




Prologue



The first thing I remember about the island is opening my eyes and seeing nothing but sand, up really close like it was under a microscope. It sounds stupid but I didn't realise until that moment that sand up close just looks like a bunch of tiny rocks all stacked together like that crumbly brown sugar you have in England. My head, on the side that I was lying, felt as though it had been squished flat, like my skull had morphed from an English football shape to an American football shape.

I blinked and tried to focus. Something was rushing towards my face. It was warm salt water. It splashed into my mouth, making me gag, then rushed away again as quickly as it had come. Then a few seconds later it was back, and this time it brought something with it. I put out a hand that didn't seem to belong to me and caught at the spidery black shape, bringing it closer to my face. It was my £4 pair of glasses from Tiger, still intact.

I sat up, and my head throbbed once, hard. I washed my glasses in the sea and out of habit I put them on, the water from the lenses falling down my face like tears. It was so hot the tears dried almost at once. I wiggled my jaw. It hurt. Then

I explored the teeth on the right side of my face with my tongue. They felt a bit wobbly, but there were no gaps, just the sharp edge of the tooth that had been cracked where I'd been punched in games. My mom had been hounding me to get it fixed for weeks, but I hadn't gotten around to it. I guess now it would have to wait a helluva lot longer.

I looked down at the rest of me. I didn't seem to have any injuries. My skinny white arms were all right, and my skinny white legs seemed OK too. I had no mirror so I couldn't check my football head, but I looked down my shirt and my torso seemed good too – its usual puny, concave self, with about as many hairs as Homer Simpson's head – pathetic for a sixteen-year-old, but good. The white shirt and khaki shorts that I'd worn on the plane were a bit scrubbed and ripped, and somehow I'd managed to lose my sneakers – my long white feet were bare. But all things considered I was in pretty good shape for someone who'd just fallen from the sky.

I looked around me. I was on a classic, SpongeBob SquarePants island, with palm trees, and green sea, and blue sky. A golden sun was burning down from overhead – I'd never been so hot in my life, not even back in Palo Alto. I could hear my own breathing inside of my head, and outside of my head I could hear the sound of the tide washing in and out. The island was breathing too.

There was a sudden, delicious breeze and another sound was added to the mix: this sort of whispering of the wind in the palm trees. The big glossy leaves were wagging about, above these huge green coconuts dangling in pairs below them. Inland beyond the palm trees was a jungly wilderness, and a high

green hill. Of course, I didn't know right then that I was on an island, but it sure as hell looked like one. Behind me there was a long scar in the sand as if I'd been pushed or dragged along the beach as I'd landed. Far along the beach were scattered white somethings, which I figured must be bits of the light aircraft my class and I had taken off in.

I got up from the beach slowly, spitting sand, my legs wobbling like a new foal's. My eyes, nose and mouth were full of sand. I blinked and hawked and spat. The right side of my head, the squashed side, hurt like hell. But I didn't care. I turned around on the beach, three-sixty degrees, and peered as far as I could to the horizon. There was not a soul to be seen. Just me.

I should've been frightened at that point. But I wasn't. No, sir. I did a little victory dance, flapping my hands at the sky like those tube dudes you see at gas stations, the ones with the air blowing through them. With my sandy throat I sang a few shaky bars of 'Ode to Joy'. The fact that it was the tune to our school song couldn't ruin it for me any more.

My classmates were dead. All dead. And *that* was a cause for celebration.

My mom had been right.

The geek had inherited the earth.





DISC TWO

Nowhere Man – The Beatles

John Lennon, Paul McCartney (1965)



THREE YEARS EARLIER

1

Desert Island Discs

My kind – the lesser spotted geek – have our stereotypes to conform to. We like words (I can quote Star Wars verbatim). We like numbers (I can quote Pi to hundreds of places). And we are as happy as a pig in shit when words and numbers intersect (I like that there are 39 Steps, or 101 Dalmatians, or that the Count of Monte Cristo was known as Prisoner 34.) We like computers. We like Marvel and DC. We can build stuff, but we can't talk to people. We can make anything you like except friends. We like girls but we can't get 'em. And what we don't do, what we *absolutely* don't do, is Sports. Or as my new school called them, Games.

