

BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER



PETER HENRY
A Memoir

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Causing hurt or harm to anyone he has ever known is the last thing the author would want. Some names, characteristics and events have been changed, compressed or omitted, the author's former company name has been changed to conceal identity, some dialogue has been recreated or changed and great care has been taken in the book's writing and editing.

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

Firstly, I am very grateful to Maria Farrer and Peter Stephenson for all their help and patience in editing this book.

The number of others deserving a mention here runs into the hundreds, and there are too many to mention each by name. A few, however, are simply too important to me to go without acknowledgement: my parents, Pauline and Hugh Henry; my brother, Rupert; dear friends Dave Machon, Andy Jones, Lisa and Richard Crossley, Paul Brown and Giles Norman; ex-girlfriends Rebecca and Lauren; doctors Professor Hans Frankel, Mr Bakul Soni and Dr Paul Smith; and carers who have become good friends – Birgit Kanneberger, Sarah Symonds, Gitte Jensen, Istvan Szabo, Anita Balicka and Shaun Churchill. One, though, is first amongst equals: Linda Adamsen.

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Preface

I live in a village in the Yorkshire Dales. It's a small and friendly community and there is nowhere else around here I would prefer to live. I'm lucky to live in such a beautiful area and it's nice having the space to breathe.

A friend once said to me that I should write a book, and those words planted a seed in my brain. People I meet are always asking me what I do, and when I explain, they express enormous interest in the different phases of my life before and after my accident. They then say I should write it down. Over the years, little by little, maybe when driving or looking out of the window, ideas came to me and these have eventually made their way onto paper. My story seems to want to be told, if only, perhaps, because I've lived to tell the tale, and the tale is not relentlessly mired in misery but is full of challenges and a lot of fun.

Introduction

I have seen Death up close three times.

On one occasion, it was shimmering in the air like a mirage, neither visible nor invisible.

On another occasion, I saw it with my waking eyes – a solid wall of grey cloud, *just, only just*, not touching my eyes.

On the third occasion, I plunged straight through the grey into utter black, for I had drowned. Somehow, for some reason, my eyes opened again into sunlight.

Now, every morning when I wake and every night before I sleep, I say a little prayer of thanks to my God for the day. Existence becomes precious when you have experienced just how fragile and fleeting life is.

Everyone's life is unique and precious, full of the fun and games of living. *Before, During and After* charts some of mine.

BEFORE

CHAPTER ONE
Family Background
1892 to 1961

I wish I'd spent more time with my grandparents or with others of that generation. I didn't, as when you're young you don't think about doing such things and by the time you do, it is often too late. As a result, I don't know much about my paternal grandparents, except for what I heard from Dad, who was not a man to say much about the past. I remember Dad's parents as lovely, kind, old people, and I kick myself that I never even once asked them about their lives.

My father's mother was Enid Henry. I know she was born in 1892 in Liverpool, where, according to Dad, her father had been a successful builder. I met Enid during the 1960s, when I was a boy and she in her 70s. She was a skilled pianist and had a full-sized concert grand piano, a black Steinway, in the living room. Sadly, I never heard her play. The story goes that she had won a scholarship to study music at one of the Oxbridge colleges, where she had studied to degree level in the days before women were allowed to graduate and receive a degree. Enid never referred to the college story, so I don't know if it's true, but I would like to think that it might be.

Enid's husband, my paternal grandfather, was called Glynn Henry. He was born in 1893 and had grown up in Pontypridd, Wales. Glynn's father, Ty, had been a Methodist minister from the Welsh valleys near Bridgend. Glynn was a medical orderly

in the First World War, driving ambulances and collecting the wounded and dead from no-man's-land – what a thing to have to do. After the war, he joined Beechams Pharmaceuticals, now part of GlaxoSmithKline, as a salesman. Glynn did well during the 1920s and 1930s and drove a Bugatti. In the Second World War, he became an international director for Beechams and his job involved travelling around the country setting up factories as part of the war effort.

I have no idea how Glynn and Enid met. I know Glynn was a qualified pharmacist by the time he retired from Beechams in the early 1950s and they lived in a nice home in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire. After his retirement, they moved to Cookham, a pretty village in Berkshire, and there he established the Old Apothecary Shop in an existing former Victorian pharmacy. History relates that Glynn then attended to the medical needs of the people of Cookham for the rest of his life.

As a boy, I knew them as Granny and Grandpa, and I remember visiting the Old Apothecary. It was just as you might imagine a Victorian pharmacy to be – large coloured bottles in the window, the memorable smell of soap, chemicals, perfume, dark wood shelves and drawers everywhere. Glynn took the name from Dickens, being a huge Charles Dickens fan, so much so that he had a leatherbound set of the complete works of Dickens in the house.

When he died, we had to clean out the Old Apothecary and it was my first time at the back of the building, behind the scenes,

so to speak. It was a typical old lab space, with Bunsen burners on the shelves and all the ingredients for making pills stored in the Victorian-style drawers, each featuring the Latin names of the different drugs. Rupert, my brother, loves liquorice, and in one of the drawers, we found liquorice root. It looked like something that had only just been pulled out of the ground, but, undeterred, he chewed a piece of it and lived to tell the tale. It's probably just as well we didn't find anything too exciting or we could have got in a right old mess.

I wonder why I never asked Grandpa about his work as an apothecary, his love of books, his love of people, his love of cars. Are these things that pass from generation to generation? If so, I have a lot for which to thank Grandpa Glynn.

My mum's parents were George and Dorothy Clifford. George was born in 1903 in southern Ireland, though his father had served as a minister of a church in Kent. George, who we always knew as 'Mandad' (my mum's childhood name for him), had been in the RAF and had trained as a fighter pilot in the 1920s. In the 1930s, he rose to be a wing commander attached to the Fleet Air Arm and he trained on aircraft carriers, landing biplanes on the decks. There was a photo album, now, sadly, long gone, containing a photograph of George on the flight deck of HMS *Glorious* in the harbour of Valetta, Malta. HMS *Glorious*, despite her name, did not have such a glorious history. Built during the First World War as a battle cruiser, she was converted into an aircraft carrier in the 1920s. In 1931, caught in fog, the ship was involved in a collision with a cruise ship and ultimately came to a sad end when it was sunk in 1940 by the famous German ships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* with the loss of over 1,200 lives.

George was promoted to RAF group captain and eventually station commander during the Second World War. Much to his frustration, he was too young to fight in the First World War and too old to fight in the Second. He was in Gibraltar for a period during 1941, but he spent most of the war with the MOD Army air staff, stationed in Whitehall, London, and to the UK's various air bases.

I don't know much about my maternal grandmother, Dorothy. She came from Fife in Scotland and was born in 1907. Sadly, she died of liver cancer in 1962 aged 55, and although I did meet her, I was too young to remember her.

My aunt Dorothea, one of Mum's sisters, found Grandfather George's military records a few years ago and these showed that in the 1920s, he was based in one of the air bases near Fife. I imagine some sort of party must have been held and that was how my grandparents met.

It was into this military family that my mother, Pauline, was born on 20th August 1934 in Tring, Hertfordshire. She had two sisters, Louise and Dorothea. They had a good upbringing with a nice home, a rambling rented house next to Tring station. During the war, life changed for the family, as it did for everyone during those dark days. Mum spoke of food shortages during and after the war and how they grew vegetables in the garden and ate the likes of nettle soup and rabbit pie.



Mandad, with Bodger and a friend

Together with a friend, George owned a First World War Tiger Moth biplane, nicknamed Bodger, and we have a wonderful 8mm film of my mum galloping across a field on her pony as he flies above her.

After the war, George was attached to decommissioning RAF bases in Germany. It's hard to interpret any military record by merely looking at it, but nothing particularly caught my eye on George's. He was clearly an important officer, but precisely what he was up to, I do not know. Dorothea says he spent much of his time away from home, so it was rather like having a strange man in the house whenever he did come home.

George retired in 1953, having developed a form of muscular dystrophy. I remember meeting him before he died in the 1970s when he was a very old man in a wheelchair and couldn't speak. I would have loved to have met him in his prime, as he was, I feel certain, a fun and very interesting man.

My mum spoke only occasionally about her childhood, and it's from her younger sister, my aunt Dorothea, that I have gained a better idea of those times. During the war, Mum was sent to a local girls' boarding school, Brondesbury, at Stocks House in Aldbury, near Tring, where 'posh young girls were taught to be young ladies'. Apparently Mum did not appreciate being sent to boarding school, not one bit. At 18, she was sent to a finishing school in Switzerland, travelling there on her own. The school was to prepare the young ladies to marry the 'right sort of chap', so they were taught ballet, how to walk correctly by balancing a pile of books on their heads, and how to curtsy and speak to staff. Mum had an adventurous spirit and I'm not sure quite how much she applied herself to the lessons at finishing school. On her way home from Switzerland, she and a friend stopped in Paris, where Mum disgraced herself by getting drunk and being sick from the top of the Arc de Triomphe. After that, I think she only drank wine once again in her life, preferring to stick to gin instead.

Mum learnt how to drive in her father's large car. She later drove this car to the test centre to take her motorcycle test with her small motorbike stashed in the boot. On arrival, she simply asked the examiner to lift it out of the boot and fill it up with fuel from an empty gin bottle. Mum charmed her way around the centre and passed the test. Afterwards, she asked the

examiner to put the bike back in the car boot before setting off for home.



Mum with motorbike

In the early 1950s, she took part in the Circuit of Ireland Rally as a passenger in an Austin-Healey. These stories are quite typical of Mum – she was great fun. I like to think quite a bit of Mum rubbed off on me – pushing boundaries, a willingness to do things my own way, not taking ‘No’ for an answer and a twinkly sense of humour.

Mum moved to London in the early 1950s, sharing a flat in Earl’s Court with a young American woman, Sarah Jane. Mum always used to point it out every time we passed it when we drove to London – you can still see it over your left shoulder as you drive along an overpass section of the A4 between Earl’s Court and Kensington. Mum and Sarah Jane stayed close for the rest of Mum’s life.

Mum took a job as a secretary for MI5 and, when we were children, she told us that, to occupy themselves at lunchtimes, the secretaries used to read the files of interesting people. However, no matter how much we pleaded with her, she would never divulge whom these files belonged to, citing the fact that it was highly confidential material. Mum was not serious about many things in life, but she was very serious about what was in those files. “I’ve signed the Official Secrets Act,” she’d say, “I’m not telling you a word.” Mum was quite a character, adventurous and non-conforming, always wanting to do her own thing and very much her own person. She must have had great fun, being young and away from home working in an interesting job for a few years before settling down to married life in 1957.

My father, Hugh Henry, was born in Lytham St Annes on 25th May 1929. Lytham St Annes is a smart place north of

Liverpool, and I'm guessing that my great-grandparents had bought a nice house there to escape from the city. I know little of Dad's early life other than they lived in Pine Cottage in Aylesbury. We drove past the house once, but Dad rarely spoke of his past, except in flashes. He had an older brother, Brian, whom we saw only rarely as we were growing up. I recall Dad mentioning that, before the war, Brian had contracted TB and as it was in the days before antibiotics, he was lucky to have survived. Occasionally we'd get little snippets of information such as the time during the war when Dad and Brian saw an RAF Mosquito crash and burst into flames just down the road from Pine Cottage, killing the crew. The two boys had also seen several wrecks of German aircraft. But, generally, Dad was always very tight-lipped about aspects of his childhood, even so many years later.

In 1940, Dad was evacuated, though not officially, as his father was worried about the Blitz and how bad it may be outside London because they lived on a direct flight route from the Continent to Birmingham and Liverpool. Grandpa moved Dad and Granny to stay with the Thomson family in Bassenthwaite in the Lake District. It's an out-of-the-way place even today, but it was like being stuck in the nineteenth century during the war. Brian did not go, as he was away at school. It was a formative time for Dad and one of the happiest he knew, which could be why my parents eventually moved north. He loved the freedom and the people he met. Furthermore, the beauty of the countryside bewitched him. The war never touched such a place. Dad went to the village school and had a lovely time. He spoke to us of the village cobbler in his shed, the family he lived with from 1940 until 1941, and the winter when the lake

froze over and he saw a horse and cart crossing it on the ice. This bliss was ended when his father realised the Blitz was not as bad for them as he had feared and moved Dad and Granny back to Aylesbury.

On his return from Bassenthwaite, Dad was sent to board at a well-known school called Stowe. JF Roxburgh had set up Stowe in the 1920s as a progressive boarding school, where boys were treated well, in contrast to how they were treated at other public schools at that time. It shows wisdom from Grandpa that he chose a school that was run, in theory at least, for the good of the boys. Dad, though, hated Stowe and particularly hated being yanked out of his comfortable home to do character-forming activities such as swimming in freezing lakes as he wore glasses and really couldn't see much without them! He was a sensitive chap but had no choice other than to stick it out.

Swimming notwithstanding, there was one aspect of Stowe that left a lasting impression on my father – his English lessons with Roxburgh, the renowned English scholar whom he adored. Dad said his enthusiasm for the English language and the power of words shone from this teacher like a beacon. It affected Dad for life, and his love of words, language and books has been passed down to both my brother and me. He found time to go bird spotting too and developed an ability to paint little watercolours of them. Dad passed the equivalent of A levels at the time and could certainly have followed his brother to university.

Instead, he did something very unexpected, opting to go and work as a farm labourer in Kent. I don't know why, and I never asked because it was one of those subjects that was never raised

at home, but it does beg the question as to why, in 1946/47, you would choose to live and work for a pittance on a farm in Kent when other options were available. He did, though, tell us a few stories of his farming days. The winter of 1947 was one of the coldest on record and Dad said that when picking cabbages in the field, it was so cold that the leaves simply crumbled in his hands. On another occasion, he only narrowly escaped the horns of an angry Jersey bull by jumping out of the stall he was mucking out. And at this farm, Dad saw the last of the working horses as they gave way to Fordson tractors.

Dad and Brian were close and in 1949 they bought two little 125cc BSA Bantam motorbikes and went off to tour the Continent. On their journey they rode through the devastation of post-war Europe, traversing France, Southern Germany and the Alps. Dad never spoke in any detail about the trip and I wonder if that was a measure of some of the horrors they must have encountered, so soon after the end of the war.

Dad and his brother stayed close throughout their lives, and I remember them speaking frequently on the phone. It is a shame, though, that we were never close to my cousins, probably because, during my childhood, we only saw Brian, Betty and his family rarely, usually at Christmas parties. The two families, 10 people in all, used the dining room at Uncle Brian and Auntie Betty's large house. The long table was laden with cutlery and glasses, and we were spaced far apart – personally, I was terrified of knocking something over or saying something out of place. Sadly, it was not a relaxing meal and hardly anyone said anything. The silence with just the nervous rattling of cutlery on plates was just awful.

In the early 1950s, Dad went to work as the cowman, this time on Gordon Walter's farm, in Tring. Gordon was married to Mum's sister, Aunt Louise, so I'm guessing that's how Dad met Mum. Sometime after they met, Dad moved into journalism, writing for the *Farmer and Stock-Breeder* about the prices of fat sheep, lambs and store cattle, something he continued to do until 1957. Mum and Dad spoke little about their meeting or dating, except that they often went to see shows in London. They married in Aldbury in February 1957.



Mum's wedding

Afterwards, they lived in a flat in Maidenhead by the railway station, near to where Mum's parents had moved after her father had left the RAF.

The year 1957 was also when Uncle Brian introduced Dad to the idea of working in television. In the UK in the early 1950s there was only one television station, the BBC. The government introduced Independent Television, ITV, as a form of commercial competition and the different areas of the country had their own franchises. Uncle Brian was already working for one of the new stations, and he rang Dad to tell him about a new franchise, Scottish Television, or STV, serving Scotland. Dad had no interest in moving to Scotland, but Brian explained that STV was setting up an advertising department in London. “Get down there and get a job,” Brian said. Dad did as Brian suggested, starting as a salesman for STV, selling advertising airtime. It was a much better-paid job than the work he had been doing in journalism and it involved calling companies and advertising agencies to impress upon them the benefit of having their products on television. Once convinced, they would then spend large sums on advertising.

Mum and Dad wanted a family and, with this in mind, in 1958 they saw and fell in love with a house called Orchard Cottage on a quiet lane at the western edge of Maidenhead, near Maidenhead Thicket. Orchard Cottage was a new house, bought from its first owner, built using old London bricks that had been salvaged from bomb-damaged buildings to give houses the appearance of age. It had a large upstairs eave at the front, where my bedroom was, and beams that projected to the outside and had a huge garden – ideal for children to run riot.



Orchard Cottage, 1962



Orchard Cottage showing my bedroom, 1962

CHAPTER TWO

A Happy Childhood

December 1961 to Early 1970s

I arrived on the scene on 4th December 1961.



With Mum



With Dad



Bath time, 1964



With Granny and Grandpa, 1964

My brother, Rupert, followed in 1965.



With my baby brother, 1966

Mum employed au pairs from day one to help care for us. Throughout our childhoods, Rupert and I became used to

having a variety of foreigners in the house and we remain friends with some of them to this day.

Corrie, from Holland, was with us right from the start, and she became my godmother. Wonderfully, she, along with Annika, another of our favourite au pairs, even came to my 50th birthday party a zillion years later.

At the time of my birth, Dad had been working at STV for four years and was evidently very good at his job. He was promoted to sales director in 1969 with a fabulous office at 70 Grosvenor Street. It was all *Mad Men* glamour – men in suits and beautifully dressed secretaries. Commercial TV did very well during the 1960s and 1970s, and Dad's boss, Lord Thomson of Fleet, coined the phrase: it was like 'having a licence to print money'. Later, in the early 1980s, STV moved to the Coutts building on The Strand, occupying one whole side of the very grand building. I remember the interior wall was all glass and overlooked a large atrium complete with carp ponds and full-grown trees. Dad's circular office was the top floor in one of the towers overlooking Trafalgar Square. It was, and still is, a magnificent building.

Dad flew back and forth to Scotland and Manchester weekly from Heathrow, about half an hour away from home, and we rarely saw him. I remember going to Heathrow once in the late 1960s and it was so exciting to see all the planes at a time when air travel was still unusual. The smell of aviation fuel was like catnip to a small boy. There was only Terminal 1 in those days, but I recall its incredible 1960s vibe with glamorous hostesses

who looked like models and pilots like leading men from the movies.

In the 1970s, independent TV companies would sometimes do ‘contra’ deals, whereby they would swap product for air time. Around this time, Pan Am had one such deal with STV, and, as a director, Dad was offered a seat on the first jumbo jet from Heathrow to Hong Kong, travelling first class. “Do you want to come along, boys?” he asked, as if we needed asking. Off we went on the 747, and first class was nearly empty with just us and a couple of other passengers. The hostesses treated us like royalty, allowing us to run up and down the spiral staircase, pointing out the combination lock on the flight deck door, feeding us with double helpings of everything and giving us frequent flyer Clipper club badges – but we were too young for the mile high club! It was late in the day that Dad told us of the huge ‘BUT’ in our magical journey. Apparently, Mum, Rupert and I could not continue our journey to Hong Kong as Dad couldn’t take time off to accompany us, so we had to disembark at Frankfurt to stay with one of our au pairs for a weekend instead of going to the Far East. How could you, Dad? Rupert and I were massively disappointed, and even now, over 50 years later, it niggles ...

The company cars

Sometime in the mid-1950s, Dad had bought a pre-war Aston Martin, and I remember seeing an old photo of my parents with it on a visit to the Scottish contingent of the family. From the 1960s, Dad had company cars, starting with a Ford Anglia and ending up with a Rover SD1 Vitesse 3500. I remember hustling

this very quick Rover up the M6 one evening in 1985 – great fun.

Dad's ever-changing company cars sparked in me an interest in cars and driving that continues to this day.

Growing up

Rupert and I were typical of small boys growing up in the same house. We played snowballs, climbed trees and did the usual boy things around the garden.

Mum always had dogs and one cat. She loved dogs, and we walked them with her. Tessa was our first dog and the name was handed down through the following generations. We also had rabbits, but, unfortunately, they didn't last past the first myxomatosis epidemic. 'Home' meant us as a family including dogs, cats and an au pair who changed every year or so. Life was comfortable and relaxed. We had a large garden and in the surrounding houses there were several other families with children our age, so games were played, go-karts pushed and dens built.

Unlike some brothers, Rupert and I didn't spend much time together as we grew older because we have always been very different people.

Holidays

In the late 1950s, my parents bought a small cottage, Studio Cottage, in the centre of Polperro, in Cornwall. It was a ridiculously pretty cottage in a ridiculously pretty village.



Polperro harbour showing our tiny old holiday cottage – centre right, with a blue front door – around 1970

Trips to Cornwall could take us 7 to 10 hours along the A30 and A303. Both my parents had cars, and Mum had a little Austin A35 until she drove into the back of a goods wagon and wrecked it. She then had a Mini van without windows, and she put a mattress in the back for us boys and the dogs to sleep on during the long journey.

The cottage was surrounded on three sides by the sea, and we had wonderful holidays that were perfect for children. Our parents used to put us out in the morning, and the harbour and pier would then be our playground. We loved being there, walking the dogs with Mum and Dad, getting stuck in the mud, climbing cliffs, nearly (but not quite!) falling off rocks and watching the storms.



With Dad and Rupert

The smell of the sea and the sound of seagulls, even now, reminds me of our holidays there. Mum used to let the cottage out of season, and she and Dad were always doing repairs, fixing leaks and painting. We went on holiday to the cottage twice a year, every year, right up to the late 1970s, and our parents sold it in the mid-1980s. Some friends saw it recently, and it still looks much the same as it did back in our time.

We went on rare holidays overseas, and the smell of jet A-1 fuel, even now, takes me back to the glamorous 1960s Heathrow I loved as a boy. Early trips were to Gibraltar, where I remember peering at Spain through locked border gates over no-man's-land, which contained a burnt-out tank, perhaps from the Spanish Civil War. Up on the rock, Mum's bag of duty frees was ripped to pieces by the apes amid much screaming. Another trip was to Jersey to stay with some of my parents' friends in a luxurious house by a beach. It would have been

spring 1966 and I recall going on a pedalo ride with my parents, with me in the middle, steering. But even more vividly I remember the awful moment when Mum had put Rupert, who was only months old, in a pram under the shade of a tree. As we all sat in the sun nearby, a branch broke off the tree and fell across the pram. Thankfully, no harm was done, but I recall that sense of panic and shock.

Schooldays

Rupert and I were at kindergarten together, doing the sorts of things kindergarten children do. Kindertartens were quite unusual at the time, being a concept from the Continent, but my parents were open to such ideas because, after all, we had Dutch, German, Swiss and Swedish au pairs.



Me, 1966

I started at kindergarten in 1965 when I was three and, not long after, I began at Winbury, a small private school in Maidenhead.

Winbury was a very gentle, lovely school. The headmaster was John Spicer and the school was in an old Victorian mansion. In Class 1, I met my first love, my teacher Miss Haythornthwaite. Sadly, my love went unnoticed ... but I was only four! My Class 2 teacher was Mrs Edge and she was much fiercer – not the type to fall in love with at all as she regularly whacked my hand with a ruler for some naughtiness or other. Mrs Edge

taught us everything except science, which was covered by Mr and Mrs Smith. Mr Smith taught us chemistry and I don't remember learning much in his lessons apart from him boiling mixtures in pots on Bunsen burners and the resultant strange smells. Mrs Smith taught us nature studies, and I recall studying photosynthesis at a young age, so something must have stuck!

But it was my French teacher, Mrs Hammersly, who really played an important role in my life. I can't remember exactly when I started learning French, but I reckon I must have been five or six. Children are like sponges at that age, and when someone gives them something to learn, they learn it. I remember being in a play and speaking French when I was less than 10 years old. Mrs Hammersly played an important part in my education for the next few years and her influence on my learning is still with me today. I speak French, I still study it and take French classes. I'm very grateful I learnt another language from a young age and I give Mrs Hammersly all the credit for that.

Then there was the school cook, a Polish lady called Marie, who diligently prepared all the meals that varied from disgusting and inedible through to fantastic. She was brilliant at cakes and desserts, such as chocolate sponge with custard and fruit crumbles, and she made a wonderful steak-and-kidney pie, but the cabbage, liver and peas were horrendous and her potatoes were a lumpy mash without seasoning of any kind. I can't look at liver even now.

Thinking about school dinners, there is one particular incident that sticks in my mind. The young children ate lunch in the classrooms, while the older one used the school hall. A couple of us young ones were chosen each day to carry the used plates back to the kitchen. Picture two corridors at right angles, blind to each other, which come together outside the kitchen at the bottom of a staircase. I was proudly carrying an armful of plates along one corridor while an older boy, who shall remain nameless, starting running along the other corridor. He ran full-speed into me and the plates just as I reached the right angle. This impact threw me over sideways, causing me to drop and smash all the plates and smack my head on the hard oak stairs, knocking me out cold.

I woke up in Wexham Park Hospital in Slough. Recovering swiftly, I drove the nurses mad by hiding under the bed and startling them with my new ray gun. It was my first, but would not be my last, visit to hospital.

I enjoyed my time at Winbury. For the first few years, we were separated from the bigger boys and when about eight or nine, we moved to the older boys' part of the school. This was organised along more traditional lines with houses and headteachers, and my house was Raleigh. It was very much an old-school education and standards were high, such as having to stand up in height order when going into assembly for prayers. I was tall for my age, which I always enjoyed as it put me at the top end! I made some good friends during my time there.

Life at home was simple and straightforward. Friends came to our house and we went to theirs to play. We lived on a small road that went nowhere, so there was little traffic. There were about 10 houses and at least 6 of these had children around our age. Days were spent climbing trees, drawing chalk on the roads, playing go-karts, having our first bikes and learning how to ride them. One of our neighbours, Mary, had a convertible Morris Minor. We went for a drive in it and I remember my surprise that it didn't have a roof. My other godmother, Muriel, had a convertible Triumph Vitesse, and I loved being in that car. It had a bit more *va va voom*.

There wasn't any children's television at that stage and there were only two channels that came on in the evening. As Dad worked in the television industry, we had one of the first colour sets and later a VHS video machine, but we certainly didn't spend time in front of the screen. Whenever we moaned to Mum that we were bored, her stock reply was, "Only boring people get bored." So we made up our own games and, at Christmas, were given presents such as chemistry sets and books that kept us occupied during the winter months.

We occasionally went on trips to London to visit Dad or to go sightseeing and Mum always dressed up for the occasion. She took us to the old London Zoo with the bear pits and the penguin pool, and we saw Guy the Gorilla. Trips to the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum bewitched me. Dad took me to the Imperial War Museum too, which sparked a lifetime interest in military history and, though I haven't been back since, I will, as it has been more than 45 years. Dad loved literature and introduced me to First World War poetry.

Wilfred Owen is a favourite of mine and I keep his books near me.

I was about 11 by this time and still at Winbury, progressing through subjects such as maths and English and kicking a tennis ball around the playground at break. Being tall for my age, I could run fast and was quite good at sports. I didn't care much for football, but I was good at athletics. I won the high jump on one school sports day and I still have the hole punch I was given as first prize.

It is still in use too.



School sports day, 1973



School sports day, 1973

Winbury was a boys-only school, but across the road was Courthouse, a girls-only one. I can't remember the girls holding much interest for me at that age, but Courthouse had a swimming pool and, in the summer, the boys could use it. When Mum realised we were going swimming, she took us to a Mr Penzotti, down by the river. He taught us how to swim properly in his pool full of leaves and frogs, and only once we had learnt enough not to drown was Mum happy for us to continue at the Courthouse pool.

I don't remember ever being criticised for poor academic performance at Winbury. I wasn't a star, but I wasn't pressed to work harder either. Our parents never pushed us to do well, but maybe we would have benefited from a gentle shove at times. Mum encouraged me to do my homework, but she wasn't happy when my handwriting pushed through the paper to leave a lasting imprint on her very nice mahogany dining table. When one of the teachers at Winbury mentioned that I was having trouble listening in class, I was sent to see an ear specialist,

whereupon I was diagnosed with a particular type of tone-deafness in my left ear. Even now, I cannot hear certain tones – particularly those associated with anyone nagging me!

At some stage during my later Winbury days, my parents bought a little blue Honda Monkey Bike that they used on the road and we used in the garden. Round and round we went, sometimes sliding off and digging up the grass. So started my love of bikes.



On a motorbike

Orchard Cottage was to remain our family home until 1985 and we did indeed run riot in the garden. I'm sure that my love of cars and motorbikes must have stemmed, in some way, from

my upbringing and from the stories, memories and experiences shared by both parents and grandparents. Maybe my love of travel and sense of adventure too; who knows? But, for sure, I enjoyed a generally happy childhood.

CHAPTER THREE

Later Childhood and Teenage Years Early 1970s to December 1980

The 1970s, in general, were pretty grim in the UK. Even for us kids, everything looked grimy, dirty and worn out. With endless power cuts, the three-day week and companies going bust, it was a very depressing time.

Yet for me, this was also a simple, happy time. A couple of my friends had parents who had divorced, but Rupert and I continued to feel the constant warmth and security of our parents being a happy couple. My parents were very laissez-faire and their view of parenting was pretty much to let us get on with it. My friends' parents were much stricter with guidelines and barriers. Looking back on it, being left to my own devices probably helped me as an adult, even though it caused uncertainty in my youth. Maybe a few boundaries wouldn't have done me any harm.

Changing schools

In the early 1970s, the world changed when fuel costs went up dramatically, from 33 pence to 75 pence for 5 litres. This rapid and huge increase sent shockwaves through the global economy and, as a result, in 1972, when I was just 10, John Spicer, the headmaster of Winbury, decided to sell the school buildings and associated land in central Maidenhead and retire.

I think John knew that the school would no longer be financially viable, with parents unable to afford to send their children there. I had anticipated staying at Winbury until the age of 18, but the new headmistress, Mrs Perry, moved the school to Braywick, a few miles away, to teach children only to age 11. This meant that in 1973 I had no option but to move schools and I was dragged around to have a look at a couple of potential choices.

Some of my good friends went off to Blue Coat School, a private school in Reading. Although we went to look at it, for some reason I was not sent there. The upshot was a seismic upheaval for me. As a very confused and very frightened 11-year-old boy, in September 1973, I was to go to Desborough School in Maidenhead. It had previously been Maidenhead Grammar but was undergoing conversion to comprehensive status, with children like me as its fodder. Going from a friendly, small prep school of 100 pupils to a massive comprehensive of well over 1,000 pupils, with no warning or preparation, was horrific. Funnily enough, going to Desborough proved not to be a bad thing in the end because I encountered people from all backgrounds and made some fabulous friends, ones I would never have made had I gone to a public school. Still, it was a rough ride for the first few years.

I can still remember Mum dropping me off at the Desborough School gates on my first morning and then me walking in on my own and, by chance, meeting the only other boy from Winbury. We didn't know where to go but were herded to the floor of the school hall. The headmaster read out a list of names and the first 30 boys trooped out to their allocated classes. This

continued, with hundreds of boys going off with their teachers until, by the end of it, there were just the two of us left sitting on the floor – two terrified little boys.

The headmaster took us to an office to discover where we should be and eventually dumped us with a certain Mrs Edwards, who didn't seem to know what to do with us either. We ended up thrown into a class that was one up from remedial/special needs. It was awful and that first day was a nightmare. My classmates were from tough council estates and as different from me as it was possible to be. The bullying, by two deeply unpleasant boys, started immediately. After the comforts of a private prep school, I had to sink or swim and I certainly did a great deal of sinking before managing to paddle my way to safety. The lessons were years behind the standard at Winbury and, coupled with the fact that I was in the wrong class, I learnt next to nothing for several years. My French was good and could have been a lot better, but the teacher was occupied teaching pupils who essentially didn't want to learn or speak the language. We had exams at the end of the first year and in chemistry, much to my surprise, I achieved 98%. Thank you, Mr Smith – perhaps you taught me something after all! I was pleased with the result, but it went down like a lead balloon with my classmates. For the next three years, all my reports would read E for every subject except French, which was always an A.

I made a friend in that first year, Colin Roberts, and soon Colin and I were joined at the hip. We used to cycle to school along a main road, which seems dangerous by today's standards but was perfectly normal for youngsters at the time.

Colin was much more gung-ho than me, but I'd tag along for the adventures. There were a couple of old factories near us, one was an old brickworks and the other was attached to a lime quarry. The factories had been abandoned after the war but were ready-made playgrounds for little boys. We used to spend our days catching frogs and snakes, climbing trees and running around the old buildings. A ramp to another floor in the brickworks had a sign at the top which read: 'No entry. Danger.' We didn't cross it because, tempting as it might have been, even we recognised genuine danger. Still, we had great fun in the lime quarry, which had some old 1940s scrap cars for us to play in, as did the 'bomb hole' in a nearby field.

At the end of the first year, Colin and I were at home in my house one day when the phone rang. It was Colin's dad, who asked to speak to Colin. I remember watching Colin as he talked on the phone and, suddenly, he jolted as if hit by an electric shock. His features changed, his face went white, he put down the phone and walked straight out of the door. Later, I heard that Colin's eight-year-old brother, Steven, had run out in front of a car while chasing a football and had been killed. I only saw Colin once more after that horrible day. He stayed at school, but I changed to a different class in second year and Colin wasn't in the new one. Colin changed completely after that tragic day, and, sadly, I don't think we spoke another word to each other after that. Being so young, perhaps we just did not know what to do with such loss.

At Desborough, everyone sat in alphabetical order in class, so in my new class I was put next to a boy called Jones. Coincidentally, I knew Andy Jones from playing rugby. We

were on opposing teams, but we would often talk about air guns instead of chasing the ball. We sat beside each other for the next two years and became best buddies, going through school, being boys and doing enough to get by. Andy now lives near Reading and we're still friends today, even after all these years.

I was appalling at art and terrible at drawing, but I enjoyed clay modelling. Music lessons were awful. The music teacher lined us up and had us singing along to a tune. As he walked along the line, he tapped another boy and me on our chests and said "You two, stop singing. You're putting the whole class out of tune." It scarred me for life and that was the last time I sang in public. Musical appreciation was, thankfully, taken by a different teacher and was much better. I recall her playing *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Dukas and taking us through it, explaining the meaning of the work. It was fascinating, particularly in the way she described it for us. She then played *Funeral for a Friend* and *Love Lies Bleeding* by Elton John and again told us what these meant. I was mesmerised. She was, perhaps, responsible for laying the foundations for my love of listening to music.

As we moved into our teenage years, Andy and I continued to behave like small boys – and, arguably, we still do – out shooting our air guns and riding our bikes around the neighbourhood. We were also discovering girls. We did not understand them, but they were certainly becoming fascinating. In the all-boy environment of Winbury, my teachers had taught me to be courteous and attentive to girls and this was backed up by advice from my parents. It never felt very relevant because

girls were just annoying. Now, though, they were no longer annoying – except that they didn't seem to want to talk to us. We needed a few life lessons.

Motorbikes

My interest in bikes had been forged by Mum's Honda 50 that put me in mind to have a bike of my own. I saved my pocket money and found a place selling schoolboy-type scrambler bikes. I ended up buying one in 1974, a Rickman Zundapp 125, and managed to manhandle the scrambler into the back of Mum's VW campervan. I knew nothing about riding powerful motorbikes, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. The scrambler was the nosiest thing I'd ever heard and with no restrictors of any kind, it made a chainsaw sound like a baby's rattle. It was ridiculous. I took the bike out on a motocross scrambling track but didn't have a clue what I was doing. I fell off it many times. Eventually, the bike blew up and I didn't have the money to fix it, so I got rid of the noisy thing. However, I was left feeling a bit sore about the whole episode.

In my third year, 1975, I was moved up, from the dunces, to join Andy in the middle-level classes. Games lessons took place on one afternoon a week when we had to play rugby or tennis or do running. For some reason, neither Andy nor I were at the games lesson on the first day of term, and as a result, we noticed our names were not on the list for the following week. We therefore wondered if it would be noticed if we never went to games. The following Wednesday, we stayed away and when nothing was said about our absence, our plan was set. Every Wednesday at 1.45pm, when our class went to the playing field, Andy and I escaped straight out of the back gate.

Andy worked on a farm in Langley and from his earnings, he bought a Yamaha 80 motorbike that was taxed and had an MOT. He kept it on the farm and instead of school sports, we took the train to Langley, helmets in hand, hopped onto his motorbike and rode down the M4 to Maidenhead.

On those Wednesday afternoons, aged just 13, we biked around with Andy at the front, steering, and me on the back. We often ended up in small country pubs where we would have a few beers before heading home for dinner. The publicans seemed happy enough for us to drink there and we never misbehaved. We managed to do this for the whole school year and yet, on my end of year report, I received a C in games, even though I'd never been to a single lesson, which amused me then and now. The following year, we tried the same trick but were caught and given detention.

Even with Wednesday afternoons out of the equation, Andy and I still had a lot of fun. He bought a Honda 250cc trail bike which we played around with for the next few years. Then he bought his grandad's old car, and we played around with that too, even though neither of us had driving licences or insurance or any idea how to drive.

In 1976, we went to the British Motorbike Grand Prix at Silverstone. At the time, Barry Sheene was the man to see. We didn't go to the actual race but to the practice on the Saturday. At that time, everything was very laid back and you could wander around the pits and see all the action. Sheene wasn't in the pits, but we did see his bike and his girlfriend, Stephanie.

Everyone knew her as Steph in the bike world. She was the most glamorous, leggy blonde. She wore cowboy boots and a pair of cut-off jeans shorts, and she was nice to everybody. Later, we watched the timed runs from the stands on Woodcote Corner. Sheene whizzed past on his huge Suzuki two-stroke 750cc bike that was screaming its head off going around the corner. I enjoyed watching, but I'm not sure I was inspired to follow in Sheene's footsteps.



With Mum and Rupert, 1976

This was confirmed when Dad, who seemed to be going through a midlife crisis in the late 1970s, bought a huge Norton Commando motorbike, which was far too big for him. After taking me on the back, Dad offered me a solo ride, but I refused. I was 15 and although I knew how to ride it, the bike was enormous and I was terrified at the thought of dropping and damaging it!

My love of shooting

Dad had had a 16-bore shotgun for shooting rabbits and birds when he was a farm labourer and he had always kept the shotgun, even though he never used it. One day, Rupert and I found it under the stairs and it piqued an interest in guns for me. When I was about 9 or 10, Dad gave me my first air rifle. It looked like a cowboy's Winchester rifle, and I took up target shooting at cans and matchboxes. Uncle Brian gave me an air pistol that resembled a Colt 45 and looked impressive. When on holidays in Polperro, we used to visit Looe, about half an hour west of Plymouth, where the sport and fishing tackle shop also sold air guns.

Aged 11 or 12, one day I went off to the shop, on my own, with my savings and bought a Diana air rifle that included a telescopic sight. Back home, we built a shooting range behind the garage and had lots of practice shooting tin cans, matchboxes, Airfix models and anything else we could think of.

A year or two later, when I was about 13 or 14, Dad gave me a 20-bore over-and-under shotgun. As well as a fishing tackle shop, Looe in Cornwall also had a gunsmith, and I remember going into the shop to buy it and being fascinated by all the guns (pistols and rifles were freely available in the mid-1970s). I was particularly impressed by a Winchester rifle, the type cowboys use in the films, and I loved the smell of gun oil, particularly Youngs 303, which has a very recognisable smell. Because of my age, Dad was the legal owner of the gun and I couldn't shoot it without him being there. I couldn't shoot it in the garden, of course, only at clay shooting meets, and so

Dad took me to a shooting school in Truro, and I did surprisingly well considering it was my first time with the shotgun.

Unfortunately, we didn't do much shooting back in Maidenhead as Dad was busy with his work. The shotgun kept misfiring and we swapped it for a Japanese one, a 20-bore SKB, which is a great gun for young shooters because they don't kick too hard and are good for relatively short ranges. I kept it for some time and regularly shot at local clay shoots and agricultural shows. My cousins in Tring still had the farm and would run clay shoots at least once a month, and we'd go to them sometimes.

At shoots, the clay discs are fired from a machine at different heights and speeds to mimic various types of birds and animals. At one of these shoots, I was joint top with a local farmer after 30 shots, which meant it was time for a tie break. Standard clay targets are round and about four inches in diameter, but for a tie break, mini ones are used that measure about two inches across, so they are much smaller and faster. These were set to mimic a very fast, low-crossing bird just above the hedgerow and the clays went from left to right. The first person to miss loses, and I won ... I was chuffed to bits, though the farmer was nonplussed about being beaten by a young boy.

In 1979, we went to visit a friend of Dad's who owned a big house in the Highlands. We'd taken the sleeper from King's Cross to Edinburgh – my only time on a sleeper and it was wonderful. We had our own cabin with fresh linen and the porter brought teas and coffees and breakfast in the morning. We were staying in a lovely cottage and, thanks to Dad's TV

connections, we spent a day at the STV studios over in Glasgow, where they were filming a children's programme. The children were sitting around on straw bales and clapping along with the music, and Rupert and I were asked if we wanted to join in. Of course, we jumped at the chance to be on television. I went down into the studio but found it astonishingly weird and disappointing. It was nothing like the magical place I had seen on TV, but a big industrial warehouse with cables everywhere, and the set was pieces of hardboard held together with tape. In short, to my young and untrained eye, it seemed a mess. The reality of what television was all about hit me and a dislike for fake superficiality is still with me today. We had to wear cowboy shirts and a guy walking around with a board was telling us to clap, laugh or sing, which annoyed me.

So it was with some relief that we spent the next few days with Dad's friend on his estate. Just as we arrived, he caught a fine salmon. We were mightily impressed and later that day, we ate it. The next day we joined him for shooting, trudging around the estate's bogs and fields, but as much as I had been hoping for it, we didn't see or hear a single shot. Still, it didn't dim my enthusiasm.



Clay-pigeon shooting, 1982

Later, Dad and I bought a 12-bore shotgun, which was bigger, with a stronger kick and a longer range. I regularly shot, going rough shooting and, more frequently, clay-pigeon shooting, for years.

When I was 21, Dad decided he wanted to buy me a very nice gun, so a visit to Holland & Holland gunsmiths in London was arranged. Their gun room is amazing, and, having found the right shotgun, a Dixon boxlock ejector, Dad not only bought it but also had it tailored to fit me. Part of the purchase included training at the shop's shooting school in West London. It was the gun for me.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a shooting school in Maidenhead and Dad wasn't around enough to drive me to the one a few miles away. Really, you need to live on a farm if you are going to shoot every day to become really good. I kept the shotgun for rough shooting and clay shooting at weekends and, as much as I loved my shooting, it was only a hobby and never more

than that for me. Instead of focusing on one thing, I wanted to try a bit of everything. I wanted to ride bikes, go to concerts, travel and do this, this and this. But I loved that gun and I still own it today.

Life in the mid 1970s: The Bars, school and holidays

At the end of our road there was a footpath that linked a large housing estate development to the wide open area of Maidenhead Thicket. At both ends of the footpath were sets of steel bars, barricades, to stop people from driving along the path. When we were 12 or 13, 'The Bars' on this footpath became an informal meeting point for young people from our age up to those in their early 20s. You could guarantee there would always be someone to chat with. We spent many hours there and it became so well-known all over Maidenhead that people from other parts of the town would come over for chats and to have some fun. I was becoming interested in music then and my friends would play Prog-Rock bands such as Genesis, Camel and Yes on their ghetto blasters. Throughout the long summers of the mid 1970s, we'd sit around in the sun and just hang out with chums, listening to music.

