

Chapter One

I was born in Scottie Road, Liverpool in 1977. I already had a sister Tricia who was one year older. My Mum, Pat, was a cleaner. Chris, my father, worked in security on a building site. It was a rough, tough area and home was a small maisonette on a council estate. We had nothing.

My parents worked all hours to make sure we had *something* at birthdays and Christmas time. Holidays were rare and no further than Blackpool. Oddly, my father would never come. Dad was a man's man and Tricia was his little girl. I was very close, almost clingy to Mum.

I remember starting out at Infants School and just bawling my eyes out on the way. Mum reassured me it would be fine, but the fact that I never really took to education began before I had even got there on that first day. And from that point on, I was bullied – right the way from the age of five until some time after I left twelve years later.

I don't know how it started and I didn't really understand it until much later *but* I was always playing with the girls and joining in dancing. I didn't really have any friends and certainly none amongst the boys. Some of my classmates clearly took this home and told their parents and then those kids brought it back in and started calling me the little queer – words, really that at that age, could have only come from an external influence, like an older generation for whom it was very much the language of the day.

There was a lot of casual racism too. I hated every minute of school. Once it started, it then followed me into the Juniors and onto Secondary School. Nobody questioned it and I couldn't do anything about it. If I told the teachers, they accused me of being disruptive. There was no way I could mention anything to Dad. There was some distance between us – the generational gap in the 1980s was still huge. His upbringing and the culture in society was that people were able to be racist and homophobic and there was no proper recourse for addressing it. You just got on with it and had to endure. As

I write this in 2018, obviously the world has changed and I recently ran into one of my bullies in Liverpool who was man enough to apologise. I told him it was fine, but then when I thought about it, it really wasn't at all. I now understand that abuse to the extent that I received without any way of addressing it can make the abused person accepting of it. You know no different and ultimately become immune. That is why I told him it was fine years later. It wasn't fine at all.

Mum knew I was different, though we never spoke about it. Once, she caught me playing with my sister's *Barbie* dolls. I was always watching the glamorous over the top, and perhaps slightly camp American shows like *Dynasty* and *The Colbys*. Sometimes, I would withdraw to my bedroom and make up little plays or re-enact *Coronation Street* or sit at the desk with a big sheet across the wall pinned to the artex ceiling as though I was in some sort of studio. Here, I would pretend to be a radio presenter. And I would often stay inside for days.

Many of my actions were probably meeting the stereotype of 'gay'. I didn't understand what it meant. I just was aware that I felt different inside. It seemed totally natural to dance with the girls at school and play with dolls at home. I was only a kid after all.

As a result, I was routinely beaten. To avoid this, and to make people like me, I tried to make the bullies laugh, but it rarely worked. The only time there was any kind of let-off was in drama classes when *they* needed to look good and begged me to be in their group because they knew it was my forte. I would duly accept as the only respite from their attacks.

My only decent memory of school is therefore drama. The teacher, Mrs Groves, took a shine to me too, which I lived for. I would write plays and music and she would always encourage me and allow me to perform them for the school. When it came to the productions, I wanted to be involved in every way I could, from helping backstage, to costume design. I wrote the entire script the year we did *Aladdin*.

This really was the beginning and end of my education. Two themes manifested themselves at a very early age. The

performing arts were where my heart lay, and bullying was going to be a permanent problem.

I kept much of the drama from my Dad. I knew it was not for him and he would not approve. I would tell Mum that I wanted to go into town to rehearse and she would discreetly iron a couple of shirts for me, leave me £7 to cover costs and make sure I never spoke of it. Once, at the age of twelve, he did learn that the following night I was to play a lead role in a production of a show called *Another Yesterday* at Kirkdale Community Centre.

‘You’re not doing it, you’re grounded,’ he roared.

I couldn’t let the show down at such short notice so I snuck out of the house and went anyway, petrified the whole time that he would walk into the hall and drag me off stage. When I got home, he battered me and threw me into bed.

But I had found something that I truly loved and I dread to think what I would have done if I had not been able to act. It wasn’t just an escape outlet for me to survive. I think my teachers and the am-dram group could see I was more than capable too. I don’t know how you stand out at the age of three but somebody obviously saw something because even then, I had been cast as Joseph in the school nativity.

Life can sometimes be a juggling act between what lies in your genetics and the path you choose to take and the effect those experiences have on you shape your character. Clearly, from the earliest possible moment, I was veering towards a stage.

Anything animated grabbed me. At my first nursery I had taken Googie, the famous Liverpool Duck, in to show everyone, complete with posters and the duck’s hit single that had swept Merseyside. I realise you have probably never heard of it! The next day, for some reason, the nursery burnt down and all the contents were destroyed. Inside was Googie. On the inside, I was utterly heartbroken for weeks! To the outside world, I was already a big softie. I was the guy who mourned a dead duck, which was not even a real duck.

In time, the only place I would not get bullied was in the safety of the drama group. Beyond that, I was fair game and it was open season.

I *have* learnt to block it out over the years but that does not mean I have dealt with it. I still see many of the images today.

Dad told my sister after the first beating that she had to walk me home in future. Girl walks boy home. We used to have to trek across this field and one day it was absolutely belting down and I was attacked and left badly cut and bruised in the mud. They ragged my school jumper off me, which enraged Dad so much he sent me back to look for it. I found it soaking, stretched and full of holes in a puddle near the field. It was a senseless beating, but my classmates knew they could get away with it. I was just eight at the time.

