

Chapter 1

The Beginning of My World

I was born in 1977, but the beginning of my world does not come back to me like a clean date written in a Bible or a neat family fact pinned to a page. It comes in flashes. Warm light caught on wallpaper. The orange breathing glow of the gas fire. The smell of soup thick in the room. A grown up voice carrying from somewhere I cannot quite see. The feeling of being very small inside a house that seemed enormous, safe, and busy with hidden life.

That first world was not only made of people and rooms. It was made of atmosphere. It was the hum of ordinary family life turned almost magical because I was at the age when everything still seemed to contain a second meaning. A lamp was never just a lamp. A cupboard was never just a cupboard. A corner of the room could become a fort, a cave, a kingdom, or a place to vanish into whenever the world felt too loud. Even warmth had a shape to it. Even quiet felt occupied.

We owned our house. That mattered, even if I did not understand it then. Looking back, I can feel the steadiness of it. The house on Stenhouse Drive was not borrowed and it was not temporary. It was ours. It had the feeling of being held together by family hands. My granddad had built things for it. My dad had altered things in it. My mum kept it going from morning to night. The house did not just shelter us. It carried our shape.

I was more of a home kid than people might have guessed if they only saw the outdoor side of me later. I loved the outdoors, the feeling of adventure, and the pull of wandering the edges of things to see what was down the road, through the gate, or across the grass. But I also loved home. I was happy there. The world outside was exciting because home existed. It was the base I carried with me.

I can still picture one of those very early scenes in the front garden on a sunny day. My mum had me sitting in the pram and I had a little guitar with me, a proper miniature one in my mind even if to everyone else it must have seemed tiny and daft. I used to sit there strumming away because I loved the sound it made. To me it sounded brilliant. To everybody walking past, neighbours, pals, family, whoever happened to be going by, it was probably more of a racket than music. But that was part of the fun of it. People would see me there in the sun, this wee boy in a pram hammering away at a guitar as if I was putting on a show for the whole street, and they found it funny and entertaining. Looking back, it feels like such a perfect early image of me. Happy at home, busy in my own head, fascinated by sound, and already turning ordinary family life into a kind of performance.

Food interested me far less than whatever else the day might be offering. I was very thin when I was little, not because there was ever anything wrong with me, but because I always seemed to have better things to do. Sitting still long enough to eat could feel like an interruption. The world around the house was too interesting. There were rooms to move through, gardens to explore, paths to follow, sounds to investigate, and little adventures waiting only a few steps away. I was so hyper and so easily pulled toward movement that proper meals must sometimes have felt to the

adults around me like an attempt to pin down something that naturally wanted to keep running.

My mum was clever about that in the small homely ways good mums often are. She tried to make eating feel a bit more like fun and less like a duty. I still remember tomato soup being made more exciting by giving us bread cut so that it spelled ET. That tiny bit of playfulness made the meal feel like part of the wider imaginative world I was already living in. It was never just soup. It was soup with a joke in it, soup with something to notice, something to smile at, something that met me halfway in my own child logic.

We were close as a family. That is one of the strongest truths I know about those years. My mum and dad got on well. My sister, though much older than me, was not some distant older child disappearing into her own life. She was woven into mine. We laughed. We teased. We played. The house was full of ordinary affection, the kind that often goes unnoticed while you are living inside it and only later reveals itself as one of the great gifts of a childhood.

That early eighties atmosphere sat strangely between warmth at home and a harder reality outside it. Britain was moving through recession, unemployment, and a raw edge in adult life that I would only understand properly years later. Inside the house, though, colour kept arriving through the television. Top of the Pops. The New Romantic look. Adam Ant with the warpaint and pirate prince swagger. OMD sounding futuristic and sad all at once. Even before I had the language for eras, I was already living inside one: wood panelled televisions, record sleeves, cassette tapes, fixed routines, and the first hints of home technology becoming more modern, while the wider country shifted uneasily through the early Thatcher years beyond our front door. That contrast matters to the whole book. Home was warm, close, and imaginative, but it was not floating free of history. The wider world was already pressing at the windows.

The wider world entered the house through the television in sharp little shocks. One of the earliest I remember is John Lennon. I would only have been three when he was killed in December 1980, but I remember the feeling of it, seeing his face on the news and understanding straight away from my mum and dad that this was not ordinary television. The room changed. Their faces changed. It was one of the first times I sensed that something happening far away, in another city and another country, could still step right into an ordinary house in Stenhouse and alter the weather inside it. I did not understand the politics or the full story then. I understood faces, voices, and the fact that grown ups I trusted were genuinely shaken.