Games to me were always video games. Video games would've been OK. Like most of my kind I'm a pretty serious gamer. (*Fortnite*. *Uncharted IV*. *Link's Awakening*. And my old-school favourite, *Myst*.) Sure, some of them can get pretty violent. But it's all virtual, so it's all harmless.

What happened at my school were not games.

They were serious.

I'd managed to avoid games lessons until I was thirteen for the very good reason that I'd avoided school itself. Ever since we'd moved to England when I was just a little kid, I'd been home-schooled and I loved it. I was born on the West Coast of America. My parents were academics who taught in this hippy college where people wore tie-dye and sandals and collected crystals. Then the academic parents both got research posts at Oxford University in England, and we moved to Oxford.

We'd all had to make an adjustment moving to England. My folks look like they walked straight out of the seventies without getting changed. My dad has big hair and a beard, and aviator glasses, and wears nylon shirts that crackle when you hug him. My mom has waist-length hair, and wears floor-length skirts. At the University of Palo Alto (their old university) they were known as Paul and Marilyn, even by their students. I don't think I ever saw either of them wearing any shoes other than sandals. At Oxford they were known as Professor P. Selkirk and Professor M. Selkirk and they had to wear actual shoes. But they didn't seem to care. They loved all the history and old colleges and stuff, and they were working on this ground-breaking new Behavioural Science project that got them really pumped. And as for me, they thought the transition from my West Coast American freewheeling elementary school which basically taught finger-painting and not much else, to a buttoned-up British primary school in a very academic town

like Oxford would be a bit tough, so they decided to teach me themselves.

Because I was home-schooled I didn't really know any other kids until I was thirteen. Sure, I went to the birthday parties of the kids of my parents' colleagues, but I made no lasting friendships. For one thing, academia is this kinda transitory life and people are always buzzing around the world taking up different fellowships and the Chair of This or the Reader of That. So the kids I got to know were only in Oxford for, like, two seconds. For another, I felt like I didn't need anybody but my folks. I had a great time being taught by them. They were attached to a box-fresh, modern faculty called the Institute of Behavioural Science, and also to this incredibly old, incredibly beautiful college called Trinity. But there was always someone at home, and that someone would teach me.

They taught me science – of course – and math and English, and even some Latin because it was, said my dad, the language of science. They taught me politics, which I was always interested in from Day One, because of my name. I'd known all my life that I was named after President Lincoln but weirdly it wasn't till we'd moved to England that I asked my parents why *him*.

'He's my favourite president,' Mom had said.

'And sometimes if you're named after someone you emulate them,' added Dad. They often talked in turn like that – they were a real double act, not just at work but at home too. 'It's called nominative determinism.' My parents never dumbed things down, even when I was little. They just expected me to keep up.

I said: 'You mean you want me to be shot in a theatre at the age of fifty-four?'

They laughed at that. 'No, silly,' said my mom. 'I was thinking more of how he *lived*, not how he *died*. He was an ethical leader, with a strong moral compass. He abolished slavery, you know.'

I did know. 'I think the slavery thing has been done, Mom. I can't exactly abolish it *again*.'

'There are still slaves in some places, son,' said my dad. 'And what your mom means is that you could be president one day.'

'But we live in England now.'

'Doesn't matter,' said Dad. 'Lots of presidents came to Oxford. John Quincy Adams. JFK. Bill Clinton. The only thing that matters, Link, is that you were born in America. You're welcome by the way.'

My parents always called me Link. Nothing to do with *Zelda*, if that's what you're thinking. For the longest time I thought it was short for Lincoln but dad said no, it was because they could never find me at mealtimes because I was always playing those games, or finding the prime numbers on a chessboard, or building a model airplane or something. There was always this empty chair at the dinner table, so one of them would sigh, throw down their napkin and come and find me. And that's why they called me 'the Missing Link'. It always cracked them up but it took me *years* to get the joke.

