



FROM LIGHT TO DARK



The Story of Blind Dave Heeley

Dave Heeley and Sophie Parkes

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Foreword by Sir Ranulph Fiennes

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Preface

'You'll have to write it all down, Dave.'

'When's the book out?'

'Where can I read more?'

'Have you censored any bits, Dave?'

I HAVE regularly been asked to write the story of my life, especially since undertaking the challenges for which I have become known.

But where the hell do you begin? How do you pick your opening gambit?

When I think back to my early life and my proudest moment, it was easily 14 May 1970: the day I won the 1,500m in five minutes and 13.09 seconds to become the town champion and break the record. It instilled in me a lifelong love of running, albeit across longer distances and in pursuit of more significant personal achievements.

Or I could easily start the book on the day, not so long ago, that I eloped to Gretna Green with the love of my life, Deb, or my presence at the births of my three daughters, Grace, Georgie-Lee and Dannie.

If I wanted a fast-paced opener, like a scene from an action movie, I could tell you about the time I drove a tank in the

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Scottish Highlands or the occasion I steered a fast car around Brands Hatch, or threw myself off steep cliffs in Corfu in the name of fun. Or maybe a humorous anecdote, something unexpected – like the time I was lost in a snowy Ostend, Belgium, dressed only in a belly-dancing outfit.

Maybe the first few pages could be devoted to one of the ‘big ones’, picking up the pace during the adventure of a lifetime, running seven marathons in seven consecutive days across seven continents, or the ten days I dragged an ever-growing team of weary cyclists and runners from John O’Groats to Land’s End through ten marathons and 700 miles of cycling, when fundraising opportunities presented themselves mid-pee and failing brakes shook our nerves to the core.

I suppose the most obvious place to start would be that day in 1968 when Mom and I visited the Birmingham Eye Hospital. I can remember that moment like it was yesterday. The consultant shut the door, sat down and said to me, ‘You’ve got a disease of the eye, young man, called Retinitis Pigmentosa.’ I must have looked blankly back at him. That was a term I hadn’t heard before. ‘You’re going blind,’ he clarified.

I remember the consulting room. It had big, high windows. As he said it, I looked out of one of them. I noticed that the sky was blue. I could see the sun. A bus went past on the street below. I was confused. I wasn’t blind; I could see. At ten years of age the realisation just didn’t dawn on me. So perhaps that isn’t the place to start. After all, it was only later – when the career I had banked on became a no-go – that the diagnosis hit me like a sledgehammer. It was only later when I realised that my entire lifestyle would have to be adapted, shifted, tamed.

I actually tried to start this story, initially, as many people do, with my birth. I looked up a weather report from November 1957 and thought this would set the scene for readers, contextualising my arrival in West Bromwich. I took it seriously, reeling off four pages with the weather report as its foundation, and, after a hushed couple of hours, I printed

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off pages for Deb, my fiercest critic, to read. The next thing I heard was not the sound of astonished gasps or proud sobs. No, instead, all I heard was the aggressive, greedy whir of the shredder. ‘What a load of rubbish,’ she said, bluntly. She was right, though. It was.

This time, hopefully, I’ve got it right. It’s a strange thing, to sit in your comfy chair and wonder whether your memory can serve you right, piecing together your life bit by bit, from being a kid right through to old codger days. I’ve cringed, shed a tear, smiled and laughed out loud, frowned and wondered how the hell...?

And with so many people asking me to write my story, *challenging* me to write it – well, you know how I like a challenge. I simply thought it had to be done.

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IT WAS more commonplace, back then, to be born at home as I was. The home in question, 60 Elizabeth Road, West Bromwich, was, at the time, cutting-edge: a Smith house constructed from steel and brick, with three bedrooms and two living rooms, a kitchen and two toilets, one upstairs and one outside. Smith houses were seen to be a revolutionary way of providing affordable housing quickly, although I think you'd struggle to get a mortgage on one these days. As building regulations were relaxed in the 1950s to stimulate house building, there was a housing boom, with hundreds of thousands of new homes built each year across the country. My family home was part of that.

