

## MY EARLY YEARS

My childhood is far more influential in my present than a childhood ought to be, so that is where my story begins.

I was born in Nuneaton, Warwickshire, England, on September 11, 1965, and came to Scotland shortly afterward. My parents, John and Marcie, came from Scotland—Ayrshire to be more accurate—and were in Warwickshire because of my father’s posting as a police officer. I was their second son and there were only fifteen months between Gordon and me.

My father’s posting in Scotland was in Prestwick, Ayrshire, and it is there that I have my earliest memories. We moved from Prestwick to Kilmarnock when I was four years old. It was there that I first felt different from the other children—we were police. I cannot remember very much because I was so young, but our truck was set on fire and our tortoise got the chop too.

I have clear memories of Kilmarnock in incidents. My first introduction to the school system was in the form of punishment for a window broken by a stone which left my brother’s hand. It was not a deliberate act but an accident in the playground, which was just by our house. It annoyed me that the punishment could not be joint, and my first impression of school was, for me, the correct one, as time would prove.

I also quite vividly remember the day my brother and I learned to ride our bikes at the same moment. It was Uncle Stuart who pushed us off at the top of a hill, side by side, with the prophetic words “Mind the corner at the bottom!” It was white-knuckle stuff and we might have been scuffed a bit, but from that moment on we could ride.

We were not there long before we moved to Newmilns, which was a town of 3,000 people set in a narrow valley, but there the story was no different. Newmilns was parochial enough to single you out, but large enough to be nasty with it; to compound matters we were not only “police,” we were also newcomers.

## FLYING SCOTSMAN

It was a terrible combination and from day one at school we were “the filth.” Part of the problem was the fact that my father’s posting was in the valley itself, so the enmity toward him was passed down to the local children from their parents and from them to us. We were outsiders the entire time we were there, which was 11 years.

The enmity toward us manifested itself in three ways—name-calling, ostracism, and violence. Even my sister Yvonne, five years my junior, was not excluded from the party, but the violence was mainly reserved for Gordon and me. It seemed that rarely a week would go by without my being strapped for fights I never asked to be in. In fact I was doing my utmost to avoid them, but seeing as I was a common denominator, I was seen as a troublemaker by Mr. Gillespie, the headmaster.

This set the pattern for my whole school life, and clowning around became habitual as a means of trying to be accepted. When I think back on my school days, I can only remember feeling sadness and loneliness. The violence does not stand out so much, although there was plenty of it and some of it quite extreme. Being head-butted by the crowd or roughed up was common enough to lose its shock factor and, apart from the worst incidents, I do not think the violence itself left a large impression on me emotionally.

Avoiding violence and the fear of violence, there were worse forms of victimization: those that were intangible. When it came to physical violence, though, I thought of it and perceived it as two different sensations after a while. Being kicked about the head was so different from being kicked about the body.

Ironic as it may seem, in the midst of it, violence has a beauty and excitement that nothing else can generate. Sometimes, even though it was nothing more than extreme physical harm, I could almost be disappointed when it ended. At times the most extreme violence, especially to the head, brought an orgasm of fear, excitement, panic, and adrenaline.

Nonetheless, I always slipped back to my mode of violence avoidance.

For me there was also a much, much more hurtful thing called social exclusion. Because of being the “newcomer” and “the filth” as well as feeling I was the odd one out in the family, I was desperate to be accepted into the periphery of my peer group. I was the tagalong child on a good day, but when I was 7 an event happened that mired into the ground what hope I had.

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My memory of it starts at the point of arrival at school, where there were three double-decker buses decked with streamers and balloons sitting in the schoolyard on a beautiful, sunny summer morning. The engines were turning over and all the children were getting on board—the whole of primary three are going to Millport, a small town on a small island a mile or two off the Ayrshire coast. It was a beautiful scene, except for one problem—I wasn't going.

I cannot recall the given reason for my nonparticipation, but it made no difference to the material fact that I was there beside Mrs. Jamieson and Mr. Gillespie, waving goodbye to my peer group. It was the “belt first and ask questions later” headmaster, Mr. Gillespie, who cruelly made me stand and wave at the laughing and pointing classmates at the back windows of the departing buses.

Next I was escorted to another class by Mrs. Jamieson, who only seemed to teach the three D's—Discipline, Discipline, Discipline. I was taken to a fourth-year class, where I was placed at the front of the class like a prize example of unworthiness. I don't mean in the front row, but at the very front like a pulpit to a congregation. There I sat, in my own island of abject sorrow, staring at the blue sky through the side window. Every second of every minute I could feel the mockery of sixty eyes burn into the back of me as I shielded my face from its glare, and every second of every minute I felt the weight of tears bursting behind my eyes. I refused to cry—I could not cry—because I knew that the wolves behind me would devour my emotions and leave me as good as dead inside.

At the end of the next day I had to endure the sight of my tormentors' return; I felt dead inside anyhow. At that point I felt like “the other boy” at home, and at school I was “the filth,” but now I knew I was worthless and detestable. It was not until the next morning, when my tormentors started teasing and laughing at me, that the full impact struck my seven-year-old head to such effect that it inspired my childhood dream that everything I knew would be annihilated by a nuclear holocaust. For others it was the great fear of the era, but for me it became a day-to-day hope to cling to.

I can remember the exact spot where I stood when the blow came and at that moment the world ended for me. It was of my doing. I could not live and be part of the world around me anymore—it was too sad and painful. From that moment I was no longer here, and I was no longer

that little boy. No, I was merely an observer behind his eyes and anything that hurt the little boy did not hurt me, because I only witnessed what happened to the boy.

