serious, doctor? Tell me, how long have I got?’ I sat down at her keyboard and tapped as many keys as I could, while looking at the screen. Nothing changed. There was a picture of a big red tomato and a recipe for ketchup. “Mmmmm,” I said. “This could take a while.”

‘Oh no, I only bought it last week.’

I had guessed that already. Luckily my first client was even more ignorant than I was. I took out my tool kit and unscrewed the back of her tower (as I have since learnt the big box thing is called). ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she asked, as I tinkered away, loosening and retightening screws.

‘Please, milk and two sugars.’ Normally I have three sugars, but I thought a computer expert would not have such a sweet tooth.

It was just under an hour later, when I was able to announce that I was confident that I had fixed her problem.

‘But the screen is still not moving!’ she pointed out.

‘True, but I had to fix the problem inside first. You had a serious problem with your electrostatic fribulator. That’s what I’ve just spent the last hour fixing.’

She looked at me as though I was a surgeon who had just saved the life of her child.

‘Now, IF I’ve fixed it I should be able to...’ I sat in front of her computer again and tapped away on her keyboard. After about a minute, as she watched over my shoulder, I quickly pressed Control, Alt, Delete and up popped the box. ‘Bingo!’

I pressed Control, Alt, Delete again and the computer restarted, blue screen and then back to normal. I smiled up at her. ‘Easy when you know how.’

‘I don’t know how you do it. All those keys you have to remember. You didn’t need a book or a manual or anything.’

I tapped the side of my head. ‘This is where I keep my information. You see computers are changing so quickly these days. You buy one and before you’ve got it home from the shop, it’s out of date!’

She looked at me with a worried look on her face. Could people really be that naïve?

‘Only joking,’ I added.

I got my sixty pounds from her, plus a ten pound tip for being so efficient. She would definitely be calling me if she needed any more help.

Over the coming weeks, I fixed a range of problems: some people didn’t know where all the cables went. As they are colour coded, this is within the capabilities of the average 5 year old, though who am I to turn away good money offered by a stupid though eternally grateful, public? Of course, as I am sure you are wondering, what did I do when someone had a real problem? A problem that I couldn’t fix? I did what plenty of other people do - I

took it to a computer repair shop. It's amazing the work those guys can do. They tap away at the keyboard, fiddle around inside, tell me I've got a problem with my Numeric Data Processor or whatever, fix it and charge me 60 quid. I take it back to the client, charge them 125 quid, telling them they got it cheaper because I got them a special price. Why is it people are always happy when they get a special price? Don't they ever realise that they might be getting an especially *high* price?

I enjoyed my new career. I had a group of regulars who knew me and, sad but true, trusted me. I also had a steady supply of people answering my ad: Problems with your computer? No job too big or small. Call Mr Whizz on... Supermarkets were the best places for me to advertise. That also meant I usually got women, always a bonus in a profession which involves home visits. You'd be surprised how many women will fake a problem with their washing machine, and more recently with their computer, so that a handyman can come round and provide her with some service. That always made me smile. A fake computer expert, coming to repair a fake problem – and ending up... getting a bit of slap and tickle into the bargain! Of course we went through the pretence of looking at the computer, before she would return in a dressing gown with a bottle of wine and two glasses. 'I thought you might want a break from all that hard work...'

I still got my money and it was not long before I could put my rates up to 90 quid an hour as I was in such great demand.

It was bliss. I had moved up to fixing celeron processor motherboards 8614 (a step up from electrostatic fribulators having picked up a bit of the lingo in the computer shops). My wife was happy, kids were doing well at school - well, better than I ever did which I suppose doesn't count for much.

Then one day. It was October the 26th, I had a call from a woman called Meena. She had a problem with her new computer. Her husband was away and she couldn't send her very important e-mails. (Isn't it interesting that a few years ago, no one had e.mail . Now, people have e-mails that are so important that the world will probably stop turning if they don't send them.) Anyway, the phrase 'my husband is away' always grabbed my attention and I made sure I had the necessary equipment should she require extra services.

'Hello?'

'Mr Whizz, at your service.'

There was a buzz and the large gate opened. I climbed up a flight of steps to the front door of their massive house. ‘Hello, I’m Meena,’ said Meena, dressed in one of those sari things. Despite that, I have to say she was gorgeous. She had long black hair, all shiny, like on the adverts. She had great skin, sort of Bambi brown colour if you know what I mean. And these big brown eyes. I think she must have hypnotised me with them.

‘Er, my name’s Bob,’ I said. It isn’t, but you never know how long the fingers of the tax man are.

‘Come in, Bob.’

