

ONE

First and Last

They say everyone has their soul mate. I found mine in pre-school. Actually, mine found me would be closer to the truth. I didn't want to be there – who would? I'd been ripped away from my mother's comforting embrace and forced into a realm of random toddlers and tantrums. Admittedly, on this occasion, I was the toddler having the tantrum, having been abandoned by Mum, but that's beside the point.

One inmate chose to take pity on me. It could have been the injustice of my plight that had drawn him to me. Perhaps my righteous bawling had struck a chord of brotherly love with him. I discovered years later he had his eye on my swanky new Ben 10 toy, but I won't quibble. I don't want to cheapen the moment. A quick hug, back pat and exchange of an action figure later, and our friendship was sealed. That was

a big day for me and Dougie Hancock: we've been best mates ever since.

Twelve years later, heading for Dougie's house, I was aware that I had a stupid grin plastered over my face. It had been there for the last ten minutes. I laughed out loud as I pedalled, letting loose a brief *woo-hoo* that Homer Simpson would've been proud of. It had just gone nine o'clock, and St Mary's church bells were tolling nearby. I was going to be late getting in. Dad would probably have something to say about that, especially on a school night, but I didn't care. I had to get to Dougie's house, my good news couldn't wait. Not that he'd believe me, of course. I already knew he'd call me a liar, accuse me of having Munchausen's Syndrome. He might even say I was suffering from a head trauma, but still, I couldn't keep it to myself. I pedalled a little harder, my bicycle cutting up puddles and leaving spray in its wake.

Week nights I tended to stay in – except on Thursdays, when I went round to Dougie's to play Dungeons and Dragons and listen to his old indie albums. It's probably worth mentioning now that I was a bit of a geek, something the more mentally and emotionally challenged in school constantly mocked. They didn't like that my friends and I enjoyed roleplaying games as a hobby, didn't have girlfriends, or the fact that we read books and were able to string sen-

tences together. Our ability to walk upright with little difficulty no doubt really put their noses out of joint too. It helped that Dougie was an even bigger nerd than me. The two of us drew strength from this bond, this brotherhood of geekdom. People could call my mates and I whatever names they wanted, we let it roll off us like water from a kaiju's back. Dougie and I were 'best mates through thick and thin'. I was the thin one . . . you can guess the rest. He was a kindred spirit to me, the Yin to my Yang, the Ant to my Dec.

Anyway, this chill November evening had been one that I would never forget. I'd spent it at the Square, the local precinct which was a hangout for many of the kids from school. In short, it's an intimidating place for a lad like me. I'm shy and a bit of an outsider, often looking in on the social gatherings of my peers like they're speaking another language. I wouldn't ordinarily have been there, but somehow I'd plucked up my courage and gone along. Something had happened that had turned my world upside down. It had been unexpected, it had been beautiful, and it had blown my tiny mind. We're talking Death Star explosion here. There really was only one person I needed to spill my gossip to, and I was fast approaching his house. I laughed out loud once more, giddy with my news and good fortune, imagining Dougie's face when I told him. I passed the road that I would ordinarily have turned off down, the one that led to my home. I

didn't live far from Dougie – St Mary's graveyard and the school playing fields were all that separated our houses. I grinned to myself as I cycled the remainder of the journey to Casa Hancock.

It looked like an exciting new chapter in my life was just about to begin. Then again, fate can be a fickle beast.

I never saw the vehicle that hit me. I was doing everything right: staying close to the kerb, my lights on, both hands gripping the handlebars and brakes. It came out of nowhere. I heard the headlight shatter. I felt my bicycle crumple against the bumper as I flew out of the saddle, hitting the bonnet with a bang. My body spun as the car sped on, impacting with the windscreen before rolling like a ragdoll over the roof. Then the vehicle was gone and my broken body was flying through the air.

I was dead before I hit the tarmac.

