

Back in 1979 I was six. The thought that I would live through a decade change fascinated me. “N-i-n-e-t-e-e-n-e-i-g-h-t-y,” I would say very slowly so my brain could grasp what was about to happen. I would no longer be saying Nineteen Seventy-Nine but Nineteen-Eighty, a totally alien concept for me. No longer would I be re-assured of the familiar Seventies but have to enter into an unknown world of the Eighties. This led me in turn to think further into the future. By the time the Eighties were finished I’d be seventeen! Practically an adult and what age would I be when the year 2000 rolled around? “T-w-e-n-t-y-s-e-v-e-n...”

The whole ‘end-of-a-decade’ thing caused me a lot of thinking as a six year old growing up in a smallish town in the Home Counties. Probably far more thinking than the average six year old should be doing. I kept my revelation to myself for months, wondering why no one else was bothered by this monumental event that would occur but no one could stop. We lived in a big five-bedroom Victorian house on a ‘good’ road but we weren’t rich. My mum and dad had bought wisely upgrading from a small two-bedroom terrace opposite a pub called the Great Eastern to what became my childhood home. For years rooms were waiting to be decorated, eventually my mum and myself would paint over the childish drawings on the bare plaster that my older brother and I had been allowed to draw on. The house was a very proud house with a solid, chunky look and feel. It was indeed a house to be proud of and my mum, my brother and I were. The cellar, ground, first, second and third floor made for lots of space for us, especially now that my dad had left.

It was while I was lying face up on the green carpet of the ground floor, that I kept thinking how far away the year 2000 was. I would have to wait a lifetime to be a very old twenty-seven. What would I be doing, where would I be living, would my mum and dad be dead? My eyes followed a raindrop, with high concentration, as it made its way from a tiny hole in the roof, passed the third, second and first floors, ‘thud’ straight into my open mouth. I was an expert at catching the rain this way ever since a leak had developed. I can’t remember how long it was before repair but I used to love the satisfying noise and feeling as it smacked into the back of my throat. I got so good that I would keep my mouth shut until the last split second when, quick-as-a-flash, my jaws would spring into action and close just as quickly. Sometimes as mis-time would happen and I was left with rainwater on my face. This activity could pass several hours but as a child what other responsibilities did I have?

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I remember standing in our little cloakroom staring down at the green carpet and crying. Crying and feeling so lonely. Why wasn’t my dad here? Why didn’t he love me? As a ten-year old my world was a mixture of love and anguish. This wasn’t particularly special for a boy growing up but nevertheless; these were *my* feelings happening to *me* so they were just as every bit as important. At the time I didn’t feel important. Four years previous my primary school teacher had asked me if everything was all right at home. I froze wondering how he knew what I was feeling. How could he look at me and see my pain? I didn’t know what to say, I couldn’t put into words what I wanted to say. I said everything was fine. It wasn’t until I was thirteen that I got my chance to let the poison and loneliness seep out.

The strange thing was I knew my mum loved me but I guess looking back, a boy needs the love of his father. To know that he is loved by the male that created him. To know that he was accepted by him and that he belonged. I’m not sure how many other children in my primary school class had separated parents. I did know that one girl, Sally, had a sick mum that she looked after. I remember how she was scolded by the teacher for daring to look at her watch while the teacher was talking to

her. Little did the teacher know that she had to get back quickly to help her mum. The anger I felt towards that teacher, even at eight was intense. She seemed not to understand our own little private children's worlds with our own private pain. Either that or she didn't care. I was invited by Sally to play after school one day. We walked home along the road, passed the grass and up the step hill. Her house was small with a slightly overgrown hedge with a swing gate. Inside was dark and I could smell a faded smell of ill people. I can vaguely recall her mum all these years later. Her description in my mind is part truth and part fantasy. A typically ill-looking lady with faded blonde hair and faded blonde skin. Sally hugged her. A broad smile appeared on her mum's face full of warmth. I have a romantic image lodged with me of a sunlight room filled with the love of mother and daughter. I was an outsider but they had let me in, only for a brief second, and allowed me to share their obvious joy.

