

Rob McGibbon

About a freelance

Recently a friend called me from Heathrow in great excitement on his return from a long-haul business trip. "Rob, I've got it — I finally know who you are!" he announced, laughing. "I've just watched *About a Boy*. That's you — you're Hugh Grant in that film."

"Thanks, great."
"Yeah. You're him — the bloke with no job, the one who doesn't do anything!"

Hysterical laughter followed and I joined in lightly. It's fine: I've been getting this sort of piss-take for years because that's the commonly held perception, you know, that freelancing is a cushy little skive. Yeah right. And my name's Hugh Grant.

I watched *About a Boy* again for the sake of this piece (strenuous legwork marks out a good hack) and I have to admit, the similarities are worryingly uncanny. I even noticed that I dress a bit like the lead character these days.

For those of you not familiar with the plot the film is based on Nick Hornby's best-selling book of the same title. In the movie version Hugh plays Will, an accidentally wealthy layabout. He is single and takes great pleasure in his hedonistic "island" life by gleefully dividing his days into 30-minute slots of idleness, which he affectionately calls "units".

To meet women, Will joins a single parents' group and pretends to have a son; his cynical ploy goes wrong when a 12-year-old boy befriends him, turns his life upside down and consequently brings Will's solo days and wicked womanising to a happy conclusion. It is a wonderful, feel-good film.

I hasten to point out that I do not go around chasing single mums — well, not deliberately — nor have I invented a child — yet. However, as a freelance writer working from home, I do have a disproportionate amount of time to fill and Will's "units" principle could apply: travelling to work — one-tenth of a unit; reading the papers — two units; writing stories — multiple units at staggered half-unit intervals; ideas conference — one unit; exercise — two units; work avoidance tactics — innumerable units.

Without doubt, freelancing is an odd life and it is one that I have come to love and loathe in equal measure. Like most jobs, it can be as good as it can be bad.

My plot so far: my last staff job was as a showbiz writer on *The Sun* under Kelvin MacKenzie; I was young and on an upward trajectory. Then in early 1990 I had an idea for a quick book on an unknown boy band. Uncle Kelvin said, "Nah — write features." I left, the band was *New Kids on the Block* and the book sold by the truck load; it was an amazing break and there was never any going back.

So, at 24, I had suddenly gone from the buzz of the Super Soaraway to the surreal routine of working alone. And 14 years on, I am still on Cell Block F. I mean, Jesus, even fluttering Papillon didn't do this long in solitary.

Since going freelance, I have kept up a steady output of showbiz interviews, news stories and general features. OK, none of it is Pulitzer-winning material, but I have had countless articles in 12 or more nationals, as well as a variety of magazines, and I've had a number of celebrity biographies published. I've not been as prolific as some, but I've not been lazy either.

Most of my work goes to the tabloids and, without exception, I do business with like-minded people who are always honourable and fair. In all this time I have not been let down on one payment — touch wood — and you cannot ask for more than that. I suppose it is because I regularly produce stuff that helps out in the ever-hungry world of newspapers. Sounds easy, but it isn't.

Rather like Papillon, I have repeatedly tried to escape this writing life — so don't be surprised if you ever see a guy floating by Wapping and Canary Wharf on a coconut raft screaming, "I'm still here, you bastards!"

I have embarked on various crackpot entrepreneurial ventures in the hope of returning to the comfort of an office environment, which I have always missed. But no matter what, I come back to freelancing: it's probably what I do best.

The reason for these escape attempts is that freelancing is a mash of confusing contradictions. It messes with your head and the only way to make it work is to accept that it's all about balance. If you think of it as a set of scales, then one side sinks down under a stack of irritating negatives, but it is brought back to a satisfactory hover by a small number of seriously heavy positives.

The all-defining upside is encapsulated in the job

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