

Book I – The Story So Far

Chapter 1 - A Brief History of a Person

What is a person? How did I become the man I am? What is the real me, anyway? Do those questions sound familiar? Being hopelessly introspective, these are questions I've asked myself many times. But I never expected them to become as central to my life as they did in the summer of 2006. How did a small-town boy from North-East England, end up being that guy careening through Hollywood, one day, at the age of forty-one, on the verge of truly losing his mind? It certainly didn't happen overnight, although it seemed that way at the time. It was the inevitable culmination of four decades shaped by experiences, large and small.

Somewhere around the age of seven, my nature abruptly changed ... for the worse. In before and after snap-shots in my mind's eye, I can see both versions. It's the beginning of the summer vacation, and I'm leaving kindergarten for the last time, on a golden June afternoon. Laughing and joking with my friends, I somehow see a bunch of girls clustered around the school-gate, all bemoaning my departure. While I'm quite sure that wasn't actually the case, I vividly remember how at home with myself I was - a happy-go-lucky, well-adjusted kid, excited about the future, full of promise, mind already secretly set on a future as a famous scientist. (I had, by this time, gotten over an obsession, shared with my brother, Neil, about being a bus driver.)

Six weeks later, I'm shivering on the floor of the assembly hall in Mowbray Road Junior School, not with cold – although along the coast of North-East England it's not unknown for the temperature to dip into the fifties in the day-time even during the summer – but with anxiety,

loneliness, and an acute sense of inner and outer ugliness. It marked the beginning of four years of misery, during which I had few friends, and began to see myself as “other than.”

For most of my adult life I’ve wondered about what happened during those six weeks to change me so much, but have never come to a full explanation that feels like the truth. I have the strong feeling that if I hadn’t endured those four solitary years at Mowbray Road, I’d have never known the ailments of adulthood that challenged me, depression and chronic-fatigue syndrome. I’d have steered a different path, less cautious, carried along by a feeling that I could do anything I set my mind to. I might have been a golden boy, class-president, even. Well, actually not that, since we don’t do that kind of thing in England. I’d have gone to Cambridge, and gotten a first in astrophysics, after which I’d have been snapped up by Cal Tech in Pasadena to become a pioneer of string-theory (which was hatching around the time I went to college, where I did indeed study physics and astronomy). I’d have been invited on my favorite BBC television show, the science program *Horizon*, and, wearing a tweed jacket, thick, black-rimmed national health glasses, and an eccentric hat, and, gesturing with an unlit pipe in my hand, I’d endeavor to make high-energy physics understandable to the masses.

You’re probably thinking, number one, that I’m conceited as all hell, and number two, that since it sounds like none of those wonderful things happened, I’m a depressed loser so why should you read this book. To begin with I claim not to be a loser – I’m a successful, robustly healthy, well-paid software-developer, living with a smart, sexy boyfriend, a professor at UCLA, in our house in the Hollywood Hills, with two dogs running around in the den. At the risk of adding to your belief that I’m full of myself, I’m “told” I’m goodlooking. Damn it, I hate that phrase. You’re trying to have your cake and eat it, boasting simultaneously of your modesty and your looks. I *am* goodlooking. It’s taken me years to accept this, and the struggle with body-

image is a major strand in this story, but it would be disingenuous to deny it since my physical presence (I'm 6'6 with a lean, muscular body) is also important to the story. And I'm not even lonely – far from it, I have an abundance of friends both here in Los Angeles, and in San Francisco, where I lived for twelve years before I moved to LA to live with Ben, my partner for life – a life that is fine, by any standard.

As you might expect, having read the prelude to this memoir, there was a ... blip ... somewhere on the road to my present stasis. Well, more than a blip, actually ... more like a supernova, collapsing into a black-hole. Over a few blazing months, in 2006, everything that I'd experienced, all the strands of my life, wove together into a singularity, and I became fully realized, whole and complete. Finally, it really did seem like I could do anything I wanted. I believed I was about to become a sort of epochal intellectual / spiritual guru / gay Hollywood superhero / celebrity-messiah all rolled into one. (And you thought I was conceited before!) I couldn't have imagined how wrong I was, and that there was going to be a series of increasingly dangerous episodes just ahead of me, culminating in the longest night of hell in my life, and three days in a locked psychiatric ER room.

