

# RESPECT

## Prologue

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*“For the world, I count it not an inn, but an hospital, and a place, not to live, but to die in..”*

Sir Thomas Browne. 1643

I'd never really considered what goes on inside my body. In fact, I had quite an aversion to the very thought of my insides. But now something was wrong and it wasn't pleasant.

My partner Simon and I were staying with Simon's Mum and Dad, Georgie and David. All three were at work, and I was left at their home, nursing a recent back injury, watching Neighbours on TV. It was Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> September 1990. I was 34. The Prime Minister was Margaret Thatcher, texting was not a thing yet. People were using landline phones and pagers and no-one had an idea what 'the internet' was and video recorders had become a common household item.

Gradually, over a short period of time I began to feel increasingly ill. At first, I felt a little sick and sweaty. But in a short amount of time, I felt progressively unwell. The feeling worsened quite rapidly. I couldn't keep still. I did all I could to try and make this horrible feeling go away. I sat down, stood up, lay down, walked around and even lit a

cigarette. Nothing helped. I suddenly got overwhelming pain across my chest, down my left arm and up my neck.

A short time later, Georgie, who only worked mornings, came home. She could see that I was unwell as she noticed I was pallid and pale. “Whatever’s the matter Richard?” she asked. “I feel awful.” I replied and told her what had happened so far. Georgie thought for a while. “I think you should go to hospital.” she said. “Come on, I’ll take you there.”

We arrived at the hospital in what seemed to me like an eternity. We reported to the reception desk and Georgie explained to the receptionist my problem. I was still in agony and feeling increasingly unwell as we took our seats. After what seemed like forever, probably just a short while, my name was called by a nurse: “Richard Hill?” she called, “Come this way”. We were taken into the Resuscitation Area and I was ushered into the first cubicle. The nurse asked me to take off my shirt and put on a hospital gown which, and I’ve never worked out why, fastened up at the back. I lay down and was immediately given an oxygen mask. I still had no idea what was happening to me so I asked the nurse. “You may be having a heart attack” she told me. ‘A heart attack?’ I thought, ‘I don’t believe it. How could I be at my age? They only happen to older people.’ “Can you give me something for the pain?” I asked, “It hurts like hell. Please give me something” I pleaded. The pain was getting worse. I felt as though someone was standing on my chest, occasionally stomping on it. What if it got even worse? Would it get worse – could it? What if I died? By now the idea of dying was becoming increasingly appealing. Maybe I was dying? Maybe this was it – the beginning of the end.

And what of death? Hitherto I’d considered it as a full stop, with nothing beyond. Like having an anaesthetic but without waking up again. But now I was seriously considering the idea of an afterlife – a heaven and hell perhaps. Maybe, if there was an afterlife, there may be a God? I considered saying a prayer. Actually, when I was on my own, I did pray. I prayed hard, very hard and out loud (in a whisper). I don’t think I was afraid of death – was I?

A short time later, another nurse came in. “My name’s Karen,” she introduced herself, “I’m just going to put a needle in your arm so we can take blood samples and give you something for the pain.”

At this point Georgie said, “I’ll go home and wait for Simon. He might be home soon.” She gave me a kiss, “I’ll see you later.”, and left

Karen drew up a syringe with liquid out of a phial. "This is diamorphine. It will really help with the pain" she said. "I hope so" I replied "I'm in agony." She said "It may make you feel a little woozy and lightheaded." As the diamorphine went in, it made my arm warm. I began to feel quite strange. A pleasant sensation came over me and spread up my arm and over my body and into my brain, I felt elated, ecstatic and euphoric all at the same time. I felt an intense pleasure, better than anything I'd ever experienced before. It became like a warm glow, all over, with a tingling sensation in my hands and brain. My vision was also affected. Everything looked wavy as if viewing the ward through water. But I felt a calmness and a floating sensation.

I began thinking of the process at the time of death, trying to anticipate what it would be like. Would I know, or realise, in advance, that death was imminent say in the next few minutes. Or would it happen, just like that? I thought as though I was floating through a stained-glass corridor beyond space and time to some unknown destination. Would it be anything like the Bible's definition of heaven; a place of peace, love, and community where everything operates according to God's will? Was it simply abstract imagining? What or who is God? Was 'God in his heaven?'

Yet I was in another place, looking down on myself. I felt so good. The pain was much abated and I felt a warm glow over my whole body. I'm told that diamorphine has a similar effect to that of heroin, making you feel lightheaded, elated, high and overjoyed.

Karen returned. "How are we doing?" she asked. "I'm scared," I told her, "Am I going to die?" She tidied up my bedclothes. "I shouldn't think so," she replied, "As long as you do as you're told."

I must have fallen asleep in my diamorphine induced haze because the next thing I remember is Georgie and Simon standing by my bed. "How do you feel now?" asked Georgie. "I feel better than I did." I replied. "Mum said they'd given you some funny juice." said Simon and added with a grin on his face. "Can I have some?"

I was still under the influence of the wonder drug, diamorphine. It had settled down a bit but I still felt 'high'. I still had the feeling of ecstasy. The pain had subsided some and was now a sharp but tolerable ache. I was still having hallucinations but now they were less vivid than before. Gone had been the feeling of impending death and I felt, as the Pink Floyd song went: 'comfortably numb'. For some unconnected reason I thought back to my childhood in that little Welsh village where I lived from when I was just a few days old until I was 11. They were happy days.

What I didn't realise was that heart disease would become a major part of my life. I went on to have a further three heart attacks and two major open-heart operations.

But it hasn't got me yet. I'm still here.