That was the great thing about being home-schooled. There was no structure. If I was inventing something in the garden they'd just leave me to it, until it was too dark for me to see what I was doing. Or if I was really into a book I was reading they'd just let me finish it, until hunger pangs clawed at my stomach and pulled me out of the story. Then there would be great days when we were all at home and my mom and dad

would just decide at breakfast that we'd ditch schoolwork for the whole day and go off on some trip. These trips were always educational but they sure were fun for a nerd like me. We'd go off to London on the train and spend the days in the brown and dust-smelling Natural History Museum, dwarfed by dinosaur skeletons, or go to Stratford-upon-Avon and feed the swans and then go see a play at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. In fact, thinking about it, my parents sure took me to a lot of plays considering I was named after a president who was shot in a theatre, even plays that were too old for me. I can still remember the first play I ever went to in England. I must've only been around eight. It was about this butler, who is a total slave to this hoity-toity upper-class English family, and him and the family get marooned on a desert island, and on the island everything flips and he is the boss, and they are his slaves. My parents sold it to me by saying it was by the same guy who wrote *Peter Pan*. I was much too young to really get it, but I was Hooked. No pun intended.

After our happy days of lessons or trips, there would be happy evenings at home. We lived in a red-brick, Victorian house in a pretty nice neighbourhood in Oxford which was, for reasons no one ever explained to me, called Jericho. We'd sit around the table in our warm kitchen after dinner, listening to the washing machine coming into land, and the same show playing on the radio. My parents' favourite thing about England was the BBC, and their favourite thing about the BBC was BBC Radio 4, and their favourite thing about Radio 4 was *Desert Island Discs*. It's presented by this chick with a really soft (Scottish?) voice, and what she does is she gets all these famous

people to choose their eight favourite pieces of music, and she asks them why they've chosen them, and then she plays them on the show. I don't mean shitty celebrities like the Kardashians, I mean like really amazing actors and scientists and politicians and stuff. The subjects also get to choose one book. You already get given the Bible and *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, so there's no point wasting your book choice on those. Finally you get one luxury like a piano or a hot tub or something. It sounds like a crazy show but it is kinda cool. Apparently it's been running for like a million years and it's had awesome people on it like Stephen Hawking. (They even April-Fooled everyone in 1963 by doing a whole show on this guy who was totally fake. They made up this dude called Sir Harry Whitlohn, who was supposed to be a mountaineer, and they had him voiced by an actor who bragged about his expeditions and chose all his music and everything. Everyone totally bought it.) The idea of the show is that the music choices of the person tell you more about what the person is really like than the interview bits they do in between the tracks. I really liked it because I've never felt like a child of my time musically. For me all the latest music is totally linked with social media (ya know, people like old Taylor Swift hawking her wares on Instagram) and social media means *fear* for me for reasons which will become clear later. But *Desert Island Discs* introduced me to old music, the kind of music my parents liked. The kind of music that was actually a disc, made of vinyl, and not a download, or a stream, or an mp-whatever. That kind was safe. And I dug it.

So I had all kinds of lessons, and in the evenings I'd listen

to *Desert Island Discs*, or be in my bedroom gaming, but one thing I never, ever had to do was play actual *games*. No Phys Ed. No sports. Not so much as a star jump. And then I turned thirteen and all that changed when it was decided that I had to go to school, because that's when the rest of the kids in England would be choosing their options for GCSEs and starting the two-year courses that led up to the exams. I was outpacing my parents in some subjects, not science (of course) but other things. My folks didn't exactly press me to their bosoms and say *My boy, you are a genius. We can teach you nothing more.* But that's kinda what they *meant*. I needed subject teachers, teachers who were experts in their field. I needed to follow the curriculum, and have a more serious education than just a few hours here and there. And, most of all, according to my folks, I needed to be 'socialised'. My parents use lots of Behavioural Science jargon, and what they meant by that was that I needed to know other kids. 'You're an only child, honey,' my mom would say. 'Heck, we'd keep you with us forever if we could, just the three of us. But you need to mix with kids your own age.' Then my dad said something that would keep coming back to me. 'No man is an island.'

So they found this prestigious private school – ironically, on an island – where they gave assisted places to the kids of dons (professors of the University like my mom and dad). And that's how I ended up, at the age of thirteen, in the living hell that was Osney School.

The Games Nazi

And of course, one of my very first lessons at Osney had to be games. I found myself standing, just before noon on my first morning, in the middle of the Great Court at Osney School, freezing my ass off, dressed in nothing but my games kit.

