



Nottingham is a city in central England where legends meet modern life. Famed as the home of Robin Hood, its ancient castle watches over a bustling centre filled with shops, cafés, and various markets. Diverse and lively, its people reflect a rich mix of cultures and traditions. Trams hum past historic pubs and vibrant music venues, while green parks offer quiet moments away from the city's steady pulse. This is where Patrick Nelson grew up.

He left school at sixteen with a reasonable set of GCSE results, but no real clue as to how they might serve him. Teachers had generally regarded him as “quietly capable,” and he had no problem mixing with his school peers, though his athleticism had not yet been recognised, even by himself.

In the days following the end of his school career, however, a change occurred. One evening, a restless Patrick randomly decided to don his shorts and trainers and venture out for a jog. What then surprised him was the distance he could run without becoming unduly fatigued. Maybe it was worth doing again, Patrick decided. And as the weeks ensued ... again, again and again. Two years later, he had run five half-marathons, each one faster than the previous.

Following his school career, Patrick attended a local college to pursue a course in media studies. The fact that he had grown to enjoy films and much of what they involved was a major influence on his choice of studies. He liked working with ideas, images, and stories. His tutors were encouraging, his classmates relatively driven, and all was well. His newfound athletic prowess had also contributed to Patrick becoming a more confident young person.

College discussions often wandered from issue to issue, and he appreciated how no one rushed to conclusions. There was space to think. To wonder. And maybe, most important of all, he was surrounded by people who appreciated his talents and potential. Patrick felt like something in his life was beginning, but he did not yet understand what shape it would take, or where it might lead.

At the age of eighteen, Patrick had successfully completed his college course, and the real world loomed. He had no grand ambitions, just a vague sense that he should be doing something in line with his talents and qualifications.

When the internet revealed a local apprenticeship scheme for aspiring web developers, Patrick made an application, probably more out of hope than expectation. The salary was modest, but the structure, half college, half job placement, felt like a foothold.

He was accepted and soon found himself splitting his time between a small classroom and the open-plan office of a Nottingham tech startup. It was at the latter venue that Patrick first met Ryan.

Loud and dismissive, Ryan was an apprentice who acted as though he was in overall charge of the business. A smirk was usually his reaction to someone who tried to teach him something. Taking perverse pride in ignoring the chain of command, he demonstrated proficiency in turning constructive feedback into an argument.

Patrick was more concerned with doing this work than becoming involved in what he perceived as petty disagreements. He was a conscientious learner who even took notes during meetings, unlike his colleagues.

Andy Larkins, the lead developer, was impressed by Patrick's positivity, but he also seemed too busy diffusing issues induced by Ryan to give Patrick's work more than minimal positive acknowledgement. Patrick became aware that, for whatever reason, there appeared to be a distinct lack of time investment in his training.

As time passed, he became increasingly aware that the working world was about more than acquired skills and effort. It was also very much about people and their faults, foibles, attitudes and strengths.

There are times in life which are pivotal and may be reflected upon for many years thereafter.

Such a moment occurred when, on one dismal morning, the managing director made a rare appearance and summoned the entire workforce to the large main office.

He announced that some difficult business decisions had become necessary. In effect, the company was about to downsize, with many roles being cut, including all apprenticeships.

After two-and-a-half years of conscientious and dedicated service, it was all over for Patrick. He packed his desk in silence, with the hum of fluorescent lights being the only sound. Ryan was quick to leave the office, muttering something about bigger things on the horizon.

The next six months were ones of uncertainty for Patrick. He jogged most mornings and applied for every office job he thought might match his work ethic and abilities. Interviews were, however, rare, and job offers non-existent.

With encouragement from his mother, Patrick eventually found a part-time kitchen assistant position at a local care home. It wasn't glamorous, but it was nearby, quiet enough to manage, and offered a structured routine, something he hoped might help bring some order to his restless mind. He accepted the job optimistically.

At his new workplace, Patrick was assigned to work in a small, tiled room, with its only window being a porthole-style pane in a door, through which could be seen staff colleagues bustling past, with chefs shouting over clattering pans.

Patrick's workroom was rather oppressive, the main sounds being the hiss of the pot-washer and the occasional squeak of his wet trainers on the floor covering. After years of being ignored and spoken over by Ryan and others at his previous job, the quietness did, however, grant him an atmosphere within which to breathe and think.

But the isolation could still weigh on him; the absence of conversation and the room's stifling atmosphere sometimes made solitude feel hard to bear.

A couple of years passed with no change in Patrick's working environment. There was, however, something personal that was occurring. Patrick started talking to himself. Just short murmurs at first, a self-reminder to stack the trays properly, or rinse the big pans before loading. But then came the longer conversations. Full dialogues. One voice hopeful, the other harsh.

He began to wonder why he was left alone in that room. Why had they put him there? He couldn't shake the idea that something, someone, was watching, judging, testing him.

One particularly cold day, he dropped a heavy saucepan. The crash echoed like a gunshot. He fell to his knees, trembling, and started muttering again. Words spilled from him faster than he could control. He needed to call his mother to collect him from work. He would never return.

