

## seasonal adjustment

No sooner are Christmas and New Year's Eve but a distant (and often bleary) memory than it's time to take the great leap forward into a new working year, mourns Sally Feldman

**B**y the time you read this it will be deep summer – mid-January – when even the most devoted parents are beginning to wish they'd had the operation, and the Christmas ham is down to its last, pathetic omelette.

Pre-holiday panic has subsided, the new board shorts, rigid with a liberal dose of sea salt and sunshine, are living up to their name and we've stopped caring whether our bottoms look big in our Camilla Franks kaftans. But despite this, there's a niggling realisation that a new year is upon us, which can only mean one thing – post-traumatic holiday syndrome is just around the corner.

For all the frenzied anticipation that surrounds summer holidays – the delirious, eye-popping nights in front of a computer screen scrolling through holiday-house listings, the shopping for irrationally vast amounts of provisions (“Of course we need three packets of ras el hanout!”), the streaking, waxing and wailing about those last, impossible-to-shift kilos, and the gay little flutter of the heart as we hit the highway – there's no escaping the bleak realisation that the end of the holiday is nigh.

For me, the dread that dare not speak its name starts about eight hours into New Year's Day, when Auld Lang Syne is already an old acquaintance long forgot and the Champagne flutes are barely out of the dishwasher. It's at this point that a long-time friend – driven by outcomes and moving forward (and no, I have no idea what those phrases mean, nor, occasionally, why we're friends) – will ring to enquire as to my goals for the coming year. In my fragile frame of mind, I tend to take this more as a challenge and consider punching above my weight, except I don't know what that means, either. Frankly, I'm an own-goal kind of gal, driven more by necessity than invention and frequently scoring for the other side while moving backwards.

As I become increasingly diverted by the sounds of summer – the stultifying drone of cricket commentators, the pleasing fizz of mosquito against electric zapper, the rhythmic panting of an overheating dog – I can find no credible answer, other than I'm still working on it. And it's then that I know for sure that the carnival is nearly over. January may traditionally be the month for making resolutions for a golden future, but for me it's more a time of studiously ignoring credit-card bills, regretting that last wafer-thin morsel of pâté de foie gras and bracing myself for that first swipe of ID card across UP button in the office lift.

Forget the posters in all the stores shrieking about the great new range of back-to-school fluoro backpacks they have in stock for the kiddies, what about something to ease the trauma of getting back to work? Granted, there's always the relief that you actually *have* a job when you return. And there is the comforting glimmer of recognition that occurs sometime late on that first Monday morning when you remember what it is you do for a living. If you're a journalist, this is usually aided by the highly meditative task of deleting a thousand press releases from your inbox; if you're a captain of industry, you'll have at least one person in a tailored business suit and tasteful earrings to remind you.

How soon those sun-drenched, waterlogged, halcyon days fade as the icy blasts of the office airconditioning freeze-dry the top layer off our carefully nurtured tans. We sit in our flimsy summer clothing, huddled against the computer monitor for warmth and gazing bleakly out at the glint of a million sunlit office windows, vainly trying to remember what it was we did on our holidays. Until something catches our eye and lifts our fading spirits – the screened-out windows of the department stores.

So that's why they put sales on, then – to divert our attention from the fact that it will be months before we'll be rewriting our 'out of office' message and scampering out to play with our resort wear and beach umbrellas.

A fabulous pair of half-price Manolos does not a meaningful future make, but it sure as hell helps move the goalposts. **VE+T**



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