The material of this kit was good quality but thin as paper. It was only September but it felt like it was below zero. I'd never been so cold in my life. The Osney School games kit consisted of navy-blue shorts and a navy tee with the school badge on the right breast. The school crest was a little tree, like an oak tree, on an island, with these three lines underneath to symbolise water I guess. This was because the school was on a sort of island called Osney in the middle of the river.

The only comfort this games kit gave me (because it sure as hell wasn't warmth) was that I looked just like everybody else. I hoped that if I could hide in this crowd of kids dressed exactly the same as me, maybe I could get through the class without making a giant fool of myself. I knew that at Osney School

they wouldn't be playing any of the sports I would've failed at back home, like basketball or baseball; there'd be a whole raft of new sports for me to fail at. Worse still, Osney was a school for boys *and* girls, so half the crowd around me was female. This was not good news. My potential for humiliation always rises exponentially when there are girls around. So I shivered, and hid, and tried not to be too conspicuous.

Of course, I didn't look *exactly* like everyone else. My hair was badly cut, as always, by me. My parents don't believe in haircuts and I have longish, brownish hair, but whenever the front bits get in my eyes I just hack them off with nail scissors, usually much too short so I don't have to do it for a while, and that, I know, gave me a weird surprised look. My mom always goes on about how handsome I am but I automatically discount that – moms are programmed to think their offspring are beautiful. On the plus side I had pretty clear skin for a thirteen-year-old (lesser spotted, you see). Also I was wearing a new pair of glasses, my pride and joy, which cost three hundred pounds. That morning I doubted the wisdom of wearing them for games (no one else had glasses on) but I didn't have a locker yet and I didn't really want to leave them anywhere, they were too precious. My parents had bought the glasses for me as a kind of bribe when they announced that I'd be going to school for the first time. They were a bit too big for my face but they had black glossy frames and crystal bright lenses and they said **Tom Ford** along one arm in discreet silver type. I wasn't even upset about going to school – little did I know, huh? – but I accepted the glasses anyway because I thought they were pretty cool. I'm not actually too short-sighted, but I like wearing glasses. They are the insignia of my people.

So it was through the new glasses that I gazed at my surroundings. Osney School looked exactly like an Oxford college, which it kinda was. It even looked like a smaller version of the college (Trinity) which my parents were attached to. Right now I was in the central bit – the Great Court, which was a big square of green grass in the middle of the school. Around four sides of the grass and paving stones were these long low buildings from the days of Olde Englande, all beautiful, all slightly different, making up this huge ‘quad’. Osney School was a pretty expensive day school, and looked it. There was no way I would’ve been there except for the fact that it had connections with the University.

As we all waited, and shivered, this dude walked out into the court in an Osney sweatshirt and track pants (lucky guy – no shivering in short pants for him). He did this exaggerated little jog out into the middle of the grass just to prove he was sporty as hell. He wore a whistle round his neck on a ribbon like an Olympic gold medal. In my whole time at Osney I never once saw him use it. The whistle for him was like my glasses for me. Unnecessary, but his defining insignia. This was Mr Llewellyn, the games teacher.

He was a huge guy, with thinning sandy hair and piercing blue eyes. As if to make up for the hair he’d lost on his head he’d grown this big sandy wartime moustache. He looked at us all like we were roaches on his pizza. I tried to shrink back behind the others, but he spotted me at once, and looked at me like he’d won something.

‘Ah! I see we have a new student joining us today,’ he said, pointing at me with a big hotdog finger. ‘Step forward, boy. What’s your name?’

So much for staying under the radar. I stepped forward, teeth chattering. 'I'm Lincoln Selkirk.'

'I'm Lincoln Selkirk, *sir*.' He sniffed and his moustache took a leap. 'Bit of an odd name.'

'I was named after Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States.'

I could see that Mr Llewellyn didn't really care that I was named after Abraham Lincoln, or that he was the sixteenth president of the United States. That was too much information for old Llewellyn. I was to learn that he was only really interested, like most people at Osney, in games. If Lincoln had been a soccer player – sorry, football – then maybe.

'Well, we don't need to concern ourselves with your first name here, however outlandish,' said Mr Llewellyn. 'Here you're just Selkirk.'

'Yessir.'

'American, are you, Selkirk?'

This was the first time I'd ever been asked that question, so I had to think about it. What was I? I'd been in England since I was seven, but I'd been *born* in America, so I guessed that tipped things.