In the same way that all of my life story fed into what happened in 2006, some set of events or experiences changed me as a seven-year-old, and I've spent many hours in therapy (I can hear you groaning) trying to figure out what it was. The most obvious candidate was a tiny little incident that happened with my dad, and incident which was seemingly innocuous and inconsequential, at least to my dad, who has no idea how his offhand comment almost ruined my life.

To demonstrate how large this incident looms in my psyche, I can describe the time when I first told the story out loud. I was a tall, skinny, gawky graduate student in Philadelphia,

pursuing a PhD in alternative energy. (My quest to be an astrophysicist had gotten unfortunately derailed by a misguided dalliance with fundamental Christianity. I somehow believed that “God” wanted me to do something socially relevant with my life. I blame all my career woes on him, which is kind of sad, since I don’t think he cares. Nor even exists.)

I was out of the closet by this time, but helplessly inexperienced and naïve both in love and emotion. I didn’t remember when I’d last cried. Years of concealing my homosexuality, and the belief, instilled through being raised in the macho culture of north-east England, that emotions are effeminate, had buried my true personality under layers of self-consciousness. It’s not like I was socially backward – indeed, I had a lot of friends, both in school and out. But I was shy, and dry. And I yearned to cry. I know that sounds a bit precious, but since it’s accurate, I’ll leave it standing.

I spent one tortured, rainy Thanksgiving weekend, alone with nothing but the company of my tuna melts, in my apartment above a sex-store in Center City, Philadelphia. This is the late eighties. Ricardo, my cute Mexican roommate, a gentle soled, culturally sophisticated PhD music composer at Penn whom I fairly worshipped, was away with his awful Scandinavian girlfriend. I should take that back – her “awfulness” consisted entirely of the fact that she was Ricardo’s girlfriend, which is hardly her fault. When she wasn’t around, Ricardo and I would spend hours talking about music, film, philosophy, history. When she was here, in contrast, I’d just here them banging each other in the room next to mine.

I fairly yearned to have emotions, and watched *Ordinary People* three times that weekend, hoping that I’d cry. Not only did I have the most tremendous crush on Conrad Jarrett, the young protagonist, but I envied him that great scene with Judd Hirsch where he finally cries,

sweeps things off shelves. It reminds me of some of my therapy sessions – that is apart from the crying, and the sweeping things off shelves.

If I couldn't cry watching Conrad, then maybe I could become Conrad. I had the idea that acting lessons might unlock my heart, and the Wilma Theater was just round the corner, offering low-priced classes with Gordon Phillips (of the "Gordon Phillips Method" – surely you've heard of it?) Phillips was a lascivious, grey-bearded, dirty old man. Since the object of the class – as with all method acting – was to emote, it offered him the chance to be emotionally intimate with cute young women, and offered the young women the opportunity to emote without having to pay for more expensive talk-therapy. We guys were lucky to get a quick half-hour of attention.

The entire first series of ten classes was devoted to each of us doing a single monolog, and I did eventually get my turn. The idea was that you'd learn the words of the monolog without punctuation or meaning, just as a series of words. Then, in class, you'd be asked to recall something from your life that brought forward the appropriate emotion for the monolog. Phillips would lead you through a recall of your memories, while you sat with your eyes closed, perhaps holding Phillips' hand (if you were a girl), and just when you touched the core of the emotion, he'd tell you to speak the monolog.

I didn't really think it would work with me – I was far too self-conscious and controlled. Looking back, I'm amazed I even put myself in that situation given how averse I am to being emotionally manipulated. But perhaps that aversion is something I've developed since then, and back then I was more malleable. But there was an even greater problem – I couldn't recall any emotional experiences on which to draw. Nothing had ever happened to me, I felt, so deeply buried where my softer sensibilities by now.

