

The FIFO Dream?

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Some people are just never meant to do certain jobs.

It's 2004 and I'm on a Pilbara mine site in Western Australia. I'm sitting five metres above the ground in the air-conditioned cab of a yellow dump truck. The height is disorientating, I feel as if I'm perched on the roof of a moving house, people and cars ant-like below me.

The excavator operator's voice on the two-way radio is condescendingly slow, brimming with sarcasm and low fury.

“Drive forward *again*, and reverse back in line with my tracks. It's not that hard.”

I grasp the small, black steering wheel and go forward again, wheeling around to reverse. Plumes of red dust cloud my side mirrors and I squint to see the speck of machinery behind me. I stomp on the gas and the V12 engine roars through the insulated cab walls and my earplugs. I reverse in a wobbling zigzag, over-steering and over-correcting and land my truck nowhere near the designated spot. A rolling air-horn blasts behind me BAAAAARP. The driver has given me “the angry honk,” I slam on the brakes and freeze. A feeling of dread washes over me and I know from the length of the horn that I have done it wrong for the fortieth time

that day. I wait for the humiliating rebuke through the two-way radio. It blasts through the speakers to me and the listening audience of over a hundred people scattered throughout the mine's Mars-like landscape.

“You idiot.”

This was the life of a “green” dump truck driver on a mine site. I don't think I ever quite got it right, to be honest, even after five years of driving trucks on sites. But I wasn't too worried at the time, it was money for jam. In the end, I was earning over a hundred thousand a year for working less than six months of that year on a fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) roster. For actual working time, I'd calculated that I was being paid one dollar per minute. Not too shabby for an unskilled hospitality worker from Perth.

Now, five years later with a four-year-old and a two-year-old, I've made a dizzying fall from financial grace. FIFO rosters are impossible for most women after having children, and as our society often arranges, the lion's share of the income earning was popped squarely onto my husband's shoulders. As a stay at home mum and FIFO wife, I find myself home alone for long stretches of time with the kids. Together we wait for the return of my husband, Adam, from the mine site where he works in the Pilbara.

“Where's Dad?” Solomon, my four-year-old, asks.

It's six o'clock in the morning. Mysteriously, Dad has disappeared from his side of the bed.

“Work,” I say.

“You mean he went to work in the night?”

“Yes, he left earlier this morning and went to the airport to go to work.”

“He sure was quiet,” Solomon says.

His two-year-old brother, Oscar, stomps into the bedroom. Noticing a Dad-sized gap on the bed he launches himself at it.

“Where Dad?” he squawks.

As the older brother, Solomon is full of sage advice.

“Dad’s gone Oscar. But don’t worry, he’s not dead. He’s just gone to work.”

“Yar,” says Oscar. He looks over at me. “Podgee, mum?”

Oscar’s morning demand for porridge and Solomon’s matter-of-factness on his father’s whereabouts hints that the boys are adapted to our FIFO lifestyle. After a full week of Dad being at home, they roll with the punches and know the next step of the FIFO cycle has arrived, Dad’s absence.

According to studies on father absences in FIFO families, this adaptability is common (Bradbury 15). Despite 96 percent of FIFO dads being away from their children for six months of the year, child-centred research reports little adverse effects on father-child relationships or a child’s well-being (Bradbury 24).

I soothe myself with these statistics to alleviate the guilt I feel for our kids who have lived half their life without their father. We are lucky; Adam has a relatively even time roster, eight days at work, six days at home. We’ve taken the resources boom for granted in the last decade, but its steady decline has seen hundreds of jobs axed and rosters doubled for surprised employees at smaller mining operations. House prices are high in Perth, our average house has the average mortgage of half a million dollars. Even as a FIFO family we scrape by, but we are lucky.

