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## 1. The Charges

My brief friendship with Jacob Lovelong owed its existence to a lack of better offers. Still, for a while there, we were mates. I never really knew what he thought of me, or at least was never sure he thought much. But I like to believe he needed me back then just as much as I needed him.

He arrived after Easter break. It was 1994, my second year at Elizabeth College, and I was still passing lunch breaks alone in the library, or on a bench overlooking the tarmac tennis court. Lanky and big-eared as he was, with a walk like his knees were shackled, I instantly pegged him as a fellow outsider. At his first registration, instead of declaring ‘home’ or ‘school’ like the rest of us, he said ‘present’. The room, already stifling giggles—that *name*—exploded. Jacob didn’t flinch. When the housemaster explained that each boy must state his lunch plans, Jacob shrugged and said, ‘I’ll see how I feel.’

‘In case of fire, Lovelong,’ the housemaster shouted over the jeers, ‘I’m afraid you must commit.’

Everyone went quiet. ‘Home, I should imagine,’ Jacob said. ‘There’s leftover salmon.’

That did it. I winced but also felt a surge of admiration. Didn’t he know one slip could haunt you? Take, for example, the sixth-former who’d said, ‘Here endeth

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the reading' (instead of 'Here ends') after delivering the Bible excerpt in assembly. Two terms on and boys of all ages were still adding *-eth* to verbs at will. 'You sucketh cock!' they cried as they passed. That salmon thing would follow Jacob for months, but he didn't seem to care.

One lunchtime that first week, he joined me on my bench. Didn't ask, just sat and crossed his legs and tucked into a wholemeal roll with ham, lettuce and tomato spilling out. (My own white-bread sandwich contained only Marmite and margarine.) I was reading Bernard Cornwell and crunching on cheese-and-onion Walkers. On the net-less tennis court, fifty boys chased a deflated football. Everyone had a centre parting, with curtains to the eyebrows—any longer and the VP would march you down to Mahy's for a trim. Jacob's hair, though, was a shapeless, curly mop, the colour of wet sand.

'Not going home today?' I eventually said.

He turned as if only just noticing me. 'Very perceptive. You must be a scholar.'

Which I was. Along with a dozen others in my year, my high 11-Plus score was sending me to Elizabeth at the taxpayers' expense. The rest, Jacob included, paid fees.

'If you must know,' he said, 'I'm preserving energy for swimming club later.'

'At Beau Sejour?'

'Bizarre name for a fucking leisure centre.'

The way he swore in a posh accent impressed me tremendously. What time, I asked, and when he said four, I told him that was my session too.

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‘My brother’s in the squad,’ I said. ‘He swims five to six. Or “trains”, I’m supposed to call it.’ Ned was fifteen years old, Channel Islands champion in the 100m butterfly for his age. Sometimes he went to Jersey or the mainland to compete. My mother had decided that, rather than walk to the museum after school and wait for her to finish, I should swim twice a week too, then do homework in the café until she could pick us both up. Since I’d usually taken care of my homework at lunch, I was free to devote that post-pool hour to liquidating my pocket money, twenty pence at a time. ‘You like arcade games?’

‘What have they got?’

‘*Wonder Boy. Out Run. 1942.*’ I blanked. ‘There’s loads.’

‘Those are all ancient. *Mortal Kombat?*’

I shook my head. ‘They do get new stuff sometimes, though.’

A couple of boys from our year went by, hands in pockets, shirts untucked—tiny, pointless gestures of rebellion. ‘Where’s your salmon, Salmon?’ one said. The other belched and laughed at the same time. Jacob ignored them. It was hardly affectionate, but I was still jealous that he already had a nickname.

‘Want to walk over together later?’ I said.

He shrugged. ‘I need to get my trunks from home. But I suppose it’s on the way.’

I offered him a crisp but he just wrinkled his nose.

That afternoon, once the last bell had rung, we walked back to his narrow, four-storey terraced house at the edge

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of Cambridge Park. At the green front door, he fished a key from his pocket. Even this seemed like a mainland affectation—our house was never locked.

‘Wait here,’ he whispered, leaving me on the steps out front. As he disappeared inside, I caught a glimpse of the hallway—hardwood floor, huge mirror, moody abstract painting of—trees? Trees or legs. When he came back out, he closed the door with extreme care, as if even the slightest disturbance might cause the house to collapse.

‘Mum sleeping?’ I said.