When I think back to my first 22 years of my life, when I lived at home, I'm immediately reminded of the cold and damp: there was no central heating, and it was always a case of straight-out-of-bed and get dressed – there was no hanging about. In the winter, there was always a race to who could get to use the inside loo first. The inside loo was marginally warmer than outside and had the better toilet paper, too. It was horrible, that hard, shiny stuff, not like the soft tissue paper we get today, heaven in comparison. But still, it was far better than the damp, inky squares of newspaper hanging by a nail in the outside toilet.

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We were only allowed in the front living room on special occasions, certainly at Christmas, when Mom always had a big fire going. In fact, sometimes the fire got overbearing. We'd sit on the settee closest to the fire but as we warmed up and the flames grew, we'd begin to slowly rotate around the living room, a bit like musical chairs, until we were further away and by the window. Of course, you couldn't turn it down and I often wondered how Santa made his entrance. He must have carried a fire extinguisher. Still, we always got our presents scorch-free, and that was the main thing.

So I, David George Heeley, plopped out on Sunday 24 November 1957 at around 12.20am, weighing in at just over 7lb. Apparently I had big blue eyes and no hair, and soon proved I could eat and sleep a great deal – some things never change! I'm sure it must have been like the old films we used to see: the midwife shouting to the father-to-be to bring boiling water, hot towels, a bowl. But yet, years later, when I was present at the birth of my own daughters, there was none of this at all. Perhaps the boiling water was just for a cup of tea.

My first actual memory was seeing my baby sister for the first time. Sharon was born on 8 September 1961 and I had a quick glance at her, peacefully sleeping next to my mother in bed, before I was whisked away by my Auntie Dot, my mom's sister, and Uncle Ivan to Blackpool for a fortnight's holiday. I can remember standing on the platform at the old West Bromwich station, right there, where the Metro station is now, and the steam train blowing its whistle and smoke belching everywhere. It was a brilliant holiday, where everything seemed to revolve around me. I was given bread and toast each morning at the hotel kitchen to feed the seagulls, I met Harry Corbett and had my photo taken with a life-sized Sooty. We went to the theatre to see a play about a lion and I can still see that lion in a rowing boat. I'm not quite sure what it was doing there to this day.

I can also remember the pain on the backs of my ears as my wire-rimmed glasses cut into them. They were my first

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pair; I'd had them from around the age of three. Back then it was presumed that kids didn't have poor eyesight, that it wasn't a concern until something proved otherwise. But my parents had picked up the telltale signs: as soon as I could walk, I walked straight into things, like doorframes, the edges of the settees, discarded toys. My first glasses were like two pound coins, plastic with wire rims that wrapped round your ears. The wire repeatedly cut through the skin, leaving my ears red and raw. I tried to keep it from my auntie as I didn't want her worrying, especially on holiday, but she found out; grown-ups always do.

Only a few days after I was born, my parents, George and Annie Heeley, and I moved out, to our own place. But my dad's dad, Grandad Heeley – otherwise known as the 'Nightingale of Dudley' on account of his sweet singing voice – died on New Year's Day. We promptly moved back in again, to keep Granny Ag company. That made five of us in that house: Mom and Dad, me, Granny Ag and Uncle Gill, dad's younger brother. Six when Sharon came along. People didn't seem to move around so much in those days, and generations continued to live together under one roof, with other extended family often only down the street or across the park. I liked it, having everyone around, and it meant you often knew your neighbours, and your neighbours' neighbours. I suppose it made it safer, more community-spirited. Few ordinary folk had cars, and trains and planes were expensive and didn't go quite as far or as regularly as they do now.

Granny Ag was the name on the rent book and she ruled the roost. She still ran the coal business, with one of Dad's brothers, Uncle Ernie, lugging the coal, and I loved to accompany him in the wagon. Gran had run a shop before compulsory purchase forced their move to the house on Elizabeth Road but that didn't stop her; she continued selling produce from the new place. Mom always said it was like living in New Street station: there was always someone knocking the door, whatever time of

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the day or night, for potatoes, pop, bottles of beer, Davenports in those days.