I step back to 2008, it’s “smoko” time on the mine site. We park up in the canyon sized pit, a row of 200-tonne dump trucks and a mountain-moving shovel excavator. We slowly climb down the metal giants and move stiff-limbed from ladders and staircases. The sky is overcast

and the clouds hang low and dark above us. The white machinery sits stark against the wine-red earth surrounding us. Five of us stand in a circle, awkward and dwarfed by the sky-scraping size of the machines. No one wants to say it, to acknowledge the day, but everyone is thinking the same thing. The air is thick and humid, heavy with the coming rain and the cloud cover. The helmets and dark safety glasses make it hard to read facial expressions. I bite into a green apple. We make painful small talk and skirt around it. Eventually, to our relief, smoko finishes. Later that evening some of us take comfort in the treat of defrosted seafood in the dining hall, or call loved ones, or just sit alone in our rooms to get the day over with. It's the worst day of the year on a mine site. It's Christmas Day.

Research suggests that missing these types of events has negative effects on both family relationships and stress levels for FIFO workers (Meredith, Rush and Robinson). As the twenty-four-hour production process of mining doesn't stop, little flexibility is given by companies for its employees unless holidays are booked. Certainly from my experience in mining there is a cardinal rule that not everyone can have Christmas "off" so don't bother asking for it. Family illnesses and emergencies don't guarantee an immediate passage home either. If something happens in the middle of the night, a flight can't be organised until the morning if there is a flight that day at all. The remoteness of sites and lack of company incident plans for workers can increase feelings of isolation and helplessness for FIFO employees and their families (Meredith, Rush and Robinson).

Back in 2012 I remember flipping through the calendar scrutinizing Adam's designated weeks off and how they would align with the birth of Oscar. If he took holidays too early, there would be less time with him at home with the baby. If he had holidays closer to the expected birth date that was riskier. I could easily fall into labour a few days early in the middle of the night and he'd be stuck in Newman waiting for the first 8am flight home, he would miss the birth. I was due on January 2nd. His swing ended January 1st. Due to the inflexible nature of the holiday

taking policy, Adam would have to start his holidays from either December 18th or January 1st. Playing on the safe side we booked the holidays for December 18th and lost an extra two weeks for him to spend with the baby. I went into labour on the 31st in the middle of the night and Oscar was born at 5 am. I was right, Adam would have missed the birth with no night flights from Newman, and no time to spare. At least he got Christmas off.

Of course, as a FIFO family we hope that the benefits of a higher salary and longer blocks of leisure time outweigh the negative aspects. I chat with a friend of mine, Hollie whose family changed from being a FIFO family in Perth to living as residents in the mining township of Newman. Buried in the Perth suburbs with three boys under the age of three, no support networks in Perth, and her partner on a two-week-on, one-week-off roster she spoke of her struggles during that time:

“I’d wake up, and spend all day with kids. Feed them, get out somewhere, and put them down for naps during the day. I’d always make sure we had everything we needed so we didn’t have to go to the shops. You don’t want to have to go to the shops for nappies with three kids. I wasn’t stressed with having to look after them all by myself. I was stressed for myself. I didn’t like being alone. At the end of the day you’ve done all your jobs, and then what? There’s no one to talk to, no one is coming home. All there was to do was to watch TV. It was the loneliest time of my life.”

Indeed, studies indicate that it is the FIFO spouse who suffers more from isolation and depression than children (Bradbury 18). While children adapt well from a two-parent to a one-parent family, it is the mother who plays the “buffer role” in helping children through the transition period (Bradbury 19). At home FIFO partners reported higher levels of stress in managing the children and household than non-FIFO partners, while little employment options were flexible enough for them to work and look after the kids (Meredith, Rush and Robinson).

When Hollie's family moved to Newman, she said everything changed for them:

“Brett [my husband] works for four days and then has four days off. But he is home *every* day. And he has those four days off with the kids and they love it. After we moved here, the kids stopped being so clingy with me and warmed more to their dad, especially [my eldest son] Kade. Before [in Perth], Kade was really standoffish and wouldn't hug his dad when he came home, now he does. I'm way happier here; I think being a FIFO wife was just way too depressing.”