'Yessir.'

'Hmmm. Probably never played any proper sports then, I'll bet.'

That sentence told me everything I needed to know about Mr Llewellyn. He was a Games Nazi. If Mr Llewellyn was on *Desert Island Discs* he would choose tracks like 'Chariots of Fire' and 'Escape to Victory' and 'Eye of the Tiger'. His book would be

one of those books that aren't real books but are called *1001 Sporting Facts* or something, those books that are designed for people to read while they're taking a shit. His luxury would be his phony little whistle.

'Well, Selkirk, in that case I think it's only fair that we should show you how we do things in Oxford. What do you think?' He had this very upper-class accent, like the World War II pilot he resembled. 'Well?' he asked his class. 'Should we show our American cousin how we do things at Osney?'

Now I'll tell you a bit of trivia. The play President Abraham Lincoln was watching when he was shot (aged fifty-four) was called *Our American Cousin*. I remember thinking at the time that Mr Llewellyn accidentally saying this exact title had to be a very bad omen for my first day. Turned out I was right.

'Selkirk, you are about to become part of a great Oxford sporting tradition. Like all new Osney students, you will be required to take part in the Osney Dash, a race around Osney Great Court.' He waved his arm in a sweeping arc, taking in the four sides of the court, including the kind of chapel bit in the middle with a clock and a bell tower. The clock had a blue face (like most of the kids by now) and gold numbers. The gold hands stood at five minutes to twelve. 'I will give you a pacemaker – a student to run with you – but the race is not between you and him, but between you and the bells.' He pointed the hotdog finger at the clock. 'It is nearly noon. The idea is that you will complete the circuit before the bells strike twelve.'

I looked around the vast courtyard. It was immense. 'Starting now?' I asked.

The class tittered.

'No,' said Mr Llewellyn. 'You can't begin until the sound of the first chime.'

This was a nightmare. Not only would I be at the centre of attention, exactly where I didn't want to be, but I knew just how slow I was at running. 'Excuse me. You want me to run all the way round this court in twelve seconds?'

'No,' said Mr Llewellyn patiently. 'There are four quarter strikes before the hour begins to chime. That's at least another ten seconds. You begin at the sound of the first bell of the first quarter.'

I think I knew what he meant. The quarters were the four *bing bong bing bong* bits before the hour strikes. But even with those, I figured it was impossible.

'You're *kidding*.'


'Don't be insolent, boy,' said Mr Llewellyn. 'It's perfectly straightforward. It's even possible to complete the circuit *before* the first chime of the hour, a distinction known as the "Quarters". Loam here is the only Quarters boy in a century.'

This enormous kid stepped forward – as wide as he was tall.

'Most students complete the dash somewhere between five o'clock and ten,' Mr Llewellyn went on. 'Their position in the chimes allows me to assess their probable sporting prowess.' He spoke to the giant kid, in quite a different voice from the one he'd used to me. 'Loam, you'll be the pacemaker. See if you can beat your record, eh?'

'Sir.'

'Selkirk; this is Loam.'



The giant put out his hand. Not sure what to do I sort of nodded at him.

‘Shake hands, Selkirk,’ barked Mr Llewellyn. ‘You’re in England now, not the colonies. We are civilised here.’

I took the giant kid’s paw, and he damn near crushed my hand to death.

And that’s how I met Sebastian Loam.

The Sockdologiser

If Sebastian Loam was on *Desert Island Discs* he would choose songs that people sing at English ball games, like 'Jerusalem', or 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. In the Venn diagram of *Desert Island Discs* his choices would have a lot of crossover with Mr Llewellyn's. Sebastian Loam *might* be able to think of eight tracks, but he probably wouldn't be able to think of a single book, and his luxury would definitely be a ball of some kind. In the States we'd call him a jock.