I followed her into her house. There was a sort of spicy smell - not like a curry house, but sort of, different. Sorry, I’m not very good with words.

‘I’ve been trying to install a new hard disk on this old machine. I’ve checked the jumpers and connected the cables correctly but I’ll need to format it in MS-DOS. I’m always a bit nervous about using MS-DOS. I always think that I’ll never get back again! Sorry for my naivety.’

‘Don’t worry, Meena. I understand,’ I said with complete honesty. Well, honest that I understood about her naivety, though she probably knew about a hundred times more than me.

I realise that this was a clear case where I had a better chance of swimming to Australia than fixing Meena’s problem. Logically, I should have taken it straight to my mates down at the computer store. But those eyes...my husband’s away...like a moth around a light, I was captivated. ‘Let’s have a look inside your tower, shall we?’

I would just have a quick look. See that I couldn’t help and then suggest I take it back to ‘my workshop’. The back was already unscrewed and I looked at the jumble of leads and cables inside.

‘Have I connected them properly? The original hard disk should be the master and the new one should be the slave, am I right?’

She probably was. She could have been speaking Chinese for all I knew. ‘I think you might have a problem with your, er, electrostatic fribulator.’ It’s funny how your mind works at times of stress. Why did I go back to talking about electrostatic fribulators? I suppose I thought she knew a bit about computers so I couldn’t use my new faithful ‘celeron processor motherboards 8614’.

‘Electrostatic fribulator? Never heard of it.’

Not surprising, that. Anyway, I was playing for time. I wanted her to leave me and then come back in her dressing gown. She was a real beauty and her husband was away.

“What is it exactly?”

“It’s difficult to explain in layman’s terms.”

“Try me.”

Boy, I wanted to try her. Was that her way of telling me to...Should I make a move or wait for her?

“Well?”

“It’s a kind of...”

I was saved by the bell. It was her mobile. “Sorry, that’ll be my husband,” explained Meena. “Hi, Vijay, how was your flight?”

After that, they spoke in a strange mixture of English and one of those Indian languages, blah, blah, blah, financial expert, blah blah blah...I listened to them jabbering away as I poked around inside her tower. “Blah, blah, blah, Bob, blah, blah, blah, Electrostatic fribulator, Blah. There was then a fast exchange of words, completely in their language. Then the dreaded words, “My husband, Vijay, would like a word.”

She handed me the phone. “Hello? Mr Whizz, at your service,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

“Mr Whizz, my wife tells me there is a problem with her electrostatic fribulator. Could you tell me what that is?”

“Well, Vijay, it’s not easy to explain in layman’s terms.”

“I am not a layman, Mr Whizz. I am the CEO of one of the largest software companies in the world.”

“Ah well, in that case, I can explain. An electrostatic fribulator is a...hello? Vijay? Hello?” I smiled at Meena. “We were cut off.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure he’ll call back.”

I should have left, found an excuse to go and saved my skin. But no, like that moth around the light, I stayed.

A minute later, the phone rang again. Meena answered it. They didn’t speak English this time. I saw her glance in my direction once but then she smiled. Was I going to be lucky after all?

“My husband apologises,” she said after hanging up. “He asked one of his colleagues about electrostatic fribulators and he explained what they were. Even a top CEO doesn’t know everything!”

So perhaps they do exist! Perhaps I had mixed it up with something I had picked up at the computer shop. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I’d love one please, Meena.”

I really didn’t know what had happened. I thought they had me by the short and curlies but now I was getting the red carpet treatment. It was a funny cup of tea, no milk or sugar, just a slice of lemon. Meena told me about Vijay, who apparently was in California. I told her about Debbie and the kids.

I was about to explain that the job was too difficult and I would have to take it back to my workshop when the doorbell rang again. “Ah, my friends have arrived,” said Meena and jumped up to let them in.

I have to confess that I had fantasies of not one, but three Indian beauties all requiring service. These fantasies were dashed when I heard male voices in the hallway. Suddenly two men marched into the room. “Detective Inspector Platt,” declared the first man. “This is my assistant, Sergeant Young. Could you explain your presence in this lady’s house, Mr...Whizz?”

The phrase ‘it’s a fair cop’ seems to have gone out of fashion amongst the criminals today. Not that I’m a criminal, well, not one that beats up old ladies or shoots people. True, I hadn’t been paying taxes. True, I didn’t have a business licence...

I got a suspended sentence which Debbie was happy about. I’ve gone back to my plumbing again – at least I know what I’m doing there. So next time a plumber calls at your house, sucks in air through his teeth and says, ‘Who did this? Must’ve been a REAL cowboy’. It could well be me.

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