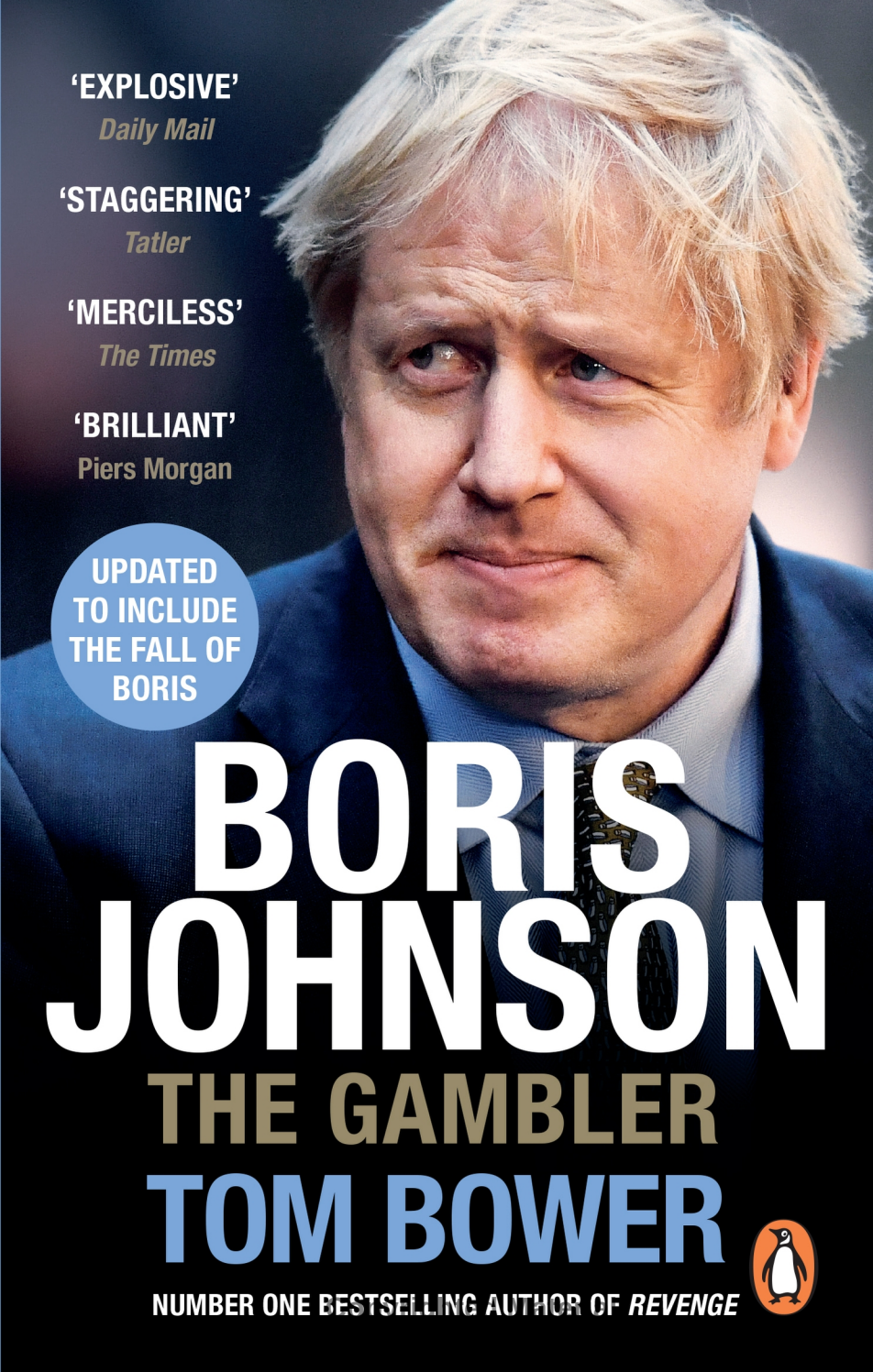

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To George and Sylvia Bower
Generous, inspirational and loyal

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Contents

Prologue: A Family's Secret ix

ACT I – ORIGINS 1

Chapter 1: The Truth 3
Chapter 2: Effortlessly Superior 21
Chapter 3: Uncertain Star 30
Chapter 4: Awakening 41
Chapter 5: Defying the Critics 59
Chapter 6: 'It's all a mess' 72
Chapter 7: Downfall and Resurrection 94

ACT II – 'THE FIRST TIME HE'D HAD TO WORK IN HIS LIFE' 119

Chapter 8: The Challenge 121
Chapter 9: Exposing Vipers 131
Chapter 10: Birth of 'Borisism' 141
Chapter 11: The Messiah Complex 151
Chapter 12: 'I'm standing by to fill the gap' 159
Chapter 13: Playing with Fire 181
Chapter 14: 'Jealousies and paranoias' 188
Chapter 15: 'Alexander the Great' 193
Chapter 16: 'Transparently self-defeating policies' 204
Chapter 17: 'A blithering, Bullingdon, Bollinger-drinking buffoon' 219
Chapter 18: 'The next PM will be Miliband if you don't fucking shut up' 239
Chapter 19: The Legacy 246

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Chapter 20: 'He's ruined my life' 256
Chapter 21: Leadership and Treachery 279

ACT III – THE CABINET 295

Chapter 22: 'We're being stitched up' 297
Chapter 23: 'Boris is Boris' 324
Chapter 24: 'God, she's awful' 343
Chapter 25: Showdown 371

ACT IV – TRIUMPH AND TURMOIL 395

Chapter 26: Total Victory 397
Chapter 27: Covid I 423
Chapter 28: Covid II 482
Epilogue 517
Afterword 527
Postscript 543

Acknowledgements 553
Endnotes 555
Bibliography 587
Picture Credits 589
Index 591

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Prologue

A Family's Secret

On Friday 16 August 2019, Boris Johnson hosted a dinner at Chequers for his father's seventy-ninth birthday. Stanley Johnson was understandably proud that his son could entertain his family at the prime minister's official Buckinghamshire country estate. Elected by the members of the governing Conservative Party nearly four weeks earlier, Boris had fulfilled his childhood ambition to become the nation's leader. As the staff served dinner in the Jacobean wood-