





The immense value within the attribute of attempting to never take you too seriously is something that my horrific experience of suffering a severe Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) has confirmed. It is what it is and now I wish to invest much of my time on fun, friendship and fairness.



This is inspired by Carrie and Chels – always with me  
every step of the way – eternal love.



Jack Martindale

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BATTLING A BRAIN  
INJURY

THE LIFE THAT JACK BUILT

AUSTIN MACAULEY  
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## Preface

The process of writing my own subjective recollection of having a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) has been therapeutically cathartic. It is refreshing to have provided an existential account of my experience having a Brain Injury. There is a real paradox in talking about my accident; that of me being both immensely unlucky for it to have occurred yet terribly fortunate in the way that I have progressed since the first of January 2010. I've always loathed the ineptitude of the term, but I think for once, I can actually be justified in saying that my life was literally turned upside down. What has been crucial for me is learning to re-embrace life and overcome any feelings of isolation; as it is all too easy for me to feel ostracised in there being nobody who can fully comprehend my experience. A Brain Injury hardly goes towards the formation of any stereotypical pub conversation.

Seeming overindulgent in writing this is something that I am desperately trying to avoid. This process has been incredibly cleansing for me, as I feel that I have now fully reclaimed the ability for it to be completely my choice who I divulge my accident to. Another paradox in talking about my Brain Injury is it being a fantastic thing that I don't any longer feel an obligation to share my Brain Injury with new acquaintances, yet I can feel slight detachment from so many people being completely oblivious. Communication of my experience is now my optimum goal.

I am dramatically uncomfortable in potentially profiting from the horrific tragedy that I suffered. Five of us were injured by being involuntary struck by a passing car on the roadside— two of whom lost their lives. In spite of this, it has become increasingly clear that many of the gripes and difficulties that I've experienced are best described as things to

which we can all relate; mine are only in an over exaggerated manner. My goal is for my unique experience of having a Brain Injury to be something that is worth sharing for mutual benefit.

Never thinking that worse cannot happen is perhaps the most invaluable lesson that I've learned; carpe diem. The last thing that I ever want to sound at all is self-righteous in anything that anything my experience may have seemed to have taught me. Being flexible about various life-paths occurring is a thing that I would always recommend.

## **1- All I really want To Do**

Providing a worthy backdrop for relating the experience of suffering a Brian injury has not been easy. In short, (without wanting to sound more pompous than usual) it can be said that prior to my injury a good life was certainly had and has mercifully now returned. Defining yourself and your chosen lifestyle is hardly an easy task. With gratitude, it is possible to say that I certainly enjoyed living life; like I say, this fulfilment has thankfully come back to me. Some people unnecessarily never find it and probably never will.

Without wishing to sound like I am boosting my own esteem, I suppose that a 21<sup>st</sup>-century ‘Likely Lad’ is a description that I would have liked for myself. This said, ‘laddish’ is certainly not something that I ever at all was, but I liked to have a fun time. To me, nothing in life trumps a great party; throwing your own really is the cherry on the cake.

There really is no excuse for not attempting to enjoy life in the best possible way. In an outlandish way, this discourse has some elements parallel to a eulogy here. The major difference being that I clearly never died, so am under no obligation to talk of any life had by me using only hindsight. It seems sensible to live life with some plans that can be devised with foresight, but as I’ve learned the hard way, you can only really ever control the present situation to any extent. At times, giving too much thought to the future can only diminish your enjoyment of the moments that you find yourself experiencing. Attempting to live at a fair pace and not dying too young had always worked pretty well for me up until this point. The accident that I suffered caused me to inadvertently plummet from a high perch.

Disastrously I was hit by a car on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010. The first term of my third year of university had just been completed and I was on track to earn a respectable degree over that summer. There is the contradiction of it being devastating

that I inadvertently had to go through so much grief, although there was some relief that many of life's rites of passage had already been attained which relieves pressure.

Being struck by a car was less than 2 months after enjoying a fantastic 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday Party that I couldn't have imagined being more fun for me. (People leaving at dawn on a Tuesday after apologising for thinking that they have overstayed their welcome are always positive signs of a party's success!) Whatever petty gripes that may have been entertained by me are irrelevant in the grand scheme of things; I certainly knew how to enjoy myself. Dividing time between the University of York and a north-London life at home went down well with me.