He passed me on his way down the steps. ‘Dad, actually. And he’s working, not sleeping.’ His mother, he explained, worked at Deutsche Bank. Her job was the reason they’d moved from London.

In the changing room, surrounded by boys whipping welts on to one another with goggles or caps, I asked what his father did.

‘Writing, mostly.’ Jacob had an oddly protruding sternum, as if his ribcage had been squeezed from both sides at birth until the middle shifted tectonically out. ‘Plays.’

A playwright moving from London to Guernsey? I pretended this made sense.

‘Arcades after, then?’ I said.

But he only turned and walked away, leaving me there as if we weren’t both headed for the same lane full of spluttering, screw-kicking chumps.

He was good at some games, terrible at others. Once, he got so worked up playing *1942* that he kicked the machine

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and turned a toenail black. But ten minutes later, playing as Dhalsim, he reached a *Street Fighter II* level I'd never seen.

In June, a new game appeared. Or at least it was new to us—the machine itself had clearly been well used in its previous home. As we entered the gloomy arcade, I spotted it immediately. *Silver Sabre*. The graphics were magnificent, every pixel charged with life. The demo reel opened with a message from FBI Director William S. Sessions: *Winners don't use drugs*. Then a sinister figure appeared, tall, wide, stacked. A horned helmet-slash-mask revealed only his piercing eyes. His spiked shoulder pads seemed vaguely Chinese. This was Doom Viper, an evil renegade who had taken over the once peaceful kingdom of Zarna, and who now held the Zarnan king and his wife hostage in their castle. He had also stolen Zarna's sacred and magical emblem, the Silver Sabre.

Our mission was clear. Reach castle, slay Viper, reclaim sabre, free kingdom.

'The call is from destiny,' I said, part of a line from *The Simpsons*. Usually, one of us would set it up for the other to complete in their best Homer voice. But this time Jacob either didn't hear me or was too engrossed to speak.

He dropped twenty pence into the slot and we were introduced to his avatar, Lyra Flair. She had long brown hair, grey bikini, red knee-high boots, iron-grey sword. She reminded me of Flora, the older girl who'd lived next door for a while. Flora had liked to sunbathe in the garden and my mum had liked to complain about it. Where

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was Flora now, I wondered. As for Lyra Flair (Lyra Flora to me), having once rejected her royal upbringing, she was now, apparently, determined to redeem herself.

But, with Jacob at the controls, she was dead within thirty seconds, hacked down by a pair of grey-skinned ogres with spiked clubs. ‘Bollocks,’ he said, shoving in another coin. This time, beginning to learn the moves—jump-attack, twirl-and-stab—he got a bit further. From a sprite in a blue cowl he collected bottles of magic potion. These unleashed a fiery tornado, full of ghoulish faces, which wiped out a fair few bad guys. But pretty soon Jacob was out of change. With a nod, he stepped aside and I took his place. The joystick felt warm and clammy.

I got roughly as far as Jacob had before a mallet-wielding sumo clobbered my final life out of me. Reluctantly we stepped away to let some other kids try their luck. One was so young he could barely reach the controls.

My brother was already waiting outside with his mate Richard Sarre. Richard had recently become ‘The Shark’ by accepting a dare to swim up under a backstroking Alexis De Lisle and bite her on the bum. (‘She loved it.’) As usual, Ned and I ignored each other.

‘That game is *quite* good,’ I said to Jacob. That year, *quite* implied disdain for anyone who might fail to appreciate just how funny or big or crap something was. At school, I never said it for fear of being a try-hard. But with Jacob, I was safe.

‘Relish,’ he said, something he’d brought over from London. So far, it wasn’t catching on.

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When Mum pulled up, Ned got in the front—I didn't even try. I nodded to Jacob through the window of our Vauxhall Nova. He nodded back. It was agreed—for the final three weeks of term we would be skipping our hour in the pool altogether and devoting ourselves to Doom Viper's demise.

My brother had a job that summer—beach cleaning. Our father had helped him swing it, or so Dad claimed.

Every year, the States picked a dozen teens to spend their July and August mornings keeping the island's bays pristine. Eight till noon, six days a week. It only paid five quid an hour, but the work was unsupervised. Visits from States Works (two hungover middle-aged blokes in a yellow van, *Daily Sport* on the dash) were rare, if not mythical. Ned knew a guy who, the year before, hadn't picked up so much as a ring pull all summer, instead bringing full sacks from home and leaving them out for collection.