Patrick was becoming increasingly deluded and was referred to a panel of doctors at a local clinic. He was diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and returned home with his mother.

A few days passed, and his mum had gone shopping. Patrick contemplated his steaming mug of coffee in the presence of his visiting grandfather. The latter was iterating something about the garden, or the weather, but the words distorted in Patrick's ears. They morphed into whispers that didn't sound quite human. He glanced at the cup again. Something was wrong.

He vaguely remembered his grandfather placing the coffee in front of him with a smile. But this was too deliberate and too rehearsed; the kind of smile you'd wear if you were trying to poison someone. Patrick felt his heart thumping, as though it was about to burst through his chest. He stood up without a word and placed the cup carefully on the windowsill. His fingers shook.

"Everything okay?" his grandfather asked.

Patrick didn't answer. He turned and left the room, his mind screaming at him to get out now. The hallway seemed to tilt slightly. He stumbled into the wall, stockinged feet sliding on the laminate floor. No shoes!

Where were his shoes?

He scanned the space. Nothing. Nothing but the heavy leather shoes his grandfather had taken off and left near the back door. They looked enormous, but they were there. Wobbling slightly, he thrust his feet into them and yanked open the garden door.

Then he ran. Down the side path, past the bins, through the gate that led to the alleyway behind the houses. He didn't look back. Couldn't. The thought of his grandfather chasing after him, with a syringe, with something worse, made his chest tighten like a vice.

All Patrick could hear now was the panting of his own breath and the thud of his grandfather's shoes contacting the pavement.

Without shoes, his grandfather couldn't follow. Patrick disappeared down the side street. When Patrick's mother returned with two bags of groceries, her father met her at the door, pale and panicky.

"He's gone," he said.

"What do you mean he's gone?" she asked, her voice already beginning to tremble.

"I—I gave him coffee, and he just ... ran." Within an hour, they were combing the neighbourhood, ever more frantically, but to no avail.

That evening, after mother's hope had reduced panic, the police were contacted. Officers arrived, asked for details, and logged him as a missing person. Some hours later, some sightings were recorded, like someone having seen a young man in a thin T-shirt at a pub several miles away. Another claimed to have passed such a person walking along the A60 main road around midnight.

But still, no Patrick.

The hours dragged. At 3:17 a.m., his mother was sitting on the hallway stairs watching the front door, willing her son to appear.

And at 5:30 a.m., he did!

The front door creaked open after a click of the lock, and Patrick stepped inside, in 'borrowed' shoes. His hair was wet, and his eyes sunken and distant.

His mother blinked, unsure if he was real. "Patrick?"

He gave a slow, vague nod and walked past her without speaking. The stairs creaked as he scaled them, and his bedroom door could be heard quietly opening and closing.

Mother didn't follow. Not yet.

Two uniformed officers returned just after 9 a.m.

"He's safe now," his mother told them, voice hoarse from exhaustion. "He came back just before dawn. Didn't say a word."

"Glad to hear it," one said gently, scribbling notes. "We'll update the report."

The departure of the police was followed shortly after by a soft knock on the door. The caller was a middle-aged woman in a tan coat, with a clipboard tucked under her arm. She was announced as being from adult social care. "Is Patrick available to talk?" Speaking gently, she asked Patrick about the previous night, but he wouldn't answer. He sat on the sofa with his knees pulled up to his chest, averting her eyes.

The issue of medication was important, and she explained the necessity for Patrick to accept it. He said nothing. Then, slowly, he reached out for the glass of water. The pills were now on the table. His hand hovered. And finally, silently, he consumed this first, prescribed dose. His mother's shoulders sagged in quiet relief.

The woman nodded and, in a compassionate voice, announced that she would now contact the early-intervention team. A next-day phone call confirmed the availability of a bed at the mental health unit in Nottingham. It was explained to Patrick's mother that this could be a voluntary admission with no attached consideration of sectioning.

Patrick looked up. "If I agree ..., can I leave if I don't like it?"
"If you choose to," was the reply, "but I'd like you to stay, at least until the doctors can help you feel safe again."

He didn't respond immediately.

Then: a shallow nod.

His mother squeezed his hand. For the first time in days, he didn't pull away.

At the hospital, they called it psychosis, a condition Patrick accepted. He became increasingly conscious of every clatter of the meal cart, every key turning in a lock, doors opening and closing, and various nurses and other staff bustling around, carrying out their tasks and duties. But he would notice such things, wouldn't he? He now had so much idle time on his hands.

He kept his room tidy. Spoke politely to the nurses. Sat still during group therapy, eyes forward. But inside, the noise in his head never ceased.

Five weeks passed. He smiled politely during the psychiatrist's questioning. He said family members were no longer a danger to him. The psychiatrist felt Patrick was now sufficiently stable to return home. The discharge came with a signature and a blue folder full of advice. The final words to Patrick's mother were "You are now free to go", and 'Free' was the word to which Patrick clung.

At home, the silence was intense. His parents stepped lightly around him, as though he were a glass left near the edge of the table. But he didn't mind. At least he could now open a window and, more especially, sleep in his own bed.