Around this time, in 1976, my third year, we had a maths teacher called Mrs Duckett, and at the end of term, she told me I needed to pull up my socks if I was going to pass my maths O level, otherwise I'd be taking CSEs instead, which were lower-level exams. With that threat, Mrs Duckett transformed me into someone who began to try at school. Not before time, I started working, and my results improved.

Still, I was never going to be Mr Perfect. In metalwork, another great friend, Dave Machon, and I made dishes from copper and aluminium and turned bits of steel using big, old mechanical lathes. The teacher simply told us we had to wear our safety goggles and to keep our ties tucked in and then left us to our own devices. We could have all sorts of fun then, cutting pieces from the metal and placing it in the vice for smoothing around the edges. To do that, you had to stand with your left foot on the ground and the right foot on the table's crosspiece, then put your weight behind, tightening the vice before working on your metal. You could sneak up behind someone and, in the gap between your pal's legs, use a big file to give them a quick tap on the testicles – just enough to cause the victim to utter a satisfying “Oooof.” Dave and I shared a wicked sense of humour that way and a similar taste in music too. Just like my old pal Andy, Dave and I are still close.

As mentioned, the summers of 1975 and 1976 were long and hot and seemed to go on for ever. I remember happy holidays with endless sunny days at the Gower Peninsula in South Wales and Pickering in North Yorkshire.

When not away, I continued to spend much of my time with chums at The Bars. The only pool in Maidenhead was a long way to walk, and we went for a few dips in the local gravel pit. I also remember hours of intense boredom while wandering around doing very little. During that time, I had a friend called Jeff Howe. He was a quiet chap but we spent most of our time together chatting, wandering around the town and listening to music. He is the one who introduced me to Prog-Rock bands such as Pink Floyd and King Crimson, and this led to my wider

interest in music. Jeff was a touch older than me and went to a different school, and we gradually drifted apart. Decades later, I googled him and was horrified to read that the poor man had been murdered by his lodger in London and mutilated after being killed. Such an awful, awful end.

Rupert and I had had au pairs until we were about 10 or 11, but then Mum had stopped them just as they were becoming interesting. One was a Swedish girl, Torun, whom we called Tojo. She stayed in touch over the years and in 1976, Tojo invited me to Sweden to stay with her family. Her husband was a vet and she had a young daughter. It was to be my first solo international trip. On the SAS flight to Stockholm, a young girl walking down the aisle stopped next to some people sitting a few rows in front of me. I looked at her and thought, that's the girl from ABBA, sitting on an ordinary plane – and this was at the height of their fame. The girl had a chat with them, but I was far too shy to say anything.

In arrivals, I met Tojo and went off to buy a book to keep me company during my holiday. I bought *Eagle in the Sky* by Wilbur Smith. The book sparked a lifelong interest in his writings, and I read the book from cover to cover many times during that holiday, along with listening to Simon and Garfunkel and The Beatles. In fact, I still have the battered copy today. Outside, we crossed the car park to where Tojo had left her car and right next to it was a green Mercedes-Benz with all the members of ABBA sitting inside it. Out of the corner of my mouth, I mentioned this to Tojo, who said, “Ask them for an autograph.” I wanted to but I was far too shy.

It was a wonderful trip. We went to see a medieval ship that had been dug up from Stockholm harbour some years previously and visited a glass museum. Tojo's husband took me to an enormous pig farm with no animals outside but thousands inside. I was wearing my new Levi's jacket and I was very proud of it, but I never did get the stink of those pigs out of the denim.

In 1977, the beautiful sunshine of the previous summers was lacking. Another au pair, Karen from Germany (the one we went to see on the truncated jumbo-jet trip), wrote to Mum. She was going to Spain with her sister in August and asked me to come with her. Of course, I'm always up for a holiday in the sun, so I flew to Barcelona with Karen, her sister and son, Jeremy, and we stayed in Cambrils, near Tarragona. I didn't know what I wanted to do on a 'sun holiday', but I quickly realised that what I didn't want to do was sit on the beach roasting myself for three weeks.



In Spain, 1977

However, that was what Karen and her sister wanted to do (this was long before skin cancer fears) and you could literally smell the sizzling baby oil. I was bored to tears by lunchtime on the first day.



On holiday in Spain, 1977

In the evenings, we mooched about and had a good time and, one day, we went to Tarragona, which was so hot we could barely move. Karen's nephew, who was a little younger than me, talked about a new film he'd seen in Canada, where he lived. "You have to see it," he said. "It's brilliant. It's called *Star Wars*." I didn't take any notice because as far as I was concerned, he was just a kid, whereas I was 15. When I did see *Star Wars*, I saw what he meant. On the way home on the plane, someone walking down the aisle announced, "Elvis has died," which became one of the few times I can remember where I was when I heard a piece of news. I wasn't a big Elvis fan, but I remember the ripple of shock at the death of this music icon.

Mum had no problem with me going off at that age to stay with the au pairs, but she would not have let me go alone. I was independent minded and did not mind travelling alone when young, but flying then was so relaxed. There was no security, no worrying about overweight bags and you just turned up at the airport. It was easy and fun. I still feel excited about flying, like a little boy, but I dislike the hassle of it today.

The summer of 1977 also brought us the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Given the general grimness of the 1970s, the Queen's Silver Jubilee was, in contrast, a wonderful outpouring of much-needed joy. All over the country there were street parties, and it brought people together with a kind of togetherness usually seen in wartime. Our street was no exception and we had a party in the garden of one of the neighbours with everyone there. It was incredible. At the time, the country needed an event like that.

The year 1977 also found me buying my first moped. Many older kids at school had a Fizzie, a Yamaha FS1E, and, in July 1977, I decided to buy one as I had managed to save some pocket money and went off to Motorcycle City in Reading. It cost me £279. I took it home and buzzed it up and down a little but then kept it in our garage until my 16th birthday, when I could legally ride a motorcycle on the road. On my 16th birthday, I took it out and that feeling of growing up and having a sense of independence was profound for me. The fact that for the first time I was my own lord and master of where I went wasn't lost on me. I was very aware that it was the end of my childhood in some ways. All my mates had mopeds too, and we met up at The Bars when not at school. I had mine painted

silver instead of the Yamaha yellow which was greeted with a lot of piss-taking by my mates, “Enry, why do you always have to be different?”

Rupert's skateboarding years

On the other hand, my brother, Rupert, became obsessed by skateboarding in the mid- to late-1970s and was very good at it. Mum used to run him up to a skatepark in Brentford, West London, that had huge half-pipes. I tried once but I fell off, hurting myself, and never tried again. In contrast, Rupert was one of the best. The owner of the skate park started a competition team and picked Rupert as a freestyle rider. They set up a challenge between some UK and US teams, and 13-year-old Rupert was selected to go to San Diego to take part. In an unexpected outcome, the UK went and beat the Americans at their own game.

Rupert won the freestyle competition and we were all very proud of him. He was one of the best in the country by then and was practising all the time. Not long after winning the competition, while practising in the wide half-pipe with a junior, the junior fell off and his board flicked out, hitting Rupert's ankle and breaking it. Rupert never skateboarded again.

Still, our lives continued to be noisy, with shooting, music, dogs, motorbikes, people, chat, CB radio, cars and more. I fear Dad may have nailed it on the head when he said we were, “The family you would least like to live next door to!” Nonetheless, on a brief return visit to a next-door friend after we had moved away some years later, our old

neighbour somewhat wistfully observed to my mum, “Pauline, it’s been so quiet here since you moved away ...”

Music

The 1970s was also the time when I really discovered music. Music has always had a big influence on me, but I hadn’t realised how much until I started planning this book. In the early 1970s, I was listening to Prog Rock on tape and the radio played the likes of T-Rex and Sweet as well as lots of bands from the US, which was fine, but from 1975 onwards, music became really interesting. British music was suddenly fabulous. In 1976, Punk Rock hit like a bomb and was immediately followed by New Wave.

In 1977/1978, aged 14/15, Dave Machon and I would jump on a train straight after school to go to places such as the Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park, North London. Perhaps wisely, Andy ducked out of these trips. Our first trip was also my first time without my parents on a train. On arrival in Paddington, we took the Tube to Chalk Farm, another first for me. At the time, London was a grimy place with blackened, sooty buildings everywhere but exciting and very different from Maidenhead. The Rainbow concerts started at 6pm or 7pm and the bands would change every half hour. Dave saw the Sex Pistols (I didn’t like them much), and I saw bands such as the Boomtown Rats, Generation X and the Ramones. I loved the New Wave bands. Really, New Wave was our music, with Ian Dury, The Clash, Elvis Costello and The Stranglers being some of our favourites.

The last train back from Paddington was at 10.45pm, so we would sometimes miss the last half hour of music to arrive home in the early hours and then be up for school the next morning.

These early experiences led to a love of music and concerts, and I would go on to see The Rolling Stones concert in 1982 at Wembley Stadium and the Thin Lizzy farewell concert at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1983. At the Summer of '84 concert, I saw a huge amount of music, including Big Country, Kool & the Gang, Nik Kershaw and Elton John. I enjoy so many different types of music, and over the years I have also been fortunate to see Dire Straits at the Wembley Arena, Shirley Bassey at the Royal Albert Hall and, much later in Manchester, Level 42, Jools Holland and The Police, amongst others.

Improving at school

It may sound as though I never did any work at school, but, in fact, I did keep my head down and the grades gradually improved. Andy Jones, Dave Machon and I stayed good friends through second and third year. In the fourth year, Andy and I were moved into different classes, but we remained great mates. We saw each other around school and continued to gather at The Bars at evenings and weekends. One of our other mates, Dave Clare, was a little older and he had a Mini, which meant that suddenly, everyone was his best friend. About five of us would pile into the back and drive all over Maidenhead. Everyone smoked except for me. I had tried one of Dad's cigars a few years previously and had thought it tasted disgusting, which put me off for life. But that didn't let me off the hook. One time in the car, the lads said, "OK, let's get

Henry smoking.” They shut all the windows and lit up, every one of them. Being the central passenger, I couldn’t escape and the car filled up with smoke, like a bonfire, a fuming smog of cheap, disgusting cigarettes. In the end, they gave up before I did, and, eventually, they piled out of the car with the smoke billowing behind them. You’d be forgiven for thinking the car was on fire. I’ve still never had a cigarette to this day.

The main use for the Mini was to find country pubs where we could stop for a pint. One was called The Dew Drop Inn and another The Plough, both tucked away in the middle of nowhere in the countryside around Maidenhead. We were out on Friday nights and most weekends. I was never asked for ID anyway but as it wasn’t the kind of pub where young kids would drink, the police would not check up on it, so there was no danger of being caught drinking under age. One day, in the midst of a very hard winter, Dave’s dad drove us to The Dew Drop Inn (it’s still there, the inn, a beautiful country pub tucked away down a secluded cul-de-sac). Dave’s dad and grandad dropped us off and had a swift half before leaving us to our own devices. Unbeknownst to us, the temperature was so cold that a stream that had been in full flow had frozen over in the car park and Dave’s dad’s Austin got stuck. Dave had lit up a fag and was just enjoying his pint when he heard his Dad’s voice, “Oi, you lot, can you give me a push off the ice?” Dave got such a fright he practically swallowed his cigarette. It transpired Dave’s parents didn’t know he smoked – well not up to that point anyway!

The plan was to get behind the car to try to bounce it off the ice. I was decked out in my super-cool ’70s get up of a leather

jacket, cowboy boots, skin-tight jeans and a cream polo neck – possibly not ideal for the job in hand. In my enthusiasm, I lost my footing and went slipping and skidding backwards down the 10 or 15 yards of ice, shouting, “Wooooaah! Wooooeer!” while trying to keep my balance as I slid into the gloom, my cream polo neck blending into the pitch dark, icy surroundings. Somehow I managed not to fall, but I have never lived it down and am still teased about it even now. We did manage, finally, to push the car out of the ice and then went back to have a skinful in the pub. As teenagers, these were the things that amused us, and they still do.

Dave, Andy and I often went to Maidenhead to the cinema. Andy loved horror movies although I’ve never been a fan. Back then, people were allowed to smoke in cinemas and we used to sit with our legs thrown over the seat in front. During a particularly scary part at the end of *Carrie* (age restrictions seemed to be optional at the time), Andy got such a fright and jumped so violently that he hit himself in the face with his knees. The fag that happened to be in his mouth at the time went flying through the air in a shower of sparks and I quite literally pissed myself laughing ...

Occasionally, those carefree days were punctuated by less relaxed moments. In the late 1970s, Dad came back from New York with bad flu and the word around the house was, “Dad’s not well. Be quiet.” When he grew worse, Mum rang the GP, whose reaction was to call an ambulance and take Dad to the hospital.

I remember feeling sad as I watched Dad coming down the stairs in his pyjamas. It was probably my first time of seeing him vulnerable. He was in hospital for over a week. Unfortunately, what the doctor thought was pneumonia was actually a very serious infection that we'd never heard of – legionnaires' disease. Apparently, he had picked it up from infected air conditioning in the hotel in the USA. Thankfully, he made a full recovery but it gave the whole family a huge shock.

Meeting Rebecca

Then, in 1978, I met Rebecca. I was scratching by at school and leading a simple, fun-and-games life at the time. At a disco out in Cookham Dean one night, I spotted a very petite girl with bright red hair. She was wearing a top hat and the first thing I did was to tap the hat on her head, which I did a few times until I had her attention. We got together that night and went out for the next six years. Rebecca and I became very, very close. We were in love and incredibly happy, and it was great for me to have that stability during my late teens, when everything can be messy.

Rebecca, a very clever grammar-school girl, was a year above me at school. Our schools were close to each other and the pupils moved in the same circles. I was at school all week, out with my mates after school and with Rebecca at the weekends. Like all teenage boys, I used home as a dormitory, somewhere to eat, sleep and get clean clothes.

Around this time, after he stopped skateboarding, Rupert got into motocross racing and our parents bought him a Suzuki

motorbike, probably to give him something with which to occupy himself after he stopped skating. By now, Mum had sold the VW van and bought a green box Fiesta, ‘the little green box’ we called it, with a trailer on the back to carry Rupert’s bikes to scrambling meets. I too had a yearning to do motocross, but school, girls and growing up were getting in the way. I had tried to do it when younger but had never quite got it together, but now, Rupert at that same age was doing it and doing it well.

During the summer of 1978, Andy and I went down to Cornwall on the train. We took our bikes with us so that we could get around when in Polperro, but Andy’s moped broke down on the way to the station. We got off at Plymouth, but we knew we’d never reach Polperro with the two of us on the back of my little moped. My aunt sent her daughter, Karen, over with her boyfriend, who had a bigger bike, so Andy went on the back of his bike, while Karen was on the back of mine. We mooched around Polperro for a few days, eating fish and chips and drinking beer at the local pub. Mum had given me the key to the electricity meter and had told me to empty it and take the coins to the bank to exchange for notes. I duly took the bag of coins to Barclays, only to be told by the cashier to return in an hour. We walked around the village, killing time, but when we returned, a big chap in a long coat was waiting for us.

He introduced himself as ‘Detective Plod’ and asked for a few words. He wanted us to explain where all the 10ps had come from, thinking we’d been smashing up phone boxes. We were completely innocent, of course, so this came as a huge shock as neither of us had ever crossed paths with the police before.

Trying to stay calm and knowing we'd done nothing wrong, I told the policeman the story and gave him Mum's phone number, after which, having given her a call, he then told us to be on our way. Being on the receiving end of a suspicious policeman is not a pleasant experience.

I passed seven O levels with Bs and Cs, which I was happy about as it was enough to go on to sixth form, although many of my good friends left school. Dave went on to technical college. Andy chose to go off to drive trucks, with the result that he, at 17, was earning good money and feeling pleased with himself. I stayed on to do my A levels of French, economics and biology, mainly because I didn't feel drawn to anything else. Andy and Dave and I saw each other at weekends and our friendship has lasted until the present day. Many other classmates became friends, including Lindsay McKay and John O'Farrell, but they were not close ones like Andy and Dave. John went on to be a humourist and has been on *Have I Got News for You?* He has written a few books too. He was always very funny in French class and had us screaming with laughter.

When I turned 17, in 1979, I bought a Kawasaki KH250 two-stroke triple, which was the biggest bike you could then ride on L plates. It was a bike and a half, and I absolutely loved it. I was riding it home from school one autumn evening at around 4.30pm. It was pitch dark, raining and I was in the middle of the Maidenhead rush hour on the A4. All the traffic was crawling along at 30mph. I was young, impatient and stupid on a quick bike and I decided to move out of the line of traffic. I dropped a few gears to zoom past the waiting cars and started

screaming along at 60mph or more before going around a curve and down a slope. Cars were coming towards me as I was speeding along the cross-hatchings when suddenly someone coming towards me decided to turn right. Cars were approaching me on the outside, one pulling out in front and, of course, the line I was speeding past was on the left. If I hit the brakes, I would be off the bike. I opened the throttle and managed to squeeze between two cars onto the open road beyond. My heart was thumping afterwards and my stupidity really scared me. I slowed down following that incident.

Not long afterwards, I sold the bike, as Rebecca and I were fed up with being wet and cold when going anywhere on it. Instead, I bought an old Mini, painted British Racing Green, with an 850cc engine, which meant it couldn't do anything over 50mph. By then I was working on Saturday mornings in a motor parts shop in Maidenhead so was well placed should the car break down!

I was a loyal boyfriend. In 1979, Led Zeppelin was playing at Knebworth, and a friend offered me his spare ticket. Now all music fans will be for ever screaming at me, but I turned it down and gave it back. One reason was that I had never really liked Led Zeppelin and may not have enjoyed it, but the real reason was that I had promised Rebecca I would take her to a craft fair. In hindsight, I really should have gone to see Led Zeppelin's last-ever concert, as the craft fair was – well, a craft fair!

Rebecca had four A levels and could have gone to any university in the country, but she went to learn to be a bilingual secretary at the Institut Français, a college right opposite the National History Museum in South Kensington. You had to be very sharp to get in there. When I passed my driving test, I drove Mum's car to London to see Rebecca during the week and at weekends, and we liked to walk around the West End and enjoy the beauty of Hyde Park and West London.

She stayed at lodgings in the Boltons, a very fancy boarding house for young ladies in London run by nuns who ruled with a rod of iron. Boys were not allowed across the threshold at any time, day or night. The mother superior met the girls at the door, so there was no chance of me going in for a canoodle.



With Rebecca, 1980

Going into my final year at school, I stopped the job at the motor-parts shop to concentrate on studying for A levels in French and biology. In the summer after my A levels, my parents took us on holiday to Italy, where we stayed on the Amalfi Coast in a little holiday apartment. We ate fabulous pizzas and had a brilliant time on what was to be our last family

holiday. The holiday had a big effect on my mum – but not in the best way.

There was a storm drain running through town and it was not far from our flat. One day, Mum heard a dog barking in distress and went looking for it. The dog had fallen into the drain and could not find a way out. She grabbed a policeman to help, but his solution was to pull out his pistol to shoot the poor dog. Fortunately, Mum stopped him, but nobody came forward to help the dog and it was still there when we left. Mum never went on a foreign holiday again, saying, “I’m not going anywhere where they treat animals so badly.” I returned to my results to find they were not good enough to take up an offer to do business studies at Brunel University. I was knocked sideways. All my schoolfriends were working or off to uni and I now had no firm plan for my life.

For the remainder of the summer, I took a job on a building site, where I was the lad and the butt of all jokes, knocking things over and getting it all wrong. We were building an extension to an office block in Ascot. Each morning, the lads picked me up from the end of the road in their little builder’s truck and, really, I didn’t know one end of a shovel from the other. I was the bloke to make tea and shift the sand and the cement and I couldn’t even do that very well. Still, we had a few laughs.

One afternoon, the architect and the property owner were coming to inspect the work we had done on digging the footings. The digger driver was only good for doing any work

between 8am and midday, when he'd go off to the pub and get drunk. On this particular day, he was due to meet the bigshots at 2pm. Everyone thought this would be fun to watch because we all knew the digger driver could barely stand up by that time and usually would go off to find a place to sleep. Anyway, he met the men as arranged and they were wandering around, talking to him and inspecting the work. At one point, he missed his footing and fell backwards into the trench he'd been digging that morning. The trench was about a foot or 18 inches wide, which was about the width of him, and so there he was, about six feet down, stuck solid and incapable of doing anything as he was three sheets to the wind. We were all hanging off the building scaffolding like the gibbons in *The Jungle Book*, howling with laughter, but the owner and architect went berserk.

On another occasion, a floor was being laid and I was put in charge of mixing and bringing in the screed for the final fine-concrete layer before tiling. On the second day, the screed was stiffening and forming lumps instead of flowing out of my wheelbarrow, and it was going down on top of the still-wet waterproofing layer. I tipped up a barrow of screed but instead of gently sliding out, it came out in one lump – *splat!* – into a pool of tarry water, which then splashed onto the pink, freshly plastered walls. The tarry water, of course, soaked straight into the plaster. At that precise moment, the architect and the project owner walked in to witness me making a mess of everything. My services weren't required for much longer and I didn't go into the building trade.

I was a bit lost that autumn as the impact of not getting into university set in. My options seemed limited. I signed up at an adult college, but my heart wasn't in it. I only lasted a week or two before signing on as unemployed. There were 3,200,000 unemployed people then and it was a horrific time. I was one of the '1 in 10' UB40 sang about and my lack of employment left me feeling a failure. I couldn't get a job without experience and I couldn't get experience without a job. I was stuck in a circle. My parents were very supportive and Dad tried his best to introduce me to someone who might have had a job for me ... but it didn't go anywhere. Rebecca was an immense support at the time and I'll never forget her. She was a steady influence when I needed it most, a rock to anchor myself to over those directionless months after leaving school.

In September, I heard Marks & Spencer were looking for Christmas staff, so I took a job with them. I was incredibly impressed by how organised everything was, and I was incredibly grateful to have the work. I was doing everything from stacking shelves to being on the tills and packing the customers' bags – just one of the young lads around the store. One Saturday afternoon before Christmas, I was on the tills. Usually, we would only be on the till for an hour, but it was so busy that I was on for the whole afternoon. At the time, we were dealing with Green Shield Stamps too (the 1970s equivalent of loyalty cards), so I was tapping the tills, packing groceries and working out the Green Shield deductions. One half of my brain was going berserk doing calculations, while the other half was doing nothing at all. The three and a half hours of only using half my brain while the other half lay idle were very unbalancing. Eventually, the supervisor relieved me.

I practically staggered away from the till, and it took a good half hour, plus a cup of tea and a slice of cake, before I began to feel OK.

CHAPTER FOUR

Beginning My Working Life *January 1981 to June 1986*

The Marks & Spencer job finished after Christmas, which meant I went into January 1981 unemployed. Then, out of the blue, I received a call from the husband of a woman I had worked with in M&S, a lovely lady called Hillary Kenneth. Peter Kenneth rang, telling me he worked for a German wine company called Niederthäler Hof and asked me to join them as a salesman. I'd always wanted to go into sales, for no other reason than it was what my dad did. I said fine but that I knew nothing about wine. Peter told me to get to a hotel in Colchester to meet his sales manager. I was in a 16-year-old Mini and for the first time I drove on the North Circular Road, right through the middle of London. I was absolutely terrified. At the hotel, I met Trevor Hill, told him I was 19 and knew nothing about wine or anything else, really. He offered me a commission-only sales job with £1,000-a-year car allowance which meant I was employed by the company but not on a salary.

Trevor gave me a stack of blue sheets of paper on which were the details of everyone who had bought wine before Christmas. He sat me in a room with a telephone and told me to sell wine to these people as part of a New Year sale. I looked at the price list and had no idea where to start until he eventually said, "You have to call these people, Peter." "I don't know what to say," I said. "I've never even seen the bottles. I don't know what they taste like. I've never even made an outbound

business call.” He gave me a script and wrote on the price list what each wine was and whether it white, red, sweet, heavy, dry and so on. “I’m not going to leave until you start ringing people,” Trevor said. I sat there looking at the phone, terrified and not wanting to upset anyone. Trevor called a few to show me how to do it and then I tried doing it myself, actually managing to sell some wine.

After we had finished this telesales campaign and had had a weekend off, I had to go to the office in North London, where I was given a box of customer cards, my patch being Oxfordshire, and was told I had to start making appointments to see people. I also had to obtain some sample bottles from dispatch, which was a place in Finchley straight out of Dickens. I was given 100 bottles of wine to taste and told to make a few notes before passing them on to potential customers. I could not believe that they just gave me a car full of wine. I’d never seen so much.

My first appointment was in Oxford. I found the house and the man bought some wine. Success!

During that first year, I had a couple of months on the road, constantly terrified that I would be fired. In March, I spent the month on a stand at the Ideal Home Exhibition in Earl’s Court in London. My job was to grab people off the floor to taste and buy wine, but it was hard yards and I was knocked back time and time again. It was possible to spend a whole day there and not sell anything, known as a ‘blank day’ in the sales world.

Nevertheless, I *was* learning how to sell. I got through my first year without being fired, which was a surprise to me.

In July 1981, the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer took over the country. It was, arguably, the biggest thing since VE Day or the coronation in 1953 and I decided I wanted to be part of it. The night before the wedding, there was to be a huge firework display and classical music concert in Hyde Park, so Rebecca and I made our way there along with most of Southern England. With hundreds of thousands of people milling around, there was so much noise we couldn't hear the classical music, but the fireworks were spectacular.

We then tried to go from Hyde Park to the Mall to find a place to watch the wedding the next day. Going around Hyde Park Corner with 500,000 people on the streets was nigh on impossible and it turned into a ridiculous crush, so tight that the crowd was moving like a single organism. You could lift your feet and be carried along and as Rebecca was a tiny little thing, at only 4 foot 11, her nose was pressed against my chest and she could hardly breathe. Eventually, we made our way to a barrier, where if we could get over it, we could wait for the crowd to make its way past.

Somehow, we managed to get down Piccadilly to the Mall, but the crowd was already 12 deep at that stage. Nevertheless, it was a lovely night, and everyone slept wherever they could find space. We needed to be at the front, otherwise Rebecca would see absolutely nothing and there would be no point in being

there. We walked around Admiralty Arch, with people 15 deep in places. There was a gap in the barrier leading down to an alley with some bins to my right and, thinking that the gap would be closed in the morning, I thought if we sneaked into it, we would have a front-row seat. We wandered in and there were already a few East End families there and they made us feel right at home. We settled down for the night and for the first – and I hope my only – time, I slept on the streets of London town. It was cold and uncomfortable – never again!

Throughout the night, people were singing and the mood was fabulous. As the sun came up, there was an extraordinary sense of national optimism and the feeling of Britishness was immense. Union Jacks were everywhere, and songs such as *Roll Out the Barrel* were being sung by the crowd. Soon police and soldiers started to arrive and the atmosphere slowly built. The gap had remained open and at about 8am, a very smartly dressed woman arrived with her child and tried to take up a position. The East End families were not happy, saying, “No, you bloody won’t. We’ve been here all night. You can get to the back.” Soon after that, the army did indeed pull the barriers closed and we were front and central with Rebecca in front of me, so she had a perfect view.

We took plenty of pictures of the carriages and horses and of Charles and Diana passing by. It was a day of days, a special day, and to be there was something different – you could actually feel it inside. It was magical, which meant that what was to come for the Royal couple was all the more sad.

After a while, I decided my old Mini wasn’t up to the job and I bought a second-hand Ford Fiesta from Peter Kenneth’s

neighbour. On a hot August bank holiday, Rebecca and I drove to what was then Windsor Safari Park (now Legoland). In the lion enclosure, my newly acquired Fiesta picked its moment to blow its engine spectacularly – steam pouring out – resulting in the car having to be towed out in front of all visitors and staff (and lions) who were watching and laughing at us.

Rebecca and I were being very grown up too, going to musicals and concerts, and seeing comedians. The cinema at Maidenhead was a sticky-floor fleapit, so Rebecca and I used to go to a better one in Henley. The cinema in Henley was old-fashioned, like a theatre, and it even had a bar. Two films would be shown, with a short of about half an hour before the main event. On arrival, you could have a drink and also order one for the interval so that your G&T would be waiting for you. It all felt very grown up.

Rebecca and I went on holidays to Cornwall and Wales and also to Crete in 1982. It was a popular spot by that time but I'd never been to such an exotic place. We had a small villa near Aghios Nikolaos which was perfect and we hired a moped for touring around. Some of the time, we lounged on the beach, but much sightseeing was also done.



In Crete, 1982

One day, we ended up in a dusty town called Elounda. I noticed a board on the dockside offering a boat trip to Spinalonga, which was an old leper colony. Rebecca didn't want to go to a totally deserted island, but I did. I loved it as it reminded me of Devil's Island from the film *Papillon*. On the way back, the captain offered us 'waterski lessons' which consisted of nothing more than, "Here you go. I'll throw you out with a pair of skis. Just keep the tips out of the water." I stood up first time. He wasn't expecting that, and nor was I, to be honest, and he took me around in a big circle until I fell, spectacularly, in a cloud of seawater. He gave me a second go, with a deep water

start. I lasted a few circles that time – round and round we went before reaching a similarly inelegant end.



Waterskiing in Crete, 1982

Rebecca and I visited the Minoan palaces at Knossos and Phaestos and I remember the whole trip being fabulous, but with a heat that had us running from shade to shade.

Even though I was now spending my holidays with Rebecca, I never deserted my friends – the likes of Dave, Andy and Giles Norman. Giles and I met in 1979, him being the boyfriend of Ali, who was a schoolfriend of Rebecca's. Giles and Ali,

Rebecca and I would end up going on a couples' holiday to Tenerife in 1984, staying on the North Coast in a pad that had been kindly lent to us by a friend. At the time, the South Coast was deserted and Los Gigantes became our favourite place. Rebecca and Ali are long gone now, but we boys are still mates and Giles now lives with his wife and family in London.

Fishing with a friend

I was introduced to fishing by a friend of my father's, George Devlin, who became a great friend of the family's too. George was a kind, wonderful man who lived along the road with his wife, Doris, and was like a genial uncle to many of us kids. I just called him George. He and Dad used to go salmon and trout fishing and George was a master fly fisherman, fishing for trout in local chalk streams and in Scotland for salmon. On one occasion, he stopped in on his way back from a Scottish fishing trip to show Dad the fruits of his labour. In he walked carrying salmon that must have been at least three feet long and was almost too big to hold, saying, "Look at this one, Hugh, it's from the Spey." Later on, in the early 1980s, George would take me fly fishing on the Kennet at Hungerford, out near Newbury.



Fly fishing, 1983

We went a few times in August, which is a terrible time of the year to go fly fishing because it's usually too hot, too sunny and the fish are sleepy as the water is warm. I didn't know one end of a rod from the other, and all I caught was the trees behind me and my ears, but watching George spin those flies was a wonder. How you barrel cast under a weeping willow onto the nose of a brown or rainbow trout, I don't know, but George did it, time after time. On one occasion, right by Hungerford Bridge in the centre of town, he caught a trout, and it leapt out of the water, spinning in circles as it did so. George handed me the rod, saying, "Feel what it's like to have a fish on the rod." The feeling of connection to the wild animal was special and watching George handle him on the line was fantastic.

We had some glorious, happy, beautiful days, catching very little while talking and enjoying each other's company.

I treasure the memory of those days. George was a wonderful man and we got to know each other quite well and stayed friends until he died in 1986.

My 21st birthday party

December 1982 would be my 21st birthday. During the year, Mum and I decided, for just once in our family's lifetime, to have a big bash. One of my wine customers lived out in the Chilterns near Henley-upon-Thames. He had a lovely manor house and adjacent to it was a huge medieval barn that he rented out for events. I went over in August for a viewing and it was unbelievable, with tiling coming down to about six or eight feet above the ground and huge doors that at one time would have opened to allow the wagons and horses in and out. The pitch of the roof was steep and high, like a witch's hat. Inside, the ceiling had amazing beams going up about 30 or 40 feet high. I immediately fell in love with the barn and said, "Right, I'm having this for my birthday." I failed to take into consideration that I was looking at the barn in August and my birthday, of course, was in December.

The planning kicked into action, and we invited about 150 of my friends and family, cousins, grandmothers and step-grandmothers, everybody I knew, plus a few more. There was a huge, working fireplace in the barn into which you could nearly fit a whole tree. Close to the day, Mum had a look at the barn and said, "Pete, it's not going to be very warm there, even with the fireplace going." On the evening of the bash, we put two 10-foot logs on the fire but even that didn't nip the temperatures. We also had two enormous blow heaters that looked like jet engines, with long tubes with canisters of

propane at the back. The heaters started blowing hours before the party, but it was a crisp, dry night out, and it remained coats on for the first hour or two. My friend Dave Clare was doing the disco, 'Whale Disco' he called himself, and he had the music going to warm up the atmosphere for people arriving. As the party began to get going, there was a *whoosh* and, *bang!*, all the electricity went off in the barn, leaving no light except for the fire and no power anywhere in the barn. My immediate thought was, not now!

As luck would have it, Dave was an engineer for the local electricity board, so off we traipsed out to the back to see if we could find the problem. In our search for the fuse box, we found some interesting signs indicating that the barn had once been a POW camp during the war (there were rumours that Rudolf Hess had been there for a short time). However, history was of little use to us in the current situation. Dave soon located the fuse box and when he opened it, declared it an absolute rat's nest, with the wires all over the place, ancient connections bent and full of cobwebs. "There's no way we can fix that pile of shit," Dave declared, giving the box a sharp kick, at which, in a shower of sparks, the barn came back to life again. Power restored, we said a little prayer and the party went on.

It was a night to remember. Mum had organised a cake in the shape of a shooting cartridge bag because of my interest in shooting. We had great fun with so many fantastic people. As mentioned, it was a cold, crisp night and, fortuitously, dry. Not so the next day when we went back to clean up. Rain was falling in sheets, the barn was leaking everywhere, and the

rugby field next door, which served as the car park, was ankle-deep in mud. I felt so lucky in so many ways. It was the only big party I have ever had in my life and I'm so glad I did it.

Learning the tricks of the trade

The year 1983 was also when I really started to build my wine-selling career. I was earning – but not as much as my mates. I was working hard and in 1983 things were starting to pay off. I was feeling more comfortable and becoming a better salesman to the point where I was selected to cover The Boat Show, a job which only the best salesmen were given. Sales suddenly seemed easy. I made my first big sale, went for a walk, went back to the stand, made another huge sale and so it went for the whole week. I sold more than anyone else. I did the same at the Highland Show and from then on, it seemed, every week the sales kept coming. The company ran an annual competition, the Golden Lion, to name the top salesman in Europe. I was top of the list by mid-year and I then spent the rest of the year making sure I stayed there. Bob Alex, who looked like Tom Selleck in a pinstriped suit, was very competitive and determined to tip me off my spot, but I held on and was immensely proud. The following year, I was promoted to junior manager.



Top salesman in Europe presentation, 1983

I started to wonder if it was time to settle down. All my mates at the time were getting married and buying houses and, at that moment, I felt the impetus to buy my own house. As a salesman, I travelled quite a lot and, while driving round Wallingford, I saw what had been an old mill that was being converted into houses. I bought a tiny single-bedroom starter home and when the developers asked me what colour bathroom fittings I wanted, to my shame, I said avocado. In my defence, I was only 22, and it *was* 1983!



My first house in Wallingford

Settling down did not involve giving up adventures. On a holiday to Yorkshire that year, I enjoyed exploring The Wolds, the North York Moors and Castle Howard. Always keen to try something new, I went up in a hang-glider-type microlight from Sutton Bank aerodrome. Slowly and noisily, we powered our way up to 1,000m/3,000ft and then the pilot switched off the engine for us to be treated to magnificent views on the wonderfully near-silent glide back down to earth.

I was still into motorbikes and had a Yamaha YZ250 for the adult motocross races, a proper bike for racing. Rupert and I shared it for a few years, racing in different classes, and it was brilliant fun. Rupert would always be at the front in his races while I was always in the rump of mine, but there was nothing like it when the bike took off. Things did get a bit fractious between us when sharing racing the bike, as you can imagine

...



Motocross racing, 1984



Motocross racing, 1984



Motocross racing, 1984

In 1984, I bought Rupert's share of the bike. My highlight of bike racing was winning the holeshot – getting to the first corner in the lead – at a club race in Leatherhead in the summer of 1984. Thirty-five bikes were lined up and it was a race to the

first corner. Usually, I was at the back and the chances were if one goes down, all go down. On that day, I managed the holeshot as I dropped the clutch and, *bang*, off I went. Suddenly I realised I was out in front, flying along and screaming up to the first corner. My brain froze. Everything was too fast, too close and the rope around the track was going to cut me in two. I thought I can't slow the bike. The bike was way better than me and, somehow, I managed to throw it around the corner and retain the lead for two corners but three guys then got ahead of me on the next straight. The bike needed an engine rebuild after that race, so, not having the time or money to continue racing, I got it fixed, sold it and my biking and racing days were over.

Learning to drive – properly

Instead, I thought it was, perhaps, time to learn to drive properly. My first cars were the knackered Mini and, in 1981, the Ford Fiesta. After those came a Mini Metro, followed by a rather sporty Escort Harrier. I was meeting Rebecca after work in Maidenhead and driving her home, and one day when I was waiting for her, I happened to be flipping through *Punch* magazine. There was an article on high-performance driving and it sounded like something I'd enjoy, so I took a few details. A few months later, I found myself in Wimbledon at the BSM headquarters to start their High Performance Course.

In the car park was a Triumph TR8 V8 convertible and the co-driver was John Lyon, the high-performance driving instructor at the time. BSM had started HPC in the mid-1960s as a civilian version of police car driving because cars were getting faster, but instruction hadn't kept up with the changes. John Lyon had been an instructor at Hendon Police School and was

now teaching people how to drive fast cars safely, discreetly and swiftly.

John introduced me to the TR8. He showed me how to drive the car and he drove around the block a couple of times. I then swapped with him and we headed off. After 10 minutes, he told me to pull over and then proceeded to rip my driving to pieces. Nothing was right. “Peter, you’re not sitting straight, you’re braking wrongly, you’re using the clutch badly, your gear selection is terrible and your observation is non-existent.” In short, everything was absolutely bloody awful. He was brutal, but I didn’t buckle under the criticism as I was there to learn and so I simply asked, “Right, where do we start?” We started with a number of half-day drives spread over a year or so. I was learning all the time. On one of those drives, we went to Silverstone circuit, where a friend of John’s was testing a Le Mans D-Type Jaguar. John was offered a drive and, to me, watching him scream past in this beautiful car, the engine’s noise echoing around the empty stands, was amazing.

John continued to work at my driving, telling me that he was, “trying to put an old head on young shoulders.” Eventually, I was deemed good enough to take my driving to the next level and, in 1983, I did the entire HPC course with a huge amount of driving over two very long days. John and I went all over southern England, from London to Lincoln and over to Norfolk. At Cadwell Park racetrack John demonstrated how hard a car could go and how to handle it properly at speed. He was a brilliant instructor. I was then allowed behind the wheel with John guiding my driving as we sped around the twisting

tarmac – it was exciting to make a sports car come alive like that. I passed the course and it was John who really ignited my love of driving properly and getting the most out of a car. In 1985, I would go on to do my HPC Silver Award Night Drive and also to pass the very different Institute of Advanced Motoring test. To my delight, many years later, I would ultimately pass the HPC Gold Award.

The focus, precision and consistency I learnt from HPC spilled over into my life more widely and things started to improve.

For an HPC event in 1983, Goodwood racing circuit in West Sussex was hired for a club driving day. My friend Giles and I decided to hire a VW Golf GTI for a weekend of screaming around the racetrack and country lanes. After collecting the car in London, noting that the insurance stated ‘not to be used on a racetrack’, we headed off to do just that ... Goodwood was a simple affair back then, not the smart destination it is now. We did some laps ourselves and went out with other members. Unfortunately, the rain started to fall heavily which made track conditions more challenging. Giles and I were in the Golf, with me driving very fast – too fast as it would turn out. At the end of the start/finish straight, there is a long, double-apex right-hand bend, with a bump in the middle, called Madgwick. Here we were, on a very wet surface, flying into this corner at 90mph/145kph. Halfway round, the bump got me and the car snapped into a spin very rapidly. It spun three times one way and the twice the other. Throughout, the steering wheel was whipping round in circles, the tyres screaming as green/black, green/black went the view of grass and tarmac before my eyes.

I braced myself for impact and the strong likelihood of enormous bills coming my way having smashed up an expensive, uninsured car. Miraculously, we stopped on the infield having hit nothing at all and with no injuries. Phew! We trickled back to the pits and fell out of the car. The spotless black car was absolutely covered with grass clippings, but that was the extent of it! Everyone had heard our escapade and pulled my leg mercilessly for it. After that, no one would let me drive their car – I wonder why? It was a near thing, but I had been lucky not to hit anything.

Moving on from the wine business

In 1984, I was promoted to the lofty title of ‘field manager’, or ‘field mouse’ as the sales guys called it, for the wine company, with a saleswoman called Vera working for me. I hadn’t the faintest clue what I was doing. I had no management training, and, at 23, hardly knew which way was up myself. Vera did her bit, but after the fantastic 1983, 1984 was something of a let-down. I had a feeling it was time to move on. One of Dad’s friends worked in the computer industry, and I began to see that that was the way forward. I started looking around to try and get into the business.

By mid- to late-1984, I was looking for another job. My wine sales job was commission only, so it was always about the next sale. Every month, I was worried about the mortgage payments, which I always managed to make, but I did not want to keep living that way. It was time to move on.

MABX Systems

In the late summer of 1984, Rebecca and I went on holiday with some friends to Tenerife – a very interesting place. A literal highlight was standing on the very top rock of Mount Teide. At 3,715m/12,188ft, this mountain is the highest point above sea level of all the islands in the Atlantic. Just turning around gave me the most incredible 360-degree view of the whole island.

Workwise, I felt that going into the computer industry was the right place to be, but I did not have any experience. In September 1984, I got a job working for a start-up computer company called MABX Systems. It meant taking a pay cut, but it was a regular salary rather than commission. Unfortunately, MABX Systems was selling software that hadn't been written properly and didn't work, and my boss taught me a huge amount about how a small business *shouldn't* be run.

My relationship with Rebecca, which had once been so close and loving, had also, achingly, sadly, run its course. When it reached the point of marry or split up in October 1984, we split up. After six years together, this was a tough time for both of us.

As the months passed, I tried to keep busy and went to Polperro with Dave and Andy, met up with other old friends, made some new friends, and, in early 1985, went skiing in Andorra.

While I was trying to get going in my career, Dad was looking at retirement, and my parents were becoming more serious about moving away from the South. Dad was 56 and wanted to

retire at 60. They'd been talking about moving north for a while and in early 1985 bought a house in Wennington, Lancashire, which meant I had to move into my house in Wallingford, and gradually, throughout the spring of 1985, I moved from Maidenhead to Wallingford. Leaving our hometown was a bit of an unsettling time for all of us.