These were truly the saddest days of my life by a long way, and I lived in my self-imposed protective prison for more or less most of my school life. Beyond that, my childhood left me with an isolationist and insular personality as well as a real and subconscious fear of social situations.

One other incident that stands out, though, in my memory from childhood was my brother and me being taken at knifepoint when we were 9 and 10. We were walking down a backstreet in the town when we were set upon by three older boys and taken at knifepoint into a derelict house. There my brother was urinated on while I could do nothing to help. We were taken into the basement, where other things happened. One of those was being made to touch each other's genitals at knifepoint while being threatened that they'd hurt the other brother if we refused to do it and vice versa.

The incident was taken to the authorities, and when it came up in court I was too young to give evidence and my brother fainted in the dock. In the end, it made no difference as the assailants were effectively let off.

What scant regard Gordon and I had for "justice" was gone and nothing else of this kind in the future would ever be reported. Gordon and I never spoke about the matter to other people or to each other from then on, and it was consigned to history and our memories.

As far as my primary school years are concerned it was a teacher called Myrtle MacKay who gave me a lifeline, by letting me be part of something. She taught music.

She ran a recorder class in her own time after school hours, and she encouraged me to get involved. I was interested in music, but at the start I was more interested in walking home on a near-deserted footpath after school time.

My initial motive never waned, but my interest in the recorder soon overcame it. After a while I had a small part in the band, but more importantly Mrs. McKay took time—her own time—to speak to me like a person. I will always remember her as a kind and warmhearted person who provided an oasis of hope in a desert of despair.

One incident I should mention, as I am famous for cycling, is my first serious bike accident when I was about nine or ten. Gordon and I were

racing down the main street when we touched wheels. I went straight over the handlebars and ended up with my front tooth totally embedded in my bottom lip. The remaining stump had to be removed and now I only have one front tooth. Luckily, the other teeth moved round and closed the gap so that only the keenest of eyes can spot the deficit. Strangely, the whole thing was remarkably painless, despite the broken tooth and copious amounts of blood.

Gordon and I did a lot of cycling about as boys. It always seemed a safer way to travel than on foot, and it gave us freedom to go wherever we wanted. We would go to the far end of town on bike, but very rarely on foot. In fact, there was a shop at the far end of town which I never realized was there until I was about 11.

Newmilns is basically a one-street town with a few side streets branching off, so it was long and narrow, following the course of the River Irvine that runs through the valley. Because it is in a valley, there is no avoiding hills if you cycle anywhere but the main road. You can climb to about a thousand feet on either side, which we often did, and we would seem to take it in turns to fall off on the descents.

We started venturing farther and farther, and by our early teens, we could cover up to 60 miles in a day. We were not cyclists by any manner of means—we were just boys on bikes, clothed in padded jackets and trainers. The funny thing was that Gordon always seemed hardier than I in terms of his endurance of adversity, especially cold and wet weather. I can honestly say that I have no recollection of him complaining about anything ever, and I suppose in our daily lives we were used to adversity.

Cycling trips were not really my brother's thing—just something to do. He was a radio buff and buried himself in electronics from a very young age, so the more involved he got in that, the less cycling he was into. I had also gotten into cycling through forests and on rough paths, which my bike wasn't really built for. In the '70s, it was seen as a bit immature for a boy of my age to romp along dirt paths on bikes—but it was fun. The forests nearby had good drop-offs, and I always liked to challenge myself to see how big a slope I could handle without spilling it. I always felt much safer by bike because I could easily cycle away rather than be set upon. I would rarely go to the forest by foot, as I would have to run the gauntlet of the open street first.

I always preferred rainy days, as almost nobody would be out and about. Sometimes, though, during the summer holidays, I would brave the 200 yards along the main road to a stream which ran underneath the road. I could cross the road through the tunnel, and this led to a field that led uphill to the open and deserted countryside. I would simply hide there and come back in time for dinner. That way, I would avoid my parents' comments about being a couch potato and that I should go out and play—which is the impression I gave when I returned.

I used to love climbing trees, especially really hard ones with no branches at the bottom. I always felt safe in trees. There were a couple of trees which I climbed all the time and they were two of my favorite places. One was so high above ground that I could see right down the valley all the way to the coast, which was about 17 miles away, and I would spend hours up there, just watching the world go by. It seems a strange thing to talk about trees in an autobiography, but they were a bigger part of my life than friends, and I was quite dismayed when one of them was chopped down.

At secondary school, I had no real interest in academic achievement, although my best subjects were math and physics. Mrs. Monaghan asked me if I would represent the school in a math competition, but I instantly refused, as I had spent most of my life either being invisible or a clown to other kids. I did not actually know why I refused at the time—I just refused.

Ironically, my worst subjects at secondary school were metalwork and physical education (sports). This might seem strange, as I built my own bike and won the world championships a few years later, but the truth of the matter is that metalwork was the ultimate place of physical danger. Not only were my fellow pupils armed with lumps of metal and sharp tools, we were usually completely unsupervised for entire classes.

I used to dread metalwork so much that it seemed to me like going into the gladiators' arena. I believe I spent most of these classes with my back to a workbench and a sharp implement at hand. In four years of metalwork, I produced a grand total of a trowel and half of a plant-holder bracket. I could have knocked out the same in my father's shed in half a day.

In sport I also liked to keep out of the way, but, to be honest, I really was pretty poor at most sports except climbing and the long jump. I was always last or nearly last to be picked. Team sports were the worst. We