I can still see parts of myself in the clothes of that very early time too. Brown sandals in summer. A really warm jumpsuit when the weather turned. Brown dungarees that seemed to hold the shape of childhood itself, practical, soft, and forever slightly rumpled from movement. And a Kermit the Frog T shirt that I loved because it felt bright, funny, and full of character. When I picture myself at that age, I do not see anything stylish in the adult sense. I see the comfort and colour of a wee boy being dressed with love, sent out into the day clean, warm, and ready for whatever wonder the house or garden might offer.

Around the street and among the slightly older girls, roller skates and leg warmers were a big part of the look. Shoes mattered too, even before I had the language for fashion properly. I remember Clarks shoes, and adidas Kick trainers

beginning to stand out in my mind as the sort of things that looked right. A wee bit later, when I was maybe six or seven, Bermuda shorts start to appear in memory too, though they belong more to the far edge of these early years than to the very beginning.

I also remember thinking with complete seriousness that I was never going to grow up. Other kids might go to nursery, but somehow I believed that rule did not apply to me. Childhood has that strange certainty to it sometimes. You do not half believe things. You believe them absolutely. In my head, nursery belonged to some later version of life that would simply never arrive.

I can even remember saying this out loud when I was still very young, maybe about five and not yet at nursery. Kelsey Porth had come down and I was insisting that I was never ever going to nursery and that I did not want to go. I can still feel the stubbornness of it, the child conviction that by saying something hard enough you might be able to stop time from moving. Of course time paid no attention to me, and when I reached the age I did go to nursery after all. But the feeling stayed in memory because it says so much about how I saw the world then. Home felt permanent. My own first world felt complete. I could not imagine why I would ever be sent out of it into some next stage.

That was why the small forms of movement around the house mattered so much to me. My yellow scooter and my blue and white tricycle were part of that early freedom. I rode them round and round the house, through the familiar little circuits of path and garden, and sometimes a wee bit out on the pavement too. Those loops probably looked tiny from an adult point of view, but to me they were a whole moving world. They gave me speed, repetition, and the pleasure of making my own route through the territory I knew best.

My older sister was almost like a second mum to me in some ways. Fourteen years older, she belonged partly to the grown up world and partly to mine. She looked after me, played with me, and knew how to turn my smallness into wonder. She used to lie on her back and raise her legs so I could balance on her feet with my arms stretched out, belly down, like Superman. She called it high skies. To me it felt like flying. The room would tilt and open and for a second I would believe I was above everything. Other times I would sit on her upturned feet and she would suddenly boost me into the air. It was probably only a small lift in real terms, but to a child it felt huge.

That was the scale of those early years. A foot off the ground could feel like leaving earth altogether.

When I think of the beginning of my world, I also think of the way I looked at things. I have always been a deep thinker and a daydreamer. Even as a boy I could get lost in staring. Shapes seemed to mean more than they first appeared to. A shadow could suggest another object. A sound could open a private world. Adults probably just thought I was sitting quietly, but inside I was often elsewhere, following some thought or image as far as it would go.

I liked being tough, but fair. Friendly, but not weak. Even that began early. On the one hand I was a child full of imagination, fascinated by insects, fish, records, lamps, and hidden corners. On the other hand I had a strong sense that you had to stand up straight in the world, not let people walk over you, and still remain decent. That balance would become more important as I grew older, but the beginnings of it were already there.

The area around us was quiet in a particular way. There were not crowds of children my exact age outside the door all day every day. Many of the people around us were older, settled, pensioners, couples without young families, people whose routines were already fixed. That meant I often played on my own, making my own excitement, filling my own time, wandering from one part of the house or garden to another as if I was exploring new country. Solitude never felt empty to me then. It felt charged. It gave imagination room.

Some of my earliest remembered feelings are not tied to big events at all. They are tied to textures. The polished wood of furniture under my hand. The slight roughness of carpet laid where carpet was not meant to be. The smooth top of the ottoman. The heat of the fire on my face while the rest of the room remained chilly. Those things are memory before story. They are the first evidence of being here.

If I had to describe the beginning of my world in one image, it would not be a street scene or a family portrait. It would be this: a small boy in a warm patch of light inside a house in Stenhouse, looking closely at everything and already beginning to turn the ordinary into something larger. That is where it starts. Not with drama. Not with announcement. Just with the slow gathering of a life. That same habit of looking closely, misreading, imagining, and then investing objects with meaning would echo right through the years that followed.

Before school, before proper adventure, before the names of streets and years and boys and trouble, there was simply this first enclosed universe. My mum moving through the house. My dad in his chair. My sister laughing. Records somewhere in the background. The feeling that every object had a hidden purpose waiting to be discovered.

That was the beginning of my world.