Rupert was 20 at the time and bouncing around all over the place. The father of a friend of Rupert's had a villa in Dubai and another one in Spain. Rupert and his pal lived between the two, having lots of fun.

Moving to Wallingford, meanwhile, was not ideal. I was working in Maidenhead and didn't know anyone in the village at all, so Mum suggested I join the local Young Farmers' Club. I thought I'd give it a go – after all, I had some farming background on both sides of my family. I joined the Henley Young Farmers' Club in early 1985 and as it turned out, Mum's suggestion was a very good one. I was immediately made very welcome by Carol, the club chairman, and everyone else. Young Farmers come from all kinds of rural backgrounds, and, I learnt, are very sociable. My surname, Henry, proved to be a huge source of amusement and brought about my nickname of 'Hooray'. This stemmed from the club being based around Henley-on-Thames, of rowing fame and many posh 'Hooray Henrys'. They had a T-shirt printed for me with the play on words 'Hooray Henley' on it, which was funny in the 1980s.

The Young Farmers is a tremendous organisation. We enjoyed regular weekly meetings, discos and barn dances, and attended numerous local agricultural shows, all of which were great

ways to meet people. At one disco, I noticed that all the young lads were following a very spectacular blonde girl. She was tall, wearing pink suede ankle boots, pink hotpants and a 'Frankie Says OK' T-shirt. To top it off, she had a big, bouffant 1980s hairstyle. To say she was eye-catching would be an understatement. I don't know quite why or how, but for some reason, she ended up with me that night, and that was how I met Lauren.

Lauren and I got together that summer of 1985. She was from Merseyside, definitely not Liverpool, and was a professional riding instructor at the local stables. Lauren was living in a caravan, a situation she was not happy about at all. It made me feel odd that she was younger than my brother ('cradle snatching' was the phrase used) but we got on really well and had great fun together.



With Lauren (centre) and a friend, 1985

We could give each other a good game of squash and talk about everything under the sun, and we would go together to the horse-riding Hunter Trials she so greatly enjoyed.

She moved job from the riding school to work as a groom for a wealthy local family who owned an Olympic-standard three-day-event horse. Lauren helped look after this horse and several others and had her own flat in the beautiful manor house, which suited her much better! I often visited her there in the evenings after work. Returning home late at night, the views of the Chilterns were breathtaking – those clear nights were the only times that I have ever seen colour in the moonlight. It was just so beautifully tranquil.

While working at The Boat Show selling wine the previous year, I'd spotted a stand advertising Marlborough Action Holidays and flotilla sailing caught my interest. It involved four or five 11-metre yachts sailing around exotic locations, the senior boat having a professional skipper with the others having trained ones. Guests were crew, who did what they were told and tried to not get in the way. I signed up and paid for a trip to Greece.

The guests met for the first time at the airport and flew to Zakynthos for a two-week cruise around Corfu. Our flotilla went island hopping from one harbour to another, so a perfect bliss of a holiday. We tacked up through fabulous islands and went across the gap between Paxos and Antipaxos, near Corfu.



Sailing in Greece, 1985



Greek swimming

When moored in one bay, we saw a tiny white church on top of a hill, surrounded by tracks and goats. We took a bus up there and jumped off to have a look around. A wedding turned up with about 30 cars and people were throwing rice at the bride

and groom, so it was the real Greek wedding experience. After about half an hour, everyone jumped back in their cars and left. We had to walk back, but, thankfully, a passing farmer picked us up. A few days later, we docked in Corfu, the end of what had been a truly fabulous holiday.

At the end of 1985, things worked themselves to an end at MABX Systems and the company closed. I was out of a job and needed a new one sharpish as I had a mortgage to pay. I signed up with a few job agencies and had a couple of interviews – one selling Coca-Cola in French-speaking West Africa and one with Rapid Recall Computers in High Wycombe. The interviews were both set up for November, with Coke on the Monday and Rapid Recall on the Wednesday. Coke then delayed by a week, but Rapid Recall took place as planned. If the Coke interview had gone ahead, life could have been very different.

I did my bit on the day and was offered the job at Rapid Recall there and then. I signed the contract immediately and promised to turn down all other positions that might come my way. The job was mine.

I started with Rapid Recall in early December. It was a really go-ahead company and I was welcomed with open arms. Lauren and I were even invited to the Christmas party in a smart hotel, even though I was barely through the door. The company was selling IBM computers, and my job as an internal sales executive involved dealing with the likes of the large corporations and big oil- and gas-processing companies in the UK.

Frankly, to start with, I was not very good at it. The system was very complicated and I made many mistakes in the first few months. During a short break, I picked up skiing again and in February, I went off with some friends for a week in the mountains of Austria. Refreshed from my holiday, I returned to work with renewed enthusiasm.

By the spring of 1986, I was getting the hang of things and managed to land the biggest-ever order to go through the department: £160,000 from a company in Aberdeen. That was a considerable sum of money in 1986 (worth around £470,000 in 2024). Everyone was chuffed to bits, and, although no commission for me, there were plenty of brownie points. I was hopeful an external sales job would come my way and take me out of the office.



With Lauren, 1985

Around this time, Lauren decided she wanted to move on from being a riding instructor and she took a job in a financial company in Reading. She moved in with me and commuted by train from Wallingford. I was always busy doing something, whether it be skiing, shooting, travelling, squash or working. We were young, having fun and doing anything we wanted. Life was good.

Lauren came up to Wennington to meet my parents and I went to Birkenhead with her to meet her mum and family. Visiting Liverpool was fascinating, but the city was going through a bad spell in 1985 and I could see why Lauren had left the area.

One day at work, one of the other sales guys, Andy Dimmock, came in like a dog with two tails. His wife had given birth to their first child and we planned to have champagne at work on the following Monday morning to celebrate properly.

I went home that evening feeling all was fine with the world. I was living with a girl I loved and my job was going well. I was looking forward to the weekend.

It was Friday, 13th June 1986.

DURING

CHAPTER FIVE
Survival One
14th June 1986

Lauren and I awoke to a bright, sunny summer's day. During the morning, we did the usual weekend tidying jobs around the house, and, after a light lunch, we decided to wander down to spend the afternoon by the river. Carrying a bag of towels, swimming gear, sun cream and other things, we strolled hand in hand through the Wallingford lanes and across the bridge to the meadow beyond.



Swimming point, Wallingford, 1986

A few riverboats were moored to the bank and any others were already in the river. The happy cries of kids playing in the shallows mingled with the occasional sound of ice-cream van bells and groups chatting all around. Finding our spot, we unrolled towels and settled down to enjoy a lazy afternoon in the sun.

Lauren lay down to catch some rays, and after a while, I was getting a bit bored so I decided to go and explore the riverside. Wandering along the sandy, steeply sloping, silty edge of the bank about five feet below, I paddled into the café-au-lait-coloured water up to my thighs and, being early summer, it was chilly; I could see now why the kids were squealing further along the bank by the bridge. I thought it would be fun to start flicking cold river water up over the bank onto Lauren, who was dozing contentedly in the warm sunshine. That went down well ...

Right, I thought, time for a swim, and I stripped off my T-shirt and jeans, leaving only my Speedo budgie smugglers. Deciding that diving in was the best way to deal with getting into the chilly water, I took a few running steps to go in off the riverbank into the water. I can remember now the scratchy, tickly, springy feeling of the grass under my right foot as I began the dive.



The riverbank where my life changed

Swooping down into the water, I ripped through the surface as I had countless times before. I then turned over to shake the

water out of my eyes; or rather I tried to – nothing happened. My arms, legs and body wouldn't move, so I tried again, but still nothing. I remember looking through the pale-brown cloudy water thinking I had a bit of a problem here because, being face down, I couldn't breathe – then I felt the first heave of my lungs as they demanded air. My lungs then began to pump, craving air. The driving need for air eventually forced the reflex and I breathed in. The cold water felt like a fist being forced down my throat, deep down into me, filling my lungs, the water feeling like I was breathing in cold air on a winter's morning, and then, as I drowned – *black*.

After for ever, in the far distance of unconsciousness, I became aware of something which began to take shape as pain and, finally, searing agony shot through my left shoulder while I puked up lungs full of Thames water. It forced me awake and I croaked out, "Turn me over, my shoulder hurts." It had been pulled and twisted as Lauren and other people had hauled me, unconscious, out of the river.

It's a funny thing, drowning – funny peculiar, not funny ha-ha. It wasn't frightening and it didn't hurt. Lauren saved my life, but pain kept me alive.

Someone turned me onto my back, and in the innocent June sunlight, unable to sit up, I looked up to see a ring of faces around me, all of them watching the afternoon's entertainment. One of them, a kid of 12 or so, was licking an ice cream as he said casually, "He's paralysed." You never want to hear those words and definitely not right there, not right then, and particularly because the snot-nosed little bastard was right.

AFTER

CHAPTER SIX

14th to 30th June 1986

Eventually, an ambulance appeared. The crew got me onto a spinal board but did not put a neck collar on me and then they carried me along the bank to the ambulance. Inside, Lauren and I asked the crewman why they had not put on a collar and he said, “Oh, you’ll be all right, mate.”

On arrival at the new John Radcliffe Hospital, organised chaos engulfed me. Lauren disappeared and I was surrounded by nurses, doctors and X-ray people. They started poking me with a needle to see what I could feel, which was very little and I could not move at all. Then I was very carefully X-rayed and I had catheters and drips inserted while my pulse, blood pressure and temperature were taken. On and on it went.

I remember the trolley being wheeled into an anteroom, where a group of masked surgeons gathered around me. Something was put around my head and then I heard the rattling of spanners on metal followed immediately by pressure tightening around my skull – tighter and tighter as if my head was in a vice. I remember the screws squeaked as they tightened ever harder into the bone and it reminded me of my dad’s woodwork screws. The four screws were tightened so much that I really thought my skull would burst. I still have the scars today – two on my forehead and two at the back of my head.

I asked what it was and was told, “You’ve broken your neck. This is halo traction to keep your neck fixed, so no more nerve damage is caused by moving your head.”

The next thing I remember is waking up the following day alone on a ward. I had a strange feeling of unreality – as if I was watching everything happening while feeling it couldn’t be happening to me.

Please note that while the next several pictures are not of me personally, they get the message across.



*An example of a broken neck/cervical spinal cord injury
(Cervical spinal fracture-dislocation; case study by A Almuslim
on Radiopaedia.org; <https://doi.org/10.53347/rID-6920>)*



An example of a skull traction halo
(Taken from www.slideshare.net/YashavardhanYashu/03-traction-ppt)



An example of halo traction fixing
(Taken from <https://kylesblog2011.blogspot.com/p/photos.html>)

In hospital, in traction, my life followed hospital routines. I could not move or feel anything at all from my chin down.

Later, I would learn that actual cutting of the cord by fractured bones, combined with ‘spinal shock’, a kind of bruising or swelling of the spinal cord, causes everything to shut down, including reflexes, digestion and all movement and sensation. This means consuming no food or fluids for days until bowel sounds restart, which can take a week. During this time, all fluids and nutrients are given intravenously. I remember the pleasure of sucking a deliciously cold ice cube on my parched lips and mouth.

Then the waiting and hoping starts – will the spinal shock swelling go down? Will any feeling or movement come back? This awful waiting period can last for at least a month. Nobody knows; the doctors don’t know – you just have to wait and hope and pray that things will get better ...

Medical things happened with the drips and catheters attached to me, and, for 3 long months, I was rolled every 3 hours, 24 hours a day, to protect me from pressure sores. Everything happened in bed, whether it was being fed or emptying my bowels.

My memories of the first few days are fragmented. I know Dad was with me when a white-coated doctor told me exactly what had happened, that I had a severe cervical spinal-cord injury from breaking my neck diving and that as a

tetraplegic/quadruplegic, it was very unlikely that I would ever walk again.

It was never really established what I hit that caused me to break my neck – it could have been the surface of the water itself, the muddy riverbank or something in the water. I'll never know.

I remember trying to talk to Dad but losing the thread of the conversation, and on telling the nurses heard them say, “Oh, that’s the Valium.” I told them to stop giving it to me as I could not think clearly because of it – to which the nurses replied, “That’s the whole point of Valium. It’s to stop you thinking.” Horrible stuff.

I remember watching the British F1 GP and *Brideshead Revisited* upside down in the angled reflections of mirrors the bemused nurses had pointed at a television. In 1986, there was no Internet, no mobiles, no laptops or iPads. After a couple of weeks in Oxford, I was transferred to the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital near Aylesbury.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Never Give Up
July 1986 to March 1987

If you're going through hell, keep going.

Winston Churchill

The wards at Stoke Mandeville were all brightly coloured after a completely new unit was built in 1982. As a new admission, I had a private room in St Francis ward under the expert care of Sister Rose.

Not long after my arrival, I discovered the true meaning of real physical pain. My left shoulder had been damaged when I was pulled out of the water and hauled up the riverbank, and the pain caused by that damage now dominated every waking hour. The only way of stopping it was by someone lifting the arm and holding it up vertically to remove all weight from the joint but this could only be done for short periods. Painkillers did not work either. One of them did lessen the pain but it made me feel as though I was floating halfway between the bed and the ceiling. I was also certain that I was the president of the United States and I had sorted out all the world's problems in half an hour – easy. The problem was that when the pills wore off, I couldn't remember the answers to the problems – and the pain came back.

The memory of pain fades. I wanted to fix in my mind a vision of this pain as it was happening. I imagined it as an old-

fashioned blacksmith's forge, smoky in the fire's heat. The blacksmith himself was a big, bald, bare-chested thug of a man with hands like hammers. He was jamming a length of half-inch iron bar into the fire until it was white hot, sparkling with heat, then he was pounding the bar into a rough point on his anvil, sparks flying. After reheating the iron point to white heat, he grabbed a huge mallet, put the searing-hot point onto the skin of my left shoulder and smashed the iron bar, spitting, burning, bubbling, tearing right through the joint and out through the other side. He then dropped the mallet, grabbed the iron bar and, using his full weight, while wrenching, ripping and pulling, he forced it backward and forwards, grating through the joint bones and severing muscle, nerves and flesh. I remember lying there in a quiet little room, screaming silently, with this scene playing in my mind, knowing it was exactly how it felt. Of course, on the surface of my skin, there was not a mark.

Thankfully, over time, the pain disappeared. My heart goes out to people who have long-term, untreatable pain.

As my internal system, i.e. blood pressure, bowels, temperature and so on regained some steady state, time passed until, one day, I heard a commotion in the ward and people speaking French. It seemed a young boy from Paris had been in London for a language-exchange visit, had looked the wrong way crossing the street and *bang!* He was hit by a car. Next stop, spinal unit. His parents were there but they left at night. The poor lad spoke no English and the nurses spoke no French, and one night he was becoming hysterical, thrashing about, which could easily have made his incomplete injury a complete one.

Now things became surreal. I told the nurses that I spoke French, so they, becoming panicky as this poor lad became increasingly agitated, unplugged me from God-knows-what machines and wheeled me, still attached to spinal traction equipment, drip stands, blood pressure monitors in a hospital bed, out of my room and across the ward so I could have a chat to François. Once he had got over his surprise at being addressed in French, I calmed him by reassuring him that his mother had not abandoned him and that she would be back by breakfast time – as, indeed, she was – and that he must lie still. Tranquillity swiftly returned. Surreal. I never saw him again.

Some weeks later, I was transferred to the rehab ward, St George's, which was to be my home for the next five months.

My consultant was Dr (now Professor) Hans Frankel, who had been at the unit since the days of the founder, Ludwig Guttman. I felt lucky to have such an eminent doctor, although his bedside manner was 'direct' and patient/doctor communication was not his strongest point. I liked him, but I never could quite tell if he was joking or not.

The routine of hospital life took over. Physios arrived after breakfast but there is not much they can do when you're in traction and can't move at all. Now able to eat, exactly how disgusting the hospital food was became apparent – even the nurses were embarrassed.

We tried a page turner so I could read. My dad picked up a favourite childhood book of mine, *Reach for the Sky*, about

Douglas Bader, an injured wartime fighter pilot who lost both legs in a plane crash. The page turner did not work but the attempt made me think that Douglas Bader had it easy.

Dad visited when he could. Being an old-school Englishman, opening up and hugging were not really his thing but, later, a touch on my shoulder as I struggled to push my wheelchair was well meant and deeply felt by both of us.

Anxious to DO something, anything to help, my parents joined the SPINAL INJURIES ASSOCIATION, which has been very helpful over the years.

I was, by this point, allowed visitors, and I was incredibly lucky to have at least one visitor every day for the many months I was in hospital. They were wonderful and I felt very sad for people who did not have a single visitor during their stay. One of my most regular visitors was my old mate Dave Machon.

The year before, my parents had sold up in Berkshire and had bought an old farmhouse in Lancashire. My mum always referred to that year, summer 1985 to summer 1986, as her 'sabbatical'. Mum came down once a week from Lancashire to spend a day or so at the hospital.

On one day, Dave was there with my mum. It was lunchtime and Mum was anxious to get on to catch her train. She was feeding me a McBurger, talking to me, talking to Dave, looking

at her watch and probably desperate for a fag and a gin and tonic. Remember, I was still lying flat on my back in traction, utterly immobile. Suddenly, a searing lightning strike of pain ripped through my right eye. This pain was white-heat agony in an unprotected eyeball and, as you would, I started to yell and scream, “Arrrrrrrrrrrrgh! Something’s in my eye, get it out, get it out!”

Mum said, “Stop being such a baby. I’ve got a train to catch.” She then proceeded to stuff more McMankyburger down my screaming throat. Dave at this point was weeping with hysterical laughter, absolutely pissing himself laughing, hanging off the end of the bed so as not to fall over. Meanwhile, I was still screaming the place down as – remember, I couldn’t move at all – I was unable to wipe my eye until, eventually, Mum realised that in her rush to give me lunch, something had indeed dropped into my open eye and that something was a lump of raw onion covered in mayonnaise. Not nice when it’s in your eye. With a harrumph, she wiped it away and swept off to the station. Dave eventually pulled himself together and muttered to me, “You’re the first person I’ve ever heard use the F-word to their mum.” I hadn’t even realised.

Another morning, the nurses were getting us patients ready for the day. Now, male patients, as a result of washing, often had what is known as the ‘morning stiffy’. Some nurses threw a towel over Mr Willy to make a tent until he had calmed down, while others gave him a smack on the nose, which had the same result. Rumour via the giggly student nurses was that one of us, Mark, who had

been stabbed through his neck by a ‘friend’, was the owner of a particularly fine example of the species *Biggus dickus*. On this day, Mark needed a wee and Nursey put his one-eyed trouser snake into a pee bottle (they were thick glass bottles then). This attention woke the beast and ‘morning stiffy’ stirred. Now, Mark, who had full sensation, felt Mr Willy getting a bit tight in the bottle – and these things have a 2in/5cm internal diameter – so he asked Nurse to remove the bottle. Blushing Nurse tried to take the bottle away but the more she pulled and pushed, the harder the problem became, so to speak.

The nurse ran off to get help and a whole swarm of hysterical 18-year-olds then ran down the ward to inspect this mammoth knob stuck in a pee bottle. They all had a go at pulling the bottle off, only for his dick to start throbbing purple and expand even more with Mark howling the place down. At this point, Sister Mackenzie swept in like a battleship, scattering the nurses. Seeing the problem, she said, “Soon have this fixed.” She then left for a moment and returned with a gleam in her eye, holding a large hammer to smash the bottle. At this point, Mark really started yowling, fearing for his manhood – the grinning Sister then replaced the hammer with a bag of ice and it was Shrinksville here we come. This saga embarrassed Mark no end but gave the rest of us a good laugh. You’ve got to have a laugh even in, or maybe especially in, a spinal unit.

Each evening, Lauren would get me ready for the night. She would put on my Walkman earphones so I could fall asleep to my favourite tape – *Love Over Gold* by Dire Straits. With that and a kiss goodnight, she would be gone and I would be left

alone with my thoughts. I always fell asleep to Dire Straits melodic guitar music of Telegraph Road only to be awoken by the click at the end of the tape.

It was then that my thoughts went berserk. Lying in the quiet, pale-green night lighting, the traction preventing me from even turning my head left or right, the inescapable reality of breaking my neck came crashing down on me.

My life and hopes and dreams lay as smashed and splintered and shattered as the nerves and bones in my spine. I was totally crippled; I could not sit up and walk away and it was not going to get better because no one could make it 'all right'. I was confronted by 'this is what it is – you can't move anything at all; everything, Everything, *EVERYTHING* will need to be done for you for ever until you are a little old man and die'. It was then that the sadness overwhelmed me, tears welling up from deep within. These were not the hysterical tears of a child but the heartfelt sobs of a young man who has lost everything but remains alive. The realisation that I couldn't kill myself, even if I had wanted to, only added to my despair. Thoughts fought endless battles in my skull – struggling to deal with this new horrendous reality. The thrashing brainwork was so furious and so loud that I'm surprised no one heard it as it burst around my head. My hopelessness, helplessness, utter despair, fear, incomprehension, self-pity, regret, 'It's not fair', 'Why me?' 'Why me?' 'Why me?'



An example of skull traction – I spent three months like this in 1986

(Taken from www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-1-Visao-lateral-da-colocacao-do-halo-craniano_fig1_286888499)

Lying there in traction, I could move and feel only my face, eyes and mouth – nothing at all below my neck worked.

The tears welled up and up to fill my eye sockets and still I cried with an occasional deep sob, the tears overflowing my eyes as I could not wipe them away, to flow down over my ears to soak into the pillow under my neck, which became cold and wet as if to remind me of my misery.

Trapped inside my head with my thoughts, this scenario repeated itself every night day after day, week after week, month after month ...

Alone.

Eventually, I drifted off into an uneasy sleep, only to be awoken at midnight by the night nurse, Pat, to be given my sleeping pills. Oh yes, this happened. Thus woken, I could hear the occasional call but then a gentle, regular snoring echoed softly around the ward as one of us slept like an innocent – it was, of course, Pat.

Bladder training with Angelo

One morning after breakfast, I was dozing when the curtains around my bed flicked closed and I slowly awoke to hear a rhythmic scraping noise. Now, you may accuse me of living a sheltered life, but I was not expecting to see a large, smiling black man holding my willy in one hand and a cutthroat razor in the other. Being very attached to my willy, I started to pray.

I need not have worried because all Angelo did was shave me. Angelo was the ‘willy man’. His skill was all things relating to bladders and he was an absolute master of his craft. He was also one of the nicest, kindest people I’ve ever met as well as one of the happiest. He had found his calling, and his joy shone from him as he helped people whose lives had been shattered by a spinal injury. He was there to bladder train me, i.e. to allow me to urinate without using a catheter, with all the problems they bring, and instead use a drainage condom. This is a complex skill requiring great understanding of the bladder muscles. He sorted me out in a week or so and I continued to use his method for 20 years. Thank you, Angelo.



An example of wearing a hard collar, as I did shortly before getting out of bed for the first time in 1986 (Taken from www.halozone.com/broken_neck/broken_neck.shtml)

A milestone was, after three months, the removal of my halo traction. I had been sharing a two-bed bay with a chap called Doug. He had been injured in a car crash when a friend of his had been driving too fast, had rolled the car and the top of the windscreen pillar had collapsed onto his head, him being the front-seat passenger. At the beginning, our injuries seemed the same but, over time, he regained more and more, so after three months, he was pretty much recovered. I was not.

For me, relatively little had come back – partial movement and feeling in my arms and hands was about all.

My traction was due for removal one day before his and he was scared shitless that it was going to hurt, but, because of his recovery, I was not particularly sympathetic. In the end, it

didn't hurt either of us and after three months of baring our souls to each other, once Doug was up, he never said another word to me. He ran past me once in the corridor with a physio checking his gait and that was that.

A few days after the halo was removed was my first day out of bed. After three long, long months in bed, as you can imagine, I was anxious to get up. The nurses warned me that blood pressure would be a problem, i.e. that I'd faint. After a few days elevating the head of the bed, they got me up and, despite all the surgical stockings and belts, out I went in seconds. With time and heavy meds, they got me up fully by the end of September 1986. The NHS was still human then and on your first day up, you were given a can of beer. Never has warm, piss-thin Ind Coope Light Ale tasted so good or, mixed with gawd knows what drugs, been so strong. It was much appreciated.

Newborn babies are like supermen compared with the strength of a new tetraplegic. Merely sitting and breathing is pushing it – when it comes to thinking or talking, forget it.

My first wheelchair was an Everest & Jennings. These things, designed decades earlier, are tanks – heavy, bastards to push, resistant to going in a straight line or turning, difficult to get in cars and impossible to adjust. Mine had only one redeeming feature: after three long months, it got me out of bed.



First day out of bed, with Lauren, 1986

There I was, strapped into this thing that was like an execution electric chair and trying to push it forward. Nothing. At all. The physios put little leather mitts on my hands to protect the skin but with those and because of the chrome-plated push rims, I had no grip to push with. This was frustrating. I would become very familiar with frustration in all its forms in the coming years.

Mum, Dad and many friends were visiting, and these many visits buoyed me immensely, stopping me from becoming swamped by self-pity and depression. I always felt that I had to put on a brave face when people had made the effort to come to

see me. No one wants to be with a monosyllabic grumpy old shit. I think these visits, fused with this enforced brave face and my naturally glass-half-full character, made all the difference in dealing with things.

Around this time, I was moved from the two-bed bay to a six-bed section. Along with a few others, my new pal Paul, another patient, was there, as was Arthur, a much-tattooed Hells Angel who, predictably, had broken his neck falling off his motorbike. Now, in bed, there were people to chat to. One evening, all of us were tucked up quietly for bed when the silence was shattered by a thunderous, cheek-shaking fart. Pissing himself laughing, Arthur proudly announced, “Fuck me, that’s the first time I’ve farted since I broke m’neck. Good one won’nit?” We all fell about. In a spinal unit, as in life, it’s better to laugh than to cry.

Every Sunday, loyally, a group of massive, leather-clad Hells Angels pals of his would take him out for the day. As this involved tying a newly injured tetraplegic to the back of a motorbike, his consultant went nuts, but Arthur had a great time.

For me, every day and every thing were frustrating. I couldn’t do anything at all and I discovered that frustration has an infinite variety – a gentle aching nag increasing to a more fulsome grinding, going up to short, sharp ‘fucking hell’ to a full-on screaming, searing anger. Frustration accompanies me constantly, for example this is being written with one finger

and the slowness of this process is frustration of the grinding variety.

The seemingly flat, level lino floor of the ward was actually a mountain range to me, being impossibly bumpy to push on in my wheelchair. I got stuck in dips and wobbles that were seemingly invisible. The physios (they called themselves ‘physioterrorists’) would every morning whisk me off to Pooh Corner, the physio gym. Once there, they stood me in a standing frame to practise balancing and strapped me into the weight machines for exercising my biceps and chest muscles. I realised just how weak I was when I found I could not move the mechanism at all, even with no weights in it.

Afternoons were spent at occupational therapy but in those pre-computer days, there was not much a tetra could do except chat to the therapist. One afternoon, three of us were there: my new friend Paul Fisher from Zambia (motorcycle accident) with his lovely wife, Myra, and me. Myra put a chocolate on the bench top in front of us saying, “Whoever can reach it, can have it.” Despite our best efforts, neither of us could reach it, so she ate it in front of us. That was frustration of the short, sharp kind. I stayed in touch with Paul after leaving hospital and heard that, a year or so later, it had all become too much for Myra and this lovely lady had committed suicide, leaving Paul, who was a C4/5 tetra in very poor health, with two young girls under 11 to look after. Paul, the girls and I would meet again in Cape Town, South Africa, but that would be many years in the future.

Another form of physio was hydrotherapy. The word went around that at least you got to see your physio in a swimsuit, which perked things up a bit, but Ruth, my physio, was far too smart for that and I ended up with Harry, who did not have the kind of large, sweaty chest I'd had in mind. Anyway, there I was by the hydro-pool being rigged up in rubber rings, kids' armbands and slings, when I noticed, bobbing at the bottom of the pool and beckoning me in, was someone else's turd.

Once in the 37°C water and sweatily gripping me around the shoulders, Harry started to swing me gently left and right to ease my spine and joints. Seeing, but not feeling, my body, legs and feet slowly swinging like kelp in the sea, with the sweet smell of chlorine up my nose and the sound of water in my ears, put me off hydrotherapy for life.

The days wore on. I conquered pushing the wheelchair out of the ward and found myself at the top of a short slope down towards Pooh Corner. Was I going to try it or not? As soon as I started to move, I realised I'd made a mistake. I had no grip or balance to slow down as the chair accelerated swiftly, gently turning right. Seeing the fast-approaching steel frame of the fire door, I knew it was going to hurt. *Whack* went the footplate, *smack* went my forehead, first into doorframe, then *splat* onto the floor as the chair turned over. The nurses and my consultant were not amused – and, yes, it did hurt. Twenty years later, I got down that bloody slope without incident!

Every afternoon was punctuated by all the ward TVs being tuned to *Blockbusters*. Patients and nurses would all shout out

answers to the questions which helped the day pass with a bit of fun. Food would follow but was often so disgusting as to be inedible. Baked lamb savoury was the worst. Perhaps composed of hoof, it bounced well but defied knife and teeth. Thus came about the McDonald's run. Over my months in hospital, I ate so many burgers as the 1986 menu was so limited that I could not face another one for more than five years after I left.

The entrance foyer was, at that time, decorated much like a hotel, with a wide expanse of red carpet, lots of yucca plants, water features and red crushed velour benches beneath the windows – true 1980s style. Now that I was out of bed, it was a good place to go and sit away from the ward. Even though he was supposed to be working, somehow my friend Dave escaped to spend hours with me there over many, many months – simply talking it out and listening. Along with others, Dave saved me. I will never forget what he did for me when I needed it most. I have thanked him since but will do so again, here and now – thank you, Dave.

If pushing on lino is hard, pushing on carpet is like walking through deep snow/mud/sand. Over weeks and months, I tried to push myself to the front doors to meet Lauren when she arrived every evening. The frustration at my own weakness in not achieving this was of the tearful disbelief variety. Eventually, I conquered the metal joint between lino and carpet and made it to meet my love at the sliding doors. Seeing her was the highlight of my every day in hospital.

We talked, held hands, cuddled, shared McManky burgers and chatted to others in the ward. Some of the other injuries were falls from the backs of trucks, one had been crushed by a digger on a building site, another was hurt playing rugby, and the remainder were car crashes, horse riding falls, motorbikes, diving and windsurfing accidents, with the occasional more prosaic stumbles and trips mixed in. Almost all were men under 35.

One afternoon during October, I was slowly pushing back from OT to the ward along the Long Corridor – a walkway maybe 100 yards long, unheated and single-glazed. Partway along, I noticed a strange effect in my eyes. This gradually grew worse, forming a sparkly aura surrounding my vision – like the sparkling colours in a kaleidoscope. I then noticed that I was losing sensation in my tongue. Someone noticed my distress and pushed me to the ward. By that stage, I could hear but not understand people talking and I had started raving and shouting. I was put into bed, by which time I was totally uncontrollable, yet I could see the worry on the nurses' faces – then I went out of it completely.

I heard later that my condition had set off real alarm bells as this had never happened before. With me still raving but unconscious, the team of nurses wheeled me in bed to St Francis, the acute treatment ward. En route, we met Lauren on her way in. Apparently, although I recall none of this, the moment I saw her, my raving stopped, and, looking into her eyes, I said very clearly to her, “I love you.”

I awoke the next day feeling absolutely drained. Despite numerous checks, brain scans and other tests, the cause of my ‘flip’, as we called it, was never pinned down. Having had and dealt with similar but lesser events since, I think the causes were/are a combination of low body temperature, low blood pressure, low blood sugar or salt, restricted circulation and low blood oxygen levels. This odd aura still appears from time to time, even now, 35-plus years later, but I know how to deal with it.

My birthday occurred during my time in hospital. Dad took Lauren and me out to lunch at a place he knew, The Bell at Aston Clinton. Following the now-familiar struggle to get into the place, I remember sitting by the beautifully set table, strapped into my scaffold-like wheelchair, unable to eat or drink without help and thinking that this was not exactly how I had imagined I would be celebrating my 25th birthday.

Shortly after, the doctors decided that I was well enough to go home for a month at Christmas, on the understanding that I would return to hospital for a further month and if that went well, I could then leave hospital. Going home for Christmas was something of a blur – the building work to convert the barn attached to my parents’ house was ongoing and our bedroom was my Mum’s box room, complete with grand piano and flower arranging stuff. In this old 1680s house, every room was on a different level and just going to the kitchen required going up/down nine steps.

All went well and before we went back to hospital, we celebrated Lauren's birthday. She and I agreed we would stay together despite this brutal shock to my life and hers. Even though she had a deep dislike of northern England, she had made up her mind to give up her office job and return up north with me. Being from Merseyside, this dislike had driven her south originally, but she returned because of me, even though we'd only known each other for a year. Dad described her as '1 in 10,000'. This was particularly true if you think that when I broke my neck, Lauren was just 20.

On returning to hospital, I moved wards. My last month at Stoke Mandeville was in St Joseph's ward, where I had the luxury of a single room, allowing me to enjoy that rarest of pleasures in hospitals – solitude. When you've been constantly surrounded by so many people for months, simply being on your own and having some personal space is wonderful.

Those last few weeks were a good transition. Instead of the nurses taking the lead, I was told to ask them for what I wanted or needed as practice for how life would be outside hospital.

The weeks passed peacefully with no real dramas and towards the end of February, Dr Frankel agreed I could leave. The day itself was a flurry of last-minute details and waiting around, culminating in an oddly anti-climactic, "Oh, I thought you'd already gone," to send me on my way.

The nurses filled the car with a few weeks' medical supplies and waved us off.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Spinal Injury

So, what is a spinal cord injury/tetraplegia/quadriplegia?

The canvas on which every detail of my life is painted from here on in is living with a complete C5/6 spinal cord injury.

The spinal cord is the part of the central nervous system, located in the protective hollow centre of spinal bones, that conveys the nerve impulses to/from the brain and the rest of the body. It works a bit like a mega broadband Internet cable. A spinal cord injury means damage to the spinal cord within the bones/vertebrae of the neck and back that stretches from the skull to the tailbone.

It is possible, and surprisingly common, to break the bones yet have no spinal cord nerve damage. Partial spinal cord damage is also possible, where some function is retained – this is termed an ‘incomplete injury’. A ‘complete injury’ is when the cord is effectively fully severed, like a cut/broken Internet cable, and this is the damage I have.

The higher up the cord the damage occurs, the more movement and feeling you lose and the harder life becomes. With spinal cord damage, a broken neck is called tetraplegia/quadriplegia (Greek/Latin, indicating that all four limbs are affected) and a break further down the back is known as paraplegia (Greek, indicating that two limbs are affected).

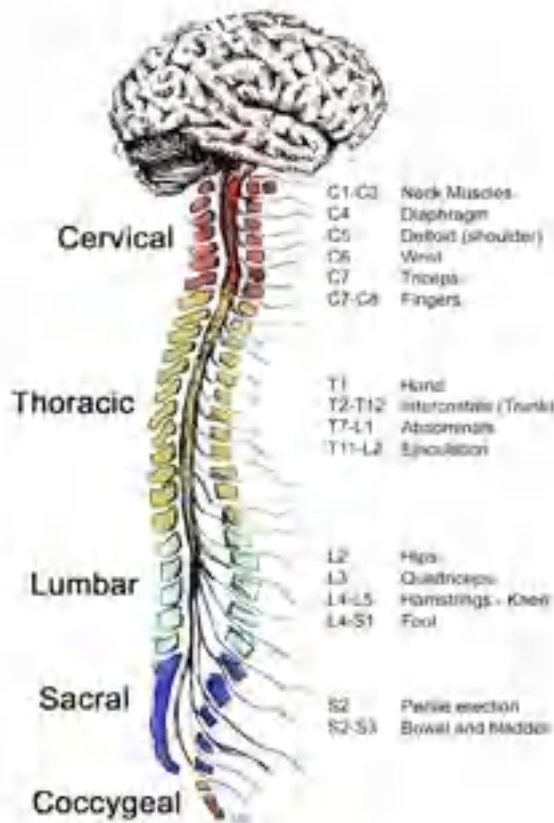


Diagram showing nerves and main functions

*(Taken from Facebook page of Murray Osteopathic Clinic:
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=267965739187913&set=ecnf.100079234652623>)*

My injury is a fracture-dislocation of the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae and is a classic broken neck. This injury has changed my life in every possible way. But has it substantially changed me? I asked the opinion of one of my old friends and he responded, “No, you’re still the same wanker you always were!” I took this as a compliment.

Seriously, I think having a spinal injury perhaps amplifies/polarises innate personality traits. So, for example, determination or anger or anxiety or the ability/inability to change, and being positive or negative, are amplified. If most people are either 'thems that do' or 'thems that don't', then these character traits often become more pronounced, so some people go on to live full and rich lives after their accident while, sadly, others do not. Obviously, each to his or her own, and I respect everyone's choices, but, personally, I feel it is too easy to give in to regret, bitterness, despair and sadness. Life is still there to live, if very differently. To coin a phrase of Stephen King's, 'You either get busy living or you get busy dying.' It's your choice.

Physically, below my armpits, nothing works. No balance, bowel or bladder control, no leg movement, no fingers/grip, no sensation, no body temperature control, no blood pressure control, no lung/cough control (I breathe using my diaphragm) – and that's the easy stuff.

I can partially move my hands but not my fingers and can use my biceps but not my triceps. With effort and trick movements, and lots of help from my marvellous friends and wonderful carers/PAs, I can do a surprising amount.

However, on a practical day-to-day living basis, I need everything to be done for me. Everything.

Anyone who has a spinal injury has to find or develop their own way of doing things and of living their life. There is no

one right or wrong way, it's very individual, and this book just covers how I've chosen to do things.

Think about what 'everything' in life means: every itchy nose, cutting every fingernail, every time you want to change the TV channel, every chip you eat, every paper you drop, every envelope you open or send, every time you pee or poo, make a phone call, reach for a jacket – every single tiny thing you use your hands or feet for involves explaining to someone else so their hands can do it for me. Everything takes so much longer too, so you have to plan accordingly. I might have had 5 to 10 different carers per year over 35 years to date, which equates to at least 200 to 300 different people of wildly different backgrounds, nationalities and abilities. Consider if you were explaining to a stranger how you like your breakfast – where to find everything, tea/coffee, weak/strong, fruit/herbal/PG Tips, decaf or not, toast/cereal, hot/cold, sugar or not, milk in or on, table or by the TV, and don't forget some fruit, "What fruit?" ... and it will be 5 to 10 different strangers every year, for ever. And that's just breakfast ... It can become taxing. And remember, every request must be made with a smile not a growl, every day, for ever and ever. Amen.

Health

In terms of health, being a tetraplegic puts you at elevated risk of all the ailments that affect people normally, plus a practically infinite range of minutely specialist illnesses reserved just for us. Pressure sores, autonomic dysreflexia and autonomic failure, neuropathic bowel/bladder problems, loss of body temperature control, low blood salt and circulatory problems, weak bones from not standing, psychological issues – the list is

endless. Not being able to feel pain also brings its own huge dangers as I would come to find out in a number of ways.

Although it is far from easy, I have found that you need to learn and understand your own spinal injury as well as you can and keep an open mind to new treatments and products. If you are to help yourself stay as well as possible, sometimes you have to accept exactly what the medical professionals advise, other times you have to question them or even straight disagree. On other occasions you have to find better ways than the medics can come up with. The hard bit is knowing when to do what.

Over the first weeks and months, what I could no longer be or do filled my mind and life. I became angry and bitter, snarling at everyone until my mum commented that I was driving people away from me by being so bad-tempered. This prompted me to realise that I did not want to live a lonely, friendless life. Gradually and eventually, I realised that, as I couldn't kill myself, I had no option but to learn to live with my injury and that rather than focusing on everything I couldn't do, it would be better to concentrate on what I could do, like think, use and develop my brain and my mind. Luckily, after my accident, I retained full mental capacity – what little I had anyway – and, aching slowly, I began my new life.

My mum had a phrase or a saying for every occasion. For this, her comment was, “Have a cry and then you’ve just got to bloody get on with it.” It has not been easy. Looking back, it seems like there is a glass wall between my life before my

accident and my life afterwards; I can look back, but not go back.

It's amazing; not having any bloody choice focuses the mind wonderfully.

You can't always get what you want ...

My accident was my fault. I had misjudged where I'd dived into the Thames and whether I should have done so at all. Some people can't deal with something when it's their fault, but I would have had a much harder time dealing with it if it had been someone else's fault. If it had been a fluke, such as something falling on my head from a building or a similar accident, it would have been the same. However, it was my own fault and I could only blame myself. I was the one who had done it, and I had to live with the consequences. I certainly had regret and loss, like a bereavement almost. I was 24 years old and suddenly that life I had was smashed to pieces and there was nothing I could do. No one could make it OK in the morning. I was lucky that my friends talked it out with me, because that really helped.

When you internalise trauma, you can end up a mess, and, once again, my heart goes out to anyone who has any kind of real mental or psychological pain.

However, I couldn't shut up talking and it all poured out of me. I regret my accident happened – I certainly do – but so much good has happened since that may not have happened otherwise. To some, it's totally a bad thing, but to others, it's more a case that a cloud can have a very different silver lining

if you look hard enough. However, at the time of your accident, believing that life, if not your medical condition, can get better is near impossible to comprehend.

Like the words of the song: ‘You can’t always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes, you might just find that you get what you need.’ With a bit of luck, you might even have some fun along the way. I could never have foreseen the highs and lows that the future would bring – nor the speed with which one could become the other and back again.

People may not appreciate the sheer amount of time it takes to do anything as a tetraplegic person. A normal day of getting up and getting dressed can take one and a half to two hours, and that’s on a quick day, with a good carer. If I’m doing the full bathroom routine of toileting and showering, it can quite easily take three to four hours, so half a day can be gone before I’m even ready for it. Getting in a car can take 10 or 15 minutes, and I have to factor in all this time when planning a day. It can be so frustrating. I went from getting up in a matter of minutes to it taking hours ... and hours ... and hours ...

Today is an average bowels/bathroom day, yet it took me more than three hours to get up. A good carer is faster, but a new one takes longer until they learn the ropes. Someone mentioned to me on the ward that you check out your dignity on the way into a spinal unit. It’s true; there’s no room for dignity or shyness. You have to put up with what any able-bodied person would view as the grossest indignities. It’s a new fact of life that you have to accept, and if you are a very shy person, it must be

absolutely awful. You have to accept strangers will be helping you to do, and seeing you do, the most intimate things, seeing you with no clothes on daily, doing everything for you that you would normally do behind locked doors. It can be hard to come to terms with, but if you break your neck, that is the way it is. In the spinal unit, no special compensation is made for the newcomers and, in a way, that made it easier for me to cope. The staff were so matter-of-fact about it, and that was very heartening. Some newly injured people get very upset, and understandably so, but you get used to it too. A sense of humour also helps, of course.

Please take some time now to read through my routines for details of my everyday life. It is important to bear these routines in mind as we go forward.

