

The Tip of the Spear

by Paige Cooper

Again, we summon the stranger’s sedan. Again, we order the suffering pig. Again, we forget the canvas sack. Again, we run the machine half-empty. Again, we deny the beggar. Again, we scroll the feed. Again, we delay responding. Again, we fly across the ocean. Again, we enter the simulacrum of an apartment. Again, we criticize the honest attempt. Again, we foul eight gallons of pristine water. Again, we open the streaming site. Again, we idle the engine. Again, we avert our eyes. Again, we procrastinate. Again, we browse the products. We learn more. We sign up. We shop now, again, and believe us, the guilt burdens us as heavily as it does you.

We came to conscience from various industries; Nadia spent a decade in software, Alexis interned for a two-tariff consumer luxury brand, and Daniel has an agency background. The three of us are growth. That is, our job is to grow the number of people who buy the product, which, as you know, is a home appliance that relieves guilt. We each make use of the product ourselves; in fact, upon execution of the employment contract every new hire receives a couriered package to unbox: the premium model, along with a top-tier refill subscription (like a pod coffee maker or a water bubbler, the thing is useless without its refills) valid for the duration of our employment. The product itself could be mistaken for a midcentury Scandinavian table lamp or a hag’s scrying crystal; the handblown glass is recycled, of course, and perched on a pedestal you may customize to your taste—powder-coated steel, walnut veneer, antique brass, et cetera. The product, and the relief it offers to one’s conscience, is a perk of the job. Free. A gift from the founder in support of our mission: *Improving quality of life in the universe*. Gifts, Nadia mutters, have always made her feel guilty.

Specifically, within the entirety of growth, we three are inbound growth. When Alexis reported her new job title, her sister replied, “Sounds like something you ought to see a doctor about.” When Alexis revealed her new salary, her sister, a care-home nurse, guffawed.

“Congratulations, asshole.” Her parents, of course, were pleased: “Bet you can see about some of those student loans now,” said her father. When Alexis tried to explain her duties, skills, and goals, her family frowned at her, in pity or incomprehension.

For the time being, we ignore the sixteen percent of the population who, according to independent research, don’t feel guilty about anything. Perfection is the enemy of good enough. When we are close to agreeing we act like we are in agreement. We are agile, so we execute now and iterate later. There is art and there is science. The science, obviously, is revenue, whereas the art is attraction. The founder’s calendar is booked wall-to-wall. Coverage from the news orgs and all the other clicky properties are floating our content to the top of the SERPs and fattening up our SSOV. The angels are smug and getting pushy. They want us to be a unicorn. “You could be a unicorn,” they tell us at the weekly town hall, “so act like it!”

Nadia is the Lead, though she was hired after Daniel, who’s been building the inbound engine up from scratch. To compensate for this inequity, Nadia gossips virulently, saying outrageous things about colleagues on other teams—who’s *manifesting bitcoin on her Instagram Stories*, who’s *obviously working from bed or Mexico*, who’s *just a fatally weird indoor cat*—in order to expose her throat and balance their power with the implicit promise that Daniel can blackmail her anytime he wishes. Nadia, for her part, has worked in startups long enough that she has eyes only for the liquidity event, and the results that will induce it.

In pursuit of those results, we hot-desk almost every day through Q4. Nadia prefers to sync with external teams in person because, she says, she sounds needy remote. Daniel is filtering profiles on a talent aggregator for a technical SEO and he woos candidates by interviewing from the bullpen with its standing desks and glass walls overlooking the harbour. Alexis solicits continuous input as she postjams our top-converting keywords:

How to stop feeling guilty

How to get over guilt

How to stop feeling bad

How to stop guilt tripping

How to stop guilt
How to stop feeling guilty about everything
How to stop feeling guilty all the time
How to reduce guilt feelings
How to get rid of guilty feelings
How do I stop feeling guilty
I feel so guilty about everything
How can I stop feeling guilty
Stop feeling guilty
Stop feeling guilty about everything

The rest of our topic territory could be covered by an endless string of Boolean operators:

AND (spending money OR wasting time OR family OR being unproductive OR credit card OR colonization OR cheating OR sleeping in OR fast fashion OR getting drunk OR being a bad friend OR genocide OR all-inclusive resorts OR shit-talking OR climate change OR unconscious bias OR sexual assault OR crying dog OR bingeing OR lying OR carbon footprint OR gentrification OR failing).