Overall life had just gotten better for me since the tumultuous teen years had been passed. Never had I had (or indeed really been avidly in search of) a definitive idea of where my life would take me and this was something which had always seemed to afford me freedom. In the final year of my degree it felt as though you could be increasingly sure who would be your friends for life; this has even more so being confirmed to me now. There were very occasional times when envy was something that I had for people that could be definitive about what vocational path they would take. This didn't generally ever seem to matter a great deal to me most of the time, as I was just aiming to use my degree to get onto some sort of rewarding career. (It was lovely to be able to enjoy this innocence of youth...) Travelling had always been an ultimate pleasure of mine, so amalgamating this with fending for my existence had always appeared close to perfect.

Happy is certainly something that I was at the end of 2009 and although being confronted with death was not anticipated for many generations, I'd be satisfied to have concluded that I'd made my life eventful. On an academic and personal level, life for me was going pretty well. How circumstances can alter so rapidly.

In the early morning of New Year's Day 2010 my house door received a greeting which my dad can only describe as containing the "worst of worse" news for a parent. It was

uniformly divulged by two police officers, that I was within the Royal London Hospital after having been hit by a car. Absolutely no further information was given; I can't even begin to imagine how this must feel. Circumstances were left most uncertain by the end of the communication. Whether I was in a critical condition or had merely broken a couple of bones was not at all clear. Of course things are perhaps all too easily said about being related circumstances once you have been given details of the situation, but I think my family could have been better prepared; not that there is really any correct way to relate tragic news. Dad, Mum and younger sister could then welcome in a New Year's Day by trudging across London in anticipation of learning what had happened to me. My parents assumed that the accident had occurred whilst I was in town, rather than somewhere within closer proximity to my home. Their journey was held up around Palmers Green, as a result of some serious accident, though of course the three were clueless that I was in any way connected with this cataclysm. With this in mind though, it sounds pretty credible of my mum to have said that one of her two greatest fears was confirmed upon entering the hospital. These dreads included me having being paralysed or having received a Brain Injury. The latter was soon established. An uncomfortable waiting game immediately began.

## 2- Here to Stay

Luckily I survived a catastrophic Brain Injury, albeit with severe brain damage. I was in a coma for nigh on 3 full months. This coma was by no means induced; waking up just never occurred throughout this period. As mentioned, two other friends died in consequence of the Road Traffic Accident and two others were also injured. I had the duality of tremendous grief on simultaneous accounts; both for me and my intrinsically close friends.

To use a ridiculously colloquial figure of speech in real terms, my life really had been lain out before me when I and my 4 friends were run into. No matter how much more time elapses, it will always strike me as rather dumbfounding as to how one vehicle managed to run into 5 completely disconnected passers-by on the pavement. As two lost their lives, nothing at all solely positive can ever be extracted from this upsetting ordeal. Being asked to feel grateful that worse didn't happen to me is important to recognise, though it can also be seen as selfish on account that two young ladies died.

Brain Injury still suffers an incredibly negative stigma. That being overturned would be a more than welcome relief. The intention now is to raise the profile of Brain Injury, as with rapid advancements in medical technology it is likely to be witnessed more commonly. The term would still almost make me shudder if I were not accustomed at dealing first-hand with the reality of it. I too was ignorant regarding what a Brain Injury actually encompasses. To use an egocentric cluster-of three, it can be said that prior to having a Brain Injury I was not unintelligent, unpopular or ugly. I don't think that I am any of these things now. Pretentiously it can be said alliteratively that right from coming around from my coma, my essential essence remained intact. Fortunately, despite the severity of my injury, I can still be articulate. A duty is something that I feel is now had by me to speak on behalf of

the litany of Brain Injury victims, not able to currently express their thoughts at all coherently. I did face, like many other Brain Injury victims the double-whammy of having to recover from both physical and cognitive deficiencies.

The experience of initially recovering from a Brain Injury after having spent months in a coma really was surrealism to the extreme. I doubt whether many other people can vividly recollect contemplating being dead. I did, as it was seemingly the only viable explanation to me after being unconscious for what felt like an eternity.