CHAPTER NINE

My Care Routines

Why have routines? With many PAs, over time I find I need routines to keep my sanity, to keep things on track and to ensure consistency of results. Think of them as a recipe for a new dish – you have to learn it as written down before you can cook the dish from memory.

Regarding care routines, I run my life on a pretty strict routine. Each morning I get out of bed in pretty much exactly the same way, and each evening I go to bed in pretty much exactly the same way. This serves two purposes. Firstly, the quicker my PA learns my routine, the less I have to instruct them, and as a consequence the less I have to consciously think about the mechanical processes other people take for granted. I often try to explain to my PAs that while, say, getting me up in the morning is part of their job and if it takes all morning that's their job, for me it is simply getting out of bed. Something that needs to be done for me to get on with my life. The second purpose served by my routines is that things don't get left out. It is much more difficult to go back a few steps and do something again for me than it would be with somebody without a disability. If something is forgotten, it can cause severe consequences.

If I am precise in following the routines it is because years of experience have proven that they work for me; if every day they changed, it would be chaos for us both. That said, my

routines evolve with some of the best ways coming from PA suggestions. I always ask them to tell me if they see areas they think can be improved.

Once the routines have been learnt (usually this takes a week or two), the less we both have to consciously think about them, the more I can focus on the rest of my life – and we can both relax and LIVE a bit.

Another issue that can arise as a result of me having to ask someone else to do so many things for me is the question of what is ‘reasonable’ for me to ask them to do. Some people like gardening, others like washing the car. Some people are happy cleaning all day, and some people really don’t like cooking very much. So what is reasonable for me to demand of my PAs? My rule of thumb in this regard is that anything to do with my body and my personal care is non-negotiable, and everything else is open to negotiation. For example, if I want to be repositioned in my wheelchair 20 times until I am sat just right, or if I want my face washed in a particular way and my hair brushed ‘just so’, it is reasonable for me to ask that of my PA. On the other hand, if I am out all day I will not demand that they do the household chores or wash the dishes in a particular way, as long as they come out clean in the end!

I always tell carers to please ask if they have any queries as the routines are there to help them, not to hinder, and if they are not doing so, we can work on it.

MY ROUTINES

Normal mornings

Getting out of bed

1. A good morning! Remove the covers, feet pillows and socks.
2. Deodorant under arms.
3. Put on vests.
4. Then disconnect and empty night bag. Rinse with water and hang over the shower handle. Then wash hands.
5. Unpin leg bag from edge of bed, put pins in bowl and return bowl to cupboard.
6. When checking skin, take care not to over-focus only on one area – you must check all over for redness, bruising, swelling, spots, dry/flaky skin, inflammation, etc., and if anything at all, no matter how minor, is present, you must tell Peter immediately. Logroll to check skin on bottom and back.
7. Then apply terbinafine cream to groin to prevent rashes, and wash your hands.
8. Do catheter care:
 - Use gloves and antiseptic wipes to hold catheter. Hold the catheter where it comes out of the skin and wipe around the catheter site to remove any discharge, but be careful not to pull on the catheter.
 - Pinch down the length of the catheter with forceps and follow this with pinching/rolling the catheter between your fingers to break up any sediment.
 - Cut X shape in dressing and put dressing around the catheter.
9. Put plasters on both elbows.

10. Put socks on, attach the thigh strap and leg bag to Peter's left/right leg as decided each day. Thigh strap goes above the knee, it varies which leg, attach day bag to leg. Adjust testicles either side.
11. Then put trousers on (pull up as high as possible, logroll 1–2 times). Adjust legs to prevent wrinkling.
12. Shoes on.
13. Pull Peter up from the bed by holding his wrists, pull all the way till he balances – let go of his wrists – he then balances on his own hands.
14. Twist lower body by grabbing hold of his feet and moving to the side of the bed. Let go of his feet so that he now sits on the side of the bed, feet hanging down.
15. Get wheelchair in position, push the gel of the Jay Cushion to the centre. Get sliding board, sheet and pillow.
16. Get into position – follow the steps for the SLIDE to wheelchair – SLIDE.
17. Remove sliding board, sheet and pillow.
18. Put window blinds up.
19. Once in chair, put on shirt. Rearrange trousers till comfortable on chair. Jumper on.
20. Give razor for shave.
21. Well done! Downstairs for breakfast – take with you tie and belt to put on after breakfast.

Normal evenings

Going to bed

1. Position Peter and chair next to the bed = transfer position.
2. Undress top half (jumper, shirt, vest).
3. Get sliding board, two sliding sheets and pillows.
4. Follow steps for the SLIDE onto bed – SLIDE.

5. Once sitting on bed, remove sliding board and put wheelchair away. Swing Peter's legs around onto bed. Remove sliding sheet and put away – push up bed if needed.
6. Undress lower half (shoes, trousers, socks).
7. If needed, adjust the thigh strap and attach it to Peter's right leg loosely.
8. When checking skin, take care not to over-focus only on one area – you must check all over for redness, bruising, swelling, spots, dry/flaky skin, inflammation, etc., and if anything at all, no matter how minor, is present, you must tell Peter immediately. Logroll to check skin on bottom and back.
9. Catheter care – use gloves and antiseptic wipes to remove/clean catheter as per morning routine. Check groin and apply cream as per morning.
10. Put pillow/towels under and around Peter's ankles as described.
11. Take leg bag and pin it to the bed cover.
12. Make sure that the catheter is not kinked in any way and that it is flat on the top of right thigh.
13. Attach the night bag and make double sure that the TOP tap is OPEN and the BOTTOM tap is CLOSED correctly! (This is important as Peter is not able to open the tap of the leg bag by himself. It is secured to the bed by the pins.)
14. Put stretchy socks on and red night socks on, if needed.
15. Attach night bag to day bag, pin to bed, lie bag in bucket.
16. Give Peter the phone for the night, if needed.
17. Pull covers over and extra blanket if needed.
18. Give pills.

19. Lights out ... sweet dreams!

Getting into car

1. Chair into position at driver's side.
2. Sliding board under Peter's bum, also sliding sheet then pillow on wheelchair wheel.
3. Lift legs into car.
4. Push Peter's upper body forwards (by pushing his shoulders) into balancing position.
5. Go to passenger side, get into position = left leg in driver's side, right knee on passenger seat, right arm on driver's seat backrest.
6. Grab Peter by the belt with your left hand.
7. SLIDE = Pull with left arm, gently but firmly.
8. Peter will slide into the car seat. Then adjust his position as needed.
9. Go to driver's side, remove chair, board and sheet and pillow.
10. Bend Peter's right knee so that his foot points towards gearbox.
11. Peter will lean forwards himself while you pull his jacket down at the back.
12. Adjust trousers as needed.
13. Now pull car seat forwards = kneel down, lift seat lever up and pull seat forward.
14. Fasten seat belt.
15. Pull right leg trouser out to remove any creases Peter may sit on.
16. Put pillow by feet, and Jay Cushion and sliding board behind driver's seat.
17. If at home, leave wheelchair in garage, otherwise put wheelchair in boot.

18. Jump into passenger side.
 19. Attach hand control to steering wheel once Peter is ready.
- Off you go!

Getting out of car

1. If at home get chair from house/garage, if out and about get chair out of car boot. Lift up wheelchair footplate.
2. Open door at driver's side.
3. Take out pillow at Peter's feet and position onto wheelchair.
4. Take out sliding board and Jay Cushion from behind driver's seat and put on wheelchair.
5. Unlock seat belt, move seat back and straighten right leg.
6. Peter leans himself to the side. Place sliding board and sheet into position.
7. Pull him upright again by grabbing hold of his wrist.
8. Lift legs out of car.
9. Put wheelchair into position (against car, and sliding board resting on wheelchair seat).
10. Put pillow over wheel.
11. While Peter leans forward, grip with your left hand at the belt.
12. Put your right hand on car roof to stabilise yourself.
13. Get feet into position (feet pointing towards car door).
14. Give hard solid pull with left hand (in direction car lock).
15. SLIDE – congrats!!
16. Pull out sliding board and pillow, leave in car.
17. Pull wheelchair a couple of metres back to give you space.
18. Put on brakes, position foot plate.
19. Peter will lift while you pull out the sliding sheet.
20. Adjust till Peter is comfortable in wheelchair.

21. (Sometimes Peter gets out from passenger side, then everything is in reverse.)

Toileting routine

Mornings

Using sliding board, SLIDE Peter from bed to toilet chair, then push chair over toilet.

Evenings

First empty the day bag in toilet if necessary, pull toilet chair over toilet, Peter gets into position then pull down trousers and underpants. SLIDE from wheelchair to toilet chair.

1. Once comfortable on toilet chair, prepare toileting stuff (suppositories, gloves, plastic bag, KY gel).
2. Insert two suppositories.
3. Give tray and book/magazine to read.
4. Go downstairs to prepare drink.
5. Go back initially after 20 mins, then every 5 mins to check progress on bowel movement. End of bowels.
6. Once finished, pack toileting things away and get shower things in order (two flannels, Carex soap).
7. Now undress top half first, then bottom half – move to shower area.
8. Shower – wet flannel, clean catheter area, wash hair then face and rinse afterwards.
9. Wet flannel again and soap up for body wash, start from top and work down.
10. Then use different flannel for genital area and bum.
11. Rinse whole body and dry.
12. Hand Peter the hairbrush.
13. Wash your own hands.
14. Wheel Peter to bedroom.

15. Transfer back onto bed by following SLIDE steps – Peter lying on back on bed.
16. When checking skin, take care not to over-focus only on one area – you must check all over for redness, bruising, swelling, spots, dry/flaky skin, inflammation, etc., and if anything at all, no matter how minor, is present, you must tell Peter immediately. Logroll away from you, dry bum and check skin is dry and in healthy condition. Apply creams/ointments as necessary. Roll back onto Peter's back again.
17. (If morning put deodorant and vest on.)
18. First dry around genital area, then apply terbinafine to skin creases.
19. Put moisturiser on arms from elbows down and legs from knees down.
20. Follow the rest of routine depending on evening (put to bed) or morning (get dressed and ready for day).
21. Clean bathroom and lavatory.

DONE!

Getting on/off aircraft

I used to fly alone but general and security regulations since 2001 have become so involved that I no longer do so. Having booked what's called 'Special Assistance' and extra bag allowance for my medical stuff when buying flight tickets, once at the airport I check in all the bags and report to the Special Assistance office to let them know I'm there for my flight. My carer and I agree to meet their team at the boarding gate.

Going through security is frustrating. After refusing to remove my shoes, belt and jacket as it is so complicated to do that there, I have to wheel into the secure zone to be checked by a security officer who pats me down. They inevitably get confused by my catheter/urine bag. They then wipe down my wheelchair with a special test fabric that is then analysed. Several times, this has flagged up the presence of acetone, for some reason. As this is a component in certain explosives, it has caused a bit of a flap on occasion.

After that, I push round to meet up with my carer and collect our bags. Once again, we usually get pulled up with questions about such items as my sliding board and wheelchair toolkit consisting of a few Allen keys and a spanner ...

It's at the boarding gate that the real fun starts. In theory, we should board the plane first, but usually, we do so last and in front of all the other rubber-necking passengers. So, eventually, the moving/handling team arrive. They take me and my carer, who now has all our cabin baggage and my wheelchair bag to carry, down a lift onto the tarmac, where we wheel across to the plane. Down here, it is always very noisy from the aircraft engines, stressful and pressurised. If it's at night, windy, raining, snowing or in a non-English speaking place, it's even more so.

In larger airports, we then get into an ambilift, a height adjustable van-sized box, which raises everyone up to the height of the aircraft door. Once there, the moving/handling team, usually two men, have to pick me up bodily by my

shoulders and knees and lift me from my own wheelchair into a baby pram-sized aisle chair that will fit into the plane. My carer then, very quickly, has to put my wheelchair into its flight bag to prevent damage. This bag then gets put in the hold. The ambilift is then raised up to the aircraft door. In other airports, this lifting/transferring manoeuvre happens outside by the plane on the tarmac. Where there is no ambilift, the moving/handling team either use a mechanised step-climbing aisle chair or physically carry me up the flight of 20 or so steps and into the plane.

Sitting in an aisle seat is the best option, but some airlines are reluctant to let me do so, insisting that I sit by the window ... blaming health-and-safety regulations. To avoid the difficulty and danger to me and the moving/handling team of dragging me over three seats/armrests while being squashed underneath the overhead lockers, I always book all three seats in a block.

Once in the plane, where space is very limited, I am taken down the aisle to the row where I'm sitting. So, my carer will now be near the window seat and I'll be in the aisle wheelchair needing to be moved across into the aircraft seat. This again requires moving/handling me by physically lifting me, but this time, there is little knee room and the person lifting my shoulders is doing so over the high back of the aircraft seat. This move is fraught with danger, but they lift me up and my carer puts my pressure cushion underneath my bum – aircraft seats are not safe for me to use – and after a bit of pushing and shoving, we're in.

Throughout, I explain to the lifters the risks, my disability, my weight, and so on. You have to be super alert throughout to avoid twisted or broken legs, ankles and arms, as well as bruises, cuts and other physical injury and clothing being pulled off. If they don't speak English, it can be a major problem and the whole thing can go disastrously wrong. European airports, particularly in Denmark, are generally pretty good at carrying out this routine. British airports are often, regrettably, not as good. In my experience, London Gatwick is the worst of all.

During the flight, I have to insist that the captain radios ahead to ensure that my wheelchair bag is brought to the aircraft door on landing, not taken to baggage reclaim as I will not use an airport wheelchair; it is dangerous for many reasons, such as pressure sores. Getting off the plane is the reverse process.

I love travelling and am willing to put up with this routine to do so, but many disabled people do it once and swear, "Never again."

CHAPTER TEN

Moving on With Life *March 1987 to October 1988*

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change what can be changed,
and the wisdom to know the difference between the two.*

Serenity Prayer

Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things ...

Stephen King, *The Shawshank Redemption*

In March 1987, Lauren and I drove up from Wallingford, where we'd stayed overnight, to my parents' house in Wennington. Pre-M40, it was a long and tedious journey, punctuated by a stop at the grim Hilton Park services on the M6. Eventually, we arrived. As the barn conversion was not finished, our accommodation was a bed raised on bricks once again in my mum's box room with its grand piano and flower arranging stuff. Thankfully, Lauren was very strong from years of horse riding, and getting around was just doable. I had no bathing or toilet access, so all that was done in bed and was not ideal, although some tetras prefer it.

We had no help at all except for an occupational therapist who brought round some basic equipment – some kind of tray/cushion, as I recall – so we made the best of things and learnt as we went along. Having the help of my parents was invaluable, but the person I valued most was Lauren. She had saved my life and given up hers to help me and I loved her

deeply. Without my parents and Lauren, I really don't know how or if I could have got through it all.

Mum swiftly decided that I needed feeding up, so every morning began with a full English breakfast. Days were occupied with getting involved with finishing the house – choices of everything from flooring, furniture and fabrics to choosing which lift to install. To get around, we had my Vauxhall Astra and a tiny Suzuki van with ramps.



Lauren at home, 1987

It was far from easy getting in and out of either. However, this transport allowed us to investigate the local villages and go out to country pubs and, of course, the spinal unit.

The North West Spinal Unit is in Southport and is nearly a three-hour drive from home. I needed to be on their radar so

visited not long after coming up north, but it was my firm wish to stay as far away from hospitals as possible.

In April, something rather wonderful happened. A friend of my father's, the Rev Robin Buchanan-Smith, somehow combined being a Church of Scotland minister with being a hotelier. Touchingly, he said to Dad, "Peter has had a tough time; we'd like him to come and stay at our hotel for a week, at no charge." So, we set off in April, past Glasgow and Loch Lomond and using the fabulous A82/A85 roads through the disturbing grandeur of Glencoe, past Oban and to the hotel itself. That journey, howling along amazing, deserted roads listening to Bryan Adams' *Summer of '69* up loud will stay with me for ever.

The hotel, the Isle of Eriska, is a very special place indeed. The wheelchair-accessible room had originally been the billiard room and was vast, easily bigger than the whole of my old house. It comprised a bedroom and living/diner all in one space. We settled in and that evening the dinner gong sounded; it's that kind of place! We went through to a magical sight – the dining room was furnished with polished mahogany, gleaming silver, sparkling glasses and glowing candlelight. Having been through hell, it was fantastic to be in such a special place. It was a wonderful evening with a lovely meal and delicious wine amid the hum of conversation from our fellow diners. Later, we went to bed, kissed goodnight and so to sleep.

I was awoken a couple of hours later by an ominous smell. I had no control of my bowels and I had messed the bed. After

such a super day, Lauren had to get up and clean up our bed that was full of my shit – the embarrassment, disappointment, shame and indignity were heartbreaking and I could have cried. It was the first time my spinal injury had upturned things, but it would not be the last, not by a very, very long way.

Luckily, the rest of the week was a delight. We wandered through Oban, oohed and aahed at the seals bobbing in the grey water, and explored the highways and byways of that lovely coastline, passing Inverary and the striking whirlpools at Connel. Evenings passed without further incident and after a super week, we returned home.

The house inched closer toward completion and we christened it Easter Cottage and eventually, in May 1987, we were in. Life, proper, could begin again.



Easter Cottage



Easter Cottage from the garden

When Lauren and I first moved in, we acquired a kitten from a family friend. She was tiny and squeaked instead of miaowing so, of course, we called her Mouse. Mouse started off as a minute, tortoiseshell creature that you could hold in the palm of your hand. She'd chase feathers and run around the place, and it was lovely to have another presence around the house. But her sweetness didn't last – or at least it became less predictable. One minute I'd be rubbing her tummy and the next she'd be savaging my hand. I wasn't the only one who got the 'Mouse treatment'. It wasn't long before most of my friends wouldn't go near her.

Lauren was a skilled, competition-level, professional rider and she had a friend's horse, Four Winds, on semi-permanent loan. 'Windz', as she was known, was stabled with some local friends, Keith and Barbara. The four of us spent time with each

other as the horse was being schooled in jumping, dressage and cross-country with a view to doing some local Hunter Trials.



Lauren riding Windz



Lauren competing

One day, Barbara was driving us somewhere and I was in the passenger seat, with Lauren behind me. This was the journey when I was to discover just how much centrifugal force affects me. As we drove round a roundabout, I lost my balance and ended up face down in Barbara's lap, Barbara being a 40-something English lady who really didn't know me that well. Understandably, she was greatly surprised and, trying to maintain her grip on the steering, started squealing increasingly loudly, "Ooh, ooooooh, Pete!" Unable to sit up myself, I was reliant on a hysterically laughing Lauren behind me and, eventually, after being hauled upright, dignity was restored.

After a number of months, I found myself getting bored at home. I'd always been a busy person, as you may have noticed from reading about my pre-accident life, and now there was nothing to do – all day, every day. For the five years leading up to my accident, I had been telemarketing so, more for something to do than anything else, I went along to a presentation on telemarketing at the local chamber of commerce. During the presentation, I did not learn much new and just thought, well, it got me out of the house. However, at the end of the presentation, I got chatting to the lady giving the talk. In passing, I told her how I'd been in this field and that I thought it might be something I could still do as I could use a telephone, talk and scribble notes. Out of this came a job offer. In disbelief, I agreed instantly.

On the day I was due to start, however, my injury decided to remind me who's boss, and gave me a bursa, a swelling, on a knobbly joint on the back of my spine. This low-level pressure could easily burst and develop into a full-blown sore and

bedrest was the only cure. I was deeply frustrated at my own weakness and, fearing the worst, had to ring my new boss to call in sick before even starting my first day at work. She was very understanding and agreed I could start when I was fit and well again. Shelagh Whittaker, thank you.

So, Lauren and I started as timeshare sharks. Well, not quite. We called people who had responded to ads promoting lodges at Pine Lake near the Lake District. Our job was to invite them to Pine Lake on an all-expenses-paid trip for the salespeople to do their thing. Honestly, none of us understood why anyone would want to buy an orange-stained shed next to an old gravel pit, still itself orange with sediment, sandwiched between the railway, the A6 and the M6. But people did! Interestingly, 30 years later, the site has matured nicely and is now a smart lake and centre for water sports.

After that contract ended, Shelagh moved me to a local business, making appointments for their salesman. The way the disability living allowance benefit was structured then meant every pound I earned was subtracted from my benefits, so, overall, I cleared £5 a week – not including my fuel to get there. But it was well worth it. The job got me out of the house, forced me to be on my own and got me meeting strangers who seemingly did not care about ‘the wheelchair’. It also forced me to have to do things like ask total strangers to empty my urine bag. Wonderfully, everyone did without a blink. But, eventually, all the telesales work fizzled out.

Lauren as carer

When you leave hospital and then start to live independently again, you need a carer. Lauren took on this role willingly – there was no one else to do it, and even if there had been, Lauren was very protective of me at the time and wouldn't have allowed anyone else to take on the role. That said, being a carer for someone who is also your romantic partner is not good.

Around the winter of 1987, my parents were invited by a friend to a party. Lauren and I went along and we met Paul Brown, who was helping with food and making guests comfortable. Paul went on to become a great friend. In the middle of the party, I suddenly fell ill. My vision went again, with the same aura as before, and I didn't know what was going on. The hosts let me lie down on their bed, but we had to go home early. It was both frightening and sobering. I was just out of the hospital and ill again. Was this my life from now on? It was awful.

Not giving up takes a great deal of added energy and determination, and sometimes it can help to search for inspiration from outside. In 1987, the Kendal Ski Club put us in touch with Back Up. In early 1988, we hooked up with the charity and Lauren and I went to the Back Up Ball on King's Road in London.



With Lauren, 1987

The Back Up charity was started by the freestyle skier Mike Nemesvary, who had broken his neck in a trampoline accident. Mike was one of the stunt skiers in the James Bond film *A View to a Kill*. Mike's friends had helped try to get him back up the mountains and their success had inspired him to help others do the same. So, in the spring, we signed up for Back Up's ski trip to Switzerland and Lauren and I took off to Les Diablerets. We stayed in a lovely hotel with 10 or 15 other spinal injury skiers and probably double the number of carers.

The willingness of the Back Up carers to do everything struck me. Just getting us to the ski lifts was a mission. “Don’t worry if you can’t push, we’ll carry you,” was their way. The next minute you were over someone’s shoulder and they’d plonk you down on the seat, with your chair in the one behind. At the top, they’d get you off, and you and the wheelchair were matched up again. It’s then that it strikes you, with some force, that you are at the top of a mountain. The view, the light, the air – it really lifted the spirits. The wonder of being up in the mountains when months before, your life had been smashed to pieces ... it was indescribable.

Then, of course, we had to get down.

The instructor said, “See that thing over there?” I looked at a go-kart but on skis instead of wheels. They picked me up, put me in a moulded seat on this trolley and dragged it to the top of the mountain. I was wearing about four layers, with my hands and nose sticking out. A good skier was behind me, tied to me by a rope, and she pushed us off, telling me nominally when to steer left or right. There I was on this wonderful, blue day going down this pristine white piste, where two years previously I would have done the same when standing.



Skiing in Kitzbuhel (I'm back left), 1986



Skiing in Les Diablerets 18 months after my accident, March 1988.

Skiing is very different post-accident, but still brilliant fun!

I had the realisation of ‘Wow, I can still do things like this.’ It was so powerful, and that is exactly what Back Up does. It gives you the option to do these activities. The realisation that you *can* do these things can hopefully help you try other new options in life generally.

One day on the slopes, the guy skiing behind me and slowing me down lost his footing and fell over. “Pete, you are on your own, turn into the bank,” he yelled. After a few scary, wide-eyed, nearly out-of-control minutes hurtling down the piste untethered, I had enough space to turn and all was fine.

It was the first trip that Back Up had arranged to Les Diablerets and was a bit of a learning curve. Lauren helped me in the evenings and would join us for lunch, dinner and the parties. We spent most of the time drunk and having fun. I’m still involved with Back Up. They are fabulous.

On our return home, Lauren got a job in Kendal working for an offshoot of Barclays bank. It was a hard life for her, helping me in the mornings and evenings while working during the day. The house in Wennington was open plan, and I discovered Lauren had a real love of soap operas. I dislike soap operas and reality TV. In an open-plan house, there is no escape. At 5.30pm it was *Neighbours*, followed by supper from 6pm to 7pm. Next came the irritating (for me at least) *Eastenders* theme and the even more annoying *Coronation Street* one at 7.30pm. At 8pm, it was *Dallas* or something similar. I came to detest those theme tunes and soap operas in general and they were made so much worse by the fact that I couldn't escape them!

Still, by 1988, we were starting to become used to this new way of living. One weekend in the spring of 1988, Rupert came over from Spain and we had a wonderful family Sunday meal together and the only photo of us as a whole family was taken.



With my parents and brother – the Henry family

In September 1988, I wanted to give Lauren a break, so I booked myself into a spinal injury care centre for two weeks. For me, the experience seemed horrific at the time and I could almost feel the life ebbing out of me. There was no opportunity to do anything. It was a place where you survived, not lived. It made me realise how much I valued the freedom of being at home and determined that a residential home was not a way forward for me.

At around this time, I realised it would be easier to start my own business than expect someone else to give me a job. I had always wanted my own business, though I was under no illusion that it would be easy. However, it is not until you do it that you realise the extent of what is involved.

Dad had chosen to retire a little earlier than planned because of my accident, and he and I started a small business consultancy delivering the Small Business Government Development Scheme. The job got me out of the house and gave us both something to do, plus it was great to spend so much time together. Dad was paying me to keep out of mischief, though probably not himself. The company was advising people on how to start and grow their business. We met plenty of people with great ideas at the wrong time, a few weird people and many good people. Dad, who had a wealth of experience, advised them on business growth.

Dad would go out and leave me alone for the day, only coming back for lunch. Of course, there was the telephone for keeping

in contact. The year 1988 was tough, but going to the office in Lancaster and supporting Dad's job got me through it.

In addition, Lauren and I were getting out and about more, going out to dinners and parties, and one day, Lauren suggested having a barbecue in my parents' big garden. She invited friends from her work and I asked some of mine. Richard Crossley, who worked with Lauren, and his wife, Lisa, drove up in a white convertible Triumph Stag. The minute we met, we were friends, which doesn't happen too often. We spoke all evening and would meet up again at different times throughout the summer.

By the autumn, my relationship with Lauren was, sadly, not going well, and, in October 1988, we eventually split up. I could see why as she was young and had her life to live. She was the girl who had saved my life and who gave me something to live for, but now she was gone. The quiet security of my parents was immense, but I was utterly bereft.

I was devastated. The old 1960s Neil Diamond song *Red Red Wine* became my 'break-up anthem', summing up just how I felt. I saw Lauren only twice again – the first time was in December, for my birthday. We hugged but it was obviously not enough to make her stay, and she went a few minutes later, leaving behind only her perfume in the air, my broken heart and my tears. God, I loved her.

I was only 27. Life was terrible after Lauren left. I had never in my life felt so lonely and so alone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Life After Lauren: A New Beginning October 1988 to Early 1991

I saw Lauren only once more. After my accident, someone had advised me to put in a personal injury claim, maybe not to win any money but to set a precedent if anyone else tried to dive in the river at that spot. We had started the claim in 1987, working with a team of lawyers in London. It was a long, protracted process, culminating in 1993 when I saw Lauren outside the High Court in London, where she was giving evidence. It was an odd, rather awkward meeting, and she looked so different from when I had known her before. In late 1993, we received a judgment in which we lost the case but the precedent had been set, so maybe we achieved something.

After Lauren left in 1988, things were very bad. I became very down and frustrated with life in general, but having good friends and family around was wonderful support.

Routine kept me going too – going to work with Dad, and my friend Paul Brown would take me out for a beer on Friday nights. He was a teacher who once worked in schools but was now an art teacher for the prison service. Every Friday night for years Paul would turn up, throw me in the car and off we'd go for a few beers.

Splitting up from Lauren did, oddly, also open a new chapter for me. I started to see Richard and Lisa more and more. They were fabulous and relentless in their determination to keep me going. When they suggested an outing, I'd be 'thanks, but no thanks', to which they answered, undeterred, "Well, we're going and you're coming too." They didn't know me well but cared for me like lifelong friends. Richard was quite willing to do everything for me. On our first trip out, I realised my urine bag wasn't draining properly and I asked Richard to stop.

He tried helping but then went, "Oh sod it!" He whipped my trouser leg up and bit the top off my bag. I was relieved, but pee went all over the car, and Richard got a mouthful. For a near stranger to do that for me was extraordinary. I mean, would you do that? Really?

Things were sometimes going well, but at other times, not so much. I was working during the week and seeing Richard and Lisa in the evenings and at weekends. On Christmas Eve 1988, I went to stay with them. Richard put me to bed on their sofa downstairs and attached a night urine drainage bag to my day bag. He was becoming quite the expert! In the morning, Richard came down to see the night bag full of blood. Now, instead of relaxing and celebrating Christmas Day, it was panic all around, trying to get hold of someone who could help. It turned out I had a bladder infection.

Things can happen fast when you have a spinal injury. My spinal injury means I cannot feel pain below nipple level and it's hard to explain to any able-bodied person that I cannot feel anything from the armpits down, nothing at all. If anything

goes wrong, I don't know about it, so I, along with those around me, need to be very vigilant.

On another occasion, I picked up a red mark on my tailbone/bum from sitting on a crease/seam in my jeans. Red marks can become horrible pressure sores very easily.



Pressure sores grading tool (Taken from EPUAP booklet)

The only way to fix a red mark is to keep the weight off it so the blood circulation can repair the inflamed tissue. Red marks and pressure sores are very slow to heal and this red mark on my skin, which was not an open wound, took a slow and frustrating six weeks in bed to fix; six weeks of lying on my side and rolling every three hours with nothing to do except listen to the radio and sulk. When I eventually got out of bed, it was like starting all over again.

Holiday at Rupert's on the Costa del Sol

In 1989, I decided to go on holiday alone, to stay with Rupert in Puerto Banús, near Marbella in Spain. I must have been crazy. My parents took me to Manchester Airport and dropped me at the terminal, and then off I went on my own, without even a carer. Getting on and off an aeroplane when in a wheelchair is not pleasant. You are lifted off your chair and put in a small buggy to haul you up the steps, then lifted again into the seat. The handlers push and bash you about and bruise you God knows where. Often, they lift you too high or not high enough, and some have obviously not been trained. I know many disabled people travel by plane once and never do it again because they detest it so much. I have made my peace with it, though, as I want to go places more than I dislike the way I'm bounced about. Nevertheless, it's horrendous.

The staff on my plane to Marbella were very helpful, and Rupert met me at the other end. He was living in a small flat by the port, five floors up, but he told me that there was a lift to the flat, straight from the car park. What he didn't tell me was you could only access the lift when the electric garage door to the car park was open. To open said electric door, you needed to pay a subscription, which Rupert had never paid. Half the time, Rupert had to pull me up the five flights of steps to the flat. It was absolutely terrifying.

Rupert was living with his girlfriend at the time and I saw him for breakfast and dinner but I was in the flat alone for most of the time, reading a book on my knee, or pushing myself up and down the lanes in the marina to watch the people going by. In spite of everything, I was actually quite enjoying myself.

One day, Rupert took me to a bar that happened to be open first thing in the morning. When I went in, an Irish barmaid was polishing the glasses and setting up for the day. There was one customer – a German man reading the paper and having a coffee. I tucked myself away in a corner by the snooker table with my book. Rupert went off to do whatever he was doing, and, sometime later, a young chap came in and headed over to me. Walking down by the snooker table, he said, “I’d like to play snooker with you.” I said, “Sorry, mate. As much as I’d love to, I can’t even pick up a cue.” “No,” he insisted. “I want to play snooker with you.” “I’m sorry, I can’t,” I kept repeating. “I want to play snooker with you now!” he was shouting by this stage, and next thing he had a cue in his hand, with the thick end held up over his head like a club as if he was about to hit me with it. I had my arm above my head, which was all I could do, thinking that this was going to hurt, but then I looked up to see the German man, who turned out to be the local drug dealer, and the barmaid jumping across the table to wrestle him to the ground. Eventually, they got him out of the door, screaming and shouting as he went. It was an exciting way to spend the morning!

I found out from Rupert that the snooker guy was one of the local drunks. Rupert heard of the trouble, and later that day, the guy came to see me in floods of tears, saying he was terribly sorry and that he’ll never touch another drink again. At 7pm that evening, we saw him in the street, slobbering drunk. The man was 19 at the time and Rupert later said he was dead before he was 25.

I did not like the Costa del Sol at all, and the only town I liked was Ronda, which is inland and lovely. Rupert drove me there on the one day out we had, but we spent most of the day on the beach. In the early 1990s, the Costa del Sol was not as developed as it is today and while it was a fun enough holiday, it's not the place for me.

A life with carers

It was when Lauren left that I first realised that I would be in need of private personal care assistants (PAs). At the time, we hired Louise locally. But the difficulty of finding carers cannot be understated. We were scratching around everywhere trying to find the right people, from adverts in magazines, such as *The Lady*, and agencies that had nannies, au pairs and carers. They were useful to a point. We would ring around to find someone from one or two of the agencies, some of which were superb, while others were appalling. Trying to find good ones was a nightmare.

The agency carers could be wonderful or useless, sometimes dangerous or totally unsuited to the kind of work in hand. Caring for someone with a spinal injury like mine means you need a kind of unique skillset. The technical side of it is not difficult, but a positive attitude is key. You are part carer, part companion, part friend. Some of the routine is tedious, but living life still needs to be fun. Vigilance, patience, a good sense of humour, a preparedness to expect the unexpected ... when it works it is brilliant; when it doesn't, it is awful.

I would get the odd gem. Pat was great. She introduced me to jazz and took me to a festival nearby. After Pat came one of the

bad ones. We went to a barbecue at Richard and Lisa's on Midsummer Eve. On arrival, Richard gave me a beer. "Amazing that he can drink," said the carer to Richard as if I wasn't there. At 9pm, she announced that she was leaving and therefore I was too as she didn't drive in the dark, though it would be light until at least 11pm. I fired her the next morning.

In September 1989, my world changed when I met Gudrun from Germany. She was like a whirlwind and an absolute joy. Gudrun was constantly laughing, very positive, and a bundle of energy. We had a fabulous time. Nothing was a problem and I knew this was the kind of care I wanted in future. No sighing or grumpiness with Gudrun; everything was positive. She was the kind of carer I wanted from then on too, I decided, but Gudrun had to leave at Christmas 1989. What was I going to do without her?

When Gudrun was going home to Germany, I begged her to please send back someone just like her. Over Christmas, while walking in the Black Forest with her family, Gudrun met Birgit, a friend from school, and they stopped for a chat. Lufthansa had offered Birgit a job as an air hostess on the proviso that her English improved within six months. She was looking for a job in England to help. "I might just be able to help you there," said Gudrun.

Birgit came over here at the end of January 1990, and we had a wonderful time for the next six months. She fitted in perfectly with my family and we did many wonderful things together. At Easter, the weather was awful, but Richard and Lisa brought all

their friends around to spend a night with me. We played Pictionary with Richard and Birgit as one team. Birgit would shout out words in German, and we would have to stop the game and look them up in the dictionary. Richard was very bad at sketching and drew what looked like a squashed mosquito for one guess. Birgit shouted, *maulwurfshügel*, which translated to ‘molehill’, and somehow she’d guessed right. *Maulwurfshügel* was my first word in German. Birgit and I became very good friends, and we remain so to this day. I am proud to be godfather to her younger son, Julian.



With Birgit, 1990

Gudrun and I are still in touch too, even now, which is wonderful. You develop a close personal rapport with many of your carers. I've been to stay with a few and have been invited to the weddings of others.

Studying

At work, Dad and I had taken on a business partner, Jeff Hindley, to help us develop our small business consultancy. Being a northern ex-company owner himself, Jeff was an ideal fit and he became a great friend. Meanwhile, I was beginning to realise that I didn't have the knowledge I needed to advise companies and decided I needed to do a degree. Kendal offered a part-time business degree over four years. Two nights a week and, later, one full day at Preston Poly. In autumn 1989, I told Dad, and, although very surprised, he supported me.

At the first lesson, there were 45 in the room. The course leader read the curriculum: finance, law, statistics, business strategy, a long list of subjects. The following week we had 25 in the room. My first paper got a C. Not good enough, I thought, not good enough at all. Right, I'm going to have to start really working and work myself into the ground if I need to, nothing but As will do. I worked myself through the four years. The government provided a very early laptop, and a charity gave me an Amstrad PC, which I learnt how to use. College was two nights a week from 7pm to 9pm. The carers would go to the local swimming pool or wherever before taking me home and getting me to bed at midnight. They were long days. I was studying at weekends and still socialising with Paul, Richard and Lisa too.

Occasionally, I also got to see my uncle Brian, who over the years had left the TV industry, got divorced, remarried and written a book. During the 1990s, he and his wife, Jan, used to come and stay with my parents on a semi-regular basis. It was

great to get to know him a little after all these years. Sadly, he died in 2003 aged 77.

I saw Richard and Lisa often during this time, and one weekend, they took me to Newcastle to meet Richard's family. We drove over to the family home, which was in a nice suburban area, for Sunday lunch. I knew Richard's relationship with his parents could be 'tricky', but they were very welcoming and I was beginning to wonder what the issue was. It was all friendly and lovely as we sat down for lunch of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Richard's mum brought out big plates of food piled high with meat and vegetables, but mine was not like the others. She had liquidised my dinner. I looked at the plate, then at Richard, and we both burst out laughing. "Mum, what have you done?" asked Richard. "I wasn't sure if he could eat solids," was the answer. She could not see the funny side and the more we joked around, the less amused she became, and we left not long after. We went on to have a lovely afternoon around Newcastle, even driving down to see the Spanish City, the theme park mentioned by Mark Knopfler in Dire Straits' *Tunnel of Love*.

Getting back behind the wheel

Cars had always been an important part of my life and, since my accident, I had been reliant on others to get me around. It was Richard who bossed me into starting to drive again. I had done advanced driving before my accident and I did not want to be one of those disabled people who park with one wheel up on the pavement. I wanted to be able to handle a car properly or not at all. We went to an exhibition in London to try out cars

adapted for the disabled. I was taken off to have a test drive, and Richard, for some reason, decided to occupy himself by practising sitting in my wheelchair and pushing himself around. Unfortunately, he managed to get himself stuck amongst some large power cables laid around the hall. Richard was sitting there trying to free himself when some people came rushing over to help. They lifted him out over the cables and made sure he was OK. In the heat of the moment, Richard couldn't bring himself to tell them he wasn't disabled. Oh, the shame of it.

Following the show, I ordered a Vauxhall Astra automatic car via Motability and had it set up for me. Learning how to drive now involved L-plates and Sunday mornings with me driving Richard around a deserted industrial estate. Barring a close shave with a lamp post when I lost my balance on a corner, all went well. About six months later, I was confident enough to drive independently.



Rupert and me with my first car with hand controls

First trip to Monaco

Birgit was with me through to July 1990, but we were then back to the problem of finding someone suitable to take on the work. A carer was eventually found with great difficulty.

In August, Richard, Lisa, Giles and I planned a holiday to the South of France, travelling by car to Juan-les-Pins on the Cote d'Azur, which is a very long drive from Lancaster – the drive took three days.

We gave my new carer and her boyfriend an offer of a free holiday, all food and accommodation covered, but she would not be paid. She took us up on the offer but stopped being nice and turned into a bit of a monster. She became a right madam as soon as we left on the trip, but she knew I needed her more than she needed me.

Consequently, the journey to London was a nightmare. My carer and her boyfriend decided they'd have a night away to see friends in London but were late back the next day. As a result, Giles had to get me out of bed, which wasn't easy, and we only caught the ferry across to France in the nick of time. After that, it was 14 hours to Dijon, with my carer and her boyfriend smoking constantly in the car (somewhat reminiscent of my younger days), even though Giles and I did not smoke. They also wanted to listen to their very loud music all the time – even now I simply cannot abide 'Van the Man' Morrison. They were soon christened Fag-Ash Lil and Smoky Joe. After a really turbulent second day of driving and another 14 hours

with them, we arrived in Juan-les-Pins at about 11pm. Thankfully, the apartment we'd booked was great.

During the day, we went our way and they went theirs. 'Van the Man' was replaced by Richard and Lisa's favourite LP of the time, and George Michael's *Freedom!* became the theme of the holiday.

We spent the days sightseeing around the coast and visited Antibes, which is a very pretty town and home to the Picasso Museum. After seeing the paintings on the ground floor, we had to take the lift to the second floor. One room had priceless ceramics on display and the next had a huge Picasso canvas with sheep and rams as the subject, which I was keen to see. Richard pushed me through the doorway – admittedly it was a bit of a tight squeeze. Coming back out of the room after seeing the painting, I became stuck in the pinch point. Richard pushed and pulled me a couple of times until I came free, like a cork popping out of a wine bottle, and my wheelchair went smack into a display case of original Picasso ceramics. The case started to wobble, the ceramics began to rock and spin, and we were motionless, looking at it while our hearts stopped. In that moment, it was easy to imagine the news coverage of 'English thugs smash priceless Picasso ceramics'. After what seemed like an eternity, the turmoil in the display case ceased, with no damage done, but Richard and I crept out to the nearest café, where we had two espressos and very large brandies before admitting, "Shit, that was close."

On another day, we went to Monaco, my first trip there, and I was a starry-eyed tourist. In Casino Square, parked right outside the Hotel de Paris, was a brand new red Ferrari F40, which was *the* car at the time. I'd never seen one before nor have I seen one since.

Richard had been to Monaco before and knew a nice bistro by the Royal Palace, where we planned to go that evening. We wanted to go to the casino too and, mindful of the dress code, had brought dickie bows and dinner jackets with us. But, not wanting to wear them all day, we would need somewhere to get changed. The only place Richard could think of was the public lavatories at the end of the quay, directly beneath the Royal Palace. We parked up and went into the public loo, and there we were, partly dressed, with shirts on but no trousers, when in walked a Frenchman needing a pee. He looked at the three half-dressed Englishmen in the public toilets, nervously did his business, washed his hands, gave us a nod and left, but what he said to his wife back in the car, we can only guess.

The bistro was excellent and Richard began to tell us how his first love had been Princess Caroline of Monaco. As we sat outside listening to the tale of Richard's young love, two black limousines with the royal crest on the doors pulled up and, right on cue, out of one of them stepped Princess Caroline, looking stunning. It turned out she was going to a service at the cathedral for her mum's birthday (or perhaps it was the anniversary of her death), but either way, Richard was awestruck and could not speak.

After the meal, the casino at Monte Carlo beckoned, so it was back into the car and up to the car park. It had ‘entry with passport or photo-ID only’ at the door, and, of course, I had forgotten mine. The concierge said, “*Non, monsieur, no photo-ID, no entry.*” Lisa had no interest in playing the casino, so she and I sat at the bar having drinks, with me sulking. She went through my wallet and found an out-of-date library card from Lancaster University that had my photo on it. I went back over and asked the concierge, “Will this do?” “Yes, of course, come on in.” I’ve kept the library card to this day, just in case ... We had a wonderful time playing blackjack, poker and roulette and watching the fireworks from the window. It was fantastic even though we left financially poorer, but so much richer in other ways.