Even at thirteen Sebastian Loam was huge, and broad with it. (I'm not short myself but at that point in my life I was skinny as a straw. If I wrapped my first finger and my thumb round my wrist they, like, overlapped. Loam, as he was known, was the best sportsman in the school. He rowed, he played cricket, he played rugby, he played football. In the US jocks are tolerated, laughed at as simple souls, strong but not too clever. The problem with old Loam was that he was mean as a whip *and* great at sport. He was a good-looking sonofabitch

too. A triple threat. At Osney Loam was a king because, oddly for a school in such a prestigious university town, sports (or games) were far more important than academic achievement. Even the terms at Osney were given sporting names instead of semester numbers. Autumn term was the Rugby Term, spring term was the Cricket Term, and the summer term was simply called Rowers. I was to learn later that Loam was literally the King of the School, as there was this bizarre annual ceremony called 'Toppers' in which the most achieving sportsman of the year was crowned 'King' with the lid of this big silver trophy. The most achieving sportsman was always Sebastian Loam, so he won Toppers every year. There was this Osney legend about his entry interview with the Head (Principal). (The head teacher of the school was also Mr Llewellyn. Go figure. Typical Osney to elevate the games teacher over everybody else.) The story goes that Mr Llewellyn didn't ask Loam any questions but just took a book from the shelves and threw it straight at Loam when he wasn't looking. Loam caught it one-handed and Mr Llewellyn said: 'We need a good fly half. You're in.'

Old Llewellyn's faith was justified. Loam won *everything* for the school. He was a natural sportsman, and carried Osney to victory in every competition in Oxfordshire and beyond. The whole school was silver-lined with trophies. In the States you could win trophies for science competitions or spelling bees, but there was no hardware at Osney for anything but games. Even the teachers treated Loam like a hero. He had about a million followers on Instagram and was always posting photos of his muscles or his trophies or him meeting David Beckham and crap like that. Of course I didn't know any of

that stuff on that first day. I just saw this big kid with dark hair, and this small kid standing behind him carrying a bag like a hotel porter. (This was Loam's shadow, Egan. His first name is Gilbert but he shortens it to Gil. If Egan was on *Desert Island Discs* he'd choose exactly the same tracks as Loam. Egan was Loam's bitch.)

Mr Llewellyn did his little jog to the piece of the paving stones opposite this archway under the clock tower. 'This line, Selkirk –' he scrubbed his enormous sneaker across an ancient stone drain set into the paving stones – 'is the start and the finish line. Line up, you two.'

Loam stood toes up to the stone line, jiggling about like a boxer. He was doing that warm-up thing athletes do, pulling his arms across his body and his knees up to his chest, shaking out his shoulders and waving his head from side to side. I reluctantly walked forward. Many times in my life I've wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. But unfortunately I knew enough about geology to realise that just wasn't going to happen. Maybe in California I might have hoped for the San Andreas Fault to come to my rescue, but here in England I was on solid ground and would have to endure the attention. All those eyes I didn't want to look at me were looking at me, and the mouths that I didn't want to whisper were whispering. I knew what they were saying because. Weird hair. Weird body. Weird glasses. *Geek*.

I just stood there at the starting line, heart hammering, my eyes on the big golden hand of the clock crawling upward to noon.

The crowd of kids suddenly went silent.

Loam suddenly fell absolutely still by my side.

High Noon, I thought.

This dumb English contest had suddenly taken on an American significance. Loam and I were the gunfighters, albeit that we stood side by side instead of face to face. But I knew, right there and then, that I was dead.

In that last millisecond before the bell started to chime I stopped looking at the golden hand and looked dead ahead at the course I was to run. But then something else golden caught my eye.

She'd obviously just made a tiny movement, like shifting from one foot to the other, or moving slightly so she could see better, and I turned my head to look at her. She had this golden hair, tied up in a high ponytail. Bits of baby hair, almost white blonde, were escaping from the ponytail and curling round her perfect face. She had clear pale skin, and cheekbones touched with pink like magnolia blossom. She had full pink lips and one of those tiny noses, and these blue eyes the colour of which I'd never seen before, but I was to see again three years later in a cloudless sky above a desert island. I didn't have time to wonder what this goddess would choose for her Desert Island Discs because then the bell in the tower began to strike, and I began to run.

I knew I was never going to win but I was not prepared for just how fast Loam would be. He streaked ahead of me along the pavings like some superhero, kicking up chippings into my face. He should've been wearing a cape. By the time the first quarter had rung, he'd completed one side of the square. I could hear the rest of the class cheering Loam on from the middle of the grass, chanting his name. No one chanted mine.



I really can't run. I'm very much an indoors kind of cat. When I wasn't having lessons from Mom and Dad I spent most of my time in my room, reading, gaming, inventing things; the geek curriculum.