It must have been hard on Sally knowing that her mum was different to our and in turn make her different. She did seem to carry a seriousness about her that I can't recall in any other children. Years later in my twenties I would occasionally see Sally in town. She still had the same seriousness about her but because she was an adult it didn't seem as out of place. We always exchanged the look of recognition but we never dared venture an acknowledgement of a wave or a smile. Was she ashamed of her past, knowing that I knew her childhood pain? Did she think I judged her all those years before? I never did. I only felt compassion because I knew of how she felt. How she felt she was different from us. I could spend hours in our cloakroom staring at our green carpet feeling lonely and feeling unloved. It was at this point that I made a stern promise to myself: if ever I had kids, under whatever the circumstances, I would show them love and show them that I loved them. I would always be part of their lives.

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Lining up for anything can be a drag. Lining up when you are a shy thirteen-year-old schoolboy in full school uniform that included a dark navy tie and blazer was just a hassle. Lunchtime was a particularly fraught situation and as a third year I was not top of the school that afforded a certain authority from the other years below but neither bottom so it did still have it's perks. One of those perks was the elaborate queuing system. Various teachers did their best to help the inevitable crush that happens when a thousand boys are trying to get feed at the same time. Some let pupils go when they had answered a maths question correctly or when they had tidied their art equipment away in order to stagger the flux of boys.

The most thoughtful variation was by my Religious Studies teacher. We were studying the Second World War and how various religions view war. At the end of the class, after we were all sitting still at our desks, he announced that all blond haired children could go to lunch first. Then all brown haired children, then all black haired, then ginger. This caused a massive fuss. I smiled as I quickly cottoned on to what the teacher was doing. Some kids didn't quite see the relevance. I also had the advantage of having blond hair so I was doubly amused! This constructive favouritism didn't actually help once I had made my way through the maze of the 16th century corridors and joined the increasing lunch queue.

The natural peeking order was in full swing. Older and bigger kids pushed in; younger and smaller kids get pushed on. I fell into the latter category. But I did have my Master Plan to back me up. Our year was divided into three factors purely based on the law of the jungle. Factor one was mainly kids from one estate west of the town; factor two was mainly kids from the east side of the town with factor three a mixture of everybody else. Even though I wasn't from any of the estates, I wasn't going to

allow myself to get into a situation where I had to choose what 'gang' I was in. I made careful and quiet friendships with both 'gang' leaders. This not only ensured safety from most of my year but also from the years above as they tried to be cool and hang out with the older kids.

It was in one of these volatile lunchtime queues that I finally cracked. I had had one of the most destructive maths lessons before hand and from the depths of my soul I began crying. I couldn't take the pressure any longer. I had to do something. I managed to control myself quite quickly for fear of another kid making fun and found myself eating my lunch in a complete daze. My mind was fixed on that terrible maths lesson. Most of the kids weren't interested and just mucked about all the time. Typical I suppose of a low set but I wanted more than that. I knew that I was clever or at least could pass my exams if given the chance. But I just couldn't see a way out. If I made a protest in class I would have been ridiculed just as much as the teacher. Yet if I didn't have a class that wanted to learn then I would never get myself out of that low set. I felt myself panic. I couldn't hold back the tears. I put my tray and plate away and somehow found myself sobbing to the first teacher I could find.

I'll never forget Mr Hopkins and what he did for me. As a kid, and still today, I was always aware of my first instincts of people I met. I felt I could trust Mr Hopkins; felt he was fundamentally a good person. My instincts were correct. He could see how much distress I was in. "Come into the staff room," his Welsh accent was strong. Once inside the 'sacred' staff room he asked me what the matter was. I told him about my atrocious maths lesson. How the teacher was more interested in telling us about his metal plate in the back of his head because of a biking accident when he was younger. How he once had completely forgotten to turn up for a lesson. How the kids deliberately tried to distract him onto any subject apart from maths. How they were as bad as each other and how I knew I would fail my G.C.S.C if I didn't get a class that taught maths. Just like years before, the teacher saw passed the surface and saw deeper. "How is your family life?" I was slow to catch on. "Fine," I said slightly confused as to why he would ask, "it's the maths lesson..." "How is your father?" That was it. Tears burst out from my eyes like a dam breaking.

I spent several weeks, one night a week for one hour after school with Mr Hopkins discussing my early years. Discussing how I felt about my dad leaving and how family dynamics worked. As fate would dictate, as well as being a teacher he was a trained councillor. To say I have a lot to thank Mr Hopkins is understating the situation. As the sessions went on I could physically feel a weight being lifted from my shoulders. I was no longer afraid that I would do the wrong thing, no longer afraid that I was useless and no longer shy. I had transformed over a short period of time and had begun my journey of self-discovery.