After returning home, the rest of 1990 was spent studying and working. I went down with more red marks and bladder infections several times and had two months in bed with bad pneumonia. Birgit continued to visit. She was doing flight shifts for Lufthansa and her crew was based in Frankfurt, but she had ridiculous discounts and could fly over more or less for free. We saw her every couple of months during the early 1990s. I was seeing Richard and Lisa at weekends throughout, and friends from school, such as Giles, were coming to visit as well. Richard and Lisa infected me with their *joie de vivre* and we were getting up to all sorts of fun with barbecues, swimming and long treks; I was learning to see what could be done rather than sulking at home feeling sorry for myself. The stuff we got up to in the Lake District was wonderful madness, especially as much of the Lake District, with bumpy paths and inaccessible places, is definitely not designed for wheelchairs.

But that wasn't going to stop us! One of our favourites was Tarn Hows.



At Tarn Hows with Vivi, Giles and Richard

On another day, with some other friends, we decided to go around Rydal Water, which is a little lake between Windermere and Grasmere. We pushed down the path towards the lake and discovered, about halfway down, a six-foot stone wall with a kissing gate in the middle, patently impossible to negotiate by wheelchair. "I'll stand you up and dance with you around the gate," said Richard. "Then Rob, Lorna and Lisa can take the chair over the wall and meet us on the other side." We did it and apparently, given the looks of utter disbelief on the faces of other walkers, the view of a disabled person going through a six-foot wall was something to behold, but I was too busy clinging on to Richard to even notice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Things Get Busy

Early 1991 to August 1999

Starting a business

During 1991, my carer changed, as happens quite often, and an Australian girl called Katherine took over, with whom I'm still in touch, and Katherine was one of the best.

In the summer of 1991, my old friend Andy Jones got married to his girlfriend, Louise. Wonderfully, he asked me to be his best man, a role which I was honoured to accept.



*With Andy and his brothers on his wedding day; left to right:
Peter, Andy, me and Chris*

The whole weekend of the wedding was fabulous, with good weather throughout – and even my speech went well, causing a few laughs but no ruffled feathers.

At home, even though Katherine was now helping me, we were continuing to struggle with finding good-quality carers, and each time one left, I was nervous as to who could be next. In late 1991, one of Dad's work calls was to see a chap in the Lake District. His name was Jim Henderson and he was running an agency supplying staff to local businesses. Jim had done well in the late 1980s but was struggling in the early 1990s recession. Dad went to see him, but it was an employment agency going nowhere. Dad was good at ideas and brilliant at lateral thinking, and I can picture him coming back from that meeting, puffing on his pipe in the Suzuki van and having a lightbulb moment.

Back in the office, he put it to me as, "If we're struggling to find carers, the chances are that others are too." Dad's thinking was that he had just met a man with an employment agency business that needed an idea, and Dad had an idea that needed an employment agency business: the idea being that, together, we set up a care agency to recruit and supply live-in spinal-injury trained carers. A few days later, we met Jim Henderson at our offices in Lancaster and had a chat.

As I've said, some years previously, Jim had established a limited company which had done well as an employment agency for a time but was now struggling. Jim was open to the idea of changing his company's business model and re-shaping

it around our ideas. After the meeting, we reached an agreement to work together. So began Kensgriff Care.

In late 1991/early 1992, the company started from nothing.

Jim put in his contacts, legal contracts and knowledge, and I put in my spinal-injury knowledge, contacts and the money for printing brochures. I also designed and wrote the carers' course for the company, which was delivered by St John Ambulance.

We started advertising and it went from there. Jim had an office on the third floor of a building on Kendal high street, which wasn't much good for me. As a result, and rather wonderfully, our first meetings were in a pub called The Phoenix, in Kendal – it couldn't really have been any other name, could it?

Eventually, Jim found a ground-floor office space at a local business park. Dad had had the idea and had put the two of us together and then left us to it, with nothing written down, only a handshake and a smile. The company had got off the ground. When forming the Kensgriff Care business idea, we hadn't given any thought to the company's legal structure in the short or long term. We had simply got on with making Dad's idea into a working business. This was an error I would come to regret.

We were learning from scratch, working together trying to find carers and buying computers. We picked up a contact through someone I knew, who, in turn, knew someone who could be

helpful: a man in Denmark called Martin Steffensen, who worked at their international job centre, Eures. He was an expert in finding carers. I rang Martin and he was on the front foot immediately. “Of course, we can help,” he said. “Send us the job descriptions and we’ll do the searches and interviews and have the application forms filled out.” Without any hesitation whatsoever, Martin was on side and he was a huge support.

The way university applications in Denmark worked at the time was that if you came to England to work for a while, it raised your high-school qualifications a level. If you needed the extra points to go to university, improving your English by working in England could raise a grade C to a B. As you started college at 21 in Denmark, most carers were old enough to drive. And so a steady trickle of carers from Denmark began, which quickly became a stream, and that stream helped get us off the ground.

We advertised in *The Guardian* and magazines such as *The Lady* and started off doing placements by matching people with a suitable carer. Jim couldn’t take on this aspect of the job as he already had enough to do rewriting contracts, working out a booking system, and dealing with banks and the legal requirements. We needed some administrative staff but could not afford them. Dad had another idea,

“Why not ask for volunteers?”

We advertised in *The Westmorland Gazette* for volunteers to come and help, unpaid, and several people applied. We could hardly believe it. Sally and Louise agreed to work part-time, one or two half-days a week, to help get the company off the ground, and they did it unpaid for more than a year. By then, the company was turning over enough money to pay them and they became our first proper members of staff. The company was becoming established, slowly but surely, with things coming along quite nicely.

As time went on, for various reasons Sally and Louise left and we had to directly hire our first independent member of staff to replace them. A lady called Jane was appointed, and, as luck would have it, became a real asset to the company. For many years she was important to the ongoing development of the business.

In 1992, I retook my IAM advanced driving test and passed, again first time, which made me very proud of myself. It was good to have the imprimatur from the Institute of Advanced Motorists after my accident. Around this time, I also picked up my old links with HPC, the other driving group I'd joined.

Now I could drive confidently, I had a nice holiday in Dorset, with Katherine helping me, during which I saw my godfather, Peter Bell. It was great to realise that I could, in fact, get away somewhere on holiday independently.

Back at home, in the middle of one night in 1992, I had a call from Richard and Lisa. It must have been 1am or 2am and they had been to a concert at the Manchester Apollo. Richard had

parked his car near Moss Side, and, after the concert, they had found the car had been stolen. The police wouldn't go into Moss Side on a Saturday night. "You're on your own," they said. "We will look for your car but don't hold your breath. Have you anyone who can collect you?"

Lisa's boss lived nearby, but the police said not to ask anyone to go into Moss Side in a BMW as it was too dangerous. The only other person they knew relatively close by was me, so Katherine, my carer, got me out of bed and I drove the one and a half hours to Moss Side in Manchester to pick up the frightened little church mice. I found them sitting on the steps of the Apollo, terrified.

Richard's car was found, burnt out, a few days later.

Katherine decided she wanted a change of job and worked at the fledgling Kensgriff Care for a short time before returning to Australia. After she had moved on, I had one of the early Kensgriff Care arrivals from Denmark as my carer. Her name was Hella and she became an excellent carer. This was reassuring – that the service we were providing was up to the standard other people would need.

Finishing my degree

Throughout 1992 and 1993, I was studying in the evenings and working full-time with Kensgriff Care by day, and, of course, having weekend fun with Richard and Lisa. One day, while driving around Derwentwater, we took a tiny back road over a narrow bridge. Richard pulled in by the side of the road and

announced, “We’re getting out now.” “Trust me,” he added, seeing my rather incredulous face.

We pushed off down into the forest along a very bumpy path. “Just wait,” Richard was repeating. “Just wait.” We stopped further down at the top of a cliff overlooking Derwentwater. It was a bright, sunny day and the lake was like a mirror. Seemingly, out of nowhere, a steamer came puffing across the lake. The place is known as Surprise View – and it certainly lives up to its name.

I finished studying in May 1993. All I had to do was hand in my last assignment at Preston. It was all a bit of an anti-climax after four years of blood, sweat and tears. I had been expecting something more – I’m not sure what exactly – and I now faced the weeks of waiting for my results and six months until graduation. When my results came through in the autumn, I opened the envelope with some trepidation. My joy on discovering that I had passed my Business Studies degree course to gain a Bachelor of Arts with Distinction was indescribable. Graduation day with my parents alongside me was one of the proudest days of my life.



Graduation day, 1993

After that, as a bit of a celebration, I went to Germany to see Birgit, who was still working for Lufthansa. She picked me up in her little car and sped off down the autobahn. It was her birthday, and the first stop was her party.

Of course, I was now employing carers from Kensgriff Care, some good, and some not so good. I had some really odd carers at times. One girl set herself alight while putting up Christmas decorations in front of an open fire and another blocked the lavatory drains by using a whole roll of paper every time she went.

In 1993, I also took possession of my second adapted car. The original one had been the most unreliable vehicle ever. To add insult to injury (or perhaps vice versa), it had been bashed twice, once into a phone box and another time by the loo-blocking carer, who, after she had ripped the whole side of it off, said, “I forgot where I was.” And where was she? Apparently, on a straight road and with no other cars in sight, in broad daylight, where she managed to drive it into the side of a wall. Unfortunately, after that particular insult, the car never worked properly again and died in a burst of steam on the garage forecourt. The only option was a replacement.

In December 1993, my next Danish carer, Annette, and her family very kindly invited me over for Christmas. We went to stay with her sister and boyfriend, who had a lovely house outside Copenhagen. I have a particular fondness for Danish people, and once you are invited into their homes, they treat you like family. The morning after we arrived, we threw the curtains open and the very first thing I saw, sitting on the garden fence and looking right at me, was a beautiful little red squirrel.

The Danish celebrate Christmas on 24th December, which was new to me. The booze comes out in the early afternoon before everyone sits down to the starters of soup and little chicken pies at about 5–6pm. The main meal is roast duck with baby potatoes, caramelised by refrying them in sugar and butter, served with pickled red cabbage, all washed down with copious amounts of red wine. This is followed by a dessert of almond rice pudding, and if you find a whole almond, you are in luck and win a prize. After the meal, everyone exchanges presents,

dances around the Christmas tree and sings carols. It's wonderful.

Just as you start to relax, they start pulling out more drinks, with cognac, port and, unbelievably for me with my schoolboy sense of humour, a bottle of something called Spunk. Whilst it has its uses the world over, it takes a Dane to bottle Spunk and drink it after dinner. I hesitantly took a look at this glass of gooey liquid, then ventured a little sniff and taste, and it was absolutely disgusting. Spunk is actually black and made from salt liquorice, vodka and ammonium nitrate to give it an extra kick in the balls. Danes love it, which tells you something about Danes ...

While my Danish friends were and are a little crazy in the best possible way, the same cannot be said of my aforementioned cat, Mouse. When she was nice, she was very, very nice, but when she was bad, she was horrid. Mouse would sleep at night in the crook of my arm, under the duvet, angelic as ever. But when she woke up, she'd attack my arm, coming at me out of nowhere. There seemed to be a Jekyll and Hyde savageness to her. She loved going out killing rabbits, birds and other small animals, catching birds and mice throughout the year and, in spring, dragging in live baby rabbits. This was facilitated by my house being open plan without any internal doors. I'd be lying in bed only to hear the *thump, thump, thump* of Mouse coming in and then the scattering sound of the rabbit trying to get away, followed by Mouse chasing it. Eventually, there would be the death screams of the poor rabbit followed by an ominous silence.

Some of the carers took Mouse's antics in their stride, while others were less amused. On one occasion, I had a carer called Anna who went into the hall one morning after Mouse had killed a rabbit during the night. It was still dark when she came through, and all I could hear was her shouting and oaths of fury. She stomped up the stairs shouting, "Your cat killed a rabbit last night and I stood on something that squished up between my toes."

"What was it?" I asked.

"A rabbit's eyeball," she hissed back in disgust.

I started laughing, but she didn't see the funny side ...

In 1994, I went on holiday to Tuscany with my Danish carer, Trina. We flew to Pisa in the intense Italian heat of August, and, because of my spinal injury, my temperature and blood pressure regulation were knocked sideways. I'm not good in the heat. We had to drive from Pisa to the apartment in Tuscany without air conditioning in the car. I was sitting on the right with the sun beating down on me all the way. By the time we reached the dreamlike Tuscan farmhouse where we were staying, my temperature was 39.8°C. Trina sat me under a tree and filled me with cold drinks and, over three hours or so, I slowly cooled down. It was a lovely holiday, although the apartment left something to be desired. One bonus was that there were no outside lights and, in the evenings, we had an unbelievable view of the night sky. For some reason, there were numerous meteorites that August, and we sat around the pool watching the shooting stars with another English couple,

one of whom was strumming a guitar. Beautiful. It is moments like that which remind you of the joy of being alive and the good fortune that you are still able to do such things. The effort required to achieve those moments may be considerable, but the payback is immense and the challenges and pain of the journey left behind.

During the trip, we also went to Florence and, unfortunately, the lovely Duomo cathedral was closed. I had long wanted to visit this remarkable city and see the famous Uffizi art gallery. On arrival at the gallery, the marker points (put in to manage the expectations of tourists) indicated a wait of more than three hours. However, the security guards saw us arrive and beckoned us over. Much to the displeasure of the patient line of tourists who had been waiting for so long, I was ushered to the front of the queue and straight into the gallery.

The downside was that, for some reason, Trina was in a serious grump and refused to look at any paintings, instead sitting and writing some postcards. I was staggered. We had been given free, instant access to one of the foremost art galleries and she wasn't interested in looking at anything. I continued alone, taking my time and enjoying seeing the stunning works of art. We also visited the Academia to see Michelangelo's original David and other works of Michelangelo's, including half-finished blocks of the apostles. Their heads and limbs were coming out of the blocks of marble as if they were still forming and about to move. It was unbelievable.

Going back towards the car, Trina wanted to spend some time looking at shoe shops. Her lack of interest in art was matched by my lack of interest in shoes, so it was her turn to go it alone while I sat in the street, people watching. A little old lady came up to me, said something in Italian, and pressed a coin into my hand. What could I say? I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

On a personal front, I've found that when living with a spinal injury, fun moments tend to stick in your mind. I was back home from my Italian trip and went to see *Four Weddings and a Funeral* with Richard and Lisa. We settled down to watch the film, an enormous family-sized tub of popcorn in hand, and Lisa, in her usual inimitable style, knocked it flying. It went over everybody. This set the mood for the film and we laughed and loved every moment, despite the popcorn.

It was round this time that Richard decided he fancied a change of convertible car after having had two Triumph Stags. TVR sports cars were built in Blackpool and their Griffith was very popular, so when they introduced the new, slightly larger, Chimaera, Richard signed up immediately. I remember going down to the TVR factory with him on a couple of fun trips to see it being built. When it was finally delivered, it may not have been the most reliable car in the world, but he and Lisa enjoyed whizzing around in it – and I got to go as a passenger too sometimes. Mega fun.

Another joyful weekend was my friend Paul Brown's wedding to his girlfriend, Nicki, though it was not without a few heart-stopping moments. Paul had asked me to be his best man and

he had stayed over at my parents' house on the night before the wedding. He was like a cat on a hot tin roof, so nervous was he. We did our best to help him stay calm and managed to get him to the church at the appointed hour – but no bride appeared ...

Paul became more and more stressed as the vicar tried to fill the time with an impromptu local history lesson. Eventually a car arrived, but, alas, no Nicki was to be found in it. Things were definitely getting tense. It later transpired that the reason for her delay was that Nicki had agreed to meet her bridesmaids at the reception venue so they could all get dressed together. They had left all the gowns there the day before, and the venue owners, needing to go out, had given the key to Nicki's brother to pass on to Nicki. Unfortunately, her brother forgot to give her the key, so while Nicki could see her wedding dress through the window, she could not access it. She had no option but to wait for the owners to return. What Nicki said to her brother afterwards is anyone's guess ...

Thankfully, and to Paul's huge relief, Nicki eventually arrived and the rest of the day and my speech went well.

Moving to Clapham

In 1995, I started the search for somewhere new to live. I was looking around, but not getting anywhere. I had set my search area fairly wide and instructed the estate agents that I did *not* want a 1930s, 1940s or 1950s English-style bungalow. I think they ignored the word 'not' as they kept sending me details of precisely the kind of bungalow that was on my least-want-to-look-at list. Although I looked at a couple of places, I saw nothing suitable.

Around the same time, I went on my first trip to Denmark to do some Kensgriff Care presentations to sell our vacancies for possible carers to come to England. We took an overnight DFDS ferry from Newcastle to Esbjerg, on the north coast of Denmark, and, on arrival, drove to a comfortable family holiday place in a small town outside of Aarhus. My presentations proved popular, with more than 30 people present most times. I met Martin Steffensen in Aalborg and, true to form, everyone in his agency was incredibly welcoming and helpful. I really appreciated the support and openness of Martin's people. We were very honest with them, and I think they appreciated the work we brought to their agency. We finished off the trip playing tourists around northern Denmark, seeing the small towns and the coast.

I arrived back home in late August to a stack of possible houses from the estate agent. One of these particularly caught my eye as it was a house I had eyed up before. I'd visited the small village of Clapham quite recently to talk with Cave Rescue about going up Ingleborough hill (more of which later!), and as I had driven past the driveway of one very attractive house, I had looked at the 'sold' sign and thought that it was a pity. So when I flicked through the agent's details and spotted a house I liked in Clapham, I put two and two together and realised that it was the very same house. I rang the agent and it turned out the sale had fallen through – something to do with boundaries – and it was on the market again.

I raced over the next day, and the minute I saw it, I had the feeling that it was the house for me, notwithstanding that it had no central heating, steps outside and a huge orange 1970s

wood-burning stove right in the middle of the front room. The elderly owners, however, were anxious to sell and move closer to their daughter and I was anxious to buy. However, when preparing the purchase agreement, we saw the problems. The driveway was dual access and none of the boundaries had been set on paper but were more a handshake between neighbours. Over the next three months, my solicitor, to my eternal gratitude, solved all the problems.

We were really lucky, buying at the bottom of the market in August 1995. However, I probably overpaid and there was much to do to make it suitable for me to live in. This involved completely gutting the interior, installing a lift and putting in new floors – in short, the lot! Before work commenced, we had a ‘house defrosting’, as it was known, to meet the neighbours (with everyone in their warmest coats).

Building work started in spring 1996, and I moved in in April 1997. I would like to say that all went smoothly, but it didn't!



House renovation, 1995–1996



New lift, 1996



House renovation, 1996



Home, sweet home

It took about a year to make it habitable and another few years to fix all the errors made in the building work. As ever, Mum was of immense practical help, but my first winter there was horrendous. The house was so cold and draughty as the new

boiler had been plumbed incorrectly. The warm coats stayed on and my patience was wearing thin.

The village of Clapham sits at the foot of Ingleborough hill. Friends of my parents, Robert Brown and his wife, owned Ingleborough Nursing Home and had been helpful when I had first had my accident. It was Robert who put the seed of an idea in my head. He was a big bear of a man and a true optimist. “Why not do something fun?” he suggested one day. “I know the people at Cave Rescue, and we could do a charity thing of getting you up Ingleborough hill.”



Ingleborough hill (2,372ft/723m high)

It sounded like a good idea and preparations began. Weather conditions meant that we had to wait until the summer months and, tragically, Robert died unexpectedly in the interim. If anything, this made me even more determined. I stayed in touch with Cave Rescue though, and with no warning, on

Saturday, 1st July 1996, we had the call to say that today was the day and we were going at 1pm – be ready! They duly arrived and bundled me into a scratch-built wheelchair of two long scaffold poles with a bicycle wheel underneath.

On the flat, this would be wheeled, but on bumpy land, it could be lifted. It needed a team of about 16, but they could only manage 10 plus my then carer, Vivi, and a few others who came along for the ride. It was essential that Vivi came to accompany and help me.



On my way up Ingleborough hill with Cave Rescue, 1996

Cave Rescue put me in the chair and wheeled me through Clapham Village, up the nature trail and past the lake, places where I'd never been, and it was a voyage of discovery. The lads were full of banter and good cheer to keep us going, very lovely people. Up we went past Ingleborough Cave, where the terrain starts to become rougher.

A little beyond the cave, there is a narrow gorge called Trow Gill and at the top of that is a dry waterfall. I had to go up the waterfall in the chair, which was something of a mission.



*I went up Trow Gill in the wheelchair on the way up
Ingleborough hill, 1996*

The looks from people coming down on their bottoms as I was being heaved up were a picture. Next was a stone wall, but with an almighty effort, it was up and over.



Going over a wall, 1996

After that came Gaping Gill, which, as one of the biggest potholes in the country, made for an essential detour. It is an extraordinary hole, dark and scary with an aura of danger. People have died there.

Ahead of us, in the distance, we could see the summit of Ingleborough and our epic journey continued.



View from Ingleborough summit, 1996

We started over the first rise, Little Ingleborough, which is cruelly deceptive as it's not the rise to Ingleborough proper, which is much steeper. The team kept going, and, eventually, thanks to the stoicism of Vivi and the team, we reached the top.

The sense of achievement and camaraderie was terrific. After resting and taking in the stunning views, we realised that, essentially, this was only halfway and started back down. Mindful of some of the complexities of the ascent, Cave Rescue had summoned their rescue Land Rover which meant that the lower part of the descent was far easier.

Nevertheless, we didn't get back to Clapham until after 5.30pm, and I had booked tickets that same evening to a classical music concert at a local stately home. We were supposed to leave my parents' house in Wennington at 6pm. With just five minutes to get ourselves into the car, we drove

like mad things to Mum and Dad's. After the day's walk, Vivi needed a shower. Worse still, she had to get herself into a ballgown and me into my dinner jacket. Richard and Lisa were waiting, dressed to the nines.

"Where the hell were you?" asked Richard.

"Long and exciting story," I replied. I think Vivi deserved a medal. No dinner jacket for me but we went off in Richard's car and arrived at 6.59pm for the performance of Classics in the Park, due to start at 7pm. It was a wonderful setting. Vivi and Lisa threw down the rugs while Richard sorted me out. The first note sounded just as Richard popped the champagne. A day and evening of joy and wonder. And what a day; a fabulous day of days.



With Richard and Lisa, 1996

Rupert's wedding

Rupert's wedding to Monique was in 1996, but I missed it as I was languishing in bed with a rather nasty urinary infection. UTIs are a fact of life for people with a spinal injury, and I've had many UTIs over the years. Things deteriorate quickly and if antibiotic pills don't work, you can end up in hospital on intravenous antibiotics. Sometimes such infections can be very serious; they result in kidney infections that cause kidney stones. If using one, a blocked catheter is dangerous and can lead to autonomic dysreflexia, which, in turn, leads to dangerously high blood pressure. A side effect is a headache like you've never had before, as if your head is going to blow off. You can hear the blood vessels throbbing in your head while you wonder how high your blood pressure will go.

You often know you have a UTI, but not always. A sure sign is you begin to feel awful and uncomfortable, and they seem to have a habit of rearing their ugly heads just as you're looking forward to some special day or event. Whenever you least want one to happen, it does. On this occasion, I felt horrible and was lying in bed, regretting missing Rupert's wedding.

Rupert and Monique decided to live in England, rather than return to Spain, and bought a house in Hull, where Monique had grown up. They used to come over regularly, most notably with their first child, Romilly.



Family at home, 1995

Linda Adamsen

Vivi was finishing in July 1996 and Linda Adamsen was on the list to take over from her. We'd been chatting and there was a sense that we had somehow been friends for life, even though we'd never met.



With Linda, 1996

Linda was Danish and was working as a teacher but she wanted to take a sabbatical. She agreed to take over from Vivi. We immediately got on like a house on fire, a very noisy house on fire, rather like Phil and Kirstie on *Location, Location, Location*, except LOUDER. Linda did her first month before having two weeks off, during which time a pre-booked carer took over.

Linda wanted to visit Manchester as she had never seen the city, and she had booked a nice-looking hotel. At the hotel, the receptionist said, “Ah, Miss Adamsen, we have your room ready.” Linda thought she’d never before seen a receptionist dressed like the biker from the Village People, and when he turned around, his leather jeans didn’t have a bum in them, so she realised something very odd was going on. Inadvertently, she had booked a hotel in Canal Street, in the heart of the gay village – innocently thinking of ‘gay’ as meaning ‘happy’ – and was the only woman staying there. The chaps found it most amusing and took great care of her.

Linda was with me when I moved to Clapham in spring 1997. It was in a beautiful location, but I’m glad my parents were still living locally as we needed lots of help to get settled. Linda was here for three further months and went back to Denmark in June 1997, at which point, yet again, I had to get to know yet another carer.

When I moved to Clapham in 1997, Mouse came with me. I kept her in for the first few months – the cat, not Linda – as I know cats don’t like change and I wanted to give her time to adjust. One night, I let her out and she never came back.

I really wanted another cat, though, and my friend Paul Brown gave me a kitten from his cat's litter. This cat became Tom Cat and was very sweet and, unlike Mouse, rarely attacked anybody. In fact, Tom Cat was an absolute joy to have around the house and he used to sit on the doorstep like a guard cat. He was a lovely, warm-natured animal and far more user friendly than Mouse! Tom Cat lasted for about 14 years, when he developed an infection in his teeth and, after the surgery didn't go well, I had to have him put down. Since Tom died, I have done far more travelling and as it's often difficult to find someone to take in a cat while away, I didn't replace him.

The early part of my time in Clapham was very hectic and I was lucky to have Linda to help. I was working hard at Kensgriff Care, and there were many teething problems at home to sort out. I was also going back and forth to Richard and Lisa's at the weekends. At night the Lake District is quiet and beautiful, with the moon reflecting on Windermere. One night, en route, I was stopped by the police at a roundabout in Kendal. They were talking about £20,000 worth of cigarettes stolen from a supermarket and they asked me, "Can you get out of the car please?"

"Ah, not too easily," I replied. My driving licence was in the boot, and I told them they were free to take a look there. They found nothing but my wheelchair, of course, and I was free to go. It struck me that maybe I was the ideal candidate to carry out a cigarette heist.

In August, after Linda had returned home, I went over to Denmark for a holiday to see her in Kolding. We had an absolutely lovely apartment and again visited her parents, who were wonderful, warm and caring people. Linda then took me on a fabulous trip to stay in the lovely artist colony village of Skagen, in the north of Denmark. I had a wonderful time.

Putting a structure on Kensgriff Care

By the mid- to late-1990s, Kensgriff Care was growing; Jim and I ran the company, making a reasonable salary, and it was moving forwards. One of the things missing, however, was a policies and procedures structure. I took on the project of putting together that structure on the operational side of the business as it had all been rather ad hoc prior to 1998, with nothing really set up and no fixed processes. BS5750/ISO9000 is the quality management system for companies, and through the local chamber of commerce workshops, I discovered what was needed. The work took ages.

In the middle of it all, I was diagnosed with a nasty stomach infection, *Helicobacter pylori*. My GP wanted to have it treated and referred me for a colonoscopy. Stoke Mandeville was the best place for me, I decided, and, luckily, my original consultant was still there. The doctors did a colonoscopy – which isn't much fun – and the *Helicobacter* was duly diagnosed and treated with antibiotics.

In autumn 1998, Linda and her family came over to stay. By that stage, Lena was my new carer and we had about 10 people dotted all over the house. Through HPC, we had a day of circuit driving around the Croft track, which I loved but which frightened the living daylights out of Linda.

It was also around this time that my parents moved to a village in north Cumbria.



With Mum and Dad, 1999

Trip to South Africa

As previously mentioned, Wilbur Smith has been one of my favourite writers ever since I picked up his novel *Eagle in the Sky* at Stockholm airport as a teenager. I'd always dreamed of going to South Africa. Jim had taken a month off in 1998 and he agreed that I could take off February 1999. My friend Paul from the spinal unit was living in Cape Town and we had stayed in touch. "Right, I'm coming over there for February," I said, and, without hesitation, I booked the flights.

Martin was travelling with me as my carer. He was my long-time respite guy, although never full-time. Martin had been in Africa before and was strong, willing and knew what was happening there. The journey over was terrible, with multiple

delays and missed connections, but we eventually arrived in Cape Town exhausted.

We stayed in an ‘aparthotel’, and it was very helpful to have a kitchen to use. It was just great to see Paul again after all these years. Paul lived in a residential care home for tetraplegics and had created a little charity business to help keep his care home going. Rugby and cricket teams used to sign jerseys, balls and other sports memorabilia that was donated, and Paul would sell them or auction them to raise funds.

As visitors to South Africa, the exchange rate was very much in our favour, and it made us feel so crazy rich that it was embarrassing and upsetting, particularly as inequality was horrendous in South Africa at the time; the discrepancy between the rich and the poor obvious at every turn. There was a big squatter camp, Khayelitsha, on the Cape Flats, with people living in cardboard boxes out in the open, even living in the motorway central reservation. Driving along one day, I saw a man squatting down having a shit in full view on my left while a bright red Ferrari drove past on my right – a moment that stuck in my mind as symbolic of the chasm between wealth and poverty in that beautiful country.

Tourism is an important part of the South African economy and we did plenty of sightseeing and went for a fabulous meal in the well-known Mount Nelson hotel. The weather was beautiful, though the earth was tinder dry, so dry that one day there was a bush fire on Table Mountain and it came so close to our hotel that we had to move indoors as the smoke was out of

control. Luckily, the wind direction changed and the fire burnt itself out, but it was a sobering experience.

We made it up Table Mountain in the cable car to see the incredible views of the Indian Ocean one way and the South Atlantic the other, with Cape Town ahead. The docks from Wilbur Smith's *Hungry as the Sea* were there right before me, with Robben Island in the distance.

We found a wheelchair-accessible boat to take us to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela had been a prisoner, which looks close, but is, in fact, four miles or more out through the South Atlantic swell. Embarking at the Cape Town dock was easy but there was a profound height difference at Robben Island pier, with it being much higher than the tide level. The boat's fenders also kept it away from the dock and there was a wall to go over as well, not to mention the swell of the sea. The deckhands said, "We'll get you across. We'll lift you." One of them jumped onto the pier, and they practically threw me – absolutely terrified – over the metre-wide gap, but they got me there.

We walked under the archway that Nelson Mandela had also passed under, which was very atmospheric and emotive. One of the former convicts showed us around the cells. He was a formidable looking guy – big and burly – who had had all his front teeth knocked out. He had been there at the same time as Mandela but not in the same block. He took us into the giant cell in which he had been locked up for years. It was not much bigger than a badminton court and had held more than 200

people, with only one toilet, which was never cleaned. The men had had to sleep in shifts as there wasn't room for them all to lie down at one time. He then took us into the political block, which was a couple of dozen single cells. The block was exactly as it had been the day Mandela was released. His cell had a green floor but no bed – there was only a bedroll on the floor, a table and chair and bucket. It was hard to believe that he, the current president, had lived in that space for decades.

Outside his window was the kitchen garden where the manuscript for the *Long Walk to Freedom* was hidden. We had a tour of the gardens and while listening to the talk, I watched two small children, one white and the other black, playing together in that very garden. It was a profound moment.

Back at the dock, the tide was out and the sea level had dropped a further 10 feet. On top of this, the sea was now an angry one. I was again thrown onto the top deck, which, being plastic, was wet and slippery. We arrived in Cape Town, where, somehow, I was taken down the steep ladder and into the nearest bar for a much-needed drink to calm the nerves.

The whole trip was filled with amazing experiences. At Kaggga Kamma Safari Park we saw wildebeest, antelopes and other wild game. It was a dry wilderness, and we drove through miles of bumpy dirt roads in our Fiat Panda, out of phone-signal coverage. There were plenty of opportunities for disaster, but luck was with us and we made our way safely to the end of the trip with a wealth of memories, many very thought-provoking, to take home.

On returning from South Africa, it was straight back to work and reality.

In the early summer of 1999, Kensgriff Care had the full British Standards Institute (BSI) assessment for BS5750/ISO9000 and passed it first time. I was very pleased with this outcome. The assessors said it was the first ISO9000 procedure manual in full flowchart form that they had seen, but to me it had made sense to do it that way. Until they saw it, I don't think Jim and his wife, Maggie, had really understood how much work had gone into getting BS5750/ISO9000 accreditation.

In August 1999, I had another trip to Denmark when I went to Linda's 30th birthday party. My English carer at the time was Rosie, and she was a fabulous cook. Rosie was one of those people who managed to do everything while looking as if she was doing nothing. I used to go home in the evening to a cocktail and a three-course meal. It was wonderful!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Annus Horribilis
August 1999 to August 2000

Sometimes, when things feel as if they are quite settled, something will leap up to rock the boat. The year from August 1999 to August 2000 would come to be framed in my mind as my own *annus horribilis*, and before it all started, I was definitely not prepared for what was about to be thrown at me.

*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'*

From 'If' by Rudyard Kipling

Kensgriff Care held its annual directors' meeting on the last Friday of August each year. The financial year ended in July 1999, so the meeting was our time to reflect and plan for the following 12 months. We'd go through the formalities, review the numbers, financial results, pay rises for the staff and us and any strategic issues that needed addressing. Jim and Maggie had a lovely house in the Lake District and the meeting meant we could get away from day-to-day activities and chat things through there.

A few years after Kensgriff Care got started, Jim and Maggie had, unprompted, kindly gifted me a little less than 50% of the

business while they retained the controlling interest with just over 50%. Although Jim was very much the senior partner, I didn't mind too much because he was older than me, with more knowledge and experience of the agency business. While we had talked from time to time about succession planning, nothing was ever formally agreed. Jim was over 60 by then and I assumed that as co-founder of the business, ownership would come to me on Jim's retirement. Our partnership was cordial and mutually supportive.

I remember driving out to meet them on that sunny Friday in August. I had just returned from a recruitment trip to Denmark and was expecting a relaxed, pleasant afternoon. When the meeting started, we talked through various issues in the usual way along with a broad discussion of challenges and successes. The company had had a decent year, but recruitment was still complex and becoming more difficult as time went on.

Then, as the meeting was drawing towards its close, out of the blue Jim started to talk about a concept for a major change in business direction. He proposed that a diversification into an unknown, competitive and very different client market would bolster our recruitment. My first reaction was, "But Jim, we know nothing about this other market." I didn't understand where this proposal had come from – we had not even chatted informally about anything like it. Where was the development money going to come from – the market knowledge, the recruits, the staff, the clients, the structure? Who was going to direct and manage it? My immediate response was, "We are a tiny, specialist agency. We just can't do this." However, I knew that as majority shareholders, Jim and his wife could quite

legitimately instigate this change with or without my consent. Driving home after the meeting, I realised that I might have a problem here.

Over the next few weeks, I repeatedly tried to discuss this further, but we couldn't agree and the atmosphere in the office deteriorated dramatically. Much to my regret, any hope of reconciliation rapidly disappeared into the distance. I did not know what to do. We had built Kensgriff Care into a small business that was making good profits after only eight years. Yes, we had a problem with recruitment, but the proposed major new business diversification would change everything. We had a fundamental difference of opinion – I didn't understand why we should do this and I just couldn't agree to it.

Suffice to say that the next three or four months at work were very, very difficult. Without going into details, sadly our previously friendly working relationship slowly crumbled, making any conversations difficult. By October, I was becoming increasingly worried about where the company was going and that was not how I wanted to work, especially in the long term.

And so, as the previously cordial relationship between Jim and me continued to decline, the idea was forming in my head that I might have to leave Kensgriff Care and start again from nothing. This filled me with horror, but while leaving was almost unthinkable, I could not see a way to resolve things so I could stay at Kensgriff Care – the company I had co-founded,

that provided my carers, my job and my salary. I felt that I could not stay but I could not leave. Talk about feeling stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Dad was very supportive of me but he was also much saddened at the changes afoot because Kensgriff Care had been his idea after all and it had turned Jim's business around. As the weeks crept on, the stress I felt was becoming ridiculous and it was like being on a hamster wheel that was being turned faster and faster so that I couldn't keep up, but equally, I couldn't stop it. I felt like I was going to burst. I felt awful but I just had to keep going.

Fortuitously, I had some good carers at the time. A girl called Maren had come over in September from Denmark and she was a gem. As was Sarah, a local girl who worked well with Maren and got me through it too. I leant on them very hard over those months and the months to come.

Christmas came and, as usual, we had our annual party, this time hiring a function room at a local hotel. We fancied something with music and fun as a change from the usual meal in a restaurant, but my mood was very troubled and unsettled that evening.

Eventually, we closed for Christmas and I took three weeks off. I was absolutely drained.

Shortly after Christmas, I went down with very bad pneumonia and called my GP surgery. One of the doctors asked about my condition. "I can't even cough because my cough doesn't work

due to my spinal injury,” I replied. “Ah, it’s only a cold,” was the rather dismissive opinion over the phone.

Feeling even worse some hours later, a bright young locum answered my second call to the surgery and later mentioned at a staff meeting how bad I was. Within 10 minutes, the senior partner was over with an oxygen canister and serious antibiotics. He knew all about pneumonia and tetraplegics – thank you, Dr Storey. For weeks on end I was lying in bed, not knowing what meetings were going on at work without me. The frustration and worry were excruciating.

Jim was still steadfastly behind his diversification idea, although nothing had yet happened to begin making it a reality. “Either you buy me out, I buy you out, or we split the company,” I said to Jim one day. While this filled me with dread (as I would be giving up everything I, we, had built over the years – my source of carers, my job, our business and my source of earnings), I realised that we could not carry on as we were.

In the end, in early 2000, it was agreed that I would sell my shares to Jim. I informed the staff that I was leaving – I thanked them and left and never looked back.

After leaving the Kensgriff Care office, I drove to Mum and Dad’s for a large cognac. My parents were stunned at the turn events had taken. I knew the magnitude of what I had done, but also knew that I’d had no choice. Dad said that I shouldn’t have left. At that stage, I was still being paid, temporarily still on the

books, but long-term I was losing my job, my salary, my care and my future.

What was I to do? I knew I would have to start again and I knew that I could take absolutely nothing with me, but how do you start a company from nothing except the clothes you're wearing? Again? Alone and as a tetraplegic? "Dunno," was my only answer to that one. I did, though, reckon that if I could start again, I could do it all better than them.

Driven by this conviction, I decided to do an honours degree thesis in Internet marketing. I knew the Internet was the way forward for recruitment. I went down to the University of Preston and signed up with the professor for the year. I was busy planning my future and pulling all the pieces together. I was seeing more of Mum and Dad, visiting them two or three times a week, going out for pub lunches and making the most of our unexpected time together.

Obviously, things were not good, with me, a tetraplegic, having no job and numerous future business worries. To be honest, I didn't think things could get much worse. But I was wrong. In March 2000, things got much, much, much worse.

For years, Mum had complained about an achy bad back, but we never took it as anything more than that. Dad was an old-school English gentleman, the stiff-upper-lip type, straight out of public school in the handling of his emotions. One afternoon, he rang me in tears, saying, "Mum is very seriously

ill.” He then put the phone down. I had never heard him cry before.

I rang back. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think?” Dad replied and put the phone down again. I jumped into the car and screamed over to their house. By this time, they were living near Penrith, around an hour and a half away, a journey long enough to play through any number of awful scenarios.

In Dad’s study, Mum explained that she had been to see a doctor about her bad back. The doctor had done tests and had said, “Pauline, I’m sorry to have to tell you that you’ve got liver cancer. Except for that, you are in perfect health but the cancer is advanced and treatment is needed immediately.”

The three of us sat together and talked things through as best we could. Mum’s mum had died of liver cancer at 55, and now Mum was 65 with the same disease.

I told them both that I loved them and asked what I should do.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing,” Mum replied. And I took solace in that.

Mum was offered chemotherapy and radiotherapy. The former involved having a big needle inserted into the liver with the

chemo drugs, but after the first treatment, Mum said she was not doing it again; the pain was so bad.

Over the next few weeks, the disease dragged her downhill at the speed of an avalanche – completely out of control. It was devastating. At the same time, in the background, I was trying to deal with selling my shares to Jim and worrying about planning my business future. I immediately cancelled my university plans.

One minute would be calm but the next could be crazy. Then I had a frantic call from Dad one morning to tell me Mum had had a stroke. She had fallen ill downstairs, and Dad, who was far from fit himself, had somehow carried/dragged her up the spiral staircase to bed (in his panic, he had forgotten they had a spare downstairs bedroom next to the living room).

Once again, I screamed over to my parents' house to arrive just as the paramedics were carrying Mum to the ambulance. Her face was drained of all colour and life. I got Dad into the car and we sped after the ambulance to Carlisle hospital. The staff settled Mum in intensive care and later in the day told us to go home for the night. Dad was beside himself with worry about Mum but was also not used to looking after himself. In the evenings, he consoled himself with whisky. Thank goodness for Rupert, my brother, who returned home from Spain (where he and his family were by then living) to look after him. They used to sit up at night talking and getting Dad through his pain.

After a few days in intensive care, Mum was transferred to a hospice ward as she was in rapid decline.

Simultaneously, I was in the middle of actioning my exit from Kensgriff Care. I needed to find a corporate lawyer to advise on my case. Thankfully, a friend introduced me to a good firm in Preston where I dealt with one of their partners. He and Jim's lawyers got talking, and the horse-trading began. At the same time, I was commuting up and down the road to Dad's while Mum was dying in front of my eyes. It was heartbreaking and unbelievably stressful. There was little time for self-pity, though. Spinal injury and life as a tetraplegic, with its constant challenges, never goes away, and the need to start a new business and build a future for myself was pressing. It was a lot to deal with all at one time and the strain was taking its toll on all of us.

By the middle of April, the hospice said they couldn't do any more for Mum and prepared her for home.

Mum came home but couldn't talk or care for herself. Rupert undertook all her personal care, the feeding and keeping her clean. I don't know how he did it, but he did. It was amazing to see and the tenderness was just fantastic.

One sunny afternoon in the garden, Mum sat in her wheelchair beside me in my wheelchair and we looked into each other's eyes. Mum's were bloodshot and jaundiced, but they were her eyes, the ones I had known all my life, and I had a certain feeling of connection that day. It was just so sad.

As though there wasn't enough to contend with, my car started playing up with warning lights going off everywhere. The timing of my car problems couldn't have been worse and I had to drive to Manchester to have the hand controls taken off and replaced. Dad, Mum and Rupert were in Penrith, the car was in Manchester and I was all over the place. In the end, Vauxhall accepted that it was a standard fuel sensor fault and repaired it.

Then, right in the middle of all of this, my solicitor rang to talk about the Kensgriff Care share negotiations, delivering his opinion, "Your position is weak and the future looks bleak." I can tell you, you really don't want to hear that from your own lawyer at the best of times – and these were far from the best of times.

Mum went downhill very quickly during the next week. One afternoon, while I was in the kitchen chatting with Dad, Rupert pushed Mum in her wheelchair past me on the way to the downstairs bedroom. She held out her hand to me and squeezed my finger. It was the last physical communication between us. Over the following few days, her life ebbed away, and it sometimes seemed as though Dad's energy was seeping away with her.

I remember looking at myself in the shaving mirror each morning and wondering what else could go wrong that day. The washing machine broke down next, then the fridge and, finally, the cooker gave up the ghost. It felt like everyone and everything around me was dying. I stopped looking in the mirror then.