Ned got Soldiers' and Fermain. Both were close to home, though the path through Bluebell Wood that connected the two was hardly direct, and the cliffs meant a lot of steps. Still, he said, Fermain was sweet—no cars, no crowds.

On his first day, he got home at 12.15. I was eating beans on toast and waiting for *Neighbours* to come on. How was it, I asked.

'Tide was up so piece of piss. Fermain took about an hour. After that I just sat there with my Walkman.' *In Utero* had come out the year before and he was still playing it constantly.

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Next day it rained and he was back before eleven. Not going to sit there getting soaked, he said. After that, he only ever did the full four hours when the sun was out.

Meanwhile I was spending more and more time with Jacob. My pocket money was five quid a week, and once a fortnight I would score another fiver by mowing my grandparents' lawn. I'd been saving hard for a Mega Drive, but now that was on hold. Most days, I would bike around to Jacob's, and he would leave a note telling his father that we'd gone to kick a ball or throw an Aerobie or 'shoot some hoops' in the park.

'The key to level five,' Jacob said one day as we crossed the playing fields, kicking our alibi ball ineptly between us, 'is saving enough magic for the pink knight.'

'So hard, though,' I said, punting the thing in his direction. 'Those skeletons with the shields are *quite* annoying.'

He swung a leg but missed, pale shins sticking out from baggy grey Mambo shorts. On top he had a bright red Quiksilver T-shirt—his mother bought him trendy clothes that lost their coolness the moment he put them on.

Near the skate park, I spotted Adam Beale and Gavin Chester. Two known rebels with broken voices, always in detention, hanging around with state-school girls. I knew their nicknames—Bubbles (an extension, I think, of Beale-zebul) and Cheese—but also knew I didn't have permission to use them. Both had undercuts, curtains hanging down over buzzed back-and-sides in a style forbidden at school. Both were smoking cigarettes, one arm around a girl. I tried not to stare as we passed,

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glancing up long enough to confirm that Jacob's T-shirt was—oh, shit—exactly the same as Beale's.

Chester noticed next, pointing and turning to laugh at Beale. The girls started creasing up too. I picked up the ball and widened my stride. Oblivious, Jacob was still banging on about the boss on level four.

Beale jumped up from the bench. 'Oi! Salmon Boy!' In a second, he was right in Jacob's face. 'Why you wearing my T-shirt, dickhead?'

Jacob turned away, screwing up his face, waving a hand under his nose. 'Polos? Mentos? Trebor Extra Strong? So many good minty options.'

Beale shoved him to the ground, kicked him in the gut and set about removing the T-shirt by force.

'Leave him,' I mumbled. I had to say something. But now Chester was on his feet too, and I had no interest in getting my head kicked in over an overpriced garment. The girls stayed on the bench, somehow looking both amused and bored by the spectacle.

Jacob was now face down and topless on the grass. His pale back was heavily freckled and moled. Beale was trying to rip the shirt in half. 'Where's that lighter?' he said. Chester produced a handsome Harley Davidson Zippo and smirked as Beale set the shirt on fire. It burned pretty well, and we all watched it disintegrate. The flames must have singed Beale's hand because he dropped it suddenly and tucked his fingers under his armpit. Jacob clambered up and stomped on the thing as if it might still be salvaged.

Beale smirked, though you could see the futility dawning on him. Now both shirts were ruined: one by fire,

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the other by association. He might as well have torched his own.

‘That was illegal,’ said Jacob shakily. ‘Have fun in prison getting bummed senseless.’

He strode away. The prison remark had sounded funnier, I was sure, than he’d intended. Chester was in hysterics. Ball under arm, I caught up with Jacob. ‘Thanks a fucking trillion,’ he said. I mumbled an apology. I assumed we’d be heading back to the house, but half-naked Jacob made directly for the arcade. I don’t know whether he was trying to save face or if he just really needed to play, but we managed about fifteen minutes before we got kicked out. ‘It’s not like there’s a flipping heatwave,’ the woman said. We took the long route back, avoiding the skate park. In brighter spirits, Jacob said that playing like that had actually been relish. Lyra, after all, only had her bikini.

I almost pointed out that he’d fallen through the gap in the bridge on level three, a move we’d long mastered. But I decided not to rip him when he’d finally cheered back up.

‘Want a job?’ my brother said. ‘Half a job, anyway.’ He was sick of cleaning Soldiers’. So many steps for so little rubbish. Did I want to take over? ‘Fiver a day.’