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The twelve or so log cabins were beautiful if a little weather beaten, all arranged in a circle with embers of the night's camp fire in the centre. I first set foot on American soil when I was barely eighteen. I had been going to a youth club since I was twelve and when I was too old they said how about becoming a volunteer. So I did. Partly because I could still go to the youth club but mainly because I fancied one of the youth workers there. Her name was Dawn. I can remember how friendly she was and, in a naff kind of way, just what a nice person she was. I found that immensely attractive. I was never sure how old she was but I guessed about five years older, making her twenty-two. I couldn't really see that as a problem but she did. I do

sometimes wonder where she is nowadays and what she is doing not because I want to start any relationship but more from a 'is she happy' curious kind of way. I hope she is.

It was Dawn who gave me one of my references that I needed to apply for Camp America. I don't think anyone gave me much of a change in getting a job working in the US on one of their summer camps. I was determined and for the first time was doing something that I had achieved for myself. So there I was in London, just me, my arm full of every kind of certificate a seventeen-year-old has at that age, my references and a smile. The place was packed with tables for each camp. The purpose of the weekend was for the camps to hire there and then as many of their staff they could find. They weren't short of applicants. Imagine, that instead of getting a job at their tables, they were giving away chocolate, booze and money; such was the competition and amount of people trying to get to speak to a camp director. I thought I was fortunate as the first director said he would hire me. Not bad I thought until I saw a notice behind him saying his camp only hires people who are over twenty-one. Disappointedly I pointed that to him and he said when I turn twenty-one that he defiantly hire me.

Let down but with a little boost of confidence I went to the next table. Then I had to go to the next table, then the next. I must have gone to over forty tables and talked to over forty directors trying the hard sell, the soft sell, any sell I could think of. Nothing was working. By that time I had been there since 9am and it was now nearly 5:30pm. Not good. I didn't want to return the next day to face this all over again. As I finished looking at my watch I thought I would try one more table. I ventured a question "Are you still open?" The rather large lady said they were. We had the interview and YES! I was hired!

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"Michael is under the cabin stairs and won't come out!" A concerned fellow instructor had said to me. This was my second year working on Camp Wing just out side of Boston. I pretty much knew the drill but there was always something to occur that wasn't planned. I knew Michael well; he was in my cabin last year. Nice kid, no real problems unlike most of the others. This was a camp that was for unloved, sexual, physical or verbal abused, orphan and single parent families from the wrong side of the tracks of Boston and some of New York. So a boy under one of the cabins was par for the course and rather tame to what I had witnessed so far.

I walked over to the cabin he was under. It was the Junior Boys Section Directors' cabin. From my point of view not the best cabin to hide under but it wasn't about me it was about what was troubling eight-year-old Michael. As I approached I could see him and our eyes caught, he backed off further under the cabin. I smiled and sat on the stairs. If this was going to take time then at least I want to be comfy! Not only that I hoped I would appear less of an authority figure and more of a friend. The sun was shining and that felt good against my face. Maybe it gave me the inspiration I needed to handle this. I sat for a second thinking why Michael would want to be under this cabin. He was fine all last summer and from what I knew came from a happy home with both parents. In fact I had met his mum when she picked him up. She had even thanked me for looking after him. She seemed a kind person who obviously loved her son.

"How's things going Michael?" I asked casually. Michael didn't reply straight away. I waited.

“Fine,” Michael eventually said. I wasn’t quite sure what I had just heard. The voice came from under the cabin but wasn’t Michael’s. It was Donald Duck’s!

“How was baseball?” his last activity. I listened carefully to make sure my ears weren’t deceiving me.

“Fine,” nope, definitely Donald Duck. I only knew one other person who could do that voice, a boy in my class. I was secretly impressed at fourteen. I was still impressed at nineteen.