By that stage we had a palliative care nurse to help with Mum's end-of-life care. One day in my parents' kitchen, Dad and I were sitting chatting when the nurse asked, "Can you hear her breathing?" Mum's breathing was little more than a rasp by then, and the nurse explained, "She's on morphine and that death rattle will continue until the end." It was horrendous.

On 5th May, Mum's breathing stopped. It was heartbreaking. She was just 65. Understandably, Dad was distraught and unable to deal with the business of death – a stream of administrative onslaught when you least need it. We called the funeral directors, and they took Mum away. Rupert and I spent the night injecting large amounts of Scotch into Dad.

It seemed barely believable that Mum could go from being apparently fit and healthy in mid-March to dead by early May.

Dad was a very private person and did not want anyone but us three at the funeral, and nothing in a church, just the cremation. Eventually, we got it done and he wept his heart out.



I will always remember my mum like this

Rupert went back to Spain and my aunt Dorothea, Mum's youngest sister, came up to care for Dad. By then, he was overweight, with heart problems and angina, and he needed help as he couldn't do laundry or even cook for himself. I became closer to Dorothea over that time than I had ever been before.

In those short, and long, six weeks from March to early May, I had lost my much-loved mother, who had played such an important part in my life, and my father now needed more support from me than ever. I loved him, but he needed much more physical care than I could manage. I found an American divorcee, Dorna, to work as his housekeeper. She was a real asset and stayed for a year or two. Later, a younger person, Magda from Poland, took over. She was wonderful and her cheerfulness really brightened Dad's latter years. They became

close, with Dad caring for her as much as one would a granddaughter.

Throughout the rest of May, negotiations continued with Jim's lawyers in Preston. I was not happy with the price they were offering for my shares. In the end, I said, "I want this amount, or I will not leave." With a private company, it's all a guess what a company is worth and the majority shareholder holds all the power. I knew I had already lost, but we eventually negotiated and agreed a settlement figure.

The irony was that I knew most of that money would go straight back to them. I was still a tetraplegic, the one constant in a life that seemed to be changing at an alarming rate, and I still needed full-time live-in care. In splitting from Kensgriff Care, I not only lost my job and my ability to earn a living, I also lost my source of care providers. I now had no option but to pay Jim a client's fee to provide me with carers. The frustration of this was immense. Maybe it was all just a difference of opinion between business partners, but, perhaps naively, I felt betrayed and angered by someone I had trusted.

I had been thinking through numerous options and finally bit the bullet and rang my friend Linda in Denmark to ask if she would like to come over to the UK to help me start a new care business. Of course, I fully expected her to say no because she was living in Denmark, had a boyfriend and was working as a teacher.

To my utter amazement, she said she would think about it. Unknown to me, she had been thinking about taking a

sabbatical from her work, and by the end of May, Linda and I were sitting down at my kitchen table talking through starting a new spinal injury care agency together. I hadn't been able to take anything at all with me from Kensgriff Care, so all I had was what was in my head. Wonderfully, madly, Linda agreed to come to a new country and start a business she knew nothing about with someone she had briefly worked with five years previously. She was to risk everything and the bravery of this was not lost on me. Without her, I would not have got any new company started. Without her, I have no idea which direction my life would have taken.

This time, Jim's solicitor ensured that the share sale contracts were tied up very tightly from the start. A restrictive covenant prevented me from competing with Kensgriff Care for many months. I signed documents for leaving in June 2001 and all contact with Kensgriff Care ended, except, of course, the necessity of buying my care from them at market rates. I did manage to negotiate a small discount, but I felt it was little compensation for my years of hard work.

Descending into Gaping Gill

After all the strain and damage of my *annus horribilis*, I wanted a bit of distraction and excitement. Setting one's sights on a goal is a way of moving forward, or vertically downward, in this particular case!

Gaping Gill is one of the largest potholes/caves in the UK, a nasty, dangerous, 300ft/100m-deep hole in which people have died. It's located partway up Ingleborough hill and a couple of

times a year, it is possible for members of the public to be winched into it.



Gaping Gill, 2000

Having viewed the entrance on my ascent of Ingleborough, I now had a mind to see what lay beneath. Bradford Pothole Club holds a winch meet at Gaping Gill every year, when the members build a frame using scaffold poles that support a simple caged seat, not dissimilar to a bosun's chair. You walk out over a few planks, balanced above the void, and are loaded into the chair. The safety bar is slammed shut and a diesel-powered winch then lowers you the 300 feet or so into the cavern. It's straight out of Heath Robinson, or that's how it appears to the uninitiated! On 25th May 2000, during Linda's visit, my opportunity came to descend this famous pothole.

Robert, the boyfriend of my local carer, Sarah, had a Land Rover, and we arranged with landowners for him to drive me up. He took me as far as he could go, and Sarah got me in my wheelchair and dressed me in a red jumpsuit.

The team hauled me down the steep slope to the mouth of Gaping Gill, and in case that wasn't enough, they then had to wheel me along the edge of this black hole to the bosun's chair contraption. I was in my wheelchair facing the frame whereupon Robert lifted me over his shoulder while holding onto a pole with his other hand to steady himself. We both knew that if he slipped I was a goner, and I couldn't help thinking the whole thing was a mad idea. At this point, the scaffold felt a little terminal.

I was heaved into the chair and couldn't help noticing that the gate of the box was pretty basic and closed with only a single, thin bolt. To top it all, I found the only way I could maintain balance was by leaning back, a manoeuvre that was made near impossible because of the safety helmet that had been placed on my head. I was right on the edge of the biggest hole I had ever seen.



Gaping Gill, 2000

My balance was also right on the edge. If I were to spasm, it would all be over. The chair moved slowly away and descended at an angle. I felt close to falling out and about halfway down, I closed my eyes. Eventually, I reached the bottom, to find my chair there waiting for me. A wheelchair in Gaping Gill? It looked so strange. Linda and Maren, my PA at the time, braved the journey down too.



At the bottom of Gaping Gill with Linda and Maren, 2000



Gaping Gill, 2000

The cave is a huge geological chamber into which you could fit St Paul's Cathedral. It was lit up for the day, and in the distance, I could see a speck of yellow that I then realised was a person approaching through one of the many tunnels that go for miles under the ground. It is a most impressive place to see, if somewhat terrifying.

I only spent a few minutes down there before I had to go back up, which was a prospect I wasn't relishing. All I could hope for was that the winch didn't break on the way up. I was put back into the little lift, and I closed my eyes.



Gaping Gill, 2000

Miraculously, I reached the surface, where I was placed on a stretcher and carried back to the Land Rover.

As it happened, when the next person was descending, the winch ran out of fuel and was stuck about halfway for 20 minutes until more diesel was obtained. I said a little prayer of thanks that this delay had not happened while I was in the chairlift.

The whole experience was so scary that I didn't need suppositories for weeks.

I can now say Gaping Gill is wheelchair accessible but definitely not wheelchair adapted.

Care funding

If I thought Gaping Gill was a black hole, care funding competes.

Having sold my shares in Kensgriff Care, I no longer qualified for social services care funding. Years later, I would find out about NHS care funding, but for now, I would have to use my own money to buy my own care, even though I was not earning anything.

On top of this, I spoke with other care agencies, but none did the specialised care I needed, plus I had been in fierce competition with them over the years, which probably didn't help my cause. Some did not know I had left and most would not even talk to me, at least not seriously.

Linda had made it clear from the start that she did not want to be my carer indefinitely, but it was tricky trying to find a care provider without going to one of my competitors or back to Kensgriff Care. She was firm on the point but agreed to help until we found someone else. Maren left at the end of July and, in August, Linda took over my care again.

My *annus horribilis* was over but at a very high cost. It was probably the worst year of my life, or one of the worst, and, coming from a tetraplegic, it's quite something to find a year

that competes with the year I broke my neck as the worst one ever.

Although there was much to do, I needed a complete break and at the end of August, Linda and I went on holiday.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Picking Up the Pieces and Starting Again August 2000 to March 2009

Marbella

Rupert lived near Marbella and had married Monique in 1997. Monique's dad owned a villa in the south of Spain. Rupert and Monique had met out there but had married in England and spent two or three years here before moving back to Spain, not long before Mum fell ill. I rang Rupert and asked him to find me somewhere to go on holiday. This was not as easy as it sounds as, before the growth of the Internet, it was not so easy to find wheelchair accessible holiday accommodation without ringing every possible place.

Rupert eventually found a suitable apartment for Linda and me to stay in. It was a distance from the coast and in a residential development, but it was fine. Rupert had a friend who owned a car rental agency and this friend took me to his place after picking me up at the airport, offering me a very nice Fiat Panda. However, I had my eye on a two-door convertible and insisted on it. I was away from my worries for a while, which was all I was wanting.

One day on a drive back from Ronda, a gorgeous old town in the hills, Sophie Ellis Bextor came on the radio singing *If This Ain't Love*. The song caught me immediately and became the song of the holiday for Linda and me.

Starting again, again

Do or do not do. There is no try.

Yoda

It is no use saying, "We are doing our best." You have got to succeed in doing what is necessary.

Churchill

I was determined not to give Kensgriff Care any more money, which was an excellent incentive to get our new business up and running. My restrictive covenant finished towards the end of March 2001 and we aimed to start the new business the day after it had finished. I had a vision of how to run the business. It would be much more structured and we would concentrate purely on live-in spinal care. I had cancelled my university plans and spent mornings talking and planning with Jeff, Dad and Linda around the kitchen table. Linda and I agreed to pool our resources and, by combining our efforts, to start in business together.

We were starting from nothing. The company did not have a name, an office or a phone number and it was not registered. Really, it was nothing but a dream. I was putting my knowledge into action and very much wanted to do it immediately, but we had to harness the energy for April. We needed to catch the wave and not miss the opportunity. I had just enough money to get started. Luckily, I owned my house outright and it was a huge security for me knowing that I would not be out on the street if it all failed.

Dad's first hip replacement was due in September, and I had to drive him to Newcastle for a consultation the week I was back

from Spain. He had the operation on schedule in a private hospital, and I rang him afterwards. “Dad, how are you doing?” I asked.

“Great,” he replied. “I’m sitting up having fillet steak and a bottle of champagne.” That’s the way to do it, Dad.

I started to get into business planning at that stage. I drew up a bullet-point strategy, covering everything from registering the company to setting up phone lines, printing brochures and everything else in between. I had about 80 points to tackle between September 2000 and April 2001. One big concern was the contracts between the company and client and the company and carers. They had to be right. I went to lawyers in Birmingham to have contracts written up, and these were legally fine, but the terms were all wrong and not specific to what I wanted. I had to rewrite them and send them back for approval. This took repeated redrafts to get right and was very taxing.

I asked Jeff to find us an office, and he found the place in Lancaster where we are still based today.

We also needed a computer system and the right software. There was a computer fair in London Olympia, and I went to it with Sarah. I wasn’t staying long, so I only took a light equipment bag. While there, I met my friend Marcus for lunch at the fair (his mother was my godmother and Mum had been Marcus’s) and when finishing our meal and chat, the bottom fell out of my world as the world fell out of my bottom.

In the trade, it's known as a 'bowel accident', but this was an explosive shitting myself in the middle of Olympia exhibition hall – it could hardly have been more public – and I could have cried. Thankfully, Marcus did not notice or was too polite to say so. After we had said our goodbyes, I said to Sarah, "We're in the shit. Literally." We had nothing with us, were 300 miles from home with no change of clothes, no rubber gloves, nothing. Being a true country girl and not one to be easily rattled, Sarah said we should stop at the chemist to buy what we needed. There were no histrionics, no dramas, from Sarah as she quietly dealt with the very smelly, unpleasant problem. Back at the hotel, after stopping for incontinence sheets, gloves and wipes, she got me on the bed and cleaned me up. I did have to drive home in dirty trousers, but we got there. This whole episode was caused by a recurrence of the *Helicobacter pylori* and antibiotics were needed to rid me of it once and for all.

Throughout the time at home when I was doing all this business planning, my brain was going through the wringer. It always ran out of energy at 4pm each day, so I would put on the TV to wind down. *Ready Steady Cook* and *A Place in the Sun* became firm favourites. In one episode, Amanda Lamb, whom I happened to fancy, was with a couple in the South of France, reminding me of our time in Antibes. The area, Collioure, looked nice and I made note to take a look there if ever I was in France.

Registering the company was another big item. You can buy a stock company from the list of thousands of limited companies not trading. I spotted one called Origin Consultancy Limited.

Origin signifies the beginning of something, a new start, plus it was short and easy to remember, which was ideal.

Linda was going home for Christmas in 2000, which left me without a carer. What was I supposed to do? Richard's wife, Lisa, was pregnant with Jasper and the pregnancy was not going well, so I couldn't impose myself there. I stumbled upon an agency called Tender Loving Carers – I mean, really? It turned out they had someone who had worked with spinal injury before. She was an air hostess but was coming back home on 23rd December while Linda was leaving on the 24th. Perfect. Also, she could stay until after Christmas.

Meanwhile, I was busy dealing with Dad, trying to socialise and attempting to start Origin. Of course, I received a call from the care agency on 22nd December. The carer's flight was cancelled and she would now be arriving Christmas Eve instead and would not be with me until after Linda had left. This was a less than ideal situation but there was little that could be done, terrifying though it was. Linda left for Stansted in the snow in my one-litre Suzuki van, which only added to my overall concern. Some kind neighbours fed me, and my new carer, Juliet, rang around 3pm to say she was in England and on her way. My relief was indescribable, even more so because Juliet proved to be fantastic.

Over New Year, Richard and Lisa were having a murder mystery party, like Cluedo, and I was playing the part of a racing driver and dressed appropriately. It was a snowy night and in the end, no other guests were foolish enough to make the journey in such foul weather. We had dinner and drinks, didn't

murder each other and quietly bade farewell to a very difficult year.

Origin's origin

Linda came back from her trip to Denmark in January 2001.

She had been absolutely clear from the start that she did not want to be my carer indefinitely, but that left me with the ever-present dilemma of finding a care provider who could help me.

A local lady who had helped me before introduced me to Heather, from Ripon. Heather was unusual in that she was completely different from any of my previous carers. She was a petite lady in her 50s who had no previous experience of looking after someone with spinal injury, but we worked well together. I was very grateful to have Heather with me that spring as we were starting Origin.

Launching Origin was crazy and we were determined to get it right. No page was left unturned, no detail unchecked and the practicalities of setting up an office and ensuring that everything worked continued until the very last minute. At the end of March 2001, we opened our doors and we were away ...



www.origincare.com

We knew we had to start and not lose the impetus. Here we were in a nice, shiny, new office, with new desks and new chairs but – and this was quite key – no clients, carers or contacts. Nothing. Where should we start?

We found an advertising agency in Morecambe and placed ads in magazines and newspapers. It was on the cusp of the Internet exploding, and, at the time, print ads were still the best option. We put ads in the local papers and all brought results.

Of course, before we could send carers out to clients, they had to be trained. I designed and arranged a training course, to be delivered by one of the local colleges, and the first course took place in May with five new recruits who would, we hoped, be our first potential carers. I was covering some of the specialist aspects on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and, while it felt good to be back in business, we had no guarantee that the people in training would then work for Origin.

For those first few months, everything was outgoings, and Origin was losing around £10,000 a month. It was not a comfortable situation.

Then, one Thursday afternoon in May, I had a call from Linda, who said a chap called Charles needed somebody for Saturday. The call came in while I was giving a carer training class.

“Hold on a minute, I’ll ask the room,” I said. I turned to the trainees and asked, “Can anyone do a job starting on Saturday?”

“Yes,” said one of the guys as he put up his hand.

That was how Charles became client number one. (Wonderfully, Charles is still using Origin some 22 years later!) It was 15th May 2001 and off we went. The guy we sent to Charles as his carer did the job at first, but, unfortunately, he had to be fired two weeks later for drunkenness. It was a bumpy start, but we kept moving forward and improving. We were recruiting hard and training hard. And, all the time, looming over us was the question of whether we could start getting some income before the bank account reached zero. It was a close-run thing, but we did it. I had many sleepless nights for years, and sometimes still do, even today. Such is the nature of running your own business.

Linda and I worked together on an equal footing and we worked very hard. We decided that running ourselves into the

ground would not be helpful to anyone, so we made sure to take the occasional holiday.

In September, Richard and Lisa's son, Jasper, was born happy and healthy. I also went away that month with Heather to Rupert's house in Spain. He had bought some land in the olive-and-almond-grove country near Ronda, about an hour from Marbella. The land there is like a rumpled blanket, Rupert's driveway going up and down, up and down across the edge of a ridge. In fact, he took the top off the ridge to build the house.



Rupert's house in Spain, 2001

Heather was an excellent travelling companion, it was a great trip and I felt well rested after a few days of eating and relaxing in the sun.

By autumn 2001, the business was growing slowly but steadily, but it was not an easy year for the economy. The country was in the grip of foot-and-mouth disease and then there was the day that will for ever stick in all our minds. I remember we were on a training session when we heard that a plane had hit a skyscraper in New York. We continued with our training, but, afterwards, I fired up my laptop and recall, vividly, the distress I felt to see the horror unfolding. It was, of course, 11th September 2001.

By December, things at work were settling and my 40th birthday was approaching. Richard and Lisa, along with Jeff Hindley, came over to celebrate. I have been a big wine fan ever since those wine-selling days as a kid, and, as 1961 had been one of the finest claret vintages since the war, I muttered to Jeff that I'd like to sip a glass for my birthday.

“Well, Pete, my boy,” he said. “I happen to have a bottle of 1961. A magnum I bought some years ago for a celebration that never came, so I'd like to give you that for your birthday.”

Richard and Lisa turned up with three-month-old Jasper, who slept peacefully through proceedings. We opened that bottle of claret on the night and it was delicious – I still have the empty bottle in the garage.

And so as 2001 drew to a close, I could look back with some sense of satisfaction. After the horrors of 2000, it had been a

better year, particularly once the dramatic few months of getting the company off the ground had passed. There was no stopping us now and we were aware that we needed to continue to push onwards and that meant more of the same – a lot of hard work.

The year 2002 saw more advertising, more hard graft and the pulling of everything together to drive the company forward. We were working, recruiting and placing. I was doing much of the recruiting but was sharing it with a person down south.

Dad was starting to struggle. He lived in the epicentre of the foot-and-mouth outbreak in north Cumbria, and that meant it was difficult going to see him because of the restrictions on movement. I couldn't risk carrying foot-and-mouth from there to down here, so we'd meet halfway for pub lunches. He'd had his first hip operation in September 2000 and the second in December 2000. After the first, he was OK but he developed bad angina when out walking, which then put him off exercise for life. The second operation didn't go well and he developed swelling and pain in his leg and never really recovered fully from the surgery. He was only 72, but it was the beginning of his slow decline.

Heather was still with me and the consistency of care was a bonus. She finished in the spring after about a year with me. Once again, I was faced with finding a new carer.

Frances took over and in August I planned a trip to London for business and then on to Oxford for the wedding of one of my

old school friends, Giles. Frances was not keen on going to London or anywhere else away from home. She became very stressed and quite erratic.

Having completed the interviews in London, we headed to Oxford. I was a guest, so there were no best man or wedding party obligations. All I had to do was enjoy the day in a beautiful place with beautiful weather and friendly people. However, Frances seemed visibly distressed, to the extent that people were asking if there was something wrong with her. On the way back, she said, “I didn’t cover myself in glory, did I?” Looking back, I realise she must have been suffering from terrible anxiety that even she herself didn’t understand.

I didn’t want this to happen again and was pretty certain Frances would not be comfortable dealing with my planned trip to Spain. A few weeks before, a carer called Sophie, the daughter of a farmer, had impressed me on the training course. Linda rang her about being my carer on the trip to Spain.

“Ah, yes,” she gulped and agreed.

I had never met her, except for half an hour at the training course, and when I called her, I said, “I’ll meet you at the airport.”

“OK,” she gulped again.

I found a lift to Manchester Airport and met Sophie outside the terminal, after which we set off on a wing and a prayer. We

arrived in Spain off to a good start, and Rupert met us at the airport. He threw me into his 4x4 and we headed off through Malaga's streets back to his house in the country. Rupert has quite a short fuse, and on the journey home his fury with other drivers was expressed with a deluge of effing, blinding and fist-waving. Sophie sat quietly behind me, no doubt wondering what she had got herself into. The next day, we hired a rental car and had a great week together. She was to become a regular travel companion over the years and was always up for a challenge.

Around 2003, I started on a run of having South African long-term carers. My first was a girl called Elsbeth and we became great friends. Elsbeth was here for a couple of years and then stayed in England to do a physiotherapy degree. While she studied at Manchester Metropolitan University, I was invited down to give a lecture on physiotherapy, rehabilitation and spinal cord injury to the whole cohort of physiotherapy students. On arrival, I was greeted by a packed lecture theatre – nearly 200 people. This is the largest group I've addressed and it's a good job I like public speaking.

Elsbeth returned home in 2007 and is now working as a physiotherapist in Cape Town. After Elsbeth came Cornelia, who became another good, close friend. She stayed for the full two years of her visa, as did her boyfriend, who worked locally as a farmhand. My last South African carer was a girl called Thea, who again became a good friend. She is now a nurse in Pretoria.

The help provided by most of my carers has been tremendous and the lasting friendships have brought great joy to my life. There are a few, though, whom I would rather forget – the role is not for everyone.

The blur years

Many of the years at the beginning of Origin have merged into one. We stopped losing money in 2002 and were just about breaking even, but I was still not paying myself. Ironically, even though I was not earning anything, I had to pay tax at 40% on my care as I was receiving it as a benefit-in-kind from Origin.

I was very busy, only stopping to go on a holiday here and there.

In the summer of 2004, I went out to see Gudrun, my very first German carer. She was married by then and her husband's family owned a hotel in Southern Germany. "Stay with us," was the invitation, which we were only too delighted to do, and it was lovely in beautiful, hot, Southern Germany. Sophie, who enjoyed working short stints as a respite carer, was with me.

I remember we'd hired an Audi A3. On the autobahn, driving back from a day out, I said to Sophie, "Let's see how fast it can go. Put your foot down." She agreed, albeit somewhat nervously. There is no speed limit on the autobahn and the outside lane is like a racetrack. We were flying along, with me saying, "Come on, Sophie, come on!" The needle hit 90, 100, 110, 120 and 125mph/200kph before Sophie pulled into the inside lane. "No, that's my lot," she said, and I couldn't blame

her, even though I reckoned we could have got a bit more out of the Audi.

Our flight home that holiday was from Basel airport. Gudrun suggested going to the King Tutankhamun exhibition in Basel before going to the airport, and seeing these wonderful ancient antiquities was a great end to the trip.

By August and September, the business was ticking along nicely. Richard and Lisa had moved to France in 2003 and bought a magnificent house in Gascony, north of Toulouse. Before going, Richard had progressed from his TVR to a Mercedes-Benz to his dream car, an Aston Martin DB7 Vantage convertible – lucky boy! They were sick to death of the traffic in the Lake District, plus Richard loves his good weather and there had been a run of bad summers in the UK.

I missed them massively and was delighted when they invited me out to stay in September 2004. Gascony is pretty, rather like Dorset but bigger. After a week there, Sophie and I took the car to an aparthotel in Argèles, near the Spanish border, as I wanted to see Collioure, the location I remembered seeing in an episode of *A Place in the Sun*. Collioure is south of Perpignan and north of Barcelona but still in France.



Collioure

We parked in the main town square and I fell in love with the place on the spot. It was like a dream come true. I bought a small bronze sculpture that day which I still have now. There was an old church, big castles and winding streets, all surrounded by mountains and vineyards and bordered by a sparkling sea. I was dewy-eyed wandering around and it was such a beautiful way to end the trip. It also planted the seed of an idea.

Over the following years, Origin started to do well, with profits going up nicely, and could start paying me a wage. We were taking on staff and finding carers. With money now in the bank, the question was how to reinvest it. Inspired by my recent trip to France (and ignoring more sensible ideas like buying an office), I punted an idea to Linda: why not buy a rental property in France? We styled ourselves as a bespoke service offering specialist, high-quality care. Why not offer a rental property in France as part of that service? Linda agreed.

Property hunting in France

In March 2005, Linda, my old friend and business colleague Jeff Hindley, my carer Helen and I set off for France to try to identify the perfect property for our needs. We arranged appointments with estate agents to view properties in Collioure. Before leaving England, we drew up a list of 10 points we would look for in a place and we were full of anticipation.



With Jeff in Collioure, 2005

Unfortunately, the estate agents failed to engage with the brief we had given them. The first property we looked at was lovely but completely unsuitable for anyone in a wheelchair. Linda, Helen and Jeff went up a hill to view the second place, a beautiful villa with sea views, but it was too far from the town centre and, being up a hill, was far from ideal. We viewed a couple of others that were equally useless. One was poky, dark and terrible. At another, the agent tried to convince us that only six steps up to a mezzanine floor was fine. No, thank you. The best score thus far was about 2 out of 10.

I remember sitting down for lunch, feeling quite downhearted. Perhaps we had set our expectations too high? On the way back, we popped into an estate agent we hadn't seen before and got chatting to the lady there. A younger man opposite her said he might have something and he went out the back and returned brandishing a big, old-fashioned key. "Follow me, follow me." We followed him through a few streets and, just beyond the marketplace, he opened a gate. We felt a sense of promise.

The building was split in two: a house and a barn. We admired the impressive-looking barn as the agent cranked the enormous key into action before throwing open the doors. The workshop space was full of tools and gadgets, all belonging to the current owner. A stone wall divided the barn from a room with low beams and an uneven stone floor, unusable for anything. Upstairs was a loo and two minuscule apartments that looked to have been built in the 1960s or 1970s, apparently for the owner's mother-in-law. The barn got 8 out of 10 with zero for a sea view. Rather rashly, we decided on it there and then.

None of us knew anything about building work and this place would need a huge amount doing to it, so our next task was to try to find out more: find an architect, find a builder, find some quotes and get acquainted with French property ins and outs. This was not an easy mission! We didn't know the area and we didn't know anyone we could talk to about the potential project – French law, planning, building regulations – the lot!

In the end, we found a lawyer who talked us through exactly what was required. The project began to take on some steam.

Soon chats about buildings, boundaries and fees were going on between lawyers.

After trawling through France's equivalent of the Yellow Pages, I found an architect with an English name. We asked, "Can you find quotes, draw up plans and get planning permission?" When he replied, "Yes," we signed him up as architect and project manager.

And so we bought the place in summer 2005. What could possibly go wrong? A lot, as it turns out!

Looking back, I must have been mad to suggest buying a place in France. That said, it's been a wonderful madness, even if the amount of fun has been more than well matched by the amount of 'merde'.

Rupert and a drive in a Ferrari

On a personal level, I must have been getting my *joie de vivre* back as I started to succumb to the temptation of buying a sports car. I had always been fascinated by cars and was hankering after buying something interesting, having so enjoyed driving with Richard in his. Tempting as it was, practicalities had to be prioritised, the first being to find a collapsible chair to go in the boot. Feeling a bit like I was buying the cart before the horse, I purchased a Küschall folding wheelchair, which was perfect for me. I then stopped at a high-end garage and asked a bemused salesman if my new chair would fit in the boot of one of his sports cars. It did. First problem solved, although it would be some time before I identified the perfect car for me.

My brother is keen on cars too and in September 2005, I went to visit him in Spain for a break. Dave, a respite carer from New Zealand, came with me. It was the usual, relaxing time of enjoying good food and Spanish air. One day, Rupert piped up that one of his mates had a Ferrari 308 and would we like a ride in it? He needn't really have asked and, "Er, yes!" was my immediate response.

A plan was made to meet Rupert and the Ferrari in the village square. I was, to be honest, sceptical that Rupert would turn up with the car, but I was wrong to doubt him and soon saw him approaching in the prettiest Ferrari!



Going for a drive in a Ferrari, 2005



With Rupert, 2005

It took three people to get me in. I left my wheelchair in the bar with Dave, and Rupert and I set off.

We were like a couple of kids – the two Henry brothers, out in the Spanish sunshine in a scarlet Ferrari 308 convertible. The roar of the engine was wonderful as we accelerated onto the bypass. The two of us kept looking at each other and laughing at having so much fun together. It was so off the charts, it was unbelievable. When we returned to the square, it took five people to get me out of the car. Great trip – but I concluded that the Ferrari 308 might not be top of my purchase list.

Dave was as excited as me and got on the phone to his dad in New Zealand, where it was 2am, telling him he was about to go for a run in a Ferrari 308. He loved the experience as much as I did. It was an amazing day.

French complications

By 2006, my focus was divided between continuing to grow and develop Origin, trying to make progress with the house in France and continuing to visit and support Dad – we enjoyed talking to one another every day. It gave all of us a real boost when the turnover of Origin topped £1 million for the first time. It's a big milestone, your first million turnover. Dad was fantastically proud.

To see that our new company was helping tetras around the UK get on with life – as well as providing good, well-paid careers to office and care staff – all while earning a profit, gave and continues to give me great pride, and, honestly, relief.

With regular trips to France, I decided to take up French lessons again. I already spoke reasonable French, but I started private lessons to improve my overall ability to communicate clearly and confidently, which I hoped would have a positive impact on our project.

The architect was still faffing about with drawings, and I was pressing him to start obtaining quotes. The prices he came back with were ridiculous.

“Not a chance,” I'd say, but every time he came back to me, the price seemed to have been ramped up even higher. There was collusion, we were certain of it, between the local builders. They'd no doubt encountered too many Brits who'd got carried away having read Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* or who'd watched too much *A Place in the Sun*. It was frustrating because

our project was very different – to create an accessible holiday home that could be enjoyed by our clients.

We continued fighting over prices until, eventually, one of the builders broke ranks and said he would do it for a lower price. Rupert called, telling me off for not involving him, although I had simply assumed that he was too busy with his work. He then took over, carrying out negotiations in Spanish, which most of the builders spoke as the area is so close to the border. Rupert began picking holes in the quotes and suddenly the prices started falling until we reached a reasonable level and signed contracts.

I was back and forth to France quite often that year as, finally, our builders got to work. It was easy to fly out to Collioure from Blackpool Airport. There was a flight at 8pm, so we could finish at the office, have supper at the airport at 6pm and be in the hotel by 11pm. These trips were not entirely uneventful. On one particular trip, everything went wrong. I bruised my bum getting out of the car, Linda twisted her ankle and Nathan, the carer, ate an undercooked egg on a pizza and went down with salmonella food poisoning. Still, our French project, once we had got it off the ground, started quite promisingly. The barn needed gutting, and initially, things were moving along well.

L'ORIGINE - RENOVATION - DEBUT 08/04/2005



French house renovation, 2007–2008



French house renovation, 2007–2008

Going into 2007, though, it had already begun to slow down. The builders weren't what we had hoped, and the architect was starting to show how useless he was at everything. We had references for the builders but then discovered that the company had changed hands and was now owned by a man in Paris. The work had crawled along through the spring, and we'd lost the whole potential rental season of 2007. Our contract had all sorts of penalties, and by July 2007 there was

much bad blood. It was becoming frustrating. Plenty of work was happening when we arrived but was stopping again, no doubt, by the time we reached the airport's departure lounge.

I was in and out of France five times in 2007. Before the summer break, the builders were working slowly and occasionally, but after the summer shutdown, work never restarted. Everything ground to a halt. The main structure and extension were done, but neither was finished. None of the outdoor work, walls or garden had even started. There was still a huge amount to do.

Buying a sports car

Life was so busy that I hadn't had time to give much thought to my sports car dream. One weekend, my old friend Giles was staying and we went to Carlisle to visit a cluster of fancy car dealers based in the area. I looked at an Audi S4, but it didn't do it for me, and I didn't like the big BMWs. On the way home, we looked at a Jaguar XK8, which seemed to tick all the boxes. It was British, convertible and pretty. My wheelchair would fit in the boot too. It took me until December 2006 to find the exact model with the right spec: a Jaguar XK8 convertible. Unfortunately, it was in Kent. The dealer agreed to deliver it to the main dealer in Bradford for free and, if I liked it, I would then buy it. It was delivered between Christmas and New Year, and, as the dealer was pushing to reach the annual sales figures, I negotiated a good price on it.

The XK8 went to a company in Batley near Leeds to be adapted, but it turned out that the required adaptations challenged the limits of their abilities. Throughout 2007, if I wasn't

chasing my tail at work, I was in France chasing up builders or driving to Batley to chase people about the car. I reckon I must have been over to Batley at least 30 times, but it still wasn't drivable.

In amongst the chasing, I did manage to get to Italy in September with Richard and Lisa to celebrate their wedding anniversary. They had been married in Ravello, where Lisa's family were from, and I knew the Amalfi coast from holidays there in the 1980s. It was such a pleasure to go back. Lisa's aunt, Maria Rosaria, owned the hotel where we stayed and we had to pinch ourselves as we looked at the view from our window – the sapphire sea of the Bay of Naples spreading out in front of us bordered by beautiful cliffs and hills.

Lisa's aunt said, "If you like this view, come with me for an even better one." She took us in a lift right to the top floor, where she opened a window and said, "Richard, give us a hand, and we'll pull Pete out of this window." The window was a type of access trapdoor to an extensive vegetable patch on a clifftop.

"We come up here, sit amongst the courgettes and tomatoes we grow for the kitchen and look at the view," she explained. The view was, as she'd promised, breathtaking. It may be a three-star hotel but it's in an absolutely five-star location.

Back to South Africa

I had a wedding invitation to consider in December when Cornelia invited Linda and me (and the local farmer from nearby whom her partner Albert had worked) to celebrate

with her family in South Africa. Linda and I had a chat and decided it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and so, in early December, we jumped on a flight from Manchester to Heathrow and flew on to Johannesburg. We treated ourselves to premium economy. In Johannesburg, Corne and Albert met us at arrivals and took us to collect the car. Our Peugeot 206 awaited us, along with the rental-car delivery man – wearing a combat jacket, complete with a communist hat with a red star on it. He greeted us with a smile, revealing a notable lack of front teeth. It was all slightly alarming, but he turned out to be a lovely guy who would later come to our rescue. Cornelia said she would drive as it's easy to get lost leaving Johannesburg OR Tambo Airport, and we set off for Sediba Lodge in the Welgevonden Biosphere Game Reserve, where we had decided to spend the first four days.



Sediba, 2007

Getting to Sediba Lodge posed a few challenges. After driving for miles on tarmac through towns and villages, we turned off and bumped our way along a dirt road for an hour before reaching the park's gates. It was full-on, four-wheel-drive stuff and our Peugeot 206 wasn't exactly the right car for the job. Thankfully, at the gates there was a Land Rover waiting to take us the rest of the way, though first they had to get me into that Land Rover, which was far from easy.

Cornelia and her family left us at the gates as they had much to do for the wedding, so it was down to four African park rangers to lift me into the vehicle and squeeze me into the back seat. We drove for more than two hours over an even worse road than the previous one but we did reach the lodge. It was a dream spot. Six happy, smiling people welcomed us with cold fruit juice and a song and dance as we arrived. There was a central hub with bars and restaurants, and individual cabins dotted around in the bush. Linda and I had the nearest one, and even though it was a step-free track, it still needed a couple of guys to push me to the hub as the path was so steep. They installed us and we set up the bedroom and then enjoyed a delicious meal that was brought to us in the cabin.



At Sediba

At 10am the following day, the four rangers squeezed me back into the Land Rover and Linda made me as comfortable as possible with pillows.

Late mornings/early afternoons are not the best time for a safari drive as the animals tend to sleep in the heat. We hoped to see the Big Five: rhino, Cape buffalo, leopard, elephant and lion. On the drive, Victor, the safari leader, pointed out this and that, and then, not far from the hotel, he said, “Look over by those trees.” In the shimmering heat, two rhinos stepped out of the bush. It was a magical sight.



Rhinos!

At lunchtime, Victor stopped for a wonderful outdoor meal in the wilderness.



On a game drive in Sediba, 2007

During the afternoon, we continued our search and saw a hippo and more rhinos around a lake, plus a pride of lions on a hunt.



Lions

Victor didn't carry a rifle but he seemed, intuitively, to know where to find the game and his expertise was impressive to

observe. Back at the lodge, we had a sundowner followed by dinner on the veranda.

Later that evening, Linda was in bed asleep when she was woken by a violent thumping on her bedroom windows. The noise woke me too, and we discovered a group of baboons banging on the glass. Baboons being notoriously vicious creatures, we were terrified the window was going to break, but it didn't, thankfully.

The next day was our last full day. We told Victor that we would like to see an elephant in the wild and, with a smile, he said he'd see what he could do. I was squeezed into the Land Rover again and we drove over all the narrowest lanes and backways, but, by lunchtime, we still hadn't seen much. Victor stopped by a lake for lunch, another fabulously beautiful place. After lunch, we pushed on, and then, when driving down a tiny track, Victor brought us up right behind a big bull elephant, walking in the middle of the road, minding his own business, swinging his trunk and pulling leaves off branches. We inched closer until he noticed us and grumpily moved about 10 feet off the track, flapping his ears and looking us straight in the eye.



'Our' elephant

The intelligent understanding in an elephant's eyes is remarkable, and at such close range, we felt a real connection. Victor allowed us a little time with this hugely impressive creature, and to see an elephant in the wild was incredible.

We were miles from the camp by then and as we made our way back for our final dinner, the clouds closed in. It was twilight as we approached the lodge and the colours of the oncoming African night sky were incredible. As the sun dropped into a clear sky below the cloud, the sky was illuminated in pink and black, blue and red. There is nothing that quite compares to it in Europe.

We changed for dinner, which was held at a place called the Boma, a recreation of the centre of an old African village. Having negotiated a 10-foot python en route, we took our places at the tables opposite a wall of flame. Out came the champagne and we had the most incredible dinner under the velvet, starlit sky. Dinner over, our hosts put on a wonderful show of African song and traditional dance set against the backdrop of fire. Our safari was coming to a spectacular close, but not before we'd been back to the bar to get good and drunk on Joseph's deceptive cocktails.

The wedding took place in Nylstroom. The church was Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, and very much based on the gospels. The altar and crucifix are not there, and the service focuses on the preacher and what he is saying.

After the ceremony, Cornelia and Albert went off in a horse-drawn carriage before we had a fantastic evening with the two families. The next day, a Sunday, was spent relaxing at a beautiful holiday resort in the middle of the African bush. The African sun is fierce – it hits like a hammer, with a sharp metallic feel to it, and you can burn instantly, so care needed to be taken.

For the remainder of our time in South Africa, Linda and I were left to our own devices, though we met Cornelia for lunch a few times. We explored local towns and villages but were wary of going too far afield. When our gearbox failed, we were grateful to our car rental guy, still in combats, who drove out from Johannesburg with a replacement.

I've never been in a position of a minority, well, apart from being disabled I suppose. You feel very exposed as a white guy in a wheelchair going around a strange, backwoods African town alongside a tall blonde with a fancy handbag over her shoulder and an expensive camera around her neck. Maybe our fears were unreasonable as we never encountered any problems.



In Africa, 2007

Towards the end of our trip, we passed a squatter camp, with miles and miles of people living under pallets, cloths, branches and anything they could scavenge for shelter. The camp had no running water, electricity or toilets, yet there was a sense of place. One man had his shack backing onto the verge on the side of the road and had created a yard with salvaged wire which he proudly swept.



A shack in an African shanty town, 2007

We passed people carrying wood on their backs and as it grew dark, we could smell the wood burning in the dark and silent camp. There was the odd flicker of fire, but it was most peculiar to be experiencing the silence of thousands of people. The contrast between this and the luxury of nearby Sediba was extreme and discomfiting.

In such a variety of ways it had been an eye-opening and exceptional two weeks. We returned home to a cold, English December.

The arrival of 2008

Meanwhile, I had been throwing money at my new car for too long now and, after endless toing and froing and hair-pulling, I eventually took possession of my Jaguar in April 2008, but I still couldn't drive it. After pulling out what hair I had left, the hand controls were finished and I finally, finally, got behind the wheel.



My big boy's toy! Jaguar XK8

There is a go-kart track called Three Sisters Race Circuit near Wigan, and I told the boss of the car adaptation company that I was not happy about taking the car straight out on the road and wanted to try it on the track first. We hired the Three Sisters for half a day, and I trickled around the tiny track in first gear to get an idea of how the Jag drove. The car is dual control, meaning you can switch off my adaptations and drive it in the normal way. However, when I drive, I have hand control and line steering, like a grip on the wheel. The throttle is a twist-grip electric one, like the kind on a motorbike. The XK8 is a long car but the interior is not and trying to fit all the modifications into the small space didn't help. It was the throttle that was causing the problem. Its workings and all its mechanics were in Italian, but the car's brain, of course, was English, so all the instructions were getting lost in translation. The tech details were also in Italian; nobody at the adaptation company spoke Italian, and nobody from the throttle company was in the UK. It was a kind of Anglo-Italian stalemate.

We got it sorted eventually, and the car arrived back but then seemed intent on breaking down on a regular basis, each time having to be rescued and taken away on a transporter. It was a lovely car and when it worked, and I was in the right mood, it

was magnificent, but it took many false starts (or no starts at all!) to solve all the problems. As a daily car, I still had my Astra, which was doing hundreds of thousands of miles between work, visiting Dad and seeing friends. It was falling apart, but at least it did the job.

During 2008, the French project really hit the buffers. The builders were due to reach what's known as 'practical completion' in 2007 when we were to pay them 90% of the total fee. You then put together a snagging list and they have a year to complete the necessary work before you pay the balance. We had paid the 90%, but problems from their shoddy work were already becoming evident. The contractors were demanding more money and when we refused, they took all their men and machines and abandoned the still unfinished site in April 2008, a year late.. The house wasn't finished: there were no windows, no doors or floor finishes and no interior walls. The structure and the driveway were done, but little else. We were stuck. It was an absolute nightmare.

We needed a solution. My brother, Rupert, is good at turning his hand to pretty much anything, including building work, and, thank goodness, was both willing and able. We agreed that he would go to the house and, with individual local contractors, finish the work. He found the tiler, the carpenters and the plasterers and then somehow coerced them into completing the house by July 2008. We had no choice but to pay extra as they were new contractors, but at least we were able to let it that summer. However, the saga had far from ended.

Later that year, a letter arrived in the office in England. It was written in French and was a demand for payment of €15,000 from a debt collector in France on behalf of the original builders. I chucked it in the bin thinking they were chancing it for the 10% balance. Over the next few months, it turned out they were serious and were suing us for the contract balance, even though they hadn't fulfilled the work. They kept coming at us and finally Rupert called the company and went to see them to find out what was happening. He showed them the contract and what they hadn't done.

Things then started turning ugly, with solicitors' letters arriving in French. We were not going to back down and were forced to seek French legal advice. Our lawyer didn't speak English, so my technical legal French had to improve rapidly.

I explained what they had done and also the work they had not finished. The legal process started in 2008 and involved our own solicitor, two sets of opposition lawyers, plus the builders, the project manager and two insurers. Somehow, our lawyer managed to turn the case around from defence to attack and after 12 years of French legal action, *12 years*, we won. I'm not sure how she did it, but I'm glad she did. We retrieved our costs in early 2020 and it covered our expenses and what we had spent on the project. However, it was not until 2022 that all the repairs of the shoddy renovation work were finished.