In my third year at Senior School, I had left one lunchtime (which I always hated doing) to go to the shop. As I left the premises, a gang of about 30 or 40 lads surrounded me forming two lines in an arch, which they then made me walk through. As I did, the arch all but collapsed on me and then they piled in, kicking, spitting and urinating, throwing bricks and sticks at me. My blazer and school trousers were ruined and there was nothing I could do.

I did report it and told the head, Mr Wallace, that they had called me queer. His response was to send me home with a letter saying that I had been fighting.

I don't know why I was picked on. I can only assume that I was perceived as weak because I did 'girly things'. I did not understand words like anxiety and depression at that age, nor were they talked about, but the seeds were sewn. I used to spend hours in bed racking my brain for ways to avoid school, imagining throwing myself down the stairs, taking tablets or stepping out in front of a vehicle. From as young as eight these thoughts dominated my head, but I ultimately lacked the bottle. I couldn't bring myself to end it. I knew being hit by a bus was likely to hurt, but my rationale was telling me that it wouldn't be as bad as the beatings. It was better to hurt my body than

my feelings. How did I get to such a daft mind set? I didn't know the word suicide. I just wanted it over.

I wet the bed until I was fourteen. Mum had to change it every day and finally took me to the doctor who fed me some rubbish about needing to stretch my bladder but I knew why it was happening. I just went along with the GP who made me keep a chart and gave me gold stars if I went several nights without weeing.

I did cure it and that gave me the confidence to say yes to a school trip away at a dry ski slope in County Durham. We were gone a couple of nights and set up in bunks in our room. But I knew what was coming. I could always sense when a beating was due. My classmates would get rowdier and rowdier and one night took a pillow to my head to suffocate me. The teachers ignored it. My leg was too badly injured and the rest of my body was so grazed with cuts that I didn't get to ski much. I would never go on another school trip. I continued to sleep in my urine.

On one occasion I did try to take on the school bully – much to his annoyance. Revenge was soon forthcoming as he met me off the bus one day with his two brothers to absolutely annihilate me. They were waiting for me and broke my cheekbone.

When I got home, I just said that I was mugged. I had given up saying that I was attacked. It was pointless. I was forever making up excuses for those who went for *me* – a common symptom for people who are abused so regularly.

I had no logical explanation but it kept happening. I still did not understand at this point what gay was. I had never known this was the reason nor that I was. I would lie awake trying to work out what that isolating emotion was but I didn't understand it. I thought I was being bullied because of the way that I looked or acted. I could not blame it on being gay if I didn't know what it was.

One Sunday when I was fourteen something happened. I just moved in with my grandparents. In fact, it was more the case that I simply did not go home, and then gradually Mum

brought my stuff over and I never really went back. I don't know if it was because I changed my bus route or this attempt to disappear, but I felt a cloud lift temporarily. My relationship with my Granddad (on my Mum's side) was better than with my own father. Sometimes, that can be the case, but we were able to talk about things that were taboo at home. Frankly, much had been off limits there.

With the move came the first steps to freedom. The bullying continued at school, but I didn't have to look over my shoulder. My teacher, Nicky Lindsay, who ran her own casting agency, also had a contract to supply extras for TV shows. So, on Thursday nights I was free to act and, if the opportunities came along, I no longer had to sneak out.

I have very fond memories of living there, from simple things like having money spent on shoes for the first time to seeing my first proper stage show, watching Cilla Black at the Empire Theatre, starring in *Aladdin*, but coming out on stage singing *Surprise Surprise*, as she did on TV. She was a role model to me – representing the girl from round here who had done good, and it was the first time I had seen a real star in a live production, and I knew I was born to do it. That Liverpool connection, and the pride that went with it, resonated with all of us too.

It gave me a spur and belief and soon extra work was coming in. I found myself playing a rent boy who frequented an arcade in Channel 4's *Brookside* in a role which lasted on and off for a year. Suddenly, it was real and I was dealing with professionals and sitting in the canteen around actors whom I had been watching on television for years. My Dad did learn about this – it was hard to hide – and, predictably, he flipped.

He didn't want me doing it at all. It was a no to drama and definitely that particular part and perhaps in his world another truth was hidden – that he knew I was gay and this was his one chance to have an outburst through the role of a *character* I was playing. Of course, many people in theatre were. He could see where this was heading.

But I carried on in the role and took other parts from a factory worker in war-torn Britain to walk-on parts in the teen soap, *Hollyoaks*. It was perfect. I was learning my trade amongst people I revered and I was getting paid for it. Most importantly, I think, I was fighting my demons. I hadn't yet said out loud that I was gay, but I knew that feeling of being different, and every time you took a part, a round of applause, or a pay cheque, somehow you were fighting back and rising above the tormentors. To a small audience in a playground they could be the Big I Am. On a stage, however small the role, I felt like a giant.

By the time I came to leave school at seventeen, I somehow managed to acquire five GCSEs, but I have never been more thrilled than to have walked out of there for the last time.

On many occasions since, I have gone back to Liverpool, past familiar landmarks, as if taking the school route again, and I still feel a shiver down my spine. I would do everything I possibly could to take an alternative route. Equally, to this day, when I see big gangs of lads or any kind of crowd, I turn the other way. If I do take the bus, I wait for everyone else to get on first so I can see that I am safe. I was naïve to think that leaving school would be the end of the abuse. It wasn't.

The bullying continued.