“The sun is really hot out here. You want to come and sit on the stairs?” Long pause. I waited. “We’ve got swimming later. That will cool us right down.” Again, no response from Michael. “Do you remember last summer when our cabin went on that overnight campout?” I heard a quiet “yes”. “And Jerome’s marsh mellow kept dropping off his stick before he could eat it...” I heard duck laughter. “And he got more and more frustrated because all the other boys had eaten three already and his were burning to nothing on the fire.” I heard more duck laughter and some movement. “And you know what I saw? I saw other kids not bothered about if Jerome had a marsh mellow or not. But you know what I also saw?” “No.” “I saw one kid reach for his last marsh mellow, stick it on the end of his stick, hang it over the fire at just the right spot and for just the right amount of time and instead of eating it he offered it to Jerome.”

“That was me!” Michael’s voice was clear and full of pride. His head popped out from under the cabin.

“I know it was. And I will never forget that in all my long years.” I made space on the stairs to encourage Michael to sit. He did. “I thought to myself that is what camp is all about. Helping other people. And you did that. You did that without anyone telling you to.”

Michael was still smiling, “he was my friend”

“Yep, and that’s what friends do – help and share.” By now the sun had lowered slightly. There was another pause as I hoped what I had said sunk into Michael’s thoughts.

“That was fun,” it was clear Michael was remembering.

“Yep, camp should be fun. Which is why I would like to know why you seem sad.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Did you know, last year your mum gave me a big tin of biscuits to thank me for looking after you?”

“No.”

“Yep, it’s true”

“My dad wouldn’t have done that.”

“No? Why’s that?”

“He’s not at home anymore.” And the dam broke just as it had for me. To see the flood of tears and the pain on his little face broke my heart. He turned to me and buried his head in my chest, his little arms reaching out to hug me. We sat for a while, me still while Michael sobbed. The sun was reassuringly warm.

When Michael was ready he pulled away and looked at me as if to say ‘what now? What do I do now?’ I didn’t have the answers. He would have to travel this journey ultimately on his own like all of us who feel unloved at that age.

“There is another thing I haven’t told you.”

“What’s that?”

“When I was a kid my dad left home.” Michael didn’t say anything. He just had a look of surprise on his face. Maybe he thought that adults were never ever kids and maybe he thought that no one else knew what it felt like not to have your father around.

“I was pretty much brought up by my mum.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I knew that my mum loved me lots and lots. And I bet your mum does doesn't she?”

Michael nodded. “Can we go back to our cabin now?”

Inside the cabin all the other kids we getting changed for swimming. I went to my bunk and began to change. I could hear Michael ask one kid if he had a dad. The kid said no. Another kid joined in and said he didn't have one either. Before long the whole cabin had said that there mums and dads had split up. I looked at Michael and knew he would be all right. With my mind's eye I could see the friendly face of Mr Hopkins and for the first time I really understood why I had chosen to work with kids.

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“Happy Millennium!” Massive cheers, masses of people, masses of fireworks and my friend Jayne and I in the middle of the biggest new year's eve of them all. The year 2000 had blasted in and I was indeed T-w-e-n-t-y-s-e-v-e-n. So much of my life had happened. So much more to still to happen. As I drank Champaign with the rest of the London crowd standing on Westminster Bridge I thought back to my boyhood. Of how far away this year had seemed, such a long way away. Now I could answer my own questions simply thanks to the passage of time. I had started on my career as a graphic designer, I was still living in my hometown, and both my parents were still alive. What a journey though! The highs, the lows, the girls I'd dated, the places I'd worked, the places I'd studied, the friends I'd made and the friends I'd lost – all in front of me like the new millennium stars, so close and now so far.

I have indeed kept in touch with my father. Heard bits and pieces about my mum and dads' marriage from both of them. I've worked and reworked all those childhood memories until I feel at ease with them. Who knows, maybe in several years time I'll have to revisit them, just to make sure I got them clear in the first place. I still wonder if Michael and all the other boys I helped through four summers at Camp Wing have worked through their own private loneliness. Wondered what kind of people they turned out to be and if they too have kept in touch with their dads for better or for worse.

Had I changed? Yes and no. I still felt the same as I did when I was about twenty but I had learned life the hard way like everybody else, from experience. By now I was a father of a beautiful five year-old boy who lived in Australia with his mum. Life hadn't worked out exactly how I'd expected but life never does I suppose. Take the rough with the smooth as they say. A good philosophy I thought. And even now, four years on from that big celebration in London, I am still learning, still growing and still maturing. Ageing, not before my time... just ageing in the most natural and uplifting way.