Today, our aim is for the house to pay its way. Although we rent the apartments to anyone wishing to stay, the large ground floor is adapted for disabled people, and is all on one level, without any steps. It is perfect for disabled guests, and it is very popular with clients.

Meanwhile, Origin was ticking along well while facing the usual operational challenges of a growing business. Dad moved from his house in the north Lake District to sheltered housing in Arnside on the coast near Kendal. He had a small flat in a country setting, with a living room, bathroom, kitchenette and bedroom. Dad had only moved after much arm twisting, but by September 2008, he was slowly making friends and bedding in, although his health was deteriorating.

Dad's deterioration and death

In early 2009, Dad's health deteriorated dramatically. He developed a chest infection and then reacted badly to the antibiotics the doctor had prescribed. I suspect he had an allergy to penicillin, but the doctors didn't change the meds and Dad got worse.

In February, he went into hospital, and on the 20th, he died.

I saw him on the evening of the 19th, and, after bidding him goodnight and tickling his toe, my last memory was of him smiling. Later, we discovered that a nurse had spoken to Dad in the middle of the night, after midnight, when he said, "Today is my wedding anniversary." It was, and Dad died shortly afterwards. He had deliberately got himself to 20th February before he allowed himself to slip away.

It was Rupert who called me at 6am to give me the news. Poor Rupert had returned from Spain the night before and driven past the hospital at midnight. He thought it too late to visit so hadn't gone in. Rupert was very sad that he had not had the chance to say goodbye.

We had the funeral followed by the cremation and the scattering of the ashes in the same place where we had scattered Mum's ashes, so they could be together again.

Rupert and I then had to deal with Dad's house and after much toing and froing, we decided to sell it. It was far from the ideal time as the aftereffects of the 2008 financial crisis meant that the housing market had collapsed and any offers we received were ridiculously low. Eventually, we received an offer massively below the asking price and we decided to accept it to avoid prolonging the process. We were glad to get it off our hands.

Life goes on

The death of someone close to you tends to highlight the fragility of life, particularly when you get into a close scrape. In March 2009, not long after Dad had died, I had dinner over in Lancaster with Linda and friends. She was staying with me at the time and on the drive home, we came to a long bend on the road. The hedges had not yet got their leaves, and I could see that two cars were coming towards us. I was doing about 30mph, but as we reached the corner, I saw a pair of headlights bearing down on me, on the wrong side of the road. The driver had, for some reason, decided to overtake on a blind bend. Blocked on the left by the hedgerow and on the right by the first car, I had nowhere to go, and Linda and I froze, waiting for a full head-on crash. The other driver somehow managed to squeeze himself between me and the other car, taking off the front wheel and the wing mirror of my Astra before crashing into a gatepost in flames. Our car was lopsided on its three wheels and going nowhere. Police were called and my carer

came to collect me. It turned out that the three young lads in the offending car were showing off to the three girls in the other car. If I had been a millisecond earlier at that corner, I'm not sure we would have survived. It was a terrifying experience. Miraculously, aside from the reckless driver breaking his hand, everyone was all right. He went on to be prosecuted and convicted for dangerous driving and, hopefully, lessons were learnt.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Moving Forward

March 2009 to December 2011

Replacing a wrecked car is not so easy when everything has to be adapted. With the Astra now scrap metal, it was back to the hand-control specialists again, and when I finally took possession of my shiny new Ford Focus, I discovered that my old way of getting into the car no longer worked well as each slide in and out resulted in me losing my balance and smashing, face first, into the steering wheel. This was not fun and it took weeks of trial and error, frustration and bashed noses to work out a new way of doing things.

Yet driving gives me much enjoyment and a wonderful sense of independence. This was brought home to me when, one day in May, as I was driving to work in the Jag, I passed a place close to my office which offers educational activities for disabled people. People were getting off the bus, some going down ramps in their wheelchairs, others with a variety of learning and other disabilities. The differences and similarities in disability struck me that day, and that contradiction really hit me hard. I was disabled and they were also disabled, yet I was driving to my own business on a lovely May morning. I was more physically disabled than most of them, but they were dependent on specialist transport to take them to specially designed activities. There is much to be grateful for and there are moments in life which bring this sharply into focus.

Another time, later that May, I was driving back on a country road towards Ingleborough hill when suddenly an amazing feeling came over me. There I was in this beautiful car coming back from work at my own business on a fantastic, sunny day while looking at an amazing view, and my mind went back over the 20 years of my disability leading to that moment in time. All my emotions were full to bursting. Everything was full to maximum. Was it happiness? I'm not sure, but I was full. All my feelings were full. It was wonderful.

In October 2009, HPC, the driving club for advanced drivers that I'm a member of, rented Oulton Park racetrack, near Chester. I had driven on tracks before such as Croft, The Three Sisters and Cadwell Park, but I'd never been on a track like Oulton Park. I went to have a go, and Thea, my carer at the time, went with me. When out on the track on my own, that same feeling of profound emotion came over me and again one evening when going across the moors from Bentham. There I was driving around, alone, with this feeling of absolute disbelief, wonder and contentment. It was amazing. I couldn't even wipe my nose, but there I was in my car. It's hard to put it into words.

Hassles with cars apart, driving is very central to my life and not just as a way of getting from A to B.

Catheter problems

I had started to have real problems with my bladder in the mid-2000s. I had been using a drainage condom, and a tap on my tummy muscles would squeeze my prostate and urethra to make me wee. I asked my original consultant at Stoke

Mandeville if there was any way to avoid using a catheter. “Well, the only way is castration, chemical or actual,” was his answer. I think he was joking, but needless to say, I didn’t fancy either option. I went over to Germany in December 2009 to see a consultant in Frankfurt for a final opinion, following which I was going on to spend Christmas with Rupert in Spain.

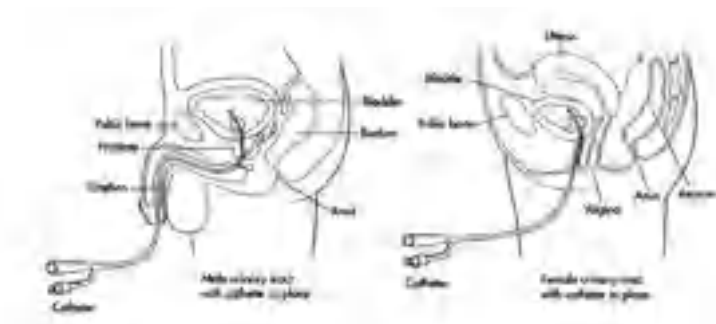
I made it to the hotel in Wiesbaden after a terrifying journey in the snow. In England, hotels are all parties at Christmas, but in Germany, there was not a soul about, although we did, eventually, manage to find a night porter. I saw the doctor the next day. He set me up, very inelegantly, in birthing-type stirrups and proceeded to poke at my bits – not that I could feel a thing, of course. However, Thea, who was at the sharper end, fell about laughing and was politely asked to leave the room. In the end, it became clear that, ultimately, I would have to go with a urethral catheter through my willy; an undignified outcome to an undignified assessment, but better than castration, I suppose.

We went to Spain and had a lovely time with Rupert and family and I saw out 2009 with them.



With Rupert's family in Spain

Back home, one morning in spring 2010 urinary matters became more pressing, if you'll excuse the pun. I was feeling very bloated and uncomfortable, so much so that it was straight into the car to hospital and A&E. It turned out I had a nasty infection as my bladder was not draining. The doctors drained out a litre of urine, which is far too much. I was still in touch with the consultant in Germany, who confirmed that a catheter could no longer be delayed. A catheter was duly inserted, and I've used one ever since.



Urethral catheters

*(Taken from British Journal of Community Nursing 2015,
Safe and effective catheterisation for patients in the community
by A Bardsley)*

I was lucky the infection hadn't occurred when I was in Spain or South Africa, and this incident has forced me to acknowledge the risks involved in travelling somewhere remote as it is too difficult to escape should an emergency change of catheter be required. So I feel fortunate to have done those adventurous trips when I was younger as I wouldn't be able to do them today unless I had a nurse with me.

It's typical for tetraplegics to use catheters eventually, but I was very lucky to go for 24 years without one. Catheters have their advantages but also have big disadvantages. They are painful to have inserted and are easy to catch, which can lead to tearing and bleeding. Mine needs changing every month, and a nurse has to come to do the work. With a catheter, you are more prone to infections. I am pretty well attuned to when I have a bladder infection, but what is far worse is if the catheter blocks completely and doesn't drain at all. This can lead to a nasty condition known as autonomic dysreflexia.

We have two parts to our nervous system. One is the involuntary, autonomic part that deals with blood pressure and temperature, like an autopilot keeping the body in a steady state. The other, the voluntary nervous system, deals with movement and all conscious body functions. In spinal injuries, of course, especially high-level ones such as mine, none of this is true. With autonomic dysreflexia, if something is causing you pain and discomfort, your blood pressure starts to rise and it keeps going up until either you have a stroke or remove the cause. As the blood pressure goes up, so does the pain, exponentially, and it literally feels as if your head is going to explode. Ultimately, that is exactly what happens, and people die from strokes quite regularly. Normal blood pressure is around 120/80 and the pain at anything above 180/110 is indescribable – think 100 times worse than the worst hangover!

All tetraplegics know about the powerful drug nifedipine and I never leave home without a supply. One tablet will drop blood pressure quickly, although not clear the cause, which is commonly a blocked catheter. As is the nature of these things, blockages usually happen at night and require immediate changing to avoid further medical complications. Thus, just another aspect of the fun and games of being a tetraplegic is to work hard to avoid the blockages by drinking lots, taking various types of medication and using catheter washout kits. However, unknown to me at the time, drinking lots of water brings its own risks ...

In 2010, Origin was approaching 10 years in business, the company was developing, office staff numbers were growing and, indeed, the office itself was expanding. We were

spreading into offices next door and the company was moving forward on all fronts. We had all the usual work challenges, with operational difficulties such as staff moving on, improvements to software and recruitment, as well as the legal case in France. As they say, 'If you don't want business problems, don't go into business.' I was seeing my friend Paul Brown for a pint at the weekends, as I had done since the 1980s, and meeting friends, such as my old mates Dave and Andy, when they were around.



With Linda, Dave and Andy

In essence, I was seeing friends, going out for dinners and travelling a little. It was busy and fun.

In May, I arranged a meeting in a separate office in our building. I was seeing a chap about some idea he had to discuss, and after the meeting, he left. I tried to call my office to collect me, but there turned out to be no mobile signal in that office, which meant I was on my own, albeit only across from reception. I decided I'd push myself over there to ask the

receptionist to call someone to pick me up. It was a newly refurbished office, and the door had a tight return spring to make sure it closed. When I tried to pull the door open, it would not move. What to do? I gave it a few more pulls as usually I can inch a door open and then push it back with my elbow, but the new spring was stronger than me and the door wasn't budging. I tried it again and again, with increased determination, until the effort flipped me out of my chair, down onto my right side while hanging on with my left hand. I couldn't sit up, and my only option was to let myself slide down onto the floor. I fought the door and the door won.

By this stage, the door was very slightly ajar, and, from my position on the floor, I managed to make enough noise for a passer-by to come to my rescue and pop me back into my chair.

Back in my office, I felt fine and decided, foolishly as it turned out, not to go to the hospital to be checked out. Instead, I finished my day, jumped in the car and drove myself home. Bear in mind that I cannot feel deep-rooted skeletal pain or anything else.

My fall was on a Wednesday and by the Thursday, I was feeling a bit sorry for myself and I looked up how I might know if I had broken a bone. A big worry was that autonomic dysreflexia might come and get me – my body's way of letting me know there is a problem. I monitored my blood pressure but there was no obvious cause for concern. According to my research, the only other way of knowing was to keep a check on obvious swelling or to get an X-ray. By Friday morning, my

right side was definitely more swollen than the left, although not by much. I decided the only sensible course of action was to go to hospital, where the X-ray showed I had snapped the trochanter, the bone connecting the femur shaft (the long bone in my leg) to the ball on the end, clean through. So, I'd driven home with a broken leg and, for anyone with a fully working body, this would have been agony. For me, of course, I had no idea of the pain I should have been in. The break would require either surgery or 12 weeks in plaster while everything knitted itself back together. I knew the practical difficulties of having a plaster cast on my hip for 12 weeks, so I chose the surgical option.

The surgery was scheduled for a Saturday night, but during the afternoon, the doctors became worried about operating on a tetraplegic and, specifically, the problem of autonomic dysreflexia. They got on the phone to the spinal injuries unit in Southport to find out what to do with me. My options were full anaesthetic, an epidural or surgery without any anaesthetic at all. The team wasn't happy to operate with a full anaesthetic as tetras can be adversely affected by a general anaesthetic and can take much longer to recover, our lungs being weak already.

We agreed on the epidural route. The surgeon wanted me to stay conscious and keep talking to him. It was rather surreal lying on my side chatting to the surgeon and listening to background music to try to blot out the *pzz pzz* of him cutting into my bone. I stared vacantly into space but slowly became aware of movement in the reflective stainless steel around the lights. As I focused in, I realised that I was watching an image of the surgeon with his hands inside me and it felt somewhat

like being in a butcher's shop. I looked away, deciding that I should spare myself the detail of the process involved in fitting me with a dynamic titanium hip screw.

I was to recuperate in the general surgery ward, where no one had a clue as to how to look after me. On the Sunday morning, while trying to do a bowel movement (a process which can take two hours) all I had for privacy was the curtains around the bed. I got there, but it couldn't have been nice for the others on the ward. I had my carer with me, and we would have been happy to have got on with it on our own, but the ward staff were somewhat territorial. I fully understand professional pride, but sometimes it can slide into ignorance. General nurses cannot be expected to have the necessary level of understanding of the specific care routines required in my day-to-day living, and I have found that I have to take the lead.

I think the consultant had a grasp of this and as soon as he was confident that my hip was getting better, he said, "You'll get better care at home, won't you?"

"Yes," was my eager answer.

"If you're fine tomorrow, you can go."

This put a big smile on my face even if the nurses went berserk. The consultant was as good as his word and, at the ward round the next day, gave me permission to be discharged. "Yes, you can go home and the district nurses can visit to change the dressings."

It was then a case of building up strength and, two months later, I could drive again – after weeks of having to take taxis to work.

My hip has been perfect ever since.

The train to France

By October, I was ready to go to France again and decided to try the train instead of the pushing and dragging involved in going by air. We took the train from Skipton, then the Eurostar from St Pancras to Lille. Eventually, we reached Perpignan at 10pm, but the journey was uneventful and we arrived in good spirits.

My carer for the trip was Shaun Churchill, an Aussie who had the excellent attitude of ‘yeah, give it a go’ in spades. It was our first overseas trip together and we got on very well.

One morning, we decided to visit a local castle but struggled to get through the gates. Shaun spotted a tour group going in another way and, leaving me waiting, followed them. I waited a bit and next thing I knew, Shaun was shouting down from the battlements, “Pete, I’m stuck!” He’d followed them in through a back door and the door had closed behind him. He couldn’t get out so had no option but to follow the group until they exited. Watching him on the battlements reminded me of the story of Rapunzel in her tower, and I had to laugh. Finally we were reunited!

Over the middle weekend of that holiday, the weather changed from being hot and balmy to stormy. Collioure has a small narrow bay, and as the wind and sea picked up, six-plus metre waves started hurling huge boulders onto the beach. This is not common in the Mediterranean and the sea remained massive into the next day, when we heard that a man had been killed overnight. He had gone swimming during the storm and not come back. It was a tragedy and a sad waste of life.

My half-century

I turned 50 in 2011 and I counted myself lucky to be reaching such a milestone. I also remember that year for the release of the French film *Intouchables*. The film is about a tetraplegic and is one of those stories that makes you laugh and cry in equal measure. It is a fantastic depiction of the rapport between a carer and his client. Amandine, who was giving me French lessons at the time, watched it three times as she said the client reminded her of me. She said she cried every time! It is well worth watching.

Reaching my half-century seemed like a cause for celebration and I was determined to have a party. I was in France a few times in 2011 and hatched a plan to have my 50th in Collioure in December. We found the restaurant and decided whom to invite, although it's quite an ask to expect people to travel halfway around Europe for a birthday party. As the year progressed, it looked as if we would have at least a dozen on the night.

I invited two of our au pairs from when Rupert and I were kids, my godmother Corrie, and Annika. Wonderfully, they both agreed – for Corrie, it was some 50 years after she had held me

in her arms as a baby. My friends Dave and Andy were coming, and Linda, as well as Giles and Vicky. It wouldn't have been a party without Richard or Lisa and my aunt Dorothea agreed to come too. We were all going by train, and I went with my carer, Sam, and met Dorothea at King's Cross. We were travelling with so many that the journey was fairly exhausting, but we had fun.

Sam and I were there for the fortnight and the party group was to join us for the weekend. The weather was crisp and clear and cool, as you'd expect for December! I'd arranged a minibus to take the party to a wine tasting, while Richard poured me into his very nice Aston Martin DB7 Volante V12 and we followed along.



Wine tasting in style, 2011

We sat in the middle of a vineyard, great friends together, drinking good wine, and I couldn't think of a better way to spend a birthday afternoon.



At a restaurant for my 50th birthday, 2011

In the evening we had a fabulous meal in a local restaurant. It was wonderful and I was particularly touched that Annika and Corrie could make it.



With friends at my 50th birthday, 2011

Some of the locals were very touched that I had chosen Collioure for my special birthday and started singing our national anthem, *God Save the Queen*. We replied with a

rendition of *La Marseillaise*. It was great fun and just the kind of celebration I had hoped for.

Linda invited us to Denmark for Christmas, so we had barely touched down back in the UK before we took off for Billund in the centre of Denmark, best known for being the home of Lego. Sam drove us to Aarhus, where we stayed in a big, fancy hotel where we felt we might have reached celebrity status. Europeans tend to spend Christmas at home, so the hotel was very quiet and we were upgraded to a room on the top floor. This involved taking an external glass lift, which was slightly unnerving. On the inside wall of the lift was a list of famous people who had stayed on that top floor, the likes of David Bowie and other musicians who had sung in the Musikhuset (a famous concert hall next door) along with major politicians such as Margaret Thatcher. The rest was glass and everything felt a long way down.

Our room was lovely, with incredible views across the city. We had a wonderful welcome from Linda's family, as always, and we spent Christmas and the New Year eating and drinking to excess. The welcome and the quantity of food and drink consumed in Denmark have to be experienced to be believed. Our main Christmas meal, on the 24th, was in the home of Linda's sister Charlotte, about an hour away from the hotel. It was a lovely old house with a modern extension on the side. She is a fabulous cook, and her husband is a superb joiner. The woodwork in the home is beautiful, with pale wood floors and amazing Danish furniture – a truly stunning house and stunning food to match. We crept home with our bellies fit to burst, only to do the same all over again only 12 hours later, with an 8-

course meal. Sam and I did plenty of wandering around Aarhus, exploring the town. New Year's Eve was all about more lovely food, alcohol and fireworks – fireworks, in Denmark, being almost more popular than food and drink!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fun at 50

January 2012 to November 2013

Now that I was 50, I decided that 2012 would be my year for doing things I had always wanted to do, never got around to doing or needed to push myself into doing. It would be my year for pulling my finger out and getting on with it.

I decided to go to the Monaco Grand Prix, the Olympics in London and the Goodwood Festival of Speed.

In order to go to the Grand Prix, I would need to be in France for the end of May. I arranged everything with Sabina, an Australian carer, as she was looking after me. I booked places on a balcony overlooking the racetrack at Monaco. It was my year of being 50, and I was going to enjoy myself – sod the cost. We found tickets for a wheelchair-accessible place, and the trip was on. Monaco was happening.

I happened to mention this to Kaye, our district nurse, as I was having my catheter changed. She stomped her foot, saying, “Pete, if you are going to Monaco, I’m coming with you. I’ve been into bikes and motor racing since I was a kid, and I’ve been on the back of a bike going around Europe to all the bike racing festivals. So you are not going without me.”

“OK, fair enough.” I said. And Kaye was on the trip!

We went to Collioure by train as before. Sabina enjoyed a long weekend at leisure as she had no interest in the Grand Prix, while Kaye, Richard and I had the time of our lives, completely riveted by all the action and excitement.



With Richard in Monaco, 2012



Monaco, 2012

We managed to cram so much in, including meeting drivers Mark Webber, Michael Schumacher and Sebastian Vettel – it was mad. As an experience, it was off the scale.

When I returned to Collioure on the Monday, I was completely worn out. The intensity of the experience in Monaco had taken its toll. For the rest of the week, Sabina and I relaxed and did touristy things around the South of France and Spain. We had croissants and coffee in little places and excellent lunches along the way. I know, problems, problems, but someone has to do these things.

Next on my ‘to-do list’ was the Goodwood Festival of Speed in July. Lord March has a car racing track at Goodwood House, and his festival is a celebration of all things car and speed. Beata, my Polish carer, went with me, and we again stayed at the Holiday Inn, Piccadilly, before making our way to Goodwood. I met Giles at Goodwood so Beata could escape for the day and not have to pretend that she was interested in cars – which she definitely wasn’t! Giles and I, on the other hand, were like schoolchildren on a day out, going excitedly from car to car. There were rows and rows of sports cars and motorbikes of various vintages and we got to watch Lewis Hamilton’s car speeding around the track. You can’t beat the roar of an engine, the snuffling and snorting and growling. We had a fabulous weekend, and it was an added bonus to spend time with Giles and his family.

Finally, it was the Olympics. Ever since watching the 1972 Olympics as a little boy, I had dreamt of watching the events

live. It was a lottery system for tickets, and I thought it was too unpredictable to plan a trip to London. I looked online and discovered that Thomas Cook was selling Olympic gold, silver and bronze packages that allowed buyers to choose which event, day and hotel they wanted for the trip. Prices were megabucks for the 100m final, but the men's 200m final day was vastly cheaper. The day also included the 1,500m, the long jump and other events. The package was expensive, but not ridiculous, so I went ahead and booked it. Giles and I decided to go together and, being a photographer, he was looking forward to some good photo opportunities. Sabina from Australia was my carer at the time. We left Clapham on a beautiful August day and, with a sense of the occasion, drove down to London in the Jag with the roof down. We had again booked a room at the Holiday Inn, Piccadilly, and it was perfect. Giles joined us on Saturday morning and we had a bit of a nail-biting wait for the planned noon arrival of our precious tickets. Eventually, a rather hot and harassed Thomas Cook rep turned up, handed over the tickets and we were on our way.

Giles had mapped out our route to the Olympic stadium which involved travelling by Tube. It was the first time I had travelled on the Underground since the 1980s, but I am so glad we did as the atmosphere was incredible. Everyone seemed to be in a fabulous mood, chatting and laughing with one another, which is unusual on public transport. The London Tube travels at high speed and I was holding on for dear life as I didn't want to fall out of my chair. On arrival, special buses had been laid on to take disabled people to the stadium. Security was very tight, but we eventually got into the stadium, where we were seated

behind the Olympic flagpoles. The seats, for a number of reasons, definitely weren't wheelchair friendly and I couldn't see a thing. After a bit of negotiation, we were moved to disabled access seats with the most amazing view – about 10 rows back from the crosshatch corner where all the lanes meet. We could see the start line and over to the finishing tape. Giles and I were delighted.

Over the day, the excitement ramped up and it was hard to keep up with all that was going on. In the evening came the high-level stuff. We watched an amazing 1,500m won by Taoufik Makhloufi, in world-record time, by which stage the atmosphere was incredible.

Then came the 'big' event, the 200m final with Usain Bolt. In a way, the 200m is better than the 100m as it is twice as long. At the elbow of the bend, right in front of us, we saw Bolt lengthening his stride and pulling away, and he loped down the track like a greyhound to win.



Watching the Olympics, London, 2012

The noise was deafening and it felt as if the stadium was about to take off. Even when leaving, the crowd was still buzzing on an adrenaline high. I had never experienced anything quite like it before. What a day!

Something odd starts happening

As so often happens, when things seem at their very best, something turns up to bring you back down to earth. It may seem from reading my story thus far that a lot of my time was spent having fun. Of course, it is the fun stuff that one recalls, and, in reality, everything was fitted around my busy work schedule. My usual work routine has me up at 7am to be dressed and breakfasted and ready to drive myself to the office by 8.30am. I'd be there at about 9.15am and would work through until around 5pm, get back home around 6pm and be in bed at 10pm. Work involves endless calls, meetings and emails, dealing with complexities and challenges and strategising for the future.



At work

In addition, with a spinal injury there are always a lot of time-consuming day-to-day routines to be dealt with ...

Around the time of the Olympics, I had noticed areas of pink skin discolouration developing on my feet. This perplexed me as I had been wearing the same type of shoes and using the same wheelchair for years, but suddenly my skin appeared to be reacting to something. By late autumn, I noticed that my belly was getting bigger and swollen after bowel movements, instead of reducing as normal. My bowels were becoming less predictable. Persistent changes to 'usual' are always a cause for concern and I tried to work out what might be going on. I kept an eye on my feet, which continued to look strangely blotchy, and went to the spinal unit for a check-up, but they found nothing amiss.

In November 2012, our office team, Linda and I went to the Back Up Ball. The theme that year was the Best of British and we had chosen to go as King Henry VIII and his six wives, accompanied by the state executioner. Just in case ...



With my six wives at the Back Up Ball, 2012



King Henry! 2012



Off with her head! With Linda, 2012



The state executioner, 2012

A good evening was had by all.

In December, Beata and I set off for France for Christmas. I find being away from home at Christmas is good as, with no family in the UK, it can sometimes feel a bit lonely.

We took the train to Collioure and arrived to some beautiful weather. Nicki and Paul arrived on 29th December for New Year. As I've stated previously, Paul is an art teacher and loves to spend time trawling around art shops and galleries. One day, when we were out, he popped down a few steps to an art shop while I waited on the street in my usual 'sitting and waiting' position. At the time, I used to sit with my arms across my tummy while leaning an elbow into my stomach to prop myself up so that I wouldn't be too hunched over. As I came forward on my elbow, it felt as if I had been struck by a lightning bolt. *Bang!* A massive spasm in my back muscles threw me backwards out of the chair and upside down onto the street. I fell to my left and it happened so fast that there was nothing I could do to stop it. I wondered, amongst other things, what the hell had just happened. I didn't feel ill, but Paul was very anxious about the situation. He got me back in the chair and home to bed, where I was checked over for cuts and bruises. I was deemed to be OK and after a couple of hours' rest I felt fine and was well enough to enjoy a lovely meal for New Year and watch the spectacular fireworks set to music. I was glad not to have missed it.

Paul and Nicki left on 2nd January, and Beata and I stayed on a few days more before returning to the UK. I was sufficiently concerned about the spasm and decided I should organise a consultation at the spinal unit.

The consultant said he could order a scan to see what was going on, but the chances were that it would not show anything. Taking his advice, no scan was done, which proved to be a serious misjudgement.

We had already worked out that when I fell out of my chair in Collioure I had broken my hand, but the doctors weren't too concerned because the bone was not displaced and would heal itself. However, throughout 2013, I noticed that when I locked my elbows to pull myself up, I would suffer from a weird spasm in my abdomen, pulling me forwards. This was definitely something new and not right. My belly was still bulging out, and the marks on my feet persisted. Tests were done, but all the markers were fine: my bloods, blood pressure and temperature all OK.

So I carried on as if nothing were amiss, working my socks off and going to visit one of my carers, a Hungarian friend named Istvan, in his home country. Beata and I flew to Budapest and booked in at a hotel. Istvan was a generous host and we enjoyed my usual busy kind of holiday. We saw many of the sights: the bullet holes left by the Russians' gunfire attempting to quell the Hungarian Revolution, the enormous synagogue and the gravestones of Hungarian Jews who died in Auschwitz, all of which left a deep and lasting impression on me. Istvan took us to his hometown and he and I had a terrific time in my rented Audi, screaming down the motorway to the Serbian border for a wine-tasting festival in the pouring rain. I have memories of sitting under an awning in my big yellow cycling cape (designed for deluges), dripping happily with a glass of

wine in my hand. All this without any thought or awareness that I might be seriously ill.

We returned from Hungary in May 2013 to an exceptionally busy summer of work. By October, I was ready for break and booked to go on the train to Collioure with Shaun, my Australian friend who was helping me at the time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A Very Close Call

November 2013 to June 2014

Survival Two

Shaun is always guaranteed to be good company, and his wife, Jen, came over to join us for a long weekend break. It was after she'd left that I began to feel very unwell. Red blotches were appearing out of nowhere and as the week went on, I deteriorated rapidly.

By Friday, I was stuck in bed, knowing I needed to go to hospital but not wanting to go in France if I could avoid it. I was desperate to get home and rang Ryanair, asking for them to fly me anywhere in the UK, I didn't care where. Ryanair were brilliant and we managed to book a flight from Perpignan the next day, Saturday.

It was a relief to know I was going home, but I was feeling so bad by that stage that I was honestly worried that I was going to die and it crossed my mind that I might not make it. On Saturday morning, Shaun packed up the car and as we drove away from Collioure, I looked at the village and over to the Golfe du Lion, where the sea was beautiful and shimmering like a deathly mirage. I wondered if I would ever see it again.

Having deposited the car keys into a box at Europcar, we went straight to departures. I must have been looking terrible as other passengers were coming to ask if I was OK. Then an announcement came that the flight was delayed and, soon after, that it had been cancelled. My heart sank. Shaun literally ran us

back out to the Ryanair departure desk, half a pace ahead of the 100 other passengers. Everyone was in the same boat, all having booked out of hotels, all having given up their hire cars.

“Come on, you can’t do this to me. I need to get home,” I pleaded with the staff.

We were booked onto another flight on Sunday evening – which seemed for ever away. Luckily, Europcar hadn’t checked the car back in and handed us back the keys. We had it booked for another week anyway. On the way back to Collioure, we passed a sign for the main hospital, and Shaun said afterwards that if we hadn’t been given seats on the Sunday flight, he would have driven straight there.

Thankfully, on Sunday we made it back to Stansted. By this stage, I couldn’t even hold myself up, and on the main concourse, Shaun spotted a policeman and asked him to call an ambulance. The ambulance crew gave me a choice of Addenbrookes, in Cambridge, or a local hospital. I had heard of Addenbrookes so chose to go there, being taken straight to A&E before being transferred to a ward.

The staff kept a close check on my infection indicators. One of the markers is CRP, which measures inflammation levels within the blood; readings should be under 10, but mine was off the scale at over 40,000, which wasn’t a great sign. I was put on intravenous antibiotics and taken for a CRT scan to see if anything turned up. Unfortunately, the doctors only checked my head and neck and as far as my chest but no further. The infection started to drop with antibiotics, but my blood salt

level also dropped significantly, making it difficult to get fluids into me.

The doctors still didn't know what was happening to me medically, but with my infection indicator now at a more sensible and stable 101, they decided to discharge me. The immediate practical problem was how to get from Southern England to Skipton to collect my car. I didn't fancy a rickety old ambulance and said OK to a taxi. A rather bemused taxi driver turned up for the long journey home.

Shaun was with me all the time in hospital and was an absolute marvel. He's a brilliant person to have around when the chips are down and sorted me out every day without a whimper. The taxi drove through the night, and we stopped somewhere on the A1 for a terrible meal. At Skipton, I found my car was covered in leaves and sap but, still, it started first time. Shaun took me home and got me to bed, after which he crept off to his room and we both collapsed in exhaustion.

By the next morning, I had started to go downhill again fast and rang the GP, who put me on more specialist antibiotics. A few days later, I had a strange bowel movement, which made me think something was very wrong, so I got straight on the phone to the doctor.

“Do not wait for an ambulance,” said Dr Howlett. “Get in the car and go straight to hospital. I'll have the Acute Medical Unit waiting for you.”

He didn't let me down. I was taken straight into the AMU, where huge resources were thrown at me to scan, test and identify what was going on. To add to the problems, there wasn't a decent pressure mattress in the unit, without which I was at risk of developing pressure sores, which was the last thing I needed. By the end of the day, I was put in the stroke ward – the only one with a bed. The ward was a big bay with eight beds, and having explained that my bowel movements take hours and are not pleasant for me and certainly not for others to experience, I was given a private room with a good pressure mattress. I settled in for my stay.

Later that evening, the consultant on my case arrived with a list on his clipboard – a long list. “We’ve identified the problems,” he said, taking a deep breath, looking at the clipboard. “You have a burst appendix, sepsis, kidney failure, dehydration, nodules in your lungs and a shadow on your liver. You also have a 6cm by 8cm abscess on the muscles of your spine, a bladder infection and dangerously low blood salt.”

“I guess that’s why I’m feeling a bit rubbish then,” I gulped, trying to take it all in. I knew I could die from many items on the list, which was very frightening. “So what are we going to do about it?”

Intravenous antibiotics started straight away, then slowly the medics got to work on each point on the list, immediately adding intravenous saline to help the kidney failure and dehydration. The abscess was in the two muscles in the middle of my back and had been caused by my appendix rupturing and

basically exploding backwards towards my spine. It was my appendix bursting that had caused the violent spasm in France, and since then, the poison had been slowly leaking from the abscess, causing the onset of sepsis.

So the abscess had to be drained and for this process, I was sent to the ultrasound operating theatre. This looked something like *Star Trek Enterprise*, with screens everywhere and doctors and nurses wearing pale-blue operating scrubs. A consultant radiologist had charge of the long keyhole surgery sticks, and a tiny nick was made in my stomach to insert a thin probe, following which the radiologist started burrowing away inside. A drain shunt was inserted into the abscess and it ran into a little tube coming out of my side, filling the attached urine drain bag. The stuff that came out was a grey, green sludge and watching it was very weird.

Luckily, my kidneys started to function again as the saline drip reversed the dehydration, and the sepsis markers started to fall now the poison was drained. Things started to look up. The nodules on the lungs turned out to be calcium deposits from my many chest infections, so my fears of cancer were, thankfully, not realised. It turned out that the shadow on my liver – and Mum's liver cancer problem had reverberated around my brain from the moment the shadow was mentioned – was no more than a cluster of veins that had not shown up correctly on initial scans.

My appetite returned and, hospital food being what it is, I looked into having meals delivered to my private room.

I looked at some local pub menus online and then gave them a ring to place my order.

“Can I order steak and chips and have a friend collect it?” I’d say, explaining my situation. They were more than happy to oblige.

The pub meals were good, I was eating well and getting better. I seemed to be constantly hungry and, for some reason, developed a fancy for food with intense flavours. I was really into M&S lemon squash for breakfast along with yoghurts and other things full of vitamin C.

Shaun was due to leave and I had a new carer starting, called Rikke, so Shaun was showing her the ropes while I was stuck in hospital. My greatest excitement was that Linda was moving to England to live at the end of November and arrived while I was in Lancaster. It was lovely to see her.

It felt like a turning point ... but that was too much to hope for!

My birthday in December was going to be in the hospital room, a far cry from my 50th in Collioure. Paul Brown was a regular visitor, popping in to say hello. Richard happened to be over from France the same weekend and he dropped in to celebrate. At the time, there was a warning of a norovirus outbreak at the hospital. We bought an Indian meal, and Richard, Linda and I ate the same dinner from the same restaurant. They didn’t get ill, but guess who did? Despite the fact that the hospital was affected by a norovirus outbreak, they put my problems down

to gastroenteritis, but it was unlike any form of food poisoning I had ever experienced. Hmmm.

It was the messiest birthday on record and my fluid loss was ... significant ... from every angle! Unfortunately, the doctors didn't put me on a drip.

Survival Three

A couple of nights later, tucked up alone in my room, I woke up in the middle of the night in the sure knowledge that I was going to faint. It was there, just in front of my eyes: a foggy, grey cloud. I knew that if I did faint, alone in bed, my blood pressure would drop dramatically, and it could be all over for me. I was willing myself to stay conscious and raise my blood pressure, but nothing was working. I pressed the nurse call button, but nobody came. The fog was right there, touching the tips of my eyelashes and pulling me into oblivion. I knew that my blood pressure was dropping to near nothing and I was terrified.

I managed to hang on and eventually a student nurse appeared, and I told her to get help. By this stage, my blood pressure was 51 over 43, which is ridiculously low. Numerous doctors were called. The problem, of course, was caused by dehydration, but instead of putting me straight onto a saline drip, they tried to get me to drink water, which was counter-intuitive given that it would further dilute my already weak sodium levels. I stabilised somewhat that night, but my blood pressure kept going up and down over the next few days. The consultant endocrinologist was in touch with the spinal unit, trying to find

out what was happening, but couldn't find a solution. My weight dropped from around 70kg to 58kg. I was too scared to go to sleep at night, terrified that if I did, I might not wake up the next morning. Rikke was now with me during the day and, on one occasion, my blood pressure plummeted to the low 50s. Thinking it was a cardiac arrest, doctors arrived quickly – but my heart was OK and they stabilised me again. Rikke couldn't be with me at night and I couldn't shout, so I had to have a nurse stationed nearby to ensure that I didn't conk out while alone. It is hard to describe how unnerving it is when your own body is totally out of control.

The medical team tried various suggestions from the spinal unit in Southport, but with little success. I celebrated Christmas in hospital and it was surprisingly cheerful. Rikke got dressed up and the food was exceptional, all cooked from scratch for a change.

We managed to leave hospital before the New Year with a sack-load of meds. The blood pressure was not as bad as it had been, but I was still terrified about going to sleep and hired an additional carer to stay at night, sleeping with my feet popped up on pillows and wearing tight surgical socks.

In order to finally sort out the blood pressure issues, I needed to go to the spinal unit in Southport, but no bed was available. Over the years, I have spent a huge amount of money with BUPA and I rang them to see if I could be admitted to a private spinal unit. I was told I could only qualify as an acute admission to a unit in Aylesbury, a long way from home. As it

transpired, BUPA said they wouldn't pay as I was not deemed an acute admission – which makes you wonder what the hell qualifies as 'acute'.

At the end of January, Southport finally had a room for me. My journey was in a rattly, cold ambulance and I ended up in a ward with a carpenter in for surgery for a slipped disc, a paraplegic with pressure sores, and another man who had fallen out of a bedroom window and broken his neck. We were a jolly crew!

I saw the consultant the next day and he put me on two litres of fluid while also taking me off all medication to see what would happen. Inevitably, my blood pressure dropped again, dramatically, and I had a team working on me all night.

"Didn't think you were going to survive," the carpenter told me cheerfully the next day.

My consultant prescribed a specialist medication for my condition and kept me in a horizontal position, but it took two days of terrible ups and downs before it started to work. The dose was then increased by tiny increments, and within a couple of weeks, my blood pressure had improved markedly and stabilised. It turned out that I'd had autonomic failure caused by the infection and low blood salt.

Slowly, the staff started to elevate me to a sitting position again. They strapped me up in surgical stockings, though trying to get the long ones on to my legs was like trying to stuff sausage meat into skins with your fingers, while the short ones

were so tight they cut my skin. However, with the success of the meds, I was finally able to get out of bed and make real progress. I had to arrange with nurses to oversee my bowel movements and other practicalities, so my routines wouldn't get screwed up. My carers were living in a Southport hotel but could not be in the hospital all the time to care for me.

Then, as if to ensure maximum inconvenience for one and all, my catheter blocked and my blood pressure rocketed again to 235/115, which is very high. It took a while for the staff to react but eventually a nurse changed the catheter, with pee pouring everywhere. She looked at me as if it was all my fault, which didn't do much to improve my mood.

Having been bedridden for almost five months, my muscle tone went a bit crazy. One side had started to contract so tightly that I developed what is known as dropped foot. It was as if my foot was continuously straight with my calf. My other side was very loose. It took months of physio to sort this out and was an added complication I could have done without.

Back home again

I was discharged in February 2014, with the meds working well – possibly a bit too well, as my blood pressure started running too high. The doctors then had to do a reverse of the previous exercises. By March 2014, things had stabilised and over the next few days and weeks, I started getting up more regularly. I gradually stopped the medication and maintained the correct blood pressure, so bit by bit, I went back to life as I knew it. I got back behind the wheel but found I was terrified of being on the road again. I was still having physio twice a week and

my muscles slowly eased so I was able to sit up straight in my chair again.

I went back to work, cutting back to four days a week instead of five to give myself time to recover. But it took six months for me to properly surface again. A cloud seemed to be touching me every night, like death hanging over me. I appreciated every breath every day. Simply being alive, taking a breath and seeing a smile – anything was better than being dead.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Back to the Land of the Living *July 2014 to Spring 2016*

By the summer, I was up and about again. My hopes and aims now were simply to get well enough to pretty much pick up life where I had left off – working, travelling and doing fun things. Despite me being as careful as I could, things didn't always turn out quite that simply.

In July 2014, the Tour de France ran a few English stages up at Hawes in the Dales. This was to be my first proper outing. Obviously, we were in the car, but were in the minority as most spectators had come by bike – thousands of them! We waited at the side of the road for three hours and then, at speeds hard to comprehend, the peloton passed us in about 20 seconds. I fleetingly saw Chris Froome and Mark Cavendish, and then it was all over. To be honest, it was more about the atmosphere than anything else and it was well worth the trip.

At this time, amongst others, I was working with my last Danish carer, Anne.

One thing I have discovered with my Danish friends and carers is that things can sometimes get lost in translation. One good example is when a carer wanted to post a gift home and asked me, “Have you got any flamingo?”

Rather perplexed, I replied, “No, but why do you want flamingo?”

Her reply of, “To wrap up my present,” really threw me.

“You can wrap things in a pink African bird?” I asked.

“No, no, flamingo – like in boxes,” she said.

I said, “What on earth do you mean? You can’t put flamingoes in boxes!”

Eventually, it turned out that in Denmark, polystyrene is known as flamingo ... How? Why? Too much schnapps, I reckon.

Another example happened one night when my Danish carer, Anne, was planning supper, and we had the following conversation:

From the kitchen, Anne said, “What do you fancy to go with pork chops? How about baby mice?”

“What?!” I said from the other room.

“Baby mice, they’ll be great in garlic butter; yum!” she said more insistently.

“What do you mean, baby mice? I don’t think you can buy them in Sainsbury’s.”

“Yes, you can. You have a pack in the fridge.”

“Of baby mice?” Thinking of little pink rodents, I said, “I don’t think so.”

Becoming irritated, she said, “Yes, baby mice.”

Anne then walked towards me triumphantly with a pack of baby sweetcorn. Eventually, I worked out that in Danish, sweetcorn is known as *maize*, spelt *maïs* and pronounced ‘myeece’, hence ‘baby mice’. Call me Sherlock.

I thought it was hilarious. Anne couldn’t see the funny side, but it was so good to laugh. There weren’t many laughs during that ghastly year.

In November 2014, I was well enough to return to France and took Beata and Anne with me. I wanted to treat us all to a good holiday with a nice car. “What’s the biggest two-door convertible you have?” I asked the car rental company. They supplied a bright white Audi A5 Cabriolet.

I pleaded with the girls not to pack too much, but they completely ignored me and we left with so much kit that anyone would have thought we were moving house. The car rental rep at Girona Airport shook his head in disbelief and muttered, “Impossible,” as he watched us stuffing luggage into every possible nook and cranny of the car – but somehow, we got it all in. On arrival at the house, we opened the car door and everything spilled out. It was like a cartoon.

