8. Churchill Hospital



Oxford's hospitals were major actors in my life. As I have already related (see Button 4), the Radcliffe was a place of childhood therapy, employment and death. Similarly, the Curchill loomed in and out of my life like an elephant moving through the morning mist. My first experience was when I was 13. I am taken there by ambulance; a newly diagnosed Type I diabetic. I drift in and out of a coma. I come to at nightfall. It is my second day in the hospital and things are a blur. I am in the children's wing and earlier in the day I heard some kids laughing and talking. There is a soft glow from an incandescent light. Its pale orange glow reflecting off the ceiling, and a glass partition makes me think I am in a corridor. I am sure the kids I heard have wheeled me out into the corridor. I think the 12-year-old equivalent of "I am fucked."

When I developed diabetes I lost weight and had a raging thirst. My parents didn't know what was going on. After a few weeks my dad took me to see a Dr. Mullins on the Woodstock road (the same road where I had a flat as D.Phil. student.) I remember it was winter - cold and damp. The waiting room was filled with the fog of patients' wet clothes. Mullins opened the door to his surgery and called

for the next patient. I looked so ill that everyone let my dad take me in. I can still see a bust on the shelf of a new born baby's head. Its eyes screwed up and its mouth opening to release its first scream. Mullins took one look at me and asked me to pee in a bottle. He transferred a few drops of my urine to a test tube, threw in a tablet and the solution turned a muddy orange. I had diabetes.

I was hospitalized because Mullins didn't realize how far gone I was. He sent me home with an admonition to my dad not to give me any sugary drinks in spite of my raging thirst. When he came to call on us some days later he was shocked to see me slipping into the stupor of diabetic ketoacidosis.

When I arrived at the Churchill I was a Belsen-like figure - drawn and haggard. As the miracle of insulin began to work its restorative effects I was allowed to go out into the extensive grounds around the hospital with my parents. My mother brought me cheese sandwiches made with low carbohydrate bread. To her, food was a surrogate for love. I ascribe that to her mother who, during the war, would sell their ration coupons to rich people. As a result there was never enough food to keep all the hungry kids satisfied.

At the time the Churchill was a drab affair, built in 1942 to care for patients with orthopedic injuries sustained as a result of air raids in the war. After a brief spell as a U.S. Army hospital, when it was named after the then prime Minister, Winston Churchill, it became a center for the treatment of cancer and diabetes. These are the events which occurred there and punctuated my life:

- My wife had an infected IUD removed.

- I was circumcised.
- My mum came for lymphoma therapy, and to my dying shame, I came with her only once.
- My dad came for prostate chemotherapy.
- My dad died there. I wasn't present. I should have been. I should have got into his bed and held him in his last hours. Instead, I was in America. Nancy and I went to see his body. This was exactly 50 years after I was taken there with diabetes. He would have been 39 years old then. The same brick buildings. I am sad, wistful, absorbed with and by memories. Nancy and I enter the mortuary. He is cold, eyes closed. I kiss his face. Fifty years.

By Small and Small: Midnight to 4 a.m.

For eleven years I have regretted it,
Regretted that I did not do what
I wanted to do as I sat there those
Four hours watching her die. I wanted
To crawl in among the machinery
And hold her in my arms, knowing
The elementary leftover bit of her
Mind would dimly recognize it was me
Carrying her to where she was going.

Jack Gilbert Forrest

Contracting Type I diabetes at the age of 13 was the best thing that has ever happened to me. I say this now at the age of 67. I could

have said it at the age of 19 and every year from then on. Many things, outside my ability to influence, have and continue to enable me to say this. I often hear friends ask or say "I wonder what would have happened if I had…?" I have no time for this speculation. Every action we take or do not take could cause our death or despair every day. Leave the house one minute earlier and get killed by a drunk driver. Wait one minute to cross the road and miss meeting the best life partner you could ever have. If one believes in a completely deterministic universe such questions are meaningless because you had to leave the house when you did. The conditions for doing so were laid down in the Big Bang. If you are a non-determinist the question is still meaningless because you will never know, unless you are a proponent of multiple universes in which every possibility plays out. However, unless and until we can move between them the question still remains moot.

I was an average person at the age of thirteen. Shy, with a domineering father and a lack of self confidence. After contracting diabetes I withdrew into myself. I guarded the fact that I had diabetes as if it were the code to launch a nuclear missile. I became self-reliant, dependent upon no one for anything, if I could help it. I shielded my parents from the devastating effect the disease had upon my pubescent psyche. Goddam it I was going to be a normal kid. After the first six months or so teachers and pupils at my school began to forget about it. I was on the school rugby team, I started to do well in my classes. I was a "B" student, not top draw but OK, a contender. I had a girl friend, a summer job, I sat the Cambridge entrance exams, and failed. But then I secured a place at Bristol University to read chemistry. At the time Bristol was the best University in Britain after Oxford and Cambridge. So, I was doing OK. I was making it.