



Come Smile With Me

## Come Smile With Me

'Life is a bowl of cherries, not all of them  
are ripe and some are rotten'

Peter Thwaites

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# Preface

I am a survivor of the Polio epidemic in the UK during the early 1950's and over the past five years have been experiencing the demoralising affects of Post Polio Syndrome ( PPS )

I have written this short autobiography as a means to easing my way out of a period of particular tiredness and anxiety, and was suggested by my Psychologist. I hope that it makes you smile and maybe cry, although this is definitely not my foremost intention.

Many of the episodes are drawn directly from memory at the moment of writing and so, over the passage of time, occasionally; events may be betrayed slightly differently than they should. I have, however, endeavoured to be frankly honest in my depiction of the last fifty years of my life and must stress at this point that I regret nothing. I have, for the most part thoroughly enjoyed my life and truthfully hope that there are many years and experiences still to be encountered.

Dedicated to my mum and dad, without whom I would never have survived, thanks.

# Episode 1

1949, the war has been over now for almost four years. Although the rationing of some basic items has still to be discarded, much of the population of the United Kingdom are beginning to rebuild their lives amidst the death, destruction and confusion that still remains, if not in fact, in memories, thoughts, and nightmares.

Worthing, a thriving seaside resort with pier, promenade and miles of golden sand is situated on the South Coast of Britain betwixt Brighton and Littlehampton and is one of the UK's major attractions during the summer months. Even during the winter season, the pier is an ideal place for the catching of the occasional flounder, bass, and if you are really unlucky an eel or two.

Young families can often be seen standing on the pier's timber decking, crabbing, with small metal containers filled to the brim with struggling crabs of all sizes, (not all complete with the requisite number of legs) trying to make a quick escape back to the ocean. Not to worry though, for at the end of the day, all and sundry are tipped unceremoniously into the sea, before the weary children head towards the nearest fish and chip shop arguing about who had caught the largest crab.

Much of the older section of Worthing, especially close to the town centre itself, contains many fine Victorian and Edwardian detached houses. With the ending of the war, finances are poor and instead of these refined properties falling into disrepair many discerning owners have converted them into small bedsits. Many of these are not self contained with the occupiers sharing facilities with other residents. It is almost spring, the 9 March, and in one of these small but

comfortable bedsits, I am born, kicking and screaming, to fantastic parents brought together by the fortunes of the war some two years earlier. The owner of the bedsits, an eccentric and affectionate elderly lady, of much wisdom and experience, appears over the top of my new cot, cigarette ash dropping on to the soft pristine covers like gently falling snow, and wisps of white and blue smoke floating serenely across the room. My mother and father show concern and I am quickly moved out of harms way by the local midwife who has attended the home birth, so common these days.

I weigh in at a very reasonable 8lb and have all of the necessary equipment for a young lad, so life is good. My hair is a bit thin on top, a precursor for later life, and judging by the various noises that I can produce nothing wrong in the voice department.

Mum and dad are deliciously proud, and at every opportunity I am displayed to my cooing relatives.

In a very short space of time I am able to create a whole range of directions that must be acted upon, such as I need a drink, a meal would be good, how about a bit of burping, oh, and by the way, this nappy is decidedly wet.

Growing up is an exciting business and I enjoy every moment, the walks in the park, the pram rides, bird song, the wind, rain, sleep, meal times, being washed, and that wonderful hazy smell of talcum powder. Oh what a time I can have with that – it is amazing how far such a small amount can travel. I am an expert at being sick, as well, I can target the point of contact precisely, and as for timing, well!.

1951 should be another fine year, but disaster; suddenly I have a competitor, a brother. Obviously I am in charge as the biggest and eldest, but he seems to be a bit slow on the uptake, and it takes a long

time before he accepts this inevitable fact. However we get there in the end, and after all, he is quite nice, really.

I am a lot more independent now, and my brother, who seems awfully slow, is still crawling about on all fours like a cat. I am certain that I never had to do that. Still, he is an ideal collaborator for the occasional prank on mum and dad, although even if it isn't always my fault I am continually getting the blame.