TWO

Hit and Run

I never could stand hospitals. I'd been into Warrington General a couple of times for operations and neither of them had been pleasant experiences. Worst of all was last year's broken arm. I'd been playing football with my mates at lunchtime. It was only supposed to be a kickabout, a bit of fun. That hadn't stopped Milton, our Peruvian exchange student who was built like a brick outhouse, from charging into me and sweeping my legs clean out from under me. I quickly discovered they take their football very seriously in Peru. I flew up into the air and came back down to earth head first. Instinctively I put my left arm out to prevent myself breaking my neck, and my arm crumpled under my entire body weight. I was told later that the kids on the lower school playground had heard the *crack* a hundred metres away. When I

got up I was holding my arm just below the elbow, revealing a perfect break halfway down my forearm. It was like an extra joint, the bottom portion swinging from an additional elbow. Two of my mates threw up at the sight and a nearby Year Seven girl fainted.

The nurse who'd seen me at the General Hospital had said it was just bruised. Admittedly my knowledge of medicine was limited but even I knew an additional pivot point in my forearm meant there was something very wrong.

Now here we were again. My parents sat on a bench in the corridor of the hospital, Mum staring off into space, her jaw slack. In her hands she clutched my scarf, the one she'd knitted, bound about her knuckles. I crouched in front of her, trying to catch her gaze, but she looked straight through me.

'Mum?'

Nothing, no response. She seemed calm but her unblinking eyes were screaming. Dad, to my surprise, was crying. I'd only seen him cry once before, when I was five years old and my grandpa passed away. He wept freely now, his arm around Mum.

'What's the matter?' I asked, but again was ignored.

My older brother, Ben, sat opposite them, eyes wandering over the linoleum floor. He was in sixth form and a tough act to follow. Straight As throughout his school career. Every

teacher I ever met would greet me with the same phrase: 'Ah, another Underwood boy: I bet he's a prodigy just like his wonderful, frighteningly intelligent brother!' I had to work my backside off throughout school, just to follow in Ben's mighty footsteps. Talking of which, his foot now tapped out a beat on the floor, iPod headphones tucked into his ears. I sat down beside him, leaning in close. Unable to catch the tune, I reached for an earphone, ready to tug it out of Ben's lughole. I readied myself for the brotherly punch. That's what we did: I pulled out his earplugs and he gave me a dead arm.

But this time my fingers wouldn't connect with the little speaker on the wire. They went through the thin white cable, again and again, as I feverishly tried to grasp it. The headphones were passing *through* my fingers; no resistance, no sensation. Ben wafted his hand beside his head suddenly, as if batting away a fly. As if he didn't know I was there . . .

'Ben!' I said, loud now. His foot kept tapping and his head remained bowed. I pulled away, looking down at my hands with incomprehension. They were so pale, almost translucent, a faint blue glow humming beneath the skin. I waved them before me, turning them over again and again. They left a blur before my eyes, as if moving in slow motion. This wasn't good at all. My stomach began to heave and lurch, a wave of dizziness crashing over me. I stumbled away from my family

down the corridor, gasping for air, reaching out for the wall as I went.

My fingers passed through it, and my feet slipped through the floor as I struggled to keep hold of both my surroundings and my sanity. A doorway opened at the end of the corridor, dazzling bright white spilling into the passageway. Warm, white light. Welcoming. I felt an urge to see what was beyond the door, to pass through into the room beyond. My feet were no longer connected with the linoleum floor, my body blending with the world around me. All it would take was the will to move on, a nod of the head and I'd be through the doorway.

I turned to my left, my attention suddenly drawn away from the white room. It was another opening, close to where my folks sat, and utterly unremarkable compared to the glowing portal at the corridor's end. What caught my eye was a pair of scuffed trainers lying abandoned on a metal trolley. I knew that the white doorway wouldn't be open for ever, I was aware that I needed to get down there, and quickly, but I couldn't resist looking into this little side room off the corridor. Because the trainers were mine.

Leaving the glowing portal behind me, I allowed myself to be drawn into the room. As I entered I could feel my feet hitting the ground once more, each step away from the white light allowing me to reconnect with the world. It was

an emergency room, another set of double doors exiting back into the Casualty ward. A body lay on a trolley, a white sheet covering it, an array of electronic equipment surrounding it. The ‘pingy’ monitors you see on the telly were there, but they were decidedly pingless. Another trolley held a grisly collection of bloodied tools – scalpels, forceps and freaky things that belonged in a horror movie. One of the trainers had been torn almost in half, while the other lay chopped up beside it. I’d saved up for ages to buy those trainers, and now some muppet had apparently taken a chainsaw to them. I bent down to look on the tray beneath – the rest of my clothes lay there, in an identical state of disrepair. Seriously, who had helped me out of these – Edward Scissorhands?

