'DEAD GOOD, DEAD FUNNY, DEAD CENTRAL CHARACTER!" CHARLIE HIGSON CURTIS JOBLING



To the Class of '88, Penketh High School, Warrington



CURTIS JOBLING

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ONE

First and Last

They say everyone has their soul mate. I found mine in preschool. 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.