Still, the thoughts came, and a TV news headline might trigger something deep inside; a suggestion that something was being arranged for him. He tried to ignore such occurrences. But the thoughts, shapeless and hovering, were always there ... watching and judging.

The days passed quietly. His bedroom window looked out on the same road he had grown up on, though it felt different now. He couldn't bring himself to turn on the TV. Every time he did, a gnawing voice in his mind told him he was failing some higher mission. That he should be writing, or walking, or searching. Anything but sitting still.

Another severe decline in his mental health saw Patrick being readmitted to the mental health hospital. His world had shrunk once more to the small, sterile ward. The faint hum of fluorescent lights overhead. His bed, marked 4C in dull green paint, felt more like a cage than a refuge.

He watched the nurse place two small pills on the plastic tray, one red, one white. "Clozapine," she said softly. Patrick nodded, swallowing the pills dry, a bitter taste lingering. He felt like a soldier drafted into a battle he neither chose nor understood.

The medication was a last resort, his mother had explained. "If your body rejects it," she said, "we'll have to find another way. But this could help."

One afternoon, the nurse's face darkened as she reviewed Patrick's test results. "Your white blood cells are dangerously low," she said solemnly. "We need to stop the medication, at least for now." The word "dangerously" echoed inside him. What if this final lifeline were to fail? Weeks later, with the dose reduced, the medication now seemed acceptable to Patrick's body. The voices softened.

But still, long periods passed with Patrick talking aloud to the empty room, arguing, pleading, coaxing himself back from the edge. His mother came frequently, often displaying optimism. "You're stronger than you know," she once whispered, brushing his hair back. Patrick wanted to believe her.

Patrick's hospital stay stretched to nine months. When the psychiatrist finally approved for him to return home once again, it was a bittersweet relief. Stepping through the front door felt like entering somewhere, both familiar and somehow strange.

The hallway mirror reflected a man he barely recognised. His clothes strained at the seams, and his face was fuller. Forty kilograms had quietly settled on his frame during those months in the hospital. The weight was not just physical; it also oppressed his spirit.

Memories returned of the long hours of boredom that had to be endured at the hospital and how consuming food became a quiet refuge. Four meals a day, trips to the corner shop for crisps and chocolate, the soft comfort of calorie-laden treats to soothe the restless storm in his mind.

Sitting at the kitchen table one evening, Patrick poked absent-mindedly at his dinner. His mother watched him, concern etched on her face. "You should remember that you have a referral letter from the GP about getting a gym membership at a reduced price because of your overweight issue." Her tone was encouraging as she commented. "Maybe it could help ... get you moving again."

Patrick saw no future in resisting his mother's will and visited the gym, letter in hand, accompanied by his grandfather to support him. The membership process was completed, and after considering his excessive weight issue and mental health experience, he was told by a supervisor that he could visit the gym as frequently as he wanted, with his grandfather able to always accompany him, if he wished.

With family encouragement, Patrick began visiting the gym frequently. But he was working from a low base. The sedentary nature of his ten months' spell in the mental health hospital had taken its toll, and his previously athletic eleven stone body had now ballooned to over nineteen stones.

The first time he pushed himself on the exercise bike and other machines, Patrick's legs and body ached. But he kept returning four times a week, each session gradually improving his overall fitness.

His mother prepared meals with care: grilled chicken, steamed vegetables, and fresh fruit. The temptation of old habits whispered, but Patrick learned to *listen* instead to his steady weight reduction that the scales revealed.

Ten months later, he stood again in front of the mirror. The reflection showed a slimmer, more upright man, with clearer eyes. Over forty kilograms had slipped away because of numerous gym visits and a distinctly healthier diet. But more importantly, a quiet strength was beginning to grow within him.

Patrick was buoyed by continual supportive comments from his mother and was heard to comment on one occasion that "I just want to feel normal again."

He glanced through a rear window of the house, looking at the small family dog frolicking on the lawn. The dog's liveliness reminded him of simpler times, before the swirling storm of thoughts and paranoia had taken hold. Yet the shadows hadn't completely lifted.

"I'm not ready to go back to work," he admitted quietly to his mum. "My mind still won't focus. I forget things all the time ... instructions, tasks, everything feels like an ordeal."

His mother nodded. "And that's okay. You're healing. It's not a race against time."

Patrick's thoughts sometimes drifted back to previous employment; the office work where Andy had asked him and Ryan to collaborate, and the kitchen assistant role where he had often found himself isolated. The memories of feeling invisible, sidelined, and belittled were not pleasant.

On many occasions, Patrick had thought that he was just bad at the jobs he did, but now he reflected that he had often been bullied, with his self-esteem being crushed. School was fine, but the workplace was a different world, a lonely, confusing place. The isolation, the constant pressure ... it wore him down.

Patrick's mind was now vastly improved, but not entirely sound. Sometimes, doubts resurfaced, moments when old fears whispered louder than reason. But now, with a steady routine and his mother's unwavering support, he faced the future with a cautious optimism he hadn't felt in years.

“Maybe one day, I’ll even go back to work,” he said softly, “but for now, I’m just trying to be okay.” His mother nodded, tears glistening. “And considering what you’ve been through, being okay is more than enough for now.”