I looked down at my feet. There were my trainers, staring up at me: scuffed, battered, but in one piece. The same pale blue glow that ran through my hands emanated from them, running up my legs through my intact trousers and the rest of my body. My eyes drifted over the figure on the trolley. I moved further into the room to get a better look, the white light in the corridor dimming behind me.

There was no hiding from it. The truth was there as plain as the nose on my lifeless face. I looked down at my body, laid out on the bed. My skin was pale, the colour drained from it, and my lips had already taken on a blue hue, different to the

glow that currently shone from my flesh. These lips were cold and bloodless. The left side of my temple looked depressed, as if it had been hit by a heavy object. The hair was matted with blood and gravel. Gravel from the road.

I reached a pale hand out tentatively, allowing my fingertips to brush my still face. No connection, no sensation. I recoiled, the full ramifications of my situation dawning on me. I made for the corridor again, quickly now, my cold corpse abandoned. Mum, Dad and Ben sat there in silence still, parents hugging, brother's foot tapping, each in their own broken world. I looked back down the corridor, knowing that I needed to go into the light now.

But the doorway was closing, the visible glimmer narrowing all the time. I hurried towards it, willing myself to fly as before, but my feet were too connected to the world of the living now. I stumbled and staggered, hands reaching out before me as I surged towards the light. Ten centimetres, five centimetres . . . the gap of light was closing. Orderlies and doctors walked past, chatting and laughing. I ran through them, through any obstacle, as I sprinted towards the fading glow.

Two centimetres.

One centimetre.

The light blinked out and the doorway disappeared, replaced by a featureless magnolia wall. I hit the wall and

passed right through it, out into the night beyond. Ambulances hurried by, lights flashing and sirens wailing as they went about their business. The illuminated exit was gone, replaced by the stars that shone down in the black night sky.

I looked at my hands once more. Pale blue. Ethereal. *Spectral*. My predicament was all too clear.

I was a ghost.

THREE

Sanderson and Sons

I'd never owned a suit, and never wanted to. It took my dying to get me into one. My wardrobe was full of jeans and indie T-shirts, which I suppose was hardly appropriate attire for the great hereafter. Mum and Dad fitted me up in a nice black suit instead. I looked like a gangster, laid out in my coffin – albeit a pretty small one with floppy hair and a smattering of zits. You could hardly see them, to be fair – the make-up artist in the funeral home had done a decent job. I thought I'd never be seen dead wearing make-up. Turns out that was wrong.

Sanderson and Sons was the oldest funeral home in Warrington and had taken care of my grandparents before me, so the place wasn't entirely alien, though my memory of running about the venue as a five-year-old was quite hazy.

Ben and I had been gathered in a back room with my cousins, where we'd played with our Action Men. It was a bit like a Christmas family get-together, although everyone was miserable. Actually, it was *entirely* like a Christmas family get-together.

Those cousins who I'd played with ten years ago were here now, dressed in black and suitably sombre. Mum, Dad and Ben were sat in the front pews, my extended family surrounding them. Ben was holding up well. He was tough, always had been. He might have only been two years older than me, but emotionally he was twenty years senior. Teachers always mentioned how he had his 'head screwed on straight', which is pretty handy, anatomically speaking. He'd help Mum and Dad deal with their grief, and they'd be there for him too. That's what family did.

There were a few relatives and family friends who I didn't recognise, but I wasn't bothered about them. I was keen to see which of my school friends had turned up. Leaving the coffin and my folks at the front of the funeral home, I wandered between the pews towards the back of the room. I could see Mrs Fulleylove, my form teacher, and, sitting beside her, Lucy Carpenter. Lucy's face was white, her eyes all red, like she'd been crying. Mrs Fulleylove had a consoling arm around her. She could clearly tell that Lucy had just lost the love of her life. That's what I was going with, anyway.

Lucy had a dozen of my classmates with her. Dougie was in the middle of them, deep into a whispered conversation with Andy Vaughn, another of our roleplaying game mates. Along with Stu Singer, they were the only ones I'd call proper friends – the rest had obviously taken the school up on the chance of missing a double German lesson. Melanie Shuker was there, the class mean girl, sobbing into a handkerchief. She looked terribly upset, which was odd. I'd barely said a word to her in the four years we'd been at High School together. I suppose German lessons can do that to you.