Worthing, like many larger towns throughout the UK is attracting many new residents year by year and with the majority of these as young families, the local authority is steadily increasing it's housing stock. One such development is in Durrington, which lies to the North West of Worthing, and here hundreds of new houses are being built to house the increasing population

My family is gradually growing and as it is getting a bit cramped where we are, mum and dad apply to the local authority for a council house, and after a short wait we are all off to live in a marvellous two-storey house in Durrington.

Moving day is a nightmare for my brother and I, as we can't find our toys anywhere, but as we have our very own bedroom, things are certainly looking up.

What a wonderful new home this is, everybody is very happy, we even have our own toilet, outside in the yard, and when I sit on the seat, I can see under the door right down to the end of our garden. Mind you, in the winter, the wind seems to find its way everywhere. The floor gets a bit wet when it rains too, but it is ours, and we don't have to share it with anyone. I am making lots of new friends and all in all, life is grand. We have our own fireplace with a real fire, and each Christmas my brother and I hang up our stockings. Father Christmas has never ever

forgotten us, and there are always loads of exciting parcels to unwrap. This year we have an enormous Christmas tree – fantastic! It is taller than my brother, or I, and is covered with beautiful sparkling and twinkling coloured balls. I can see myself if I look at one of the balls and I am always smiling. There are also strings of silver and gold that seem to wind their way up the tree, and at the very top, there is a pretty fairy holding a tiny wand. I know that she is wishing us all a very happy Christmas

I can hear people singing carols, and smell delicious aromas of chocolate, wood smoke, cigars, pine needles, and turkey. I wish this could last forever.

Christmas passes and over the next couple of years, I get all of the usual childhood illnesses, measles, chicken pox, etc., “better to get them all now – whilst you’re young” – I’m reminded, whilst buried under my bedclothes feeling ill and totally depressed. I don’t want to be young if it means being ill all the time.

There are a lot of young families living near us, and one of my mates lives next right door. He is not really a friend because he is a bit rough and always in trouble, but occasionally we have some fun together. Today, however he has a really bad cold, and something wrong with his foot so we don’t do much, except build a small camp at the bottom of my garden. We have both got toy guns and play cowboys and Indians. I’m always the cowboy because I have the best gun. We are completely lost in our own world of baddies, goodies, camps, friendly fights and lots of mud and dirt. Suddenly A-----Tishhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh –ooo and I’m drenched. I don’t like this part of the game. I’m going back indoors in the dry. This is not fun anymore and I am not going to play with him again until his cold goes away.

Throughout life it is strange how you take things for granted – but I had always thought that once you mastered the technique, ascending and descending stairs is a real cinch. Until today, that is. For some reason, after successfully mastering the top two treads on the way down to breakfast for 'tapping egg' and marmite soldiers, the remainder becomes a blur and the next thing I remember I am laying flat out on the hallway floor. Not a pretty sight, and very sore. Pride is a very tender thing, but even more so is your backside, and it would appear that I have landed on it.

Out comes the usual axiom " If you don't take more care, and end up breaking your leg, don't come running to me ". Do parents actually listen to what they are saying – they must think we are all too young to understand.

Anyway, back to my soreness and to add insult to injury I have now to contend with my younger brother's not so witty comments. Still the marmite soldiers are good, and I have soon forgotten about the incident completely. I am a bit wary on the stairs today and hang on to the handrail going up and down. Occasionally I feel a bit wobbly in the garden, but come on; I'm only four.

About a couple of weeks later it happens again. This time I am fortunately half way up, or down (I can't remember which), but whatever, my bum makes contact with every step on the way down, until the inevitable happens and I make contact with the floor – OUCH. This time it is not funny, and I forget my age, and burst into tears. Look, I am four years old, man of the house, (after my dad, of course), and falling down stairs does absolutely nothing for my 'street cred'. If my friends ever get to hear of this.

On this occasion, I am also feeling a bit unwell, hot, and sweaty, and



there is a strange and worrying sensation in my left leg. A bit like 'pins and needles'. It is a good thing that I am not a bit older, or I might begin to panic, but I will leave this up to my mum, she is really good at it.

