

Chapter Two. Autumn 2004. Settling in.

I woke the next morning with a sore head. After my carers had left after tea, at about 7.30, I decided to go over to the university bar. I thought this was a risky business, going out alone, and I felt rather vulnerable - this is why I thought I needed a personal assistant to help me do such things. Yet, speaking with my parents over the web, they encouraged me to bite the bullet and walk to the bar. I seldom walked outside alone because I was so unstable, but, faced with the choice of that or staying in my room all evening, I chose to head out. I got to the bar intact, and the first thing I notice was that they were setting up for a disco in there.

Pretty soon I got chatting to a few people. We were talking about what we were studying, whether I was going to dance, and although there was a typical "what is your condition" question, it was pretty cool. I think strangers get used to me pretty quickly, and within ten minutes we were chatting naturally. I think they were surprised to see me up on the dance floor though.

I got talking to one girl from Portugal, also doing film, and the rest of the evening was spent just chatting, watching the proceedings, and sipping beer. The disco ended at about 11, and I asked my new friends if they would mind walking me home, as I was still a bit concerned about walking out alone. They did, and after we had said goodnight I was able to put myself to bed, making sure the Lightwriter was on charge.

Thus, although I reckoned I still need a PA, now that I knew that I can go out myself, the need did not seem as urgent as before. "I think I'm going to enjoy university," I thought as I got up. I was beginning to realise that, at university, I could enjoy more freedom and control over my life than I ever had before. I rubbed my aching head. At that point the door buzzer rang, telling me my home help lady had arrived. I got up to answer it and, like the morning before, we went for breakfast in the Wesley Centre. Later that day, I had my first writing session. This was set in the smaller, more classroom-like space of the campus seminar rooms. It instantly reminded me of school, with tables set in a horseshoe, grey walls and well-worn carpets. There were fewer people on this course; there was more of a predominance of mature students, although I recognised a few faces from the film lecture the day before. I turned and faced the guy on my right. "Hi." He said before I could begin. "I'm Chris." "I'm Matt." I typed in reply, not yet confident enough with this new person to use my voice. I stuck to using my Lightwriter: "I recognise you from the film studies lecture yesterday."

“Yeah. We must be doing the same course.” It turned out Chris was from Stoke – a town not far away – and we had much of the same interests. After the night previous and now this encounter, I was beginning to think that making friends here was going to be far easier than I thought. Where I had once suspected that I was doomed to be an outcast because I was physically disabled, it was becoming clearer and clearer that people would just accept me for who I was.

Once the session was over, I headed back to the canteen with my new friend. Instead of sitting at my usual table, Chris invited me to the other side of the building. I had never been in to that area before, but it somehow seemed more communal and jovial: people chatted merrily to each other, sharing banter and gossip. Chris beckoned me to a table where six or seven other people sat and kindly introduced me.

“Guys, this is Matt.” He said. “We do writing together.”

“I’m Steve.” said a guy I recognised from our film lecture the previous day.

“And I’m Charlie!” enthused a pretty blonde young woman, who instantly struck me as having a breathtaking amount of energy about her. “I do music and drama.”

I put my Lightwriter up on the table ready to type in “Hi.” But everyone suddenly gasped in amazement.

“Wow!” said Steve, his Yorkshire accent quite clear. “What’s that?”

“It’s my Lightwriter,” I explained. “I use it to speak.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon getting to know my new friends. The next three years would see me spending a lot of my spare time in that area of the canteen. I didn’t realise it then, but it would become the spot where all my friends would meet to chat. The next few weeks were spent gradually settling in to the routine of university life. I was given a timetable of weekly lectures and seminars and, as that autumn wore on, I became accustomed to campus and the people on it. My little room began to feel very comfortable: I did most of my writing work there, as it was where I had my computer with its special extended keyboard. However, I also took to frequently going to the library. Books had always been a love of mine, even more than film: there was something in the sight of row upon row of books which I found enormously captivating. They had, it seemed to me, the power to transport a reader anywhere or to bestow upon them limitless knowledge. I found, at university, I could go to the library whenever I wanted and ask for whatever book I wished. The librarians soon came to know me quite well. The head librarian, Mary, sat at a desk in the middle of the rows of shelves. She had a reputation among my fellow students for being stern; yet to me she always seemed friendly and approachable. I took to asking her for all

sorts of obscure texts, not just those related to my academic studies but also to my development as a man with a physical disability. Until that point, I had been almost totally ignorant of political affairs in relation to disability, but through my personal research, and through my increased contact with other disabled people online, I slowly became more and more aware of concepts and ideas I had known nothing about. Thus, those first few weeks at MMU saw me begin a development process which would change me as a person forever.

As autumn became winter, the nights getting darker and darker in that small corner of Cheshire, I began to really take to university life. What had once seemed intimidating seemed, after just a few weeks, captivating and fun. My circle of friends grew, I loved the variety of people I encountered there – people from all over the world, studying all kinds of strange, exotic, fascinating subjects. Soon enough, I left campus for Christmas, my Dad coming to pick my stuff up and take me home. It had been an amazing term; I had already developed so much, in a way I would never have thought possible. I had really got in to my coursework: we had been set assignments which had challenged me but had also encouraged me to learn to research properly. I had also become a far more social person with my ever-expanding circle of friends, having realised how truly wrong I was to think that having Cerebral Palsy disqualified me from being accepted by others and having a social life.