By the time I'd got to the end of the first side of the square I had a crippling stitch and had to do this half-hop, half-walk thing. That lost me a lot of time. Then I jogged for a bit, the stitch like needles in my side, my lungs bursting. Three quarters had rung before I'd completed two sides of the square. As the fourth quarter rang Loam crossed the finish line to rapturous cheers. And after that there was just this eerie silence as the stony-faced class watched me jogging and limping pathetically home. I reached the fourth side of the square as the first chime of the hour struck.

ONE. Suddenly it was hugely important that I complete the circuit before the chimes struck twelve. They were all watching. Loam. The Games Nazi. And, suddenly more important than all, the goddess. I tried to urge my poor legs to go a bit faster. **TWO.** The cobbles swam before my eyes. I couldn't pass out now. **THREE.** It was going to be all right. I'd make it by seven, maybe eight. **FOUR.** I stumbled and tripped, in my unaccustomed new sneakers, throwing out my hands to save myself. The gravel bit into my palms. **FIVE.** I was on my hands and knees, head down, breathing hard. **SIX.** I scrambled up, palms stinging, kneecaps bleeding. **SEVEN.** I began to walk. **EIGHT.** I began to jog. **NINE.** I began to run but – **TEN** – it was no good, I was no more than halfway by the time **ELEVEN** struck. I lengthened my stride and summoned every bit of my puny strength, but the bell had



struck TWELVE and the chime had fully died away before I got back to the starting line.

I doubled over, my hands on my knees, my breath burning and coming in dry heaves. I thought I was going to make matters infinitely worse by puking right in front of everyone, but instead I just collapsed right there on the hallowed grass of Osney Great Court, looking up at the clear blue sky and breathing hard. The huge shadow of Mr Llewellyn fell over me.

‘Twelve,’ he almost spat, with half wonder, half disgust. ‘*Twelve*. We haven’t had a twelve for *years*.’ Then he gave this little speech that I didn’t understand at all. ‘Not enough meat on you for a fly half. Not fast enough for a winger. Can’t rely on you to sprint between the wickets. Too puny to pull at stroke. Too tall for a cox.’ But then he finished with something I understood very well. ‘You’re no use to me at all, are you, Selkirk?’ He turned and strode away, talking to the class at large as he walked. ‘Let’s get out to the playing fields then – there’s still time for a spot of rugby. We’ve wasted enough time here already.’

Feeling less than worthless, I wobbled to my feet and followed him. I felt like something had gone badly wrong. I wanted to protest, to say there’d been some sort of horrible mistake. I’d fallen – surely I could have a do-over? I couldn’t see Loam, I couldn’t see the goddess, I couldn’t see anything apart from red spots in front of my eyes.

We all clattered through the archway under the clock tower to the green fields beyond, but under the darkness of its shadow, Loam’s massive paw descended on my shoulder. ‘Where d’you think you’re going, Selkirk?’

‘To the –’ I pointed – ‘playing fields?’

He shook his head. ‘Not yet.’

My eyes were adjusting to the darkness of the archway after the bright day. What I saw was not encouraging. Loam and a little knot of his cronies, faces looming from the darkness, all looking mean as hell. Loam turned to the smaller kid carrying the bag, who was still dogging his footsteps. ‘What was your Dash time, Egan?’

‘Eleven o’clock, Loam.’

‘All right,’ said Loam. He grabbed the massive sports bag from Egan’s hand and held it high in front of my face. Then he dropped it on the toes of my new sneakers. It hurt.

‘Congratulations, Selkirk,’ he said. ‘This is what you won.’

I didn’t understand what was happening. ‘But I lost,’ I said.

‘Egan here used to be the slowest. Now it’s you.’ He turned to the small kid again. ‘What do you say, Egan? We’re Englishmen, we have manners.’

‘Thank you for this year, Loam.’

‘You’re welcome, Egan.’ He turned back to me. ‘Now, Selkirk, you are my new slave. You had slaves in America, didn’t you? You understand the concept? I have rugby club after school. You’ll bring that bag to the changing room. As it’s your first day I’ll go easy on you. That’s all you have to do today. Tomorrow I’ll tell you your other duties.’