I was squirrelling my way through a corn-on-the-cob, chin smeared with butter, watching *Home and Away*. ‘That’s half the work for quarter the pay.’

‘It’s not half.’ Sweat patches bloomed from his pits and on his chest where his rucksack straps had been.

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He'd recently started shaving and I could see the faint pixels of his stubble. 'Fermain is five times the size and gets ten times the rubbish, easily.'

Thirty quid a week on top of my pocket money and lawn-mowing cash. Unlimited *Silver Sabre*, plus extra to save for the Mega Drive. The downside was the early start. 'Does it have to be first thing?'

'Early doors, definitely.'

'But I thought –'

'Look, do it the way I tell you or don't bother. I'm sure The Shark or someone would –'

'Fine. I'll go at eight.'

Next morning, my alarm went off at 7.15. It was an overcast day, neither hot nor cold. I rode down the bumpy dirt path, ducking my head for low branches and brambles. At the top of the winding, overgrown steps hacked into the wooded cliff, I locked my bike to a low wire fence with ferns poking through. Being there alone was spooky, something I hadn't anticipated. I could see a few boats out on the open sea between Guernsey and Herm. The slick, metallic sea felt close and distant, everything echoing and muffled at once.

Sixty-eight steps. I pretended I was walking down to the stage in one of the Greek amphitheatres Mr Sheffrin had shown us in Classics, on one of the many occasions he'd delved into his personal slide collection. The tide was pretty high, the stony beach no bigger than a tennis court. I found a lone plastic bag, a few tiny polystyrene chunks. I could see why Ned had given up. No one was around to leave any litter or appreciate the lack of it. My

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black Casio said 8.25. I lay back on the egg-sized stones, wriggling to flatten them under my ribs, rucksack for a pillow. Seagulls drifted overhead, squawking. Apart from my brother, no one knew I was down there.

I was woken by footsteps on the stones. I sat up quickly, but the man I saw didn't look official. Mid-forties, black jeans and a matching T-shirt, dark hair parted neatly. His Hi-Tec Tennis trainers would have brought savage abuse on any kid unfortunate enough to wear a pair for PE. He carried an orange towel and a plastic bag striped white and blue. We were less than thirty metres apart, but he ignored me.

Head for the steps, I thought. But instead I sat there, looking out to sea, hoping the yellow gloves and sack beside me explained my presence.

I became aware that he was undressing. Fair enough, I thought, morning dip. But, as he hobbled into the water, I saw that he was naked. His arse cheeks were radioactively pale. He was skinny, with a gut. Edging in up to his bony thighs, he dived off the little ledge where the stones met flat sand.

As I zipped up my rucksack, he kept swimming out, alternating between a scrappy crawl and a breaststroke that made his head bob rhythmically. He angled right, towards the rock outcrop that marked the southern edge of the bay. Reaching it, he turned the corner and disappeared from view. Where was he going?

At the thirty-third step, I looked up and saw, coming down, another man, balding with clipped, greying hair. His short-sleeved shirt wasn't strictly Hawaiian but still

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garishly floral. His shorts were the same colour as his hair. I pretended not to notice him until he stood aside to let me pass. Puffing out his chest and snapping his heels together, he saluted.

‘Morning, soldier. Change of personnel, eh?’

I muttered ‘morning’ back but didn’t stop. He gave off a strong deodorant smell, somehow more intimate than BO would have been. Eyes lowered, I noticed his hairless shins, wafer-thin flip-flops, toenails in need of a trim.

At a corner further up, I looked down through the branches to the beach and water below. So this was why Ned had wanted rid of this beach, why he’d told me to get it done early. Napping on the stones definitely hadn’t featured in his instructions.

The sound of clinking pebbles echoed up as the second man reached the bottom. Soon enough I spotted him, naked, stepping gingerly into the water. He took longer than the other man to fully get in, splashing cupped handfuls on to his torso and arms. Finally, he dived, arms stretched out, chin tucked into his chest. When he came up, he let out a garbled howl, kicking his legs and windmilling his arms. Not graceful but fast.

He swam out to the outcrop, skin white against the dark green water. I felt the thrill of getting away with something. In the changing rooms, letting your gaze linger even for a second on another boy’s body had immediate consequences. But alone on those steps I was free to watch that naked bald man swim, as you might watch an unusual bird pass overhead, or a fine vintage car drive by. There was beauty in it, I suppose, though I couldn’t have put it like

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