Gravely poorly is something that I most certainly was. Thanks and gratitude cannot be overly-exaggerated on my part towards a certain surgeon in particular, Simon Holmes. The facial-reconstructive surgery he performed on my face, which exceeded over 30 separate pieces of titanium being permanently inserted, restored my face to how it looked previously. This is a remarkable feat that took place within the earliest days of this decade. There really is no time to waste upon deciding whether it is worthy to do this sort of surgical procedure. There was apparently much doubtful speculation from other hospital workers upon whether this was worthy surgery to undertake due to the chances of me coming around in any way to appreciate it being slim. Simon had the wisdom to realise that my recovery would be much harder from a physical and mental perspective if I continued to resemble Quasimodo. Unlike physicality, acknowledging any mental impairment is never an easy task without being confronted with a different appearance than you recognise. The swelling was so intense that my face looked vaguely reminiscent of a hamster's in structure for the remainder of 2010. Like many things, it is only upon recovering that you can really understand just how dishevelled everything was.

My Brain Injury is of the diffuse variety. I still go by an analogy voiced by a Nurse at the Royal London (the original hospital that I was stationed in between January and late April 2010) that a damaged Brain is akin to an office filing cabinet being turned upside down and its contents jumbled and scattered. The Brain, like those contents, needs to be

reorganised, re-filed and rewired in the best way possible. It is no simple or straightforward task. Ending-up in a handicapped state, whilst experiencing an influx of incredibly new information being related to you puts your mind into shutdown. This is all too carelessly overlooked by many practitioners of medicine. At least I felt so anyway.

The precise location that resulted in the coma I was in after I succeeded being mown down, was by junction A406, just along from the Great Cambridge roundabout. This was after having travelled from spending New Year's 2010 festivities at the Brick House, a Club in Brick Lane, East London. I was with the same four close, tight-knit and old friends I had started the evening with – two boys and two girls. We had not had too much to drink at the Club because of the comparatively extortionate prices; we were all students after all. It was our intention to continue the celebration at one of the friend's house. Having walked from Arnos Grove Underground Station on the Piccadilly Line, we had reached Palmers Green when, circa 5 o'clock in the morning we were struck by a fast-moving car. This had mounted the pavement we were walking along as innocent pedestrians.

The driver as it transpires principally had the motive of guaranteeing that their car was not too badly damaged and consequentially evading any blame. I'm thankful that I have absolutely no recollection of this dismal period as I was momentarily left unconscious. The one remaining fully conscious friend dialled 999, for which I am eternally grateful for and have heartfelt sorrow that he had to witness this harrowing scene. Now I can't afford to even contemplate the likelihood of him not having been able to have called an ambulance when he did; every moment is precious when you're at death's door. Having heard of myself described as, "slender young man in a green puffer-jacket repetitively yelping." transports me straight to feeling that I'm in the third-person. Disturbed is how you feel at hearing a dramatic situation that you were part of described, whilst you were completely alienated from this entire process. Absolute



carnage is probably the most accurate way to describe the scene of the accident.

I spent my 22<sup>nd</sup> year in hospitals and rehabilitative institutions. It was hardly the key to the door that I ever anticipated.

The time that I now recall from the Royal London was surrealism to the superlative. A bolt was soon inserted through my skull upon admittance to measure the pressure within my brain. Glad that I was completely unconscious at this point, as it makes me wince just thinking about it. Vague recollections from the Royal London that I have are just of a fantastic team of staff at the Harrison Ward at the Hospital. A considerable time was predictably taken by me, in terms of conceptualising the state that I had found myself in. It was only after coming to the Regional Neurological Rehabilitation Unit (RNRU) within the Homerton Hospital, in Hackney when things really started to gravitate truly for me. Up until that point, it had all just seemed nonsensical to the extreme. Recollections are reminiscent to having a nightmare. The difference between this and the standard deep-sleep, clearly being that you're not able to suddenly awake and put things back to normal.

This RNRU is where I was hospitalised between late April and early September 2010. The Homerton highlights to me how coming around from a coma is incredibly dissimilar to Hollywood's perception, where you suddenly just wake up and things soon go back to normal. (I assume normally after some revelation) In a nutshell, I can definitively say that I can only recount my entire experience as like something that only ever happens to OTHER people. Going back to January 2010, I scored a meagre 3 on the Glasgow Coma Index, which is the lowest score at which you can get and remain alive. I'm quite unsure what scoring two yet being dead means- an "active-dead" is not an expression with which I'm familiar!

