

NO **BIG** DEAL

Frank is no longer the little boy who years ago won a teddy bear called Northwick in a raffle at a Nystagmus Network meeting. In fact, the memory of Northwick is now barely a flicker in his teenage eye ...

Frank lay back on his bed, aimed and pressed the remote, turned up the volume and waited. Seventeen seconds later -- Frank was timing the response -- an angry rapping hit his bedroom door and his mother was giving him the usual sermon: turn down the volume, tidy your room and get a life. He waved the remote vaguely and shaved a decibel off the speaker output.

Having made the almost pointless, but nonetheless necessary, parental protest, Frank's mother scowled, turned on her heel and stamped downstairs, calling over her shoulder: "And don't think you'll be able to lie around doing nothing when you start college! You won't have me to do everything for you from next week."

Bliss, thought Frank. Freedom. No more nagging. He couldn't believe he'd put up with the last few years at home being treated like a child instead of an adult. He'd chosen a college a good day's journey from home. Not for him weekend trips home or unexpected visits from parents. Next week he'd be putting his childhood firmly behind him.

Lying on his bed, absentmindedly turning the volume higher, it crossed Frank's mind that he could make a start now. Hidden away in the big double cupboard and corners of his room were bits and pieces from years ago, from a time he now felt was very distant, almost like a different him.

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He leapt off the bed, pulled open the cupboard doors and began peeling back the years, past his teens and beyond to his earliest memories. Clothes it was impossible to imagine he'd ever worn were thrown in a heap on the floor. Passing fads -- a stamp collection, yellowing comics, even his Pokemon cards -- were shovelled aside.

Face to face

Northwick sat looking at him from the very back of the cupboard. A shirt had fallen off a coat hanger and was draped over one arm of the large bear. His glasses sat skewwhiff on his face. Frank swept away the last few items and pulled the shirt off the bear.



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He stared at the soft toy for a minute without moving. Even now, when Frank was far from being a little boy, Northwick looked enormous. The teenager lifted the bear carefully out and sat him on the floor in the sunlight. He wiped away some dust, remembering as he did so the first time he had set eyes on the bear.

Set eyes on: that's an odd choice of words, thought Frank. He still couldn't set or fix his eyes on things like other people could. Most of the time he didn't give it much thought now. Just like he hadn't when he'd won the bear in that raffle ... how many years ago was it? He hadn't even started school.

Memory lane

Back then Frank had no idea how differently he saw the world compared with most other people. It was only after Northwick arrived that he began to wonder. And gradually the problems had started. Not being able to see things on the blackboard. Not being able to see the television in the classroom. Always last to be chosen for the football team.

The feeling of being different too. The way the teachers treated him. Some were kind, but others had been horrible. They clearly hadn't understood that the way he saw the world meant he struggled with tasks others found easy. And it had been so embarrassing when he found out his parents had been to school to talk about his eyes.

There had been some teasing, but not much. Some kids had a much rougher time, and for really stupid things they could easily change, like a haircut or clothes. Eventually, often by accident, Frank learnt to hide the fact he couldn't see very well. Sometimes his parents had come up with good ideas. His uncle, who also had nystagmus, had been a help on occasion too.

But it was hard to believe it had been such a big deal to his parents. He'd overheard them talking once. Heard his mother say she'd willingly swap her eyes for his if it meant he could see properly. He had to admit there had been some bad times. Getting lost on the beach as a child, realising he couldn't see as far as most people and forever tripping over.

Second thoughts

Rediscovering Northwick after all these years made Frank think about his eyes in ways he never had before. Perhaps things hadn't always been as easy as he liked to think, especially not for his parents. After all, when he was very young, the doctors had told them he might be blind. He was registered sight impaired, but he didn't tell many people that.

He didn't like the fact that the word "disabled" had been mentioned several times when he'd been applying for college places. Frank didn't consider himself disabled, but he had started to think maybe he wouldn't find things so easy when he left home.

Worrying about things wasn't going to help, though. That was one lesson he had learnt. He'd got this far in life. Yes, there had been challenges and upsets, but nothing that actually stopped him from doing what he wanted to do. He couldn't drive, but then many of his friends were choosing not to drive -- and it wasn't the end of the world.

Frank got up, fetched some bin liners and began shoving his childhood memories in bags ready for charity shops. Finally, only Northwick was left on the bedroom floor. He picked the bear up, slapped some more dust off him and put him carefully back in the cupboard.

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