I’m not a tough guy. I cry very easily. I get what I call my Wi-Fi forehead – a series of three lines radiating up my forehead, small to big. I could feel the lines gathering now, and usually when I get the Wi-Fi forehead there’s no going back, tears inevitably follow. But I knew I couldn’t cry in front of Loam.

I stared hard at the kit bag at my feet. It was enormous – you could have gotten a small child inside it. ‘What am I supposed to do with it until after school?’

‘Carry it round with you.’

Just then I had a premonition that if I touched the bag – if I just so much as wrapped my fingers round those tough sports handles – that it was over for me, and this kid would be on me for the rest of my natural life. That other kid, Egan, had obviously been carrying Loam’s shit for a year. A *year*.

I had to stand up for myself. ‘No.’ I said.

Loam contemplated me for a second. Then he put out his hand and took my glasses off my nose. He calmly snapped them in half, and threw the pieces over his shoulder. For a moment I couldn’t actually believe what had happened. I was so shocked I couldn’t speak or move.

Fortunately my glasses are mostly for show – I didn’t have to go feeling around on my hand and knees like Velma on *Scooby Doo*, but I was angry, so angry about my beautiful glasses, that I lost my shit. I searched my mind for the worst word I could think of. A word that could kill.

‘You . . . you . . . **Sockdologiser!**’ I screamed in his face.

This stopped Loam in his tracks, just for a second. Then he started to laugh, and of course all his cronies started to laugh too. ‘Is that the best you’ve got?’ he said. He pointed to the bag, and his voice changed. ‘Pick it up,’ he said through his teeth. He glared at me, unblinking. I knew there was a chance he would hit me. And I knew if he did, it would hurt. I started to feel sick again, this time with fear.

What happened next was not very admirable. I dropped my

eyes first, knelt as if I was Loam's subject and gathered the handles in my hand. He turned on his heel and walked away, followed by his gang.

Suddenly I found that my knees wouldn't let me get up again. I sat back hard against the wall, in the shadows, the back of my head connecting with the cold stone. I sat there for I don't know how long, still clutching the handles of Loam's sports bag. The legs of all the kids who were behind us went past me, oblivious. Box-fresh new sneakers like mine, blue Osney sports socks with white bands, bare legs, blue shorts. And then a pair of legs stopped in front of me. A girl's legs, shapely and long. I looked up, hoping for a moment I was going to see the goddess. But no. The legs belonged to this plumpish, prettyish girl with pink and purple hair. She had a bunch of studs in both ears, and there was a tattoo of the ace of spades on her pale right wrist.

She sort of slid down the wall until her butt was on the floor and she was sitting next to me. Her blue shorts rode up her thighs.

'Sockdologiser?' she said.

I couldn't really look at her because we were sitting side by side. Instead I fixed my eyes on her legs where they were humped next to mine. I could see very fine gold hairs sticking up on her knees from the cold. I said to her knees: 'Abraham Lincoln was watching a play when he was assassinated. It was a comedy, and John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's killer, went every night for a week to identify what was the biggest laugh in the play. On the night of the assassination he waited for the laugh. It came when the main character accused another character

of being a “Sockdologiser”. The audience laughed their asses off, and under the cover of all the noise Booth jumped out of his seat and shot Lincoln dead.’

‘Not exactly a hilarious word.’ She had a very cut-glass English accent. It didn’t really go with the hair.

‘It killed that night,’ I said. ‘Literally.’

‘What was the play about?’

It struck me then. ‘It’s about an American guy who comes to England and doesn’t fit in.’

She didn’t say anything for a while after that. Then she took my grazed hand and put something in it. Two somethings. My new glasses, neatly snapped in two.

‘Sorry about your specs,’ she said. It was the one kind thing anyone ever said to me at Osney School. But then the girl with the pink and purple hair got to her feet and left me alone under the archway. I was to learn, a lot later, that this girl was called Flora Altounyan. If Flora was on *Desert Island Discs* she would choose obscure Death Metal tracks with names like ‘Those Who Have Lost the Right to Exist’. Her book would probably be *Dracula* and her luxury would probably be a tame black rat or a human skull or something. Flora was the only one who I was even vaguely sorry to see go down with the plane. Not that she was a friend, she wasn’t, but she was the only one at Osney who wasn’t shitty to me.