My grandparents on my mom's side were Granny and Grandad Clee. Though I didn't see them daily, I did go and visit them as often as I could. In fact, when I was allowed to ride my bike out by myself, it was Granny and Grandad Clee I'd go and visit, often calling in to Auntie Dot's first to pick up meals she had prepared for them. Maybe I was the original meals on wheels! Granny Clee became, in the latter years, the breadwinner. She worked in the factories – it was all factory work round here back then – and she worked hard in the warehouses at Walsall Conduits and Conex Sanbra, where they made pipes and compression fittings and put the components together. She even had a spell operating overhead cranes at a company called Cashmores, but would often clean the 'big houses' for extra income when she needed it. It was hard, physical work and she was old school, as hard as bloody nails. She had a hip problem for years, but hip operations weren't the rite of passage in the 1940s as they are for many old people today. She just frowned and got on with it.

Grandad Clee could have been a teacher, I'm told, but he was prevented due to poor eyesight. He took a job as a dustman instead but he was eventually forced to give that up, too, due to his aggressive blindness. When Grandad Clee gave up work, he attended the Queen Alexandra College in Harborne, Birmingham, where he learnt the art of basket weaving. In those days, he used hot pitch to make the baskets and he burnt his fingers regularly. But his baskets were beautiful, and he continued to make them from his garden shed. The college also taught him everyday life skills, helping blind people cope better as they aged and their disabilities became more profound. When I visited them as a kid, I always marvelled at him frying bacon and eggs, feeling his way around the hot hobs and sizzling pans. Back then, I didn't realise I'd be doing the same, years later. I can't recall him ever complaining about

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his condition, or wondering why he had been singled out for blindness.

In fact, people did forget that Grandad was blind, a tribute to his skills and get-on-with-it mentality. Back in the late 1950s and early 60s we used to have terrible fogs, real pea-soupers. There were times when people would lose their way, their senses dulled by the pollution, and Grandad would whisk them to where they needed to go. He never told them he was blind and they never knew; after all, it would have sounded crazy, the proverb in action.

My dad, George Thomas Heeley, was born on 14 May 1933 but the midwife attending the birth didn't think he'd survive the night and told Granny Ag to prepare herself for the worst. But she needn't have worried, as Dad was always a fighter. He was one of five brothers – Arthur, married to Beryl; Norman; Ernie, married to Auntie Margaret; and Gilbert, or Gill, married to Auntie Chris – and their only sister sadly died in infancy.

Dad and his siblings didn't have it easy back then. He would roam the same fields as I would do, 30-odd years later, looking for adventure and a game of football with the other lads in the area. But by the time he was 14 years old, he was expected to contribute to the household. In fact, it wasn't an expectation – he had to. So, like his parents and brothers, he began to work the coal, delivering with a horse and cart. When his older brother, Ernie, was called up to national service in the army, he had to keep the coal round going, pretty much single-handedly: up at four in the morning to sort out the horse, then get the cart hitched up before bagging up the coal and getting off on to his rounds. No wonder he was built like a barn door, as I would find out years later, to my peril.

Dad always worked long hours and, like the other members of my family, experienced heavy labour. I've known him to hold down two jobs, one during the day that he'd finish before heading off to his second at night. He worked very

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hard to support us, and would rarely take risks in case it would jeopardise his young family. In the latter years, he was a fitter, fixing anything that had moving parts such as engines and motors. He was a very practical man and common sense and experience got him through his working life.

In 1951, Dad was called up to do his national service. He joined the Royal Horse Artillery as a tank driver and two years later, he was given what was seen as the ultimate privilege – he was chosen to represent his regiment in the Coronation Parade. I don't think there are too many people from West Bromwich who could say the same, and I'm told it was a very proud day for the family. In fact, Uncle Ernie went right out to buy a television – black and white, of course – so they could try and catch a glimpse of Dad. London, along with the rest of the country, came alive that day and celebrated. I think it was much needed after the end of the war only eight years previous.

Mom was born Annie Elizabeth Clee on 1 March 1934, St David's Day. Mom was one of three, alongside Auntie Dot and her younger brother, Fred. Like everyone in those days, Mom finished school and went straight out to work, working all her life. Just like Dad, she often had two jobs at once, and she only retired in 1995, just after Dad died.

