14. Oxford School

The Oxford High School for Boys and Southfields Grammar school amalgamated in 1967 and became the Oxford School where I was to spend the rest of my school days. That year 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. (See Button 8.) 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. On reflection 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 codes 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 kids at the 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.

We ate lunch in the school dining hall. We were assigned a specific table, which sat seven boys and a master, and remained the same throughout the school year. The boys all wore dark blue blazers and red and blue striped ties. Once assembled, we handed in our dinner tickets to the master who scrutinized their backs to ensure we had written our names on them in ink and they were not stolen goods. The ages of the boys varied from 11 through 16. The oldest boy at my table was Scott. He did not speak much and then only in response to polite questions from the master, a Mr. William Williams, a.k.a. Billy Boy. After a few days, Scott disappeared and his name was mentioned in whispers as having cancer. My only knowledge of cancer at this time was that my mother's father, David, had died of lung cancer. As he lay dying in Madam's Cottage in Gloucestershire, a house he occupied by virtue of being gardener to the local land-owning



Nilesens, he said that I should take a lettuce from his garden. At the age of six this did not impress me, but the way in which my mother recounted this tale imbued the lettuce with fabulous value. After a few weeks Scott came back and I saw him once more at the dinner table. He was pale, haggard and wore a black polo beneath his white shirt. This struck me as very cavalier. I never saw him again. He died soon after from leukemia. I remember the look on his face at the table. He was distracted, elsewhere, and yet trying to make a fist of it as he replied to Billy's questions. That look was my first encounter with death.

Later that term I heard of a boy called Keith Howard. He had been involved in a car accident in which his mother and sister had been killed and he and his father badly injured. The day arrived for him to return to school. I looked up from my desk into the corridor where the coats hooks were. There he was. A tall boy with a lovely smile and sporting, if that's the word, which I think it is, a walking stick. He hung his stick on a hook and unbuttoned what can only be described as a Widmerpool-esque rain coat. He became my fast friend, as we are still, 55 years on.



When I was at the City of Oxford High School for Boys I took French. I did not like the teacher. I thought him second rate. He must have felt the same way about me, for when I moved on to Oxford

school in Glanville Road I found myself assigned to the bottom class for French. This class was presided over by Mr. Teasdale - Ticker Teasdale. He was a large, athletic man whose enthusiasm for French, and his willingness to instill that into the bottom stream, was infectious. I quickly shone, was moved up to the top stream and never looked back. The same boy, six months apart, showing the importance of a good teacher. Just one more anecdote about Ticker. When I developed diabetes, at about the time when I attended his classes, he came to visit me in the Churchill Hospital (see Button 8). He was concerned and kind and his visit gave me great solace and encouragement as I faced what seemed like a very desperate situation.