

My Lands' End Life - Tom Ray

Big Blue Monday

It's Monday, so that means I'm working my usual shift in the Contact Centre and I'm due to start at 10am.

But first I have to drive my son to Stamford where he's at Sixth Form College. It's a round trip of about 50 minutes, the road skirts along the side of Rutland Water, and the views are glorious in the spring sunshine. Flashes of sunlight, big blue sky. For a long time I lived on the peninsular in the middle of the lake, now I can't help looking over the flat expanse of the aqua green water to the village there, stealing glimpses of the past. I was a different man then.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Tom Ray and my life is incredible. I became a quadruple amputee overnight at the age of 38 due to Sepsis. Also, my face was amputated, then partially rebuilt. That was sixteen years ago, and it's taken all that time to get back to life. It's been very, very hard.

I drive back into Oakham in my adapted car, my robot hands gripping tight on the steering wheel. Around the ring road, listening to Radio 2. I like things to be calm in my car, the music is familiar, the voices are reassuring. I arrive at Lands' End, a huge modern office building in beautifully kept grounds on the outskirts of town. Everything's OK. I know how to do this.

There was a time when I first got ill when no-one expected me to survive. My brother flew in from Australia to be by my bedside and he was told to bring a black tie. Then, I was so completely damaged when I came out of hospital, I couldn't imagine how a man without hands and feet and with a face that looked shocking could ever get back into a job. But I had to work, I was a husband and a father – if we lost our house I knew it would probably mean the break-up of our family, so I went out on my artificial legs and looked for work.

And here I am, working in the Lands' End call centre, answering the phone and taking orders. The pace is busy, the process is repetitive, the pressure to provide outstanding customer service is strong and it never lets up. If I'm completely honest, with a good degree, great work experience in the past and strong creative skills, there are times when I am frustrated that twelve years in, I'm essentially doing the same job as on Day 1 – but living with severe disability is all about resilience. Compromise. Acceptance. Survival. And there you have it – on a good day, that's my life.

I have to settle for what's practical. As I said before, my life is incredible.

It is what it is.

The people around me at Lands' End are my friends. Each of them has their own story and I love to hear their voices as they too answer customer calls. They are endlessly polite, reasonable, quick, informative, charming, reassuring, funny, respectful, understanding, intuitive. They work within all the necessary guidelines and also improvise when they need to give incredibly personal service. The Call Centre is a very grown-up, caring place to be.

At 4pm, I'm finished. After six hours of talking to customers, I'm ready to go home. The silence and peace of the outside world beckon. .

Monday is all done. I go back around the lake, back to the home and to the family that I love.