

## PREFACE

I have this thing I call the Wedding Test which goes like this: you are sitting at the reception of a wedding and making small talk with the person beside you while tucking in to your slab of beef (or salmon). You have discussed the bride and groom, the bridesmaid's dresses, the mother-of-the-bride's hat, how nice the service was, the table centrepiece, how ridiculously OTT weddings have become ('They spent 40,000?!! My God, are you kidding me?!'), how nervous the best man is about his speech, the institution of marriage, kids, traffic, the price of property. Having established a wine-fuelled comfortable rapport, your dinner companion feels comfortable enough with you to pop the question:

*'So, eh, what do you do?'*

Up to very recently I've always dreaded that moment. It's a loaded question, a question that judges you. Measures you. A question that *expects*. 'What do you do?' Four little words with a sting in the tail. Four little words, the answer to which will define you in the eyes of that person. If, for example, you say that you're a managing director or a doctor, this will immediately establish you as a Successful Person in your dinner-companion's eyes. Yes, we are all just that shallow.

## TRADING PACES

Now, how do *you* feel about the answer that comes out of your mouth? Are you happy with your response? Are you proud of what you do for a living? Or at least comfortable with it? Or do you mutter something inaudible through a mouthful of roast potato and hope someone will start clinking glasses to herald the start of the speeches?

For ten years I did the latter. 'I'm a salesman,' I would mumble and hope that they didn't hear me or that the person on the far side of them would ask a question and they would be distracted. Somewhere else at the table Mrs Kelly (my wife is an insanely private person and has therefore expressly forbidden me to use her first name, Eilish, anywhere in this book) would be saying, 'I'm an accountant' to *her* dinner companion and watching their eyes glaze over.

More often than not I would be too embarrassed to say, 'I'm a salesman,' and would say instead, 'I work for an IT company.' Then they would say, 'Oh very good. Are you a programmer?' And I would say, 'Eh, no, I'm in sales.' I tried to avoid the word 'salesman' as much as I could. I can't really explain why I was so embarrassed by that word – and I *was* more embarrassed by the word than by the profession itself. The job itself I could just about handle. But the word 'salesman' – I hated that word. (Incidentally, I'm not alone – you will never find a salesperson with the word 'salesperson' or 'salesman' on their business card. It will say 'account manager', 'sales executive', 'new business development manager', 'sales account executive', 'sales development manager'. Pretty much *anything* but 'salesperson').

To many people the word 'salesman' conjures up an image

of someone slightly shifty, perhaps even a bit false or smarmy. It always seems to suggest that something unpleasant is about to happen. If you ask someone what a salesperson will be like socially, they will say that they might be fun and there certainly wouldn't be too many lulls in the conversation (sales people do like to talk, after all) – but won't they always be looking for an angle? Can we trust them, really? We've become incredibly tired and cynical about sales, advertising, marketing and PR – and rightly so, in my view. We always tend to think that people in those professions are trying to con us into buying products we don't need and, worse, they have Jedi mind-tricks up their sleeves that make us powerless to resist their charms.

Back at the dinner table, if the conversation developed beyond these initial forays, and it rarely did, I would find myself getting all defensive about my job, quite uninvited. I would say things like, 'Well, sure, it's only a job' or 'It pays the bills.' But, of course, a job is never only a job and we're deluding ourselves when we say this. It's far more than that. In the average working life of forty-five years, we will spend 10,800 days at work. Think about that: 10,800 days. Sounds a lot, doesn't it? Our job is something we will be doing until we're sixty-five – so we'd better bloody well like it.

And I was starting to realise – all too slowly – that I bloody well didn't.