Fortunately my parents, relatives and several medical staff kept a chronological diary of me coming out of a coma. It is incredible to read now. Amongst several little gems including me identifying photographs of images in French and saying "but you're too young to be my parents". (False flattery wasn't

my aim here) Recollections of this period really reveal how far I had to go with my cognitive recovery. This was certainly not recognised by me at the time; I could only laugh when it was told to me that whilst an aunt was visiting my bedside at the Royal London: “these people are stupid, asking me to name what bloody dog is.” To me, this seems to relate more to the circumstances of the situation that I found myself in, than any reduced mental capacity I may have had.

Identifying objects in French showed to some observers some albeit rather skewed logic still existed within me; a French language lesson would indeed have been my most recent recollection of being requested to name and identify objects. Understandable, I hope it is that could not accurately interpret the situation I had landed myself in. There was no context for me to use. I couldn't definitively say whether I was 10 or 100 years old.

The RNRU in Hackney was the optimum institution for me to go through this punitive experience. I think that overall it is a tale of two halves, where slow and steady wins the race. The practise really has illustrated the benefits of clichés and metaphors to me. On the one hand, there existed brilliant nurses and therapists who really gave invaluable deserved credit to their profession. On the other side there existed quite a few who have clearly placed themselves in the wrong vocation; I find this mystifying that they remain in the same ill-suited profession. You can but pity these uncouthly flawed individuals. Here there is the parable of me feeling at times like the innocent inmate of a prison. This does not tie in under any ethical philosophy of the criminal law that I'm familiar with. Any concerns that were entertained by me about my treatment could be rapidly dismissed on the grounds that I had endured a substantial Brain Injury. A doctor accurately informed my parents within the earliest days of being within the Royal London that as a pretty academic person, my recovery would be even harder, as I'd had more to lose.

Pre-morbid abilities are all too rapidly dismissed by professionals when relating anything to you. It was an incredibly alien situation for me, as fortunately I'd always

been lucky in falling within the top ability grouping scholastically. There was a real reversal of fortune for me, as a considerable quantity of knowledgeable things had always seemed to go my way. If you believe in reincarnation, perhaps I was being punished for something in a previous life. From my perspective, this viewpoint is just too absurd in itself to ever entertain. What I most hated, was surrendering any privileges that I had earned to disconnected agents.

It's rather feeble that some individuals appeared to get a power trip out of instructing injured people. There existed wonderful medical staff based within the Homerton, though unfortunately human nature seems to overlook this when faced by crisis. Incredibly compromised is something that I certainly felt in the RNRU, which I unfortunately found to be an institution geared towards my purgative experience. Regardless of whether there was any necessity in doing so, being constantly analysed felt grossly invasive. Even closest relatives were no exception to this, given the amount of data on my cognition making matter of declarations suggesting things that did not sit well was not comfortable. It being concluded that you must have some lack of interpretation and acknowledgement of things that you have suffered is soul-destroying.

Part of my responses would have been down to cognitive confusion, although I maintain that the other side of it did merely due to part of me psychologically just not wanting to confront the bleak reality that I had found myself seemingly trapped within.

Incredibly insulting is how it can feel being required to display that I was aware of what had inflicted me. Communication difficulties in terms of my voice being recognisable is something that I clearly had and for a motor-mouth, this is far from easy. One thing that I tried to steer clear of concerning loving to voice opinions (in context, hopefully) was ranting about various things. Not only is ranting monotonous to be heard by any of the surrounding company, but from experience of listening to them I can conclude that they're often loaded with contradictions.

False niceness is something to which I incredibly object, especially when it is at times assumed that you are oblivious to what professionals are doing. Of course there are things which it is not always beneficial or effective for medics to communicate, but there is never an excuse to me to allow the ill to feel excluded. Living within this nightmare is something that I was never going to accept.

Having a Brain Injury gives countless the excuse to jeopardise any chance of you ever feeling like an equal. Many seem to feel that talking to someone with a Brain Injury gives them a license to say whatever they like as they cannot under any circumstance be held to account.