Mom worked at Conex like her own mother had, and like many of our family and our neighbours did, and she operated the machines. At 16, early into her working life, she suffered a horrific accident. She wore her hair very long, which she piled on top of her head in a turban. And, well, you can only imagine. She told me it happened so quickly: one moment she was working away, and she barely noticed the few strands of hair that slipped out of the turban. Before she knew it, the machine had caught hold and mercilessly ripped out the vast majority of her hair from her head, from back to front. She was off work for 12 months, convalescing, and was awarded £100 compensation. From that day until now, she doesn't like her head to be touched.

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It was not long after Mom's accident that she met Dad for the first time. They 'stepped out briefly', as she says, but then Dad was whisked off to do his national service and they split for a while. It was a couple of years later when they met again, when she was asked to the Great Bridge Palace cinema, and romance flourished.

Money was tight but my parents still liked us to have pleasure when we could. We somehow always managed a holiday, whether it was a caravan somewhere in Britain with various aunties and uncles, or sometimes even the Costa del Sol. Auntie Dot and Uncle Ivan, having no kids of their own, would take Sharon and me with them from time to time.

Sharon and I would fight like siblings do. My particular bugbear was the fact that she would borrow my best jumpers and t-shirts and wear them for her favourite pastime: horse riding. The smell of horses! It took at least two washes to get rid of that smell. I'll always remember one Saturday night disagreement. I can't remember what it was about, but it must have been serious as, in a moment of madness, Sharon pulled the leg off the old coffee table and hit me over the head with it! With pain there is often a natural instinct of retaliation. Incensed, I thought about my reciprocal move, but Dad's voice chimed, 'Don't you even think about it,' and I was forbidden to move. She got away with it – typical younger sister.

She and I have always got on, though. I used to drive her mad with my persistent losing of the contact lenses I had treated myself to when I was 18. I'd always lose them when I got home from the pub and rather than risk the wrath of sleep-deprived parents, it was Sharon I dragged from her bed to help me find them. Thankfully, Sharon and I continue to get on well today, and I have a great relationship with her husband, Mark, and my only niece, Hannah.

Though our typical house was on a typical council estate, we were actually incredibly lucky with the amount of green space that surrounded us. The area was known as Greets Green, as

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it still is, but the open spaces were just known as The Fields. I could skip over the back fence and I'd be there: grassy banks and hills, perfect for playing and hiding. As clichéd as it sounds, me and the other kids did play cowboys and indians, we did pretend we were in armies, and we did go tracking on our bikes and trolleys. In the summer months, we were like latchkey kids, only coming home for dinner or when the sun was setting. In the winter, we got out our sledges. I always remember snow, proper snow, that lasted for weeks. But then people always say that – is it the trick of nostalgia?

The brook that zigzagged through the area was shallow enough to paddle in or look for fish but I later learnt it was actually a section of the River Tame. I got a little wet more than once, with a good telling-off to go with it. I didn't have the patience to sit and fish in the pond just adjacent to the river, but as the other local lads did it, I found I had to, too. So there we were, whiling away hours and hours with a worm suspended into the water from a piece of string attached to a stick. The sticklebacks fell for it every time. I much preferred it when we made rafts so we could float across the pond, or when it iced over in winter and we could play on it.

Over to the left of us was what we used to call the 'cawper', which was left over from the brickworks that had once been there. There were still great banks of stones and piles of dust which became, to us, some rough, barren cliffs and dirt tracks: perfect for bikes and some of the older lads even had motorbikes which were great fun when we could get a ride on the back. If we weren't climbing them, we were jumping off them, on foot or on bike.

We liked to try and come up with ingenious ways to make money. On the fields, there were some paddocks that belonged to a small riding school. And as soon as the coast was clear we'd get up there like a shot, buckets and shovels in hand, to collect up all the horse muck. We made a small fortune around the estate, selling manure to anyone who was growing vegetables.

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Though there were also a few occasions when we had to shell out for some new buckets when we were chased off by the owners of the fields.

Another great money-spinner was newspaper. Of course nobody really recycled then, so we took it upon ourselves to load up our trolleys with an estate's worth of newspapers, knocking on the doors like religious missionaries. As soon as we'd got as much as we could carry, we'd head up to the paperworks and make a few bob. We always had great fun jumping in the huge vats of paper – Health and Safety officers would go bananas at that these days. Actually, Dad would have back then, too, if he'd found out.