Like all great adventures they come and they go, and if I forget all the times lately that I have fallen over, or inexplicably dropped something, I am getting on well, until today.

Early morning, the sun is beginning to rise and there are noises out in the street. People are beginning to start their day and all is well with the world.

I can hear dad downstairs making the morning tea. Everyday he would get up at about 6.30, make us all a cup of tea and bring it up stairs to our beds with a slice of bread and margarine. We couldn't afford biscuits, although mum did manage to get a bag of broken biscuits from 'Isteds', a general provisions store in the town centre. Dad worked for them for a while.

Getting up in the morning was never my strong point, and the tea and bread made it a lot more tolerable. This morning, however, I have a bit of a problem. I can't move. Not just my arms or legs, but nothing, absolutely nothing. Everything has gone numb – I can't even wriggle my toes – this is not funny, extremely frightening and I am now beginning to the panic. Nobody is going to believe me. I feel really ill. I have a hot, sweaty feeling that appears to move around my body. My head feels as though it is about to explode, and I can actually hear my own pulse. I have told dad, and he looks a bit shocked, now it's mum's turn. I gather that dad has gone to fetch the Doctor, and all I can do now is wait, literally! The room is beginning to spin round and I feel that I am floating just off the top of my bed. I feel that I am about to be

violently sick and I'm right. Mum is rushing around with towels and flannels, although it is becoming increasingly difficult to make out anyone in the room. I just know that it is my mum. My brother is fast asleep.

This is desperate – I can't move a thing, and it is no good prodding me about, I can't feel it either. I don't feel anything. For goodness sake, Doctor, what is wrong? It is exactly like being in a dream, more likely a nightmare, when you want to move, but you can't. I am not able to control any part of me, even talking is becoming difficult – come on you lot – sort it out. Surely dad knows what to do?

This ambulance is fast, and I can make out the bell – I wish I wasn't so scared – I might be able to enjoy this. I wonder where I am going. I can make out mum sitting on the bed opposite mine, but I don't know where dad is, or my brother. I feel really sleepy but the bells keep waking me up. We seem to be going miles and miles...

I have never felt so dreadful. My head still hurts and my throat is swollen and sore. I can see that I am in a strange bed, in a sort of goldfish bowl, with tubes coming out of me from everywhere. I can see mum through the glass standing in a very pretty area filled with flowers of every type and colour. I wonder why she is not in here with me; I could really do with a cuddle right now. There is someone coming inside the 'bowl', they are dressed in some sort of white gown and wearing a mask – they look very strange, and somewhat concerned. Maybe I am a bit of a problem to them – I don't mean to be. I still can't move anything – I am very scared, "please help me". Even I can't hear that, so there is no chance of anyone else hearing me – what can I do? – Very sleepy.....

Mum and dad are in here with me, they've got the same clothes on as the

other person, and they are wearing masks, but I can hear them and recognise them so I must be getting better. I feel a bit better, more relaxed. My head doesn't ache quite so much, but I can still hear my pulse. There's another man standing close to dad. He is quite small with grey hair and looks very old, and appears to be wearing a white collar, and carrying a book. None of them look very happy to see me - I wish I could touch mum - but I can't move. Dad looks really sad. "Come on Dad, I'll be back home soon" - I wish I didn't feel so slee.....

Strange. It is beautiful. I am standing on the shore of a gently flowing river, which in front of me is a magnificent shade of blue with gentle white waves lapping against my feet. All around me are trees and flowers of every imaginable colour swaying quietly in the warm summer sun. I can see the sunlight reflecting like shafts of diamonds on the top of the water. I feel truly happy, content and peaceful. The light blue sky has several miniature fluffy clouds that are being blown around by the warm summer's breeze. I am at ease. Through the summer haze I can see a small wooden rowing boat coming towards me from the opposite bank. There doesn't appear to be any movement but it is definitely getting closer, and standing in the centre of the boat is the most beautiful man I have ever seen. His face is full of gentleness and caring, with his arms held outstretched towards me. He is tenderly dressed in a combination of light brown and a white flowing robe with a half raised hood of similar material, and almost appears to be floating.