I step back to 2007 and I'm on a mine site in the Kimberly. We are mining a new patch of land. I can see the virgin landscape of the Kimberly instead of machine-made dirt roads, mountains of “waste” sand, and scars of open pits as we turn the soil inside out. The terrain is not like the dry desert of the Pilbara with the low-lying Spinifex of other mine sites I'd worked on. It is fertile with fallen rain from the wet season, reed-filled lakes and stout trunked Boab trees set amongst rocky outcrops. Every day I drive past a magnificent Boab tree that stands about ten metres high, the crown of its branches spreading out with shining green leaves that reflect the sunlight and hold fist-sized brown nuts. Behind it stands an imposing wall of red dirt, a waste dump we have created from trucks of discarded earth set aside to dig up the minerals in the pit. The red mountain grows bigger each day with endless loads of loose earth, earth that is pushed flat by mining-grade bulldozers that widen the dump. Each day I drive past the tree, the wall of dirt creeps closer and closer to the Boab. The tree has a strip of orange tape tied tightly around its broad trunk; it's been marked to be saved, a process involving its relocation that costs thousands of dollars.

“What's happening with that tree?” I ask the shift boss as we drive past it on the way to the crib hut for lunch.

“We'll probably go around it.”

“The waste dump will go around it?”

“Yeah, not supposed to knock the Boabs over,” he says.

He grabs the two-way radio and calls the water-cart driver.

“Roy, can you give this crib hut road a spray mate? It's as dry as a chip.”

The waste dump moves closer and closer to the Boab over the next week. Irregular pointed rocks fall from the tip head above and roll down to land at the base of the trunk.

One day I see a dump truck above the tree, its tray lifting up to drop dirt over the edge. Diesel fumes spew out of the exhaust as the driver floors the accelerator to raise the tub. Slowly the load starts to pour out. Two hundred tonnes of maroon-coloured sand and rock slide from the back of the tray and fall a short way down the rock face before crashing on top of the tree's crown. The branches flatten and tremble under the weight but do not snap; the dirt pours through the gaps in the branches and falls either side of the base of its trunk.

The following day the Boab tree's trunk is buried up to its midsection, standing in the waist-high dirt like a paddler at the seaside. Thick gnarled branches reach out, palms up to the sky, still able to feel the sun, rain and air. Over the next few days, I try not to watch the Boab's trunk and crown become shorter and smaller as dirt piles on top of it, slowly burying it alive.

“How many sleeps until dad gets home?” asks Solomon.

He has pegged my anxiety. Oscar has Frisbeed his dinner across the kitchen after screaming at me for attention for the last hour while I made it. Solomon refuses to eat, Oscar shrieks for "ike-cream" and the dog is licking the table legs. I'm yet to chase them down, strip them and hustle the three of us into the shower together through tantrums, threats and bribes. I'm on the brink of snapping.

"Seven," I say.

"Gee, that's a lot," he says.

"Yep."

"Can I watch TV now?" he asks.

"Finish your dinner first," I say.

Solomon's face screws up and he starts wailing in a glass shattering outburst. Oscar joins in, and they sit facing each other howling. The dog goes outside. A thought runs through my head. *Working on a mine site is easier than this.* I immediately feel guilty but am not sure why. I clean the floor and attempt to calm the kids down.

As the mining industry winds down in WA and FIFO jobs shrink, I remind myself of how fortunate we are to still be a FIFO family. Far from the Cashed Up Bogans we are depicted as, we live from pay cheque to pay cheque on one income. Work skills are mostly non-transferable from mine sites to the city, and while FIFO seems like a lifestyle option to outsiders, our reality means that FIFO is a necessity. For now, like many families, we are trapped in the FIFO employment cycle, a sometimes choice less opportunity of economic survival and family sacrifice.

It is not often that I think back to my own experiences in mining. But on occasion I still think of that Boab in the Kimberly. The fifty-year-old tree, a trunk full of water stored for the dry season, slowly suffocating to death. In my thoughts, it still stands tall, bone-coloured beneath a man-made mountain. Upright in a dirt coffin; gradually buried from above.

References

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