There was a tip opposite the fields, Sheepwash Lane Tip. Anything too big or cumbersome for collection by the bin men was dumped there and we always had a good rummage through to see if there were any overlooked jewels. Anything of any worth – copper wire, copper piping, lead, brass, metal of some description – we'd lug up to the scrap metal merchant, or the tat yard as we called it, in exchange for a few coins. I'll never forget the day that a lorry-load of Etch-A-Sketches appeared there. They were the toy of the moment and they were all at varying states of disrepair, but word soon got round and all the estate's kids were soon down at the tip, sifting through to find the best ones.

Thankfully, there were also safe, sensible places to play, too. In the middle of the estate, still there today, I'm pleased to say, is Farley Park. We enjoyed all-weather and grass tennis courts, a bowling green, a playground complete with swings, slides, seesaw, and what we called 'the witch's hat' which went round and round and in and out. But it was the football pitches that were most in demand.

Anyone who owned a football then was automatically popular. Actually, you didn't need to own a football, just a book of Green Shield stamps that could be exchanged for a football up at the stamp shop in Dudley. It was a chore trekking

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all the way up there, just for a football, but as soon as you were back, the game was on. Sometimes it felt like we were always running up to that shop in Dudley – balls were forever being impaled on the park railings or getting lost in the undergrowth.

My years at school certainly hold some memories. On reflection, it's a period where you can really see your own personality emerging, your character developing as a result of your experiences. It's also a time when things begin to change, and I remember my name changing from the age of five. As soon as I started school, I wasn't David any more. I became 'four eyes', 'bunk eyes', 'milk bottle eyes', the Milky Bar Kid, some other names that, even as early as five, I can't put into print.

Greets Green Junior and Infant School was situated on Whitgreave Street and just a stone's throw from our house. It was a cluster of Victorian buildings, originally opened in 1872, with large, high-ceilinged classrooms, and visible cast iron pipes running throughout which serviced the old, heavy radiators. Polished wooden floors gleamed underfoot. A few years after I left, the school closed, the buildings too old and tired to keep the kids warm, dry and safe, and a new school opened round the corner in its place, on top of the old cawper. Newtown Primary School officially opened in 1972.

My memory of my time in the infants is very vague. I can't remember starting school exactly, but I do remember we had plenty of toys and two rocking horses in the first class, the nursery class. The rocking horses were large and one was missing a head. I always ended up on that one, for some reason. Mrs Shooker taught us to read and write our first shaky words. Apparently I had real difficulty in writing in a straight line – purely because I couldn't see the lines on the paper.

My experiences at junior school are more vivid. I can remember all the teachers, starting with Miss Westwood, then Mrs Bissell, moving on to the old battleaxe, Miss White, and in the last year before senior school, Mr Grocut. The headmaster

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was a big, strong-looking man, Mr Summerton, and there was a rumour that he was an ex-regimental sergeant major. I don't know if this is true or not, but it certainly explained his appearance: tall and stocky, rather menacing with a handlebar moustache covering his mouth. He was as strict as a sergeant major, too, and quick with punishment when deserved. I had my hands slapped a few times and my legs more than once, but I'm sure I deserved it. One particular game we – or I – always got in trouble for was running the gauntlet to the toilet block outside in the playground. We were only supposed to go there when we needed to use the facilities, but kids being kids, this was the challenge to earn peer glory. I never saw Mr Summerton hanging around until it was too late.

As smaller infant kids we had watched the juniors playing their games in the playground. The most exciting was British Bulldog, and as soon as we reached junior school, we couldn't wait to get stuck in. The chosen one had to get from one end of the playground to the other without being rugby-tackled to the ground by the bunch of menacing ruffians in the middle. My first go at this game taught me a painful lesson. There were only six or so kids waiting to cross, one of which was one of the cocks of the school, the self-confident kind. Slowly, one by one, the six were picked off until the cock of the school remained. He found himself trapped against the wall at the midpoint of the playground. We encircled him like a pack of wolves. I can't remember his exact words but with one fist clenched, he dared us to tag him. Which one of us would dare? You guessed right. On impulse, I reached out and touched him. As a reward, I got a swift punch in the ribs before I found his fist perched under my chin. He snarled a few words of wisdom and I knew not to try my luck again.