It wasn't that I was, by nature, an unemotional person – in fact, quite the reverse. I remember one day, when my Dad, Neil and I were taking a day-trip to Edinburgh, I looked back into the kitchen to see my mother's arms elbow deep in the washing tub (we didn't have an automatic). The thought of us enjoying a fun day in a fascinating city while my mother slaved away at home filled me with sorrow, and I ran upstairs to my bedroom to have a good cry.

But I was raised in a very macho, working-class culture, which my dad exemplified, and any tender impulses were squashed by derision, criticism, or, at best, a look on the face that I know only too well how to interpret. For instance, I was getting ready, when I was a mid-teen, to go to Newcastle, the nearest big city, to see *On Golden Pond*, with Katherine Hepburn and the Fondas, Jane and Henry. My dad put me down with “Why do you want to see a girl flick?” So, since I worshipped my dad, I gradually learned to bury those things that didn't fit with his image of a healthy boy. I was a quick study, and learned these lessons well. I didn't know I was doing this. It only became apparent to me much later in life, when I wondered what had happened to the empathy that was second nature to me as a kid.

In any event, when it came to choosing an emotional event as the basis for my monolog in acting class, I drew a blank. *Now*, I can think of lots of things I could have used from my earlier life, most of them centered about my body-image. For instance, when I was a teenager, my parents didn't have enough money to buy clothes that kept up with my rapidly extending limbs. And besides, I was already tall for my age, and clothes just didn't fit. My sleeves were always too short, and, for my socks not to show, I'd have to unfasten the button of my pants, slip them lower than my waist, and pray that my belt would retain its precarious hold on them. We'd have to shop in the adult department, and I'd cringe when my mother would gaily screech “He's only fourteen, you know!”

I was fully proportional, and while I'm not one to brag about my anatomy, I will admit that my feet were rather large – now size 16. It was unfortunate that we came from a ship-building town, since it gave people license to say things like “Did you get them at Swan-Hunters” (one of the local shipyards)? Even worse, I was cursed with the last name “Adams”. “Doo-doo-doo-doo. Click. Click. Doo-doo-doo-doo. Click click.” The beginning of the theme tune for the *Addams Family* will always stick in my craw. They called me Lurch, of course. Kids would laugh at me from across the street, and shout mean things. My walk to school became a mad, secretive dash to avoid humiliation, roving far afield from a direct route in order to avoid school kids. My body became a curse to me, and I moved lock, stock and barrel into my head.

All of this should have provided plenty of fodder for tears of reminiscence, but in fact, the only thing I could come up with was the tiny little incident with my dad. So that's where we started when it was my turn to do the monolog.

Phillips: *"Close your eyes, Keith, and think back to when you were that seven-year-old. Where are you?"*

Adams: *"I'm in the living room of our house. My aunty Olive is here, smoking with my mom, and I'm horsing around with my dad."*

Phillips: *"Describe the room, let your mind go back there."*

Adams: *"The carpet looks like it belongs in a multiplex ..."*

Phillips: *"Describe it like you would have done as a small boy."*

Adams: *"I love swirling my finger around the patterns in the carpet. The room is full of cigarette smoke. I'm bored. How can they talk so much."*

Phillips: *"What's happening now, Keith?"*

Adams: *"My dad is grabbing my wrists with one hand. He's pushing his glasses up his nose."*

Phillips: *"Does he say anything?"*

Adams: *"He says ..."*

And then, to my utter astonishment, I sob. *"He says I never knew you had such skinny wrists."*

The monolog that follows is a blur. Afterwards I felt raw and bruised, and almost angry at Phillips for exposing me. I'd gotten what I'd wanted, though. I'd cried.