I find myself walking slowly towards him, and as I get closer, with a voice like that of angels, he is telling me that I am far too early to take the boat with him and that I must return home. I have many friends waiting and praying for me. His tone was soft and yet commanding, full of compassion and love.

Mum is back and she seems to be very happy, I can't see dad or my brother. I am in a strange kind of metal tube, lying on my back, with a mirror just above my face. This is really odd. I still can't move anything on my own, but I can feel my chest going up and down, and there is this sort of steam sound. Maybe I am in a steam engine, but why?

Hey, everything is upside down, how on earth am I going to drink anything? I get it; I drink using a long bendy straw, wow that tastes good. It seems like ages since I had a drink

Well I am certainly getting around – I am back in the goldfish bowl and there seems to be a group of Doctors with my mum and dad. None of them are wearing those dreadful masks anymore. Maybe I am going home soon. I think I am sitting up, but I am not sure how I got like this, mind you it is a lot better than lying on my back.

I don't remember much about the last few months, except that I was allowed to go home and had to wear callipers. I learnt to walk all over again and managed to begin using my arms and hands. I could even go to the toilet on my own. It feels like ages ago that I was doing that. My home is a wonderful place, I love my mum and dad, and even my little brother. I don't want to leave them all behind ever again. It made me very sad.

When I was a lot older I was told that I had caught Infantile Paralysis or Polio as it is more commonly known. I had also actually *died* for a couple of minutes. The Doctors had told mum and dad that if I survive the night, it was very unlikely that I would ever sit up again, and to walk again was out of the question. No wonder they looked unhappy. What traumas we have to bear as parents! Mum and dad had been surrounded by loving friends and relations, and on the night that I almost crossed the river, had spent the entire night praying for my recovery in a small

chapel nearby. The many prayers had been answered.

The vision and sensations experienced that night are as vivid today, as they were at the time. I have no doubt that what I experienced, for me, was real and I have never had any reason to doubt this. I don't know what it means; I am not sure what I believe. I can only let you, the reader, come to your own conclusions.

It is likely that I contracted polio the day my mate from next door was playing in our camp. He had been banned from going out of doors that day. He had a very mild form of polio that affected his right foot. The virus was transferred to me through the simplest of things. The sneeze from his cold.

## Episode 2

I am a big six now and progressing very well, considering the doctors' prognosis. I am still having physiotherapy, mainly on my legs that don't want to work too well. I wear a sort of brace during the day, but mum can take it off when I am in bed, so that's good. My friends don't seem to notice that I am wearing anything different, which really helps me get through the days, and at night I feel normal. I have noticed that one of my legs is thinner than the other, but this will get better I am sure. Mum and dad don't talk about it much. I don't want to be special, just normal. Perhaps I am normal already?

Today is not going to be a nice day as I am going to see my physiotherapist at the town clinic. Mum takes me on the back of her bike and it is quite a way so she is exhausted when we arrive. I have to sit in a miserable sort of waiting area packed with other people with all sorts of illnesses and problems. One of the many doors leading off this area goes to the school dentist. I dread going through that door, it makes my skin crawl and I will do anything to avoid it. The dentist seems reasonably human, but his nurse – I think she hates kids, and especially me. She reminds me of the wicked stepmother in Sleeping Beauty. She scares me with her look and makes me feel very frightened. Oh, it's my turn to see the physio now, so I go into a funny smelling room. There is a long bench against a wall, an old swivel chair, a long desk like table covered with piles of paper, and loads of files. I like my physio. I have been seeing her for a long time now, and we have got to know each other. She is very kind and gentle and seems to listen to

what I am saying. I know that most doctors don't. She tells me to take off my socks and shoes, which I do, and place my feet in a bowl of water. There is a sort of transformer box on the table and some wires that she attaches to one of my legs. Wow... That stings - I get a sort of electric shock in my foot, which makes my whole foot twitch. I am not sure that I want anymore of this. Another shock, then another, and another - things are getting serious here. Then like a miracle it is all over, at least for a week when we will be back again. I can dry my feet now and putting my socks and shoes back on, we head off home.