My academic endeavours at Greets Green Junior School always took a back seat. It was never going to be the times tables, alphabet or geography lessons I was going to remember; it was always the sporting memories which would shine through. It

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was at Greets Green that I had my first swimming lessons, but it was the more social occasions at the baths on the weekends with the bigger kids that honed my skills – especially when one of them threw me in to the deep end and it was either sink or swim. Thankfully, I swam! I managed to get into the school swimming team and though I was never fast enough to win any races or daring enough at that age to perfect the art of diving, I found my place: style swimming, which suited my capabilities. To my astonishment, the first year I competed, I came second in the final.

Though the idea of diving scared the living daylights out of me, there was a special headmaster's badge for those of us who managed to dive from the high board. Of course, it was a coveted badge and we all wanted one, so I let my desire get the better of my nerves and put myself forward. It was just me, that week, going for that particular badge. My knees knocking and my legs trembling, I left the pool and climbed the ladder. I didn't know if they were, but I felt that everyone was watching me, waiting for me to wince and climb back down again. I was ten and not very tall, but nevertheless, the water looked a long way down. I glanced over at Mr Summerton, who was standing there with his self-satisfied grin peeking out from under his moustache, his formal suit including fob watch in the waistcoat pocket looking sharp and out of place at the poolside.

Everyone stopped what they were doing. They waited. They watched. Oh to hell with it, I thought, and dived off, arched like a swallow and headed slightly to the left of the pool – towards Mr Summerton, it seemed. I hit the water with an ungainly thump, stomach first.

I heard the roar of approval from my class-mates as the wind flew out of me. It was a spectacular belly flop and as I looked over at the headmaster to see whether it still qualified, I realised I had managed to soak him in the process, too. He didn't seem to mind, though. The next day, I was awarded my diving badge on the stage at school.

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I wasn't the best footballer in the world, despite the practice I'd get on the estate with the other kids, but I scraped into the school team which I felt to be quite an achievement. We all looked forward to Friday lunchtimes when the teachers put up the team sheet on the noticeboard. I played right-back in those days but I'm sure the rest of my team thought it should have been 'right back in the dressing room'. Still, me and my glasses were on the team. We weren't a great team, and in the last year of junior school, we only won one game all season.

I was a much more enthusiastic supporter of football. There was no doubt that I'd be a Baggies fan. My home-town team, my dad's team – I'm pretty sure I was wrapped in blue and white stripes the minute I arrived into the midwife's arms. I couldn't possibly name my favourite game or goal; there's been so many high points – and low, of course – over the years that it's impossible to pinpoint favourites. But I've had the pleasure of bumping into a few players during my lifetime. Occasionally, Baggies great Ken Hodgkisson would come and show off his skills to us kids rattling a football round the playing fields. Later, I had an unbelievable moment when Tony 'Bomber' Brown came to my warehouse business with his City Electrical Factors hat on – he was a rep and wanted to sell to me. Having one of my greatest idols standing at my office door really was something else. I'm not sure many fans of Premier League clubs these days would ever encounter anything remotely like it – David Beckham as an electrical sales rep? I don't think so, somehow.

In later years, Jeff and Lorraine Astle opened the Albion Lounge at our local, the Sow and Pigs, which was certainly a coup for the community. And latterly, I've enjoyed the camaraderie of a long-haul bike ride with Brendon Batson, shared a drink and a joke with Bob Taylor and Cyrille Regis, to mention just a few. That club means the world to me: it's certainly been my salvation when things haven't been easy. Through thick and thin, win or lose, the Baggies will always be my club.

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Of course, one of my best Baggies moments was that day in 1968, the summer before my last year at junior school. The 1968 FA Cup Final featured my beloved Baggies against Everton. My Uncle Ivan had managed to get a ticket to the final and was willing to take me to Wembley and blag me in. But Dad wouldn't let me go. 'What if you can't get David in?' Dad had said, over my head. 'Then you'll have to miss it, too.' Ivan hadn't considered that and he decided to go along without me. I didn't blame him, but it meant I had to make do with the telly and Dad.

But I'll still never forget that game. Sitting there as you do, nose right against the telly, willing the ball into the net, King Jeff Astle, our legendary striker – and one of few strikers who has actually scored in every round of the cup – hit the ball.

A rebound.