So, years later, in therapy, looking back both on the original incident and the acting class, I wondered if the incident with my wrists changed my nature during those six weeks between schools. I do know it had a powerful effect on me that's still with me even now, in much less virulent form. At the time, I ran upstairs and looked at my wrists in the mirror, and saw, to my horror, that they looked nothing like my dad's. They were thin and delicate. In fact, when I came to think of it, my arms were skinny too, and I suddenly noticed, after I took my shirt off, the bony knobs of my collar bones sticking out beneath my neck, and the ribs down my flank, which you could count. How could I never have noticed this?

Although I don't think this, in itself, was enough to cause the wholesale change in my personality apparent when I started my new school, certainly over the course of years, I grew to detest my body, and concealed it underneath thick sweaters, even in summer. The only time I remember crying as a teenager was when my mother asked me why I didn't take my sweater off if I was so warm, and I sobbed out that I was too skinny. Swim-class in high-school was a never-ending nightmare, and it wasn't until college that I was brave enough to wear a short-sleeved shirt – a button-up blue-striped cotton shirt (I wasn't yet gay enough to know that tall guys shouldn't wear stripes.) I wore that shirt all through my last summer, as a student in London, waiting for my grades for my degree. I even began to think I wasn't completely unattractive. I had good proportions, broad shoulders, and high cheekbones, and wide blue-green eyes topped by long eye lashes. (People used to say I had beautiful eyes. In fact, that's the only compliment I used to get. I wonder what happened to my eyes, because it's been years since I heard that compliment.)

I was wearing that shirt on the day I arrived on campus, abroad for the first time in my life, at the University of Pennsylvania, to register for classes for my PhD course. It was blisteringly hot and humid, and I was the only person not wearing shorts. (It would be a couple of years before I'd cross that threshold, and even then I only wore them in a remote section of Fairmount Park, lying reading in the shade.)

On campus, I was immediately agog at the beauty of the American undergrads. There was an eighteen year old wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, the sides torn half way open to reveal, behind his rounded biceps, the edges of a muscular chest. Everywhere, blithely, care-free, kids seemed entirely at home in their bodies, completely unaware of any self-consciousness. I went back to my room and stared at myself in the mirror, hating the bony death-head's skull (that was the exact term I wrote down in my journal) atop a stick-like body, and the skeletal bones poking out of the short sleeves of that blue striped shirt I'd foolishly thought flattering.

It seemed, then, impossible that I should ever learn peace with my body. But, like so many gay boys, I would blossom with time – a lot of time. I began to work out, and, although still skinny, had muscle tone by the time I moved to San Francisco, with my new green-card, when I was twenty-seven. I was experienced in romance by now, and had fallen in love with a beautiful black man named Shaun, and had then forcibly broke my heart after realizing he loved me but didn't *love* me. In my mid-thirties, while nesting at home, recovering from a dreadful relationship, I discovered I looked good on webcam – that is, under the carefully controlled lighting and camera angles I chose. Out of nowhere, my webcam drew attention, and, after a year or so, I was making heaps of money from my private membership site. The knowledge that I'd be showing off on cam each day pushed me to work out harder, and I finally began to get the sort of body that could put to rest the demons of childhood. Or at least tell them to lie down and be

fairly quiet. I started to go clubbing, even to the point of taking my shirt off, and found, to my vast surprise and continuing enjoyment, that people actually wanted to get physical with me on the dance-floor.

So it is no longer surprising, perhaps, but still quite ironic, that during the after-glow of my blazing streak across the Los Angeles landscape in 2006 – the events to be related through the main body of this book – I did something people had been asking me about for years, and took myself to a modeling agency, one of the most prominent in the USA, if not the world. I'll not play coy by refraining from telling you the outcome. I didn't get accepted. But, astonishingly, while sitting at lunch directly after the failure at the modeling agency, feeling not at all cowed by rejection, so strong did my self-confidence remain, all of the pieces fell into place with a resounding clink, and I finally, in a moment of manic brilliance, figured out why I'd changed so much at the age of seven. And to find the answer to that, I'm afraid you *will* have to read the rest of the book.