At the end of Q1, there is a compensation bump. Of course the terms of our contracts forbid us from acknowledging or discussing the bump, the size of the bump, who did or did not receive said bump. Alexis extends this non-disclosure to her parents, and does not accelerate her plans for student loan repayment. Instead, she buys a loveseat that costs as much as a used car, and ferries it in chunks from the sidewalk into her basement suite. Yes, it's too small to nap on, it's uncomfortably severe, and it's upholstered in an airportly shade of blue, but in the right space it will be extremely fashionable. When Alexis moves out of her parents' basement she will buy additional chunks of sofa, she will expand the loveseat to a four-seater with a chaise. Alexis imagines inviting a date to her airy loft and getting seduced on her long, luxurious sofa, and she imagines cozy evenings watching high-end television, and she imagines an unpretentious,

raucous ceremony. A conflict-free jewel on a vintage ring. She imagines ticking *coordinated* on her health benefits. She imagines driving to swimming lessons, hosting Sunday dinners, spreading newspapers over the kitchen table for the pumpkin carving. Alexis' premium model has a rose gold pedestal that complements her marble coffee table. It swirls green, putting off a spa-like scent of eucalyptus, mint, and rosemary: last year's phone disembowelled on a shoreline; bags of so-called recycling bulldozed by Kubotas into mountain ranges of trash because Alexis never finds the time to rinse the jar, much less peel the label. And there's the interest, steadily compounding, dollars duplicating like primordial cells, on the loan that her parents cosigned a decade ago, and, worse, the credit card she's never mentioned to them.

On Fridays when we re-assemble after work over drinks, Daniel closes his eyes, presses his fingers to his temples, and predicts the imminence of the liquidity event. He's never admitted to us how he negotiated hard in the recruitment stage for an extra allotment of stock options. Regardless, if even the standard windfall is as sizeable as he calculates, Daniel could take some time off. He imagines six months, twelve. Not any longer than a parental leave, because in the eyes of most hiring managers, breeding a child is an inconvenient but probably valuable act, whereas writing a book is inexplicable, and carries the sad stink of delusion. Daniel imagines six or twelve months somewhere he doesn't speak the language and the grocery store is gratifyingly puzzling. He imagines rising early and speaking to no one, embarking on disjointed afternoon walks through the unfamiliar city, taking notes in the art galleries, sitting with his head bowed in houses of worship, finally seating himself at a bar and finding the server is pleased to chat in that wry accent. Daniel imagines extending his visa, taking language classes, finding work. He imagines never coming back. Daniel's premium model lives on his desk, and when he works from home he gazes at it. Lilac and lemon smoke drifts and tears inside the glass, seeping its vernal scent: exorbitant rents in ordinary neighbourhoods; toxic ponds of jet fuel byproduct in the boreal; perforated trailers hurtling over salted highways to arrive at a warm slaughterhouse where the frostbitten occupants clatter eagerly in. The lilies relieve him of the people who lived in tents in the park until the police showed up in shields and armour. The lime is a balm for the algorithm, which is his expertise. The algorithm, all the algorithms, are in the news, journalists make podcasts about them, academics write books, parents form advocacy groups. And it's true: Daniel

knows it. If you don't believe it, think of the algorithm that governs the last porn site you visited. Consider the difference between what you thought you might want to see, and what made you come. The algorithms are designed to give us what we want, even if we don't want to want it. According to our customer research, the thing people feel most guilty about in life is giving in to a craving.

In Q2, Daniel is wrong, there is still no liquidity event, but the founder announces that in addition to KPIs we will now be setting OKRs, and we can't help but notice the frequency with which suits show up in the executive boardroom. Not just the founder consulting with the angels, but external suits. Lawyer suits, corporate suits. Nadia tells us she is being asked to do things, strange things that she's never been asked to do before. Nadia is finding it difficult to accomplish these things on top of the rest of her responsibilities. In order to focus, she works from home, but finds herself deep-cleaning the kitchen and browsing real estate listings until three, when the boys come home. Nadia imagines buying a house on the lake. They already own one up there—a normal house, no view, bad water pressure, art left over from the last owners—but it's across the road from the custom-built waterfront mansions, and to swim they have to drive four kilometers to the public beach. But at the dead end of the road there is an automatic gate set into stone pillars, which protects from view the most beautiful house on the lake. Nadia saw it once, from the water, when they canoed past with a cooler full of juice boxes, and she imagined carrying a glass of Xinomavro down the terraced steps that wind down to the boathouse, her husband grilling meat for her parents and cousins, the dining table that seats twenty, the six bedrooms filled with family, and her husband's gratified smile—her poor husband, whom she has so deeply, deeply disappointed. The first time Nadia switched on her premium model, it did not fill with sparkling condensation or put off the smell of relief. Unsurprised, she returned it to its box. She's never believed in guilt, so why should she feel it?

Nadia is told, and Nadia tells us, that this is the most important quarter in the company's history. We've got competitors now, but the barrier to entry is so high and our first-mover advantage so deep that the only way anyone could ever catch us is if we get complacent. And we won't, we've hit the knee of the curve. We look back down the slope deliriously: we thought we were

logarithmic, but we're exponential. Guilt is exploding. There can be no progress and no development without guilt. If you don't feel guilty for what you have, you should feel guilty for what you want. Our flywheel spins faster and faster. We are in attraction, we are in engagement, we are in delight. We are in blue sky, we are in white space, we see no ceiling. We see infinite growth. We are the tip of the spear.