

Dawn at midnight.

It's a strange title isn't it? Well, it happened... and this how and why...

It was the summer of 1984 and I was about fourteen years old. I was a member of the St. John Ambulance Brigade (kind of like the scouts, but for children interested in first aid) and we went on camp to Teignmouth, Devon. There were lots of ambulance units there from across the country with children from eleven to sixteen, plus the adult leaders.

We arrived on the Saturday and put our tents up. The boys were on the left side of the field and the girls were on the right. At the bottom of the camp were the adults' tents, the marquee and cooking tent. Right in the centre of the camp was a huge flagpole with the St. John Ambulance flag raised up high. As it was only a temporary flagpole, it had three long wires attached to it about half way up which were pegged into the ground (kind of like the three corners of a triangle). These wires kept it from falling over but they were quite long and were definitely a trip hazard!

After a couple of days sussing people out, I got quite friendly with a group from the West Midlands - in particular, a girl. She was the same age as me and seemed to enjoy the same things as I did. She was quite pretty too.

Anyway, the other lads in my group had noticed that I liked this girl and the teasing started. Then the comments and silly songs, followed by the shove from behind when she walked past me - a way of trying to 'push us together'.

On the fourth night, it happened... The dare! We all sat together in the marquee after hot chocolate and biscuits; we said our good nights and headed to our tents. Staying awake was hard for me, but the other five lads in my tent kept me occupied until midnight. Midnight arrived and I slowly lifted the side of the tent, crept to the corner where I was out of view and peered into the darkness, waiting for my eyes to adjust to what little light the moon was giving off.

When I felt that the coast was clear and with much encouragement from the other five conspirators, I ran across the field to Dawn's tent! This was strictly not allowed and highly unusual for me. I never ever broke the rules,

but this dare seemed worth it. And to be honest, breaking the rules for once excited me. With my mind blurred with excitement, I forgot about the flagpole wires. 'Twang' one went as I hit it and I fell headfirst and facedown on the grass. One of those prickly little plants bit my face but I picked myself up and carried on. I could hear the boys laughing at me from behind and the girls squealing in front of me. This spurred me on.

I kept running and threw myself into the girl's tent. I was covered in grass stains and had a sore ankle, but it was worth it. We feasted on sweets and drinks and laughed about my journey across the field. After what seemed to be hours, I ran back to my tent. Once there, I told the others about my visitation. After telling them everything, they asked me to go again. I refused, but they insisted, telling me that the girls wouldn't be expecting me and that I would scare them by popping my head through the tent flaps. After much persuasion, stupidly, I agreed.

Again, I lifted the side of the tent, checked to see if the coast was clear... and ran. It was at the moment that someone whistled a signal and beams of torch light from several tents shone on me, illuminating me for the world to see. I was the 'Incredible Illuminated Imbecile', darting around like a headless chicken across a field. People were laughing loudly as I ran. Then, out of the darkness I heard it...

"Oi, you!" yelled the voice. "Come here, now!" It was the camp leader and he wasn't happy. To make things worse, more people had woken up and shone their torches to see what was happening. In all the excitement, the camp leader's dog (an Old English Sheep dog - the one from the Dulux paint advert) came running at me. He wasn't vicious. I was more terrified of his breath or being slobbered to death than being bitten. It was at that moment that I decided what to do. I didn't stop and go to the camp leader. No. Completely out of character, and with a heart full of sheer delight, I ran.

The dog thought that this was some kind of game. He was gaining on me. Well, he would, wouldn't he? He had four legs and only had two. So I decided to make the most of it. 'I was going to be in trouble for the first time ever,' I thought to myself, 'So I might as well do it in style.'

So, first, I headed for my tent and the traitors within. The dog followed, trashing the place, jumping all over the other boys and covering the place with muddy pawprints and drool. I escaped out the back and headed for Dawn's tent. The same fate awaited the girls once the dog had arrived.

The camp was now in utter uproar. Children were laughing and screaming, adults yelling, a dog barking and the Incredible Illuminated Imbecile still running from tent to tent.

The adults then had the idea of trying to encircle me to stop my rampage, so remembering my earlier mistake and using it to my advantage, I headed for the flagpole. It's strange how the sound of the 'TWANG' still remains with me after all these years, but needless to say a couple the adults fell to the ground holding their ankles and moaning in pain. The dog must have thought that this was a new game and decided to jump on the adults that were now on the ground, licking them furiously.

In the madness, I still kept running, this time towards the kitchen tent. And that's where my adventure ended. The dog was now wild with excitement and followed me with a renewed energy. He entered the tent through the one and only doorway and started chasing me. As I jumped, he jumped. As I knocked something over, he trampled it into the ground, the more I darted around the more excited he got, covering the entire supply of camp food in 'splotter'. By this time, the adults had arrived, and it was over. The dog was dragged off in one direction and I was dragged off in another. The torchlights were still on me as I disappeared into the camp leader's tent and people cheered and clapped. I was the hero of the hour, a camp legend. I was also on kitchen duty for the whole of the next day. The next day, I did the walk of shame once my parents had arrived to collect me and take me home.

Many years later I bumped into Dawn in the Oxford Corner Café, Weston-Super-Mare. We recognised each other immediately.... how we laughed and laughed.