We had a wonderful time and were blessed with great weather.



In Collioure, 2014

We drove to Spain one day through the Pyrenees on a back road that was no more than a single track. Going up through villages on the French side, we passed between the peaks and into bright, clear Spanish sunshine. That night, we returned on a tiny old smugglers' road that had been used during the Spanish Civil War and when the Nazis had invaded France. It was switchback after switchback in the darkness until,

eventually, we came to a police checkpoint at Banyuls-sur-Mer in France.

The border patrol guard must have thought I looked like a drug dealer, travelling the smugglers' road at night in a white convertible Audi with two pretty girls in tow. He started questioning Beata, who is Polish and doesn't speak a word of French.

"I speak French. Beata doesn't," I offered.

"Can you get out of the car, please?"

"Um, can't, I'm sorry. I use a wheelchair and it's in the boot." A small group of police had gathered behind the guard by now and were grinning and nudging each other, clearly not believing a word of it.

"Please open the boot."

By this stage both girls were giggling and as the policeman searched the boot, being watched by his pals, he must have seen their triumphant smiles. After 'the chat', the officials gave us permission to drive off, everyone laughing, with the cops scratching their heads and wondering what on earth the story was.

On our way home to England, we left Collioure driving back past the same spot where, a year earlier, I had looked at the

Golfe du Lion while at death's door. There was no deathly mirage this time, and it was fantastic to see that wonderful view again.

After Christmas in Denmark with Linda, it was straight back to work in early January. The company continued to grow nicely in 2015, and, apart from being Chairman, my role focused on marketing, recruitment, compliance and finance. Linda had now taken over as Managing Director and the rest of the team took responsibility for all the day-to-day activities. Normality had resumed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Home and Away, Highs and Lows *Spring 2016 to Late 2020*

My first cruise

It was Linda who put the idea of a cruise into my head. Both she and one of my work colleagues had been on cruises and were very enthusiastic about them. I was always a bit iffy about cruising but reckoned I couldn't knock it until I had at least given it a go. I preferred the idea of a small luxury cruise rather than being on a massive ship, and a trip with a theme such as history or wine or food; something that dovetailed with my own interests.

I found a French company that seemed to fit the bill; a 10-day cruise that went from Venice to Lisbon, with the theme of history. The lecturer on the cruise was Olivier Giscard d'Estaing, a brother of the former French president. I've always wanted to go to Venice, and one of the stop-offs was Algiers, another place I was keen to see. We were also calling at Málaga, so that meant I could meet up with Rupert. Unfortunately, in the light of the *Charlie Hebdo* and Paris attacks, the company decided that a French-flagged ship in an Arab country wasn't such a good idea and dropped Algiers from the itinerary after we had booked. It was a shame, and the situation wasn't improved by substituting Ibiza for Algiers! Still, I would see my brother and Lisbon and, of course, Venice, and hopefully would learn a lot along the way.

Finding a wheelchair-friendly hotel in Venice was not easy. Venice itself is fairly flat, of course, but all the famous bridges have steps, not slopes, and are out of my reach. After a fair amount of research, I found a fantastic hotel right on the Grand Canal and within walking distance of St Mark's Square. Beata and I flew to Venice and were met by the water taxi right outside the terminal building. The taxi was a beautiful wooden launch, and the journey from the airport was magical. It was a misty morning and as we neared the city, Venice seemed to rise up out of the water. After a few miles, our boat driver turned into an alleyway, then suddenly, *whoosh*, we were in the Grand Canal, right by the Rialto Bridge. The beauty of it was almost unbelievable. I had studied *The Merchant of Venice* at school, and it was all there in front of me: the buildings, the markets and the squares. It was like travelling through a fantasy world where the people, buildings and water all seemed to sparkle with a magical light. Our launch slowed and we pulled in to the dock of the hotel. There was a lift that transported me from dock to street, from where I could wheel straight into the lobby. Our room was small but it was accessible, and what it lacked in size, it more than made up for in location.

Beata and I get on well and we've travelled a lot together. We had four magical days in Venice, drifting up and down the alleyways in the water bus and enjoying the sights from the Grand Canal. I had booked a walking tour for all the tourist spots, and it was excellent. Our guide added so much to the visit, providing a marvellous history of St Mark's and the Doge's Palace and pointing out the significance of everything around us. With so many beautiful buildings, I was somewhat

surprised to find a Japanese tourist preferring to take photos of me. A little weird, I thought.

The four days went by quickly, and though the streets of Venice are not the easiest to navigate in a wheelchair, I'm so pleased I had the chance to visit.

If I thought the streets were tricky to navigate, I would soon discover that transferring from shore to ship and vice versa would prove even more 'adventurous'. The cruise dock was on a different canal and the hotel booked us a water taxi to the pier, a trip which took us out onto open water, where the taxi boat could really shift. Our cruise ship, the *Le Soléal*, was smaller than many others, with only 240 passengers on board, and she was docked at the moorings used by private yachts.



Our cruise ship, Le Soleal, 2016

Our water taxi was not much above the water level, and when we arrived, the dock was about 10 feet above our heads with the steps covered in seaweed. I may have uttered one or two swearwords, but before I had time to give the situation any real thought the two blokes from the water taxi took hold of me and literally threw me onto the steps and somehow got me up. It was quite terrifying and I counted myself lucky not to have ended up in the canal.

There was more fun trying to get me on board the ship, a short journey involving a slippery gangway teetering at a 45-degree angle. While waiting, I noticed a wide doorway in the hull of the boat at dock level which was used for loading food and provisions. “Can’t I just load through there?” I asked hopefully.

“No, you have to go up the gangway,” I was told.

It took four men, in their pristine whites, and an age of shoving and pushing to get me on board. The other route definitely would have been easier, but I might have been stuck in the storeroom for the rest of the trip – which would have been a shame as the ship was very grand and not to be missed.

I was taken to my twin cabin with the disabled bathroom, but it was cramped, with not enough space between the bed and the desk for me to manoeuvre in my chair. Although most of the furniture was fixed to the floor, as is usual on a ship, thankfully, the beds moved and, with the help of a couple of the crew, we made enough space for me to move around the room. I had requested a balcony, but it was about a metre square and,

annoyingly, below the guard rails were solid steel panels, which made a glimpse of the sea almost impossible from seated height. Sometimes such small details of perspective can make a big difference. Hey ho!

Beata and I settled in, and, after a while, we made our way up on deck for the departure from Venice. We were handed a glass of champagne to toast the event and as the ship pulled away from the dock, all the guests scampered to the bow.

Four of us – Beata, another guest, a chap called David, who was the onboard nurse, and I – headed for the stern and as the ship slid past the end of the Grand Canal, we had a remarkable view back through St Mark's Square with the setting sun casting a golden light across Venice. I felt as if I were part of a Canaletto painting and the magic of that moment will stay with me for ever.

It was easy to get around the ship with its wide corridors and access was fine to the rooms and the lifts. Unfortunately, the disabled lift to the lecture deck didn't work, but the crew helped me down and we attended some interesting lectures, though some were a little obscure.

The excess of food and drink bordered on the embarrassing. In the morning, there was a full breakfast followed by coffee, then lunch and afternoon tea before returning for dinner in the evening. I reckon some people lived in the dining rooms! I asked to sit with a variety of people at meals and each evening we had a mixture of Brits, French and Americans at the table

and enjoyed great conversation. When the evening drew to a close, we toddled back to the cabin and slept – it felt great to be sleeping on a ship.

Our first stop was at Hvar, in Croatia, and an unsettled sea meant that the captain had to moor offshore instead of on the dock as planned. I had a day trip booked, but that now meant getting me onto a tender boat to take me to land. Of course, there were steep steps down to access the platform where the tender was bobbing, rather uninvitingly. I was bundled into a lifejacket and a kind group of Filipino waiters from the kitchens helped me down the ladder. The tender was low in the water and moving with the swell. One, two, three and I was thrown over the gap into the tender.

We motored over to the dock, where it took another six men to get me safely ashore. I couldn't take part in the arranged trip as there was no accessible transport, so I spent three hours exploring the pretty little town, which was great fun. Unfortunately, when the time came for our return, the conditions had deteriorated further, and I was now being hurled from shore to tender and tender to ship in crazy conditions. I took things easy for the rest of the day and concluded that I wouldn't be using the tender again – after South Africa and Italy, I have had it with small boats! Our tour continued via Montenegro, and during a couple of days on the open sea, the captain had an open-bridge policy and we took up the invitation for a guided tour.



Sailing our cruise ship, 2016

In conversation with the captain, I asked if it would be possible to see the engine rooms, and the next day we were taken below to the crew deck, the crew dining room and the engine control room, though, sadly, not to the engines themselves. Below deck was a stark contrast to the luxury above.

Talking with one of the the French crew members later, I got more of an insight into life below deck. “I am leaving as soon as I can,” she told us tearfully. “The difference in pay is ridiculous between the French and the Filipino crews. They do shift after shift with six months at sea and six months off and hardly ever get home to see their families.” Given the context, we were surprised by her openness, but also touched by her concerns.

We cruised around the toe of Italy through the Strait of Messina on our way to Sicily. There was talk of spectacular whirlpools and, just as we were sitting down to dinner, we got the full

experience. With no warning at all, the ship suddenly listed violently to one side, and we were staring straight down at the sea with plates, bottles of wine and food sliding off the table. Within seconds it had righted itself and it was lucky I had my brakes on. I can definitively confirm the presence of whirlpools!

Palermo was a place of intoxicating madness and energy and from there we headed to Ibiza, arriving mid-morning when all the partygoers were asleep. The signs for pizzas and burgers did not bode well, but down an alleyway we came across a small group of people eating outside a small and rather unpromising-looking cafe.

“Are you open?” we asked.

“Yes,” the boss man jumped up. “What would you like?”

“Whatever you’re having,” I laughed.

He came back with a whole Dover sole with salad for Beata and me. It was possibly the best fish I’ve ever eaten in any restaurant. Lesson to self: never judge a cafe by its cover.

Next it was off to Málaga to meet Rupert (almost unrecognisable with his new beard) and we spent a happy afternoon munching tapas, drinking beers and catching up.

The last few days were blighted by illness. A particularly annoying feature of spinal injury is that it can make you more prone to catching infections, and I always travel with antibiotics for this eventuality. The confines of a ship make it a good incubator for bugs and I had noticed a woman coughing near me at dinner one night. By the time we reached Cádiz, I was feeling pretty ratty. When we reached Lisbon, I was feeling extremely ratty. I had allowed two days for seeing Lisbon, but, in the end, I spent them stuck in bed with a shocking chest infection which the antibiotics refused to touch.

I was annoyed at missing Lisbon, and when we were back at home, I spent a month stuck in bed. It took two courses of antibiotics to kill that infection, which turned out to be pneumonia.

Chest infections, while a nightmare for me, are fairly insignificant affairs for the wider public. This is not the case if you are a celebrity, I've discovered. As you may remember from previous mentions, I am a great fan of live music and, now fully recovered, was looking forward to a trip to London to see Lady Gaga in concert with Tony Bennett at the Albert Hall. Minutes before the curtain went up, the public address sounded. *Bing-bong*, "We regret that Mr Tony Bennett has a chest infection and tonight's concert is hereby cancelled. Please collect your money from the box office on the way out of the hall." The irony of it! No apologies, no promise of another date, no understudy. People were in tears and I was fuming – not with Tony Bennett, with whom I had considerable sympathy, but with the way the situation had been managed and that Lady Gaga didn't give it a go on her own. Whatever

happened to ‘the show must go on’? Beata and I concluded that the only thing to do was get drunk, and discovering that the nearest cocktail bar was at The Ritz, we headed straight there to drown our sorrows with exotic cocktails.

Into 2016

In 2016, Adele released a new album and Linda and I went to Manchester to see her on tour. Her voice is truly amazing, particularly when you hear her live. It was a good start to the year.



Linda and I see ADELE

A pink bum

But things started going wrong not long afterwards when I noticed my bum was a little pink on my sitting bones, my ischial tuberosities. As I can't feel pain or wriggle when uncomfortable, visual clues are vital and marks on your sitting bones are serious and can turn into full-blown pressure sores. In Collioure that Easter, the situation became worse and I spent most of the trip in bed. If I got up for dinner, I would have to spend three days in bed recovering. Back home, I was in bed for months and had to keep up a relentless schedule of being

moved to stop sores from developing. My hips went pink, my back went pink and the spinal unit carried out pressure mapping. This is done using a plastic sheet with pressure sensors to ascertain problem areas. Cushions are then measured to fit your shape and further mapping is carried out to measure their efficacy. Thirty different cushions were tried on me over three months, each one pressure mapping the weight on the sitting bones and then mapping that cushion and adjusting accordingly. I had the same pink mark in the same place each time. It just wouldn't go. One day, I was nosing around online and discovered Jay Cushions in the USA, which had just introduced the Jay2 Deep Contour, and, like magic, it worked perfectly first time. I've been using them ever since. It's always a bonus when you get a lucky break!

The year 2016 was very much a year for being at home and the Yorkshire Dales has a lot to offer. In my home village of Clapham, there is a trail that leads, almost from my front gate, to a show cave, about a mile into the Dales National Park.

I had never been into the cave before so Beata, Bogusia (whom I called Tigger as she is a bundle of energy, enormous fun and always on the go) and I set off to do the tour of Ingleborough cave. It was a great day out amongst the extraordinary limestone formations deep underground, though it needed the strength of both girls to move me around.

On another occasion, a sunny day in May, my carer Ondrej helped me take the Jaguar on what we called our 'grand day out'.



Going for a drive, 2016

We drove around the fells and the dales on a day when the weather was perfect, if a bit cool. The roof was down and I was wearing my woolly hat, and when Ondrej took a look at me, he started laughing. “You look like my favourite Russian peasant,” he said, which I thought was a terrible insult to Russian peasants.



Going for a drive, 2016

We took some great photos that day and there is plenty to be said for staying local when you live in such a beautiful part of the world.

Into 2017 and more catheter problems

I think you have probably got the picture by now. There are highs and there are lows and there are in-betweens – that goes for life in general. With spinal injury, the lows can be a bit lower, last for longer and can be life-threatening. The highs are always pure joy – even if they are more complicated to achieve. The in-betweens are the day-to-day routine of life and care, friendship and work. And then there is age! As you get older, things can stop working quite so well.

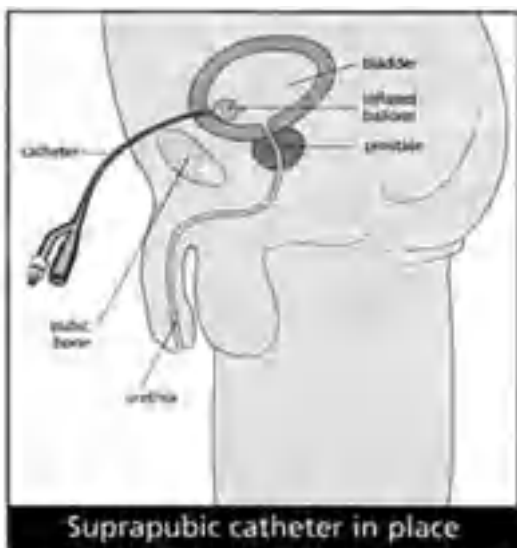
I started having catheter problems in the spring. It was occasionally blocking, but the problem was only growing worse. In France, in April, while checking the house out for the season, my catheter blocked. It was lucky that I could speak French and a district nurse arrived and changed the catheter under the bemused gaze of an ambulance crew who had arrived to take me to hospital. I'm glad I avoided that.

In June, after a business trip down to the Williams Grand Prix factory in Wantage, it blocked again in the middle of the night. My friends Birgit and her family were staying at the time and we had to call out the district nurse team. Unfortunately, they messed up inserting it to such an extent that it slid all the way into the prostate, and when they inflated the balloon, bright red blood sprayed up to the ceiling. To stop the bleeding, they wrapped me up in a cotton blanket that immediately became red and saturated with blood. They called colleagues and

eventually another nurse arrived, who replaced the catheter, but I then had to go in an ambulance to hospital, where the doctors sorted things out. It was an absolute nightmare.

We had a repeat performance in October. A night team came but again hit the prostate which involved more blood and another ambulance. I was in A&E for hours, and, of course, the autonomic dysreflexia kicked in with my blood pressure shooting up to dangerous levels. I was munching pills as if they were Smarties to keep myself from having a stroke.

Eventually, I saw a consultant who thought the urethral catheter was doing too much damage and proposed a suprapubic one.



Suprapubic catheter

(Taken from

www.bladdersafe.org/uploads/5/6/5/0/56503399/spinalinjurycentre.orgurethralcatheter-source.pdf)

This involves a special needle straight through the abdomen into the bladder to make a hole, but the doctor didn't hit the target on the first or second attempt. It was somewhat disconcerting seeing a long thing like a knitting needle being stabbed into one's tummy – and looking at the doctor struggling to insert the catheter. In the end, I was taken into surgery and given something to knock me out completely, during which I was fitted with two catheters, the suprapubic one and my usual urethral one. I woke in the recovery ward to see my carer, Anita, sleeping on the floor. The NHS ward staff cannot carry out the care needed by people with a spinal injury, and nor will they provide accommodation for the specialist carers who can provide that care. Poor Anita.

I was discharged after a few days, but I was like a cyborg with wires and bits of this and that sticking out of me. As I've said, the lows can be very low, complicated and life-threatening.

I managed to get back to work for a few weeks before we broke for Christmas. I didn't want to chance going to Denmark and went to my friend Paul's instead. I always like to celebrate New Year's Eve, so we booked dinner at a hotel in York. York is such a beautiful city, and we had a delicious dinner, the full fireworks and even a bit of a wiggle on the dancefloor. It was a much-needed high point to end 2017 and bring in 2018.

A trip to Germany in 2018

At the end of January 2018, I went into hospital to have the second suprapubic changed. A junior doctor took over from the consultant but put the catheter through my stomach and right down to my prostate – again. I was assured it was draining fine

and was sent home but then it happened all over again later that day, with the blood and the ambulance in the middle of the night. I got through most of January before catheter problems resurfaced and more mess-ups ensued. I now ensure that all catheterisation is carried out by an experienced consultant. And, as with the pressure cushions, I have sourced an excellent catheter from the US and have since been problem free. Avoidable problems really annoy me because they are just that: avoidable.

My godson, Julian, was being confirmed in Germany in April and I flew over with Anita. I love being with Birgit and her family. Her husband, Peter, is a lighting director in Baden-Baden Festival Hall and he invited us to see him at work. Baden-Baden is a spectacular place, a beautiful spa town. We had our tour backstage and around his lighting gallery. Peter asked us to go back after lunch for the final dress rehearsal of the ballet, so off we went for a nice lunch, returning later to take our place in the front row of the circle. We watched the director making his final adjustments, and it was like a private performance specially for us.

Collioure and Paris in the autumn

In September, I went to Collioure for a couple of weeks and to Paris in October. We went by train, from Skipton to King's Cross and across to St Pancras. The Eurostar took us straight to Gare du Nord, where we went outside to take a taxi to our hotel. While waiting for the taxi driver to put the bags into the cab, a random bloke on the street took hold of my chair and pushed me up the ramps, whacking me against the side of the taxi and nearly tipping me out of my chair. There was mayhem

and a shouting match between the driver and the would-be helper, who slunk off. People helping without asking can be so dangerous.

Our hotel on the Champs-Élysées was perfect, and we had a glorious week in Paris. We saw the Arc de Triomphe and the Louvre, and Anita pushed me all the way to Notre Dame. It was six months before the fire, and we caught it at its best. Notre Dame is an incredible place and a pivotal part of France. On the way back to our hotel, we dropped in on a post-impressionist exhibition of Picasso, Monet, Manet and van Gogh. When looking at van Gogh's paintings up close, you can almost feel the torment in his brushstrokes.

One night, we went to a spectacular revue at the Lido de Paris on the Champs-Élysées, and, of course, I went for a three-star Michelin meal at Le Cinq. It was ridiculously expensive but a fantastic experience to have. We loved being tourists for a week in Paris.

Continuing business growth in 2019

We rolled into work again in January 2019 with plenty of plans for the French lettings, to develop new software and keep the company, which was doing nicely, growing.

We wanted to keep doing what we were already doing but better with constant development and improvement. We had decided not to do any strategic new developments and only to grow organically. Our planning for the future was based on recruitment because the more carers you have, the more potential clients you are able to attract. We have a reputation

for excellent care, and the way to attract more clients is to offer the same level of service but to more people.

A night at the opera

Linda and I had always had a hankering to go to the Royal Opera House to see a proper opera and we finally managed it in January 2019. We were going the whole hog with a fine meal beforehand and living the high life for the evening. In this spirit, I decided to treat myself to a room at The Savoy. I had never stayed there and had never dreamt that I could. The Savoy is a fantastic place and I had a room with a beautiful river view. The level of service was almost ridiculous. Linda and I had dinner at the Savoy Grill because you have to, don't you? Afterwards we went straight to the opera house for *La Traviata*.

The Royal Opera House is amazing. The interior is as you would expect in a classical opera house, all glitter and chandeliers. Linda and I were dickey-bowed up in our finest. It was a truly wonderful night. I love live performances and I'll even go to a pantomime to watch the reality of people singing and performing live. I find it incredible and being part of an audience is all part of that experience.

Travelling again

In March, Birgit was over from Germany with her family. Her boys were growing rapidly, and when they came over, I always tried to think of things to occupy them because boys always want to be doing something. Remembering the fun I had as a boy, I managed to book them on a half-day session of off-road motorbike trials riding. We kept it as a surprise until the

morning of the outing. The boys didn't know what to expect, but when they saw the motorbikes lined up, complete with suits and helmets, they started hopping about with excitement. They had a fabulous day, and I think it was a highlight of their trip.

We went to Denmark at the end of July for Linda's birthday, for which she had rented a gorgeous function room in a lovely hotel overlooking the sea. It was a wonderful family occasion for Linda, and I was honoured to be there. The speeches and songs were in Danish, but I still felt part of the great atmosphere. We stayed on for a week and had a wonderful trip.

Over the years, I have come to like Denmark and its people very much – it is a super place. I stay in the same hotel each time I visit, so I know the layout, the rooms and how to move about the building, which makes life nice and easy.

The following week, we travelled across Denmark to stay with some friends in the beautiful town of Praestoe near Copenhagen, and we even fitted in watching Classic Car Grand Prix racing in Copenhagen.

I then had a month back at the office before heading off on a quick trip to Slovakia with Anita. Then it was off to France for its usual mix of business and pleasure. The weather was lovely during our trip, and we had a relaxing time doing things around the house, going for nice meals and enjoying the late autumn sun.

I was in England for Christmas 2019 and was looking forward to 2020, which sounded like a good, rounded sort of year! Little did any of us know.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Pandemic and Beyond *January 2020 to December 2022*

Rocking to the classics in 2020

While mooching about on the Internet in early 2020, I discovered a band called the Classic Rock Show. Being a covers band, they play all the rock anthems from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – plenty of Dire Straits, Rainbow, Deep Purple, some Queen and other greats. I spotted they were playing a gig in Leeds in February 2020 and I decided I had to go. On the night, off we went to a theatre in the middle of Leeds, having a meal in the theatre restaurant and a brilliant night of rock. The first half of the gig was early 1960s tunes, and in the second half, the band went into all the classic rock tunes. How they managed to do such good covers of the classics is beyond me, but they put on a great show.

Marrakech and the Covid tidal wave

All my life, I had wanted to go to Marrakech, in Morocco, and towards the end of 2019, I had decided to plan a trip. What I had read and heard of Marrakech made the city look magnificent, and I was keen to experience the excitement of a North African bazaar. I booked through a local disabilities travel agent and discovered that the man in the office had stayed in the hotel I had chosen and highly recommended it. The hotel is within walking distance of the old town and has a big garden for taking time out from the bustle of the city. I booked a week from 21st to 28th March 2020. Throughout February, the murmurings of Covid were gaining rapid

momentum and as we went towards the middle of March, the tidal wave was flowing across the world. Amongst far broader concerns, I also started to worry about the trip. I watched the government advice on travel to Morocco and finally made the decision to cancel just as all flights to and from Morocco were grounded. Luckily, my travel insurance covered it, although it took six months to get my money back.

We then smashed headlong into Covid. It arrived like a hurricane and was terrible for Origin specifically and care businesses generally. I can honestly say that I have never worked so hard in my life. The team in the office were, and are, magnificent. We had carers falling ill, others not able to enter the country and all with no PPE – no rubber gloves, masks or aprons. Our clients were screaming at us to get it, but PPE wasn't available anywhere in the world.

Meanwhile, we were trying to work it all out. We had no previous experience of anything like it and guidelines seemed to change constantly. What to do? I was terrified a carer would give Covid to a client and that client would die. We asked carers to stay for two or three months with a client, instead of the usual two weeks, which, wonderfully, they did. Some stayed even longer, giving up their lives and homes. It was deeply touching. The sacrifices our carers made were incredible. Everyone was terrified of catching Covid while care managers were rushing around, trying to keep it all together.

I had worries of my own, knowing my own heightened vulnerability to Covid but also mindful of the acute

responsibility that Linda and I had of keeping the company going through the pandemic. My last day in the office was 16th March, and by June, I was beginning to emerge again, but I have little memory of April or May as they were a blur of activity. Where did those months go? The government regulations were changing all the time during 2020 and at times verged on the ridiculous. How do you run a furlough scheme in the care business? Crazy! We made it through to Christmas 2020. I'm usually a social beast at that time of year, but we opted for a quiet break away in a local hotel, just for a change of scenery.

More problems in 2021, only worse

We hurtled into 2021 and the madness continued. It was a different kind of madness and somehow worse, if that makes any sense. The incredible workload went on but there was no option but to keep going.

On a more positive note, during March, the spinal injury charity Back Up issued a challenge to all its supporters to do a sponsored run to raise funds. Anita decided to take up the challenge, and, of course, I offered to sponsor her. She got the bit between her teeth and during the month of March, she ran a scarcely believable 475 miles/766km in 31 days while doing a demanding, full-time job.



With Anita, 2021

To say I was impressed is a dramatic understatement. I was also a lot poorer! As everyone was working from home by then, the challenge, overall, raised far more money than expected, which was a huge bonus in otherwise worrying times.

At work, we were doing our very best to recruit, which is key to providing a good service to our clients and to growing the company. No one was able to travel from Australia or New Zealand due to the Covid regulations, and this cut off an important source of potential carers. In addition, from July 2021, changes to UK immigration law post-Brexit made it impossible to recruit anyone from the EU. Instead of the usual dozen or so people on our courses, we were now down to two or three. It is an impossible situation that impacts significantly on the service we have been so proud to provide.

Different agencies have been lobbying parliament but we cannot persuade the government to address the problem. I have written to the BBC and have been contacting reporters weekly because, with 30 years in the business and a unique perspective on care, I want to bring my voice to bear on driving through changes and solutions. The Migration Advisory Committee is preparing a report on recruitment problems in our industry and the government is waiting for the findings in order to justify changing immigration policy for carers. Of course, the Migration Advisory Committee already knew the answer before starting the report – that we need to recruit from the EU again.

It was, and still is, tough out there. During Covid, we had to reduce client numbers by 20 to 30% because we were unable to provide cover. Some clients have been forced into hiring privately, but that comes with very high risks in quality. We're doing the best we can with recruitment drives in the UK and our company is trying to widen the avenues for attracting new people. Things have improved somewhat as the government added care workers to the 'shortage occupation list', which allows employers to sponsor overseas candidates for a work visa. Origin signed up for an international sponsorship visa as soon as we were able to do so and, although it is extremely expensive (£4,000 per candidate), we have started to make some headway with recruitment again.

Linda and I are cautious with company finances. "Keep some wool on your back," Jeff Hindley would always advise me. We keep the company relatively cash-rich, invest in the long-term

future and do not use bank loans to finance growth. We could only hope our strategy would see us through.

At home

I have no creative or artistic abilities of my own but I do have lots of ideas, and once I get an idea or project in my mind, I'm like a dog with a bone and will not let go until it's done. This stubbornness has led me down all sorts of weird and wonderful wormholes, discovering specialists in all kinds of things. For example, over the years, I've commissioned many bespoke, handmade things, from furniture to a leather blackout blind and two outside sculptures made from leylandii trees which had been removed from my garden.



Tree sculpture



Tree sculpture

Stemming from a friend's idea, my latest wild-goose chase is getting a giant transparent lampshade custom made. While interesting and getting exactly what I want, without fail these projects take ages and cost way more than anticipated! They are fun, though.

Going away again

Like most people, I relished the chance of being able to get away again once restrictions were lifted. Anita and I were both very tired and during the summer we spent a wonderful week in Pitlochry in Scotland. We also made it down to Collioure. We managed to complete most of the necessary admin including finding a new letting company and maintenance agent. We also

managed to make time for some relaxation and made the most of the food and wine of Southern France.

But then the tables were turned. Anita went home in October and fell off a ladder while pruning a tree. She was rushed to hospital and an initial scan showed three broken ribs and a possible fracture of the spine. I can barely describe my level of worry. After a horrible few hours, another scan showed a slight chip off two vertebrae so, mercifully, no spinal cord nerve damage.

She then had to spend several weeks in hospital followed by three months of convalescence at home. This accident torpedoed many of her plans and it is hard looking on when such a close friend and colleague is in hospital. I felt useless not being able to do anything to help.

My 60th birthday

With my 60th birthday fast approaching, I was determined to celebrate. In December 2021, many restaurants were closed, so I explored the idea of a private chef. After some investigation, I came upon Alex Beard, based up here in the Lake District. He had worked in many top restaurants, and, given his reputation, I was not optimistic that he would be available to help. However, when I rang him, he was both free and willing to come and do the job on the specified weekend. I decided to invite a dozen of my friends for a special dinner. We had fun working out the menu and wine and I was thankful for the help of many people in masterminding the finer points of party organisation.

The big day arrived, but because of Covid-19 rules, annoyingly, Linda's boyfriend, Kim, was stopped from flying in at the last minute, so we would be one down. Anita, of course, was still convalescing after her fall and I was sad that she wouldn't be joining us. Mid-morning, however, a delivery man arrived with a parcel. Opening it revealed something very special indeed – a bottle of 1961 Barbaresco Italian red wine. It was from Anita and a wonderful and generous surprise. We decided to keep it safe to celebrate together on her return to England in the new year.

Everything came together on the night and the whole evening was perfect – the food, wine and conversation flowed wonderfully.



At my 60th birthday party, with Linda, Richard and Lisa, 2021

Everyone got on famously and how Alex and his team produced such amazing dishes in my homely little kitchen is incredible. It was a magnificent way to spend my 60th birthday with some of my dearest friends.

Into 2022

The year 2022 began full of the hope that the previous two surreal Covid years would fade into memory and life could move forward more normally.

That hope lasted until 25th January, when a routine catheter change went wrong ... again. Even now, I don't understand how failing to insert my normal-size catheter and having to use a smaller one could cause such a crazy spiral of events. Nonetheless, in the first days after this catheter change, all I noticed was more discomfort than usual in my bladder and that I was peeing out less during the day and more at night.

Anita had returned to work but was still stiff and achy. We'd made a plan to drink my birthday bottle of wine on a Saturday. Getting up that morning, my blood pressure unexpectedly plummeted and made settling in my wheelchair very difficult. Putting it down to 'one of those things', the rest of the day went well and we enjoyed the wine with some delicious steaks, and I went to bed feeling comfortably boozy.

By the next day, my blood pressure was so low that I was unable to get out of bed – I nearly fainted even when lying down and I knew I was in trouble. This marked the beginning of a hellish couple of months.

On Monday morning, my blood pressure was see-sawing so dramatically that I decided I needed emergency medical attention and was duly admitted to Lancaster Hospital. Two unsatisfactory days later, I was discharged, only to be readmitted 24 hours later. No one seemed to know what was causing the problem or what to do about it. A further catheter change did not help much, but after 10 days, I was discharged again. Back at home, I stayed in close contact with my spinal unit. The doctors identified the problem as ‘chronic autonomic instability’. In simple terms, my body’s already delicate steady-state mechanism for maintaining stable blood pressure had been crashed by the catheter change. None of the medication worked. In fact, things got worse with violent see-sawing of blood pressure within minutes.

In early March, things became critical when I did actually faint in my sleep. As I started to come round, I found I couldn’t speak or call for Monika, my carer at the time. This was a terrifying situation. Ultimately, I managed to find a way to alert her and she immediately called the ambulance. I was unconscious again by the time they arrived, and this time, I ended up in a cardiac ward in Airedale Hospital. I awoke the next day to three consultants standing in front of me, shrugging their shoulders and admitting, “This is too complex – we’re not sure what to do.”

That was not what I needed to hear. In collaboration with my spinal unit, they tried various drugs, but, over the next few days, my blood pressure took this as a cue to go nuts. I was hooked up to a blood pressure monitor 24 hours a day and the most extreme numbers of which I was aware were a low of

51/28 and a high of 277/188. Again, normal blood pressure is 120/80. The only treatment they had was to alter the angle of my bed (head up/head down) according to the numbers on my monitor, but it was a less than effective way of dealing with such a critical situation. At one extreme I was at risk of fading away from hyper-low blood pressure, and at the other, of suffering stroke and/or heart failure. I was living (just) on the edge.

Seemingly endless days passed. I existed within hospital routines – it's odd but you almost switch off and let things happen around you with little sense of control. Life in hospital is not like life at home, where you choose how each day goes.

Eventually, someone diagnosed the real problems – low blood salt/hyponatremia and complete autonomic failure – and stumbled upon a treatment that stopped things worsening. That and yet another catheter change helped me to turn a corner regarding catheters and blood pressure. I was discharged and able to go home not long after that.

My recuperation was slow but over the following weeks and months, my condition steadily improved.

Then, in July, yet another problem. Slipping awkwardly in my wheelchair, I lost my balance and fell sideways. Phew, I had not fallen out of my chair, but I had given my left thigh and hip a big twist.

Of course, my instant worry was that I might have broken my leg, but there was no swelling or redness, and I kept my fingers crossed. However, a few days later, symptoms became more apparent and I knew I should get it checked. After waiting for six hours on a hospital trolley, an X-ray confirmed that I had, in fact, cracked the neck of the left hip ball joint. This meant I needed a hip replacement. I really could have done without this, on top of everything else ...

However, occasionally, just occasionally, a cloud does have a silverish lining.

‘Shit happens’ and I thought I had little option but to prepare myself for surgery the next day, so when the surgeon turned up in normal clothing saying he wanted a chat before operating, I was quite surprised. He began by explaining the pluses and minuses of having a hip replacement and then paused before saying, “But we need to ask ourselves: what are the reasons for having this operation?” I waited. “They are to reduce pain and to help mobility, so the patient can walk on that leg, pain-free. Now, Mr Henry, you can’t feel the pain and you can’t walk – so what would be the purpose for undergoing such a major operation?”

This was completely unexpected. “Fair point, Doctor,” I said, “but what do you advise?”

He went on to explain that, as it was a small crack, the swelling would go down and the bone would mesh enough for life in a

wheelchair while avoiding raising the risk of dislocation. “It’s up to you,” he said. “I can’t tell you what to do.”

I decided not to have the hip replacement, to which the surgeon immediately said I’d made the right decision, and so, 36 hours after being admitted with a broken hip, I left hospital still with a broken hip and having had no treatment. Welcome to Pete’s counterintuitive world. I’ve learnt to expect the unexpected.

And as a cherry on top

As noted before, I had dreamt of visiting the beautiful red city of Marrakech since I was a boy. The Covid-19 outbreak had forced me to cancel my booked trip in 2020, and it was only in May 2023 that I finally arrived there. After months of good health and normality, my long-planned trip to Morocco was finally a reality.



Koutoubia Mosque



Back street



Marrakech market



With Anita at the hotel

For the week, I had planned various guided tours from our lovely hotel. The holiday was like a dream: we explored the squares and the mosques, the exotic craziness of the souks and

bazaars; we saw camels on street corners, sampled the food, relaxed by the pool and enjoyed quiet suppers in the hotel.

After returning from Marrakech, 2023 continued on its merry way, with more successes, daily challenges, and ultimate enjoyment and appreciation of life back home. Now as I move into my 60s, I must look to the future.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Looking Both Ways Past and Future

Well, what now?

Yes, I did some things that I should not have done, like diving into the Thames all those years ago, and I have no choice but to live with the hand that I have been dealt as a result. I have a spinal injury and that is how it is, no matter how much I metaphorically stamp my feet or wring my hands.

That said, my life before, during and after my accident has been full of extreme highs and extreme lows and has never been boring. The memories are incredible.

I couldn't, and can't, do anything without the help of my carers/PAs. Nothing without Gudrun, Katherine, Birgit, Tristan, Nathan, Sophie, Shaun, Elsbeth, Thea, Sabina, Amelia, Cornelia, Sarah, Maren, Anita, Beata, Istvan and all the others. Without them, none of this life after 1988 would have been possible; I would probably be dead.

Spending so much time together with your carer, you get to know each other well from all the day-to-day chatting. Also, most weekends, we make an extra effort preparing something a bit special for supper one night. With a drink or two, maybe a bottle of wine and music playing while cooking and sharing the meal, we can just talk, very simply, as people – with disability and care work nowhere to be seen. Wonderful times.

Thank you all for helping me to rebuild my life and for opening my mind into your lives from all over the world.

I also know that no matter how good my carers are, or how attuned they are to my needs, or how good friends they become, it is inevitable that one day, they will go. The better they are and the longer they stay, the more you regret their eventual moving on. It is such a boon to share memories with someone and say, “Do you remember this, or the time we went there?” The fact that you have a history of shared experiences means so much.

Anita Balicka from Slovakia is the carer I’ve had for the longest time since my accident and she is one of the very best. She has put up with me for over seven years now, on and off, and we have been through thick and thin together; it will be a terrible wrench when she eventually leaves.

I reckon that for every calendar year since 1988, I have had between 5 and 10 completely new care workers helping me. Even 5×35 years is a lot of carers. Every single one of them has been trained, but each new carer takes time to learn my routines and get to know me: how to put my socks on, how to do my toileting, how to do my transfers, how I like my tea, where the shops are, how to drive my car. And sometimes, if I am absolutely honest, it becomes tiring. The worst run I ever had was six carers in eight days, and in September 2020, I had four in six days. Sometimes, things just go wrong and it can be pretty desperate. I’m getting older now, but new carers tend to be younger and I’m finding it harder to build up the same

rapport with someone in their 20s or 40s now that I'm in my 60s, but that's the reality of having a spinal cord injury.

As a sales guy, you need to be relentlessly optimistic and hope that things will work out well. It's much the same with life as a disabled person. I have had to learn how to live differently after my injury. Things take *much* longer and I have had no choice but to get used to it. If I can't change or do something, I try not to get fixated and depressed about it – but, God knows, it is not easy. Instead, I do what I can and do the best I can, while accepting that there are some things I cannot control.

Sometimes, circumstances change, and I have no choice but to develop new ways of doing things, which can be devastatingly hard.

Looking back, one of the hardest times was when my girlfriend Lauren left. She had saved my life and given me a reason to live, and when she and I split up, I felt like my future left with her. But parents, friends and staying busy helped me through and set me on a forward-facing path. Since then, there have been other girls, but none of those relationships lasted. If I fall head over heels for someone and they fall for me, then I'll be delighted, but if not, then it'll be a footloose and fancy-free bachelor's life for me.

It's an odd feeling, but my injury is now a fact of my life, just like the fact that I have brown eyes. Today, I have been longer in a chair than I have been able-bodied ... it makes you think.

Over the years, various phrases have really resonated with me; mantras that encapsulate my thoughts about just how much effort is needed every day when living with a complex disability. Here are some of them:

‘Just do it, now.’

‘What does not kill you does indeed make you stronger’ – if you interpret it the right way.

‘It’s too easy to give up.’

‘I’m not good at giving up.’

‘Find a way or make one.’

‘Try harder.’

‘Assume nothing.’

‘Never give up. Never, never, never.’

I try not to dwell on my disability. Over the years, health-wise I have had some massive ups and downs (in fact, an early title option for this book was *Surviving My Life*) but I have also had long periods of stable, good health and have been lucky enough to be able to do some amazing things. I hope I can now keep my health on a fairly stable footing as it makes a huge difference – that way, I can just live my life. When your health deteriorates, you are forced to focus on it and being stuck in hospital or in bed frustrates me desperately. But, like anyone else, you just have to get on with it, and while recuperating, you have to keep thinking, working at it and talking to people.

I have the immense good fortune to count some very good people as close friends. Thank you all for being who you are

and your help through some very dark times. As I work less, I hope to see you more.

We have now got Origin back to where we were before Covid and now is the time to reduce my workload. We have been talking about this for a long while, but now it is time to make it happen. Origin is not reliant on me personally now and I need to step away as I can't keep working for ever. Not being involved in the day-to-day running will be good for me – and maybe for Origin too – and will give me more flexibility to do other things. No idea what, though.

If by co-founding Origin and Kensgriff Care I have helped, in some small way, to improve the lives of other people with a spinal injury, then I am delighted. Over the years, my disability has meant I have met many wonderful people in the world of spinal injury – other injured people, our clients, doctors, nurses and others. The privilege has been all mine.

Words cannot easily describe my pride in Origin, what it is, what it does, and, most importantly, how the company does what it does for people with a spinal injury. It is so much more than just a care agency to me – it has a certain magical feeling that comes from like-minded people happily working to achieve a common goal: to be the best provider of live-in care services for people with a spinal cord injury, while also providing the best work experience for our office and care teams. The people in those teams, now and in the past, are some of the best I've ever met.

And finally ...

‘Don’t look back, look ahead – in that direction there are possibilities, not regrets.’

I have written this book sparked off by people’s interest and encouragement. I hope I have shown that it is possible to live and to live well, if differently, after tragedy comes to call, although getting there has been far from easy.

How do I feel about all that has happened? Even having thought about this a lot, it’s hard to put into words – a mixture of sadness, regret, fear, worry, disbelief, wonder, contentment, gratitude and appreciation about sums it up.

I don’t want pity or sympathy, and I hope this memoir does not come across as the big ‘I am ...’ I’m just me, doing the best I can, every day.

The extremes in my life have required me to find, deep inside, strength I never dreamt I had. I’ve learnt many, many lessons about life, about myself and other people. Through friends, I’ve also contracted a serious case of *joie de vivre*.

Having this terrible injury has, I’m sure, made me a better man. More considerate, focused, determined, patient, resilient, appreciative, persistent, understanding of others and not quite so self-absorbed. However, I do not recommend breaking your neck as a means of self-improvement.

I love being alive.

I love not being ill or in pain or cold.

I love good friends, good food and good wine – ideally enjoying them all at the same time.

I love fresh air in my lungs, thinking, a beautiful view, reading, keeping busy, travelling, days at home, an unexpected smile, getting excited about simple things.

I love having things to look forward to.

I look forward to every day.

On this long and uncertain journey, sometimes fraught with perils and difficulties, I have two options: to get busy living, or get busy dying. Every day, I choose to get busy living, and I hope to continue to live and enjoy a full, healthy and happy life. And when Death finally does call my name, I hope I can smile back, dreaming there's a chance in Eternity of, in the words of the song, *Walking on Sunshine*.

