

Chapter One. My first day at university – 20th September 2004

Finding myself in a strange, unfamiliar dorm room came as something of a shock. As my Dad unpacked my things around me, I looked about: the walls were blank and anonymous; the wardrobe and sink standard issue. It seemed impersonal, so different to my childhood bedroom at home. I was suddenly not at all sure I liked this idea: How would I look after myself? Away from home, would I get the support I needed? At home I was used to the familiar, regular routines of a suburban, middle-class household; now those routines had been outgrown, and I suddenly found myself in a brave new world. I would have to be more independent, but independence had seen away the securities of childhood.

Sat there, on the bed in my new university room, I cried uncontrollably. Dad later told me he very nearly took me home. He had returned to campus to check how I was settling in at around dinner time, and the apprehension of starting life in this strange new place had reduced me to tears. Yet, to his credit, he didn't. Dad knew this was a vital part of my growth, so he left me there in the room which the campus staff had specially adapted for me, and, still unsure of myself and my surroundings, I went to bed.

The next day saw a sunny autumn morning in Cheshire. For me, the tempests of the previous evening had disappeared, and this scary new world now begged to be explored. I woke at about eight, and shortly after my home-help lady, Jane, had arrived. These were staff supplied by the county council, who went to the homes of elderly and disabled people to get dressed, eat a meal, and help with whatever other tasks they needed to do. This was still all very new to me: up until that point in my life, my parents and two brothers had always helped me perform my day-to-day activities. Now, finding myself suddenly in this completely new environment, I would need to take more responsibility for my own care. It was up to me what to wear, when to take showers, and what I wanted to eat.

It was only a short walk to the canteen. On the way, I could already feel myself this new academic world, so different to anything I had experienced before. My fellow students walked confidently about; they seemed so much more self-assured than I currently felt. At the same time, I felt both intimidated and excited. This felt so strange and new, yet so enticing. The tears of fear I had shed the evening before had morphed into an eagerness to get to know my new life, to get on with my degree and to start making friends. Jane pushed me through the canteen doors and up to the table where my Neater-Eater had been set

up. I noticed other students walking past, eyeing the Neater-Eater with intense curiosity. I tried to ignore them; after all, as a man with cerebral palsy, I was used to being stared at. Instead, Jane rolled me to where food was being served, where I selected what I wanted for breakfast. The kitchen staff put it in my special plate and Jane carried it back to my Neater-Eater. It was nothing special, but dinner the previous evening seemed an age ago, so I ate my sausage egg and beans with relish.

Once back in my room, Jane signed the book my home-helpers had to sign when they visited and, telling me to expect someone at five to help me with dinner, left. That state of affairs was far from perfect: I would have much preferred to employ my own personal assistants directly, but until I could find someone it would have to do. I was fortunate that Esther, who had been my learning support assistant through a-levels, was able to join me again at university. When she arrived soon after breakfast, I greeted her enthusiastically. It had been a few months since I had last seen her, and we both had news to catch up on. Over the next few years I would come to regard Esther as one of my best friends, then as something akin to a sister. She asked me how I was. "Fine." I said.

Esther was, by then, used to my speech. People with Athetoid Cerebral Palsy often have speech which is difficult to understand until you grow accustomed to the patterns of their voice. In my case, I used my Lightwriter until my speech became familiar enough to people for them to understand me. Esther had reached that stage. "How was your summer?" I asked in return.

"It was okay." She said. "Ready for today?"

I told her I was, but the truth was that I was incredibly nervous: today would see the first proper day of my university life, which would be unlike anything I had experienced before. I had no idea what to expect or whether I would be capable of living up to the standard of work now expected of me. According to the induction week schedule I had been given the day before, I had an introduction seminar in the main campus lecture hall at eleven. That, I thought, would represent the first test. Esther wheeled me up to the first row of seats. I handed her my Lightwriter, got up and took a seat at the end of the first row. Behind and above me hundreds of people – most, it appeared, barely out of their teens – looked down towards the lectern at the front of the room. The place buzzed with an excited, nervous energy, the likes of which I had never felt before. No doubt everyone in that room was feeling as apprehensive as I was, not that anyone would ever let it show. Before long a tall, confident-looking man entered the room and strode towards the front. As he

approached the podium, the place quietened and I suddenly felt hundreds of pairs of eyes staring down towards the back of my head.

“Good morning, first year.” said the man. “Welcome to Manchester Metropolitan University's Cheshire campus. My name is Robert Davis, I'm head of the media faculty. We hope your three years with us will be productive, and that you get as much as you hope for out of our programme. We have designed this course to be challenging but stimulating. While we expect you, as students, to put in as much effort possible, we want you to know that we are here to support you. University is not just about attending lectures and going to seminars. Here, you do most of the learning on your own, in the library.”

As he spoke, I began to slowly relax. This fellow seemed approachable and human, not the stereotypical image of stern university lecturers, and what he was describing did not seem that alien or difficult. My fears of being overwhelmed began to evaporate.

The induction lecture lasted about an hour or so, by which time I was getting rather hungry. As the theatre emptied, Esther and I stayed in our seats, waiting for the crowd to clear. As we finally got up to move, the lecturer came over to talk to us.

“Do you think will handle this all right?” Asked Davis, addressing Esther rather than talking to me directly. Esther blushed.

“I think so.” I said, using my voice rather than my communication aid.

“Pardon?” Davis responded. We had met only once before at my interview, and he was still yet to get used to my speech.

I typed the same answer into my Lightwriter. This was nothing unusual for me: I had grown up being spoken over or down to, or having people assume that I did not understand what they were saying. There was no reason why academia should be any different.

“Great.” replied my new tutor, talking to me directly this time. “If you need anything, just email me or pop in to my office.” At that he strode away towards the door, leaving me to get back in to my wheelchair ready for Esther to push me back to the canteen. I reasoned it was time for a cup of coffee.

Once in the Wesley Centre, Esther asked “How do you feel, Matt?”

I smiled in reply. I was still in two minds about this new world I found myself in. The introductory lecture had proven reassuring, but I still had many doubts in my mind. Would I be able to keep up? Was I really as capable as anyone else? I sipped my coffee: only the next three years would tell