Stu Singer was the class clown, a daredevil and proper all-round mentalist. He was what you'd call a force of nature, although my old man had more choice words for him. A waste of talent really, as he was actually frighteningly smart, according to his grades. Simply put, intelligence and common sense don't always go hand in hand. As the founding (and sole) member of the Damage Squad, his duties included running around school shouting '*damage*' a lot, while tipping stacked chairs off tables or throwing yoghurt pots out of the third-floor windows of Upper School at passing Year Sevens. It wasn't hardcore vandalism by any means, but it clearly gave the unlikely rebel Stu a lot of satisfaction, especially considering his dad was a vicar. Indeed, Rev. Singer had run the proceedings an hour earlier at church, having been our family vicar throughout my life. As my nan would have said, it had

been a lovely service, and all that was left now was the final curtain, so to speak.

There were no more speeches, all the kind words had been spoken back at St Mary's Church. Someone at the front of the funeral home hit *play* on the CD machine and a piece of classical music suddenly kicked in. This was most definitely not to my tastes. *I Am The Resurrection* by The Stone Roses would've been nice. Perhaps that'd make me spring back to life, leaping out of the coffin with jazz hands and shouting, 'Ta daa!' Like this was all a big joke I might wake up from at any moment. Talking of my coffin, when did they put the lid on it? Pre-occupied spying on my friends as I had been, I didn't even see that happen. A curtain in the wall suddenly swung open, revealing a dark tunnel beyond. The coffin began to slide back along a bed of mechanical rollers, the music playing all the while, now accompanied by stifled sobs from my family and friends.

For the first time since the night of the accident I suddenly felt a sickening feeling hit me in the pit of my stomach. I'd found the whole business of fluttering around, eavesdropping on people's conversations and watching how my family dealt with their loss quite surreal. I'd been dipping in and out of the living world, as if awaking from naps to witness key moments as my body made its way inexorably down the home straight. The hospital, the church, the funeral home: I'd turned up in

time to watch proceedings, a spaced-out spectator who was forbidden from joining in. The closest thing I could liken the sensation to was when I'd foolishly raided my dad's drink cabinet with Dougie and Stu. I guess I'd felt drunk up until the moment the coffin moved. Now I just felt sick.

I didn't want to go. It was too soon. I hadn't had time to say goodbye to anybody. There was so much more I was going to do. I was going to learn how to speak French, to visit Paris. I was going to buy a Mini Cooper when I was old enough to drive – you can blame *The Italian Job* for that one. I was going to grow a bloody *moustache*!

I ran forward towards the front of the room as the head end of the coffin began to disappear into the wall, the tiny curtains rustling as the wooden sides brushed past. I tried to take hold of the polished brass handles, to slow the coffin's progress and buy a little more time, but my hands simply trailed through it, connecting with thin air, the box and my body continuing on their way. I started to panic now. I looked back at the room; nobody could see me . . .

Except Dougie.

Every face in the room was forlorn and tearful, seeing me off on my final journey. All except one. I could *swear* Dougie was staring *straight at me*. His jaw was slack and his eyes were wide, and his elbow was hammering into the ribs of Andy Vaughn at his side. He whispered something frantically into

Andy's ear, our friend following Dougie's gaze and squinting as he looked straight at me. He shook his head: negative. Whatever Dougie was looking at – that is, me – Andy couldn't see. Dougie's face drained of colour. I might have rushed over to him, if not for the pressing business of preventing my coffin from being swallowed up by the wall.

But then the curtain fell back into place with a pathetic *whoosh*, and I was left locked out, separated from my body. I could hear people rising from the pews behind me, going to speak to my parents and pass on their condolences. The stupid classical music kept playing on the funeral sound system – who chose that track anyway? More tunes flew through my head that I would have preferred: *Good Riddance* from Green Day perhaps? If I'd had my way I'd have been shuffling off the mortal coil to the accompaniment of The Clash – *Should I Stay Or Should I Go*. Though right now, it looked like I was staying, whether I wanted to or not.