This treatment and a range of many other exercises, some pleasant, some very uncomfortable, meant that over the next few years the strength slowly returned to much of my limbs and I begin to lead a very normal life.

I am seven when my youngest brothers arrive, they are twin boys, and together we make a large family. Poor mum surrounded by five men. At this time we are living in a temporary prefabricated house provided by the council because I was unable to manage the stairs when I got home from hospital and this home had only one floor. It is far too small now that we are six in the family and we move once again to a larger house in Worthing with three bedrooms and a large rear garden backing on to a playing field. In the field we have slides, swings and a roundabout and loads of space for football or chasing.

Mum is not too happy with the location because running down the side of our house is a public footpath that leads to and from the park. Some evenings I can hear things going on in the bushes that apparently I shouldn't be listening to. I don't know what I should be listening for, so am not sure why mum gets in such a fuss. The other night there was a fight on the path, but my brother and I were not allowed to watch. We

did hear it though, it sounded great.

When I grow up I want to be an engineer, so today I have decided to build a tunnel from the back of my garden, under the fence and into the park. Getting started is not that hard and I am already about two feet down, but it seems to be getting harder as I get deeper. I am not sure where I can put the stuff that comes out, so I am piling it up behind me.

Right, I think I am deep enough now. If I kneel in the hole, I can just see over the top, so I had better start the tunnel towards the park. As long as I can crawl through, the tunnel will be big enough.

This is tremendous fun. I feel like a prisoner escaping from prison, wait till mum sees this.

I just can't understand why mum and dad are so cross. It was only my first attempt and if dad hadn't stood on the tunnel it wouldn't have collapsed onto me anyway. It is hardly my fault. Early bed with no tea is not the sort of reward a budding young engineer should be getting. I will have to try again later.

Forget tunnelling, go-karting is the sport for me and living on the top of a very steep road, I am surprised that I hadn't thought of it before. Four pram wheels from the local dump, assorted pieces of timber, some string, and my dad's best toolkit and the first prototype go-kart was born. Road testing was not a problem and by the time that I reached the hairpin bend at the bottom of the road I had mastered the controls.

This design, my third, and it has to be said, my best so far, has a sort of roof, two seats and a kind of brake that has yet to be tested. I have decided that this morning would be ideal as mum and dad are in next doors having coffee (they are not happy with the kart being on the road for some reason). What they don't see, they won't worry about, and



anyway, my brother Paul owes me a favour.

Getting the kart to the top of the hill is not a problem, now that there are two of us pulling the string and we reach it in no time at all. Both a bit tired but excited by the adventure that lies before us.

I haven't tested the kart carrying two before, (Paul has never been very keen), so I am not sure what difference it will make to the speed, but I always have my new brake. An ideal time to test it out.

Ok, quick push against the kerb, and we're off. Steering with the string is more difficult than I thought. I wish I was using my feet, but there wasn't room with Paul behind me so this will have to do. We're past our house now - I wish mum and dad could see us, they would be really proud. We are definitely going much faster than I have ever been before.

Right now, let's try the brake. Disappointing, nothing seems to be happening and in fact I don't think it is still attached to the kart. We are about thirty yards from the bend so I will begin pulling on the steering string now...

I was not to know that the string would snap at this point. I haven't had the opportunity to test it under such conditions as this now, and it is really bad luck that the articulated lorry has chosen to come round the bend at the same time that we are, only travelling in the opposite direction. It is my quick thinking in screaming at Paul to duck that enables us to pass completely under the trailer without any harm. I can see the underside of the trailer, the enormous drive shaft spinning around, four pairs of gigantic tyres that look extremely close, and It is only when we meet the concrete kerb on the side of the road that things start to go seriously wrong.

The lorry driver is falling out of his cab and has gone as white as a sheet. He towers above us and had he been calmer would no doubt had said

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