He hit it again with his left foot and it sailed sweetly into the back of the net. At this point, like many other houses in West Brom, our living room erupted. Dad was eating his dinner of faggots and peas. Dad and I yelled in unison. As Dad flung his arms upwards, his faggot flew off his fork and hit the ceiling. We'd won the cup! We beat Everton 1-0, and that faggot stain remained on the ceiling for nearly two years, until Dad got round to redecorating.

I fared much better at running than football. I was the second fastest kid in the school over 100 yards, always beaten by Malcolm Mills. On every school sports day he would get first, I'd get second. He was almost six inches taller than me, though, so I didn't worry about it too much. After all, that's what appealed to me most about running – it was an event for individuals, and I was always comfortable with the notion of competing against myself, trying to better and shatter my last time.

I looked forward to athletics at secondary school, with access to better facilities and more impressive athletes to beat. It wasn't far on the horizon.

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My final year at junior school was certainly memorable. There was my last junior school Christmas party, which was pop and sweets heaven until the walk home. It was dark and cold, and visibility was poor, even for someone perfectly sighted. Right opposite the school was an old brewery and here I'd usually cross the main road before cutting across the wasteland. But this time, as I neared the road, I saw a familiar hump lying in the middle. It was Bart, our family dog. He was a Heinz 57, a mongrel, but he was our mongrel. Something had hit him. I didn't know if he'd died on impact or been left to die, but by the time I reached him, I could see he was gone. I cried my bloody eyes out and ran home.

But there was something else memorable about my last year at junior school, in 1968. Given the significance of the moment, given its lasting, huge impact on my life, it's funny that I can't remember either the day or the date, only that I was ten and senior school was very much on the horizon. My annual eye test loomed on the calendar. This time, though, I wanted a change. I suppose I wanted a second opinion. I had come to learn – well, to admit to myself – that my eyesight wasn't getting any better. In fact, it seemed to be getting worse, no matter what glasses I wore. I had presumed, as young kids do, that Keeler's was the only opticians in the world; when it became apparent that there were other branches, other companies, I decided I would go elsewhere. I was getting to be a big boy now, you know. I wanted to assume some responsibility for myself. I suggested Stephenson's Opticians in Great Bridge and Mom agreed. I made my appointment and turned up by myself, punctual.

On opening the door and walking in, I fell straight over a chair leg. 'You have bad eyes, son,' the optician announced to the room with a smirk. Red-faced, I feigned a reciprocal smile. The optician sat me down and set to work. He didn't say anything out of the ordinary, he didn't seem shocked or saddened by what he saw. He didn't even give me a new prescription. 'Just hand that to your parents,' he said, pushing

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an envelope into my hand. ‘Things might be on the mend,’ I remember thinking, as I walked home.

Six weeks later, Mom and I were in the consultation room of the Birmingham Eye Hospital. The consultant came in and shut the door. I was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa; in layman’s terms, I was going blind. I asked the consultant how long I would have sight for but, until I wrote this book, I didn’t realise that at that moment Mom had shaken her head, indicating to the consultant that she didn’t want him to tell me the truth. I don’t remember his answer.

Still, to me, it didn’t make sense. I could still see. Mom and Dad didn’t seem to understand more, either, as they didn’t offer any more explanations – though they probably had more of an idea of what lay ahead for me because of Grandad Clee. And that was it. There was no crying or lamentations, no conversations in hushed tones behind closed doors. I was going blind, and that was that. Life would carry on, regardless.

The next day at school, though, I was asked where I had been. I told them I was going blind.

‘Wow!’

‘Bloody hell, Dave’s going blind!’

I became a school celebrity. No one else they knew had this complaint, I was a one-off. I enjoyed the attention. As I passed through the week, the news travelled through the school.

‘Dave, are you going blind?’ Kids stopped me in the corridors, at the playground gates, even kids I didn’t know that well. They looked into my eyes with a new curiosity. They didn’t pity me; they wanted to know more. But because I didn’t feel any different to what I had yesterday, the day before, last week, I can honestly say the implications and the understanding of my diagnosis hadn’t really sunk in.

And it wouldn’t for a long time to come, so life went on as normal for me and my glasses. After all, the transition to senior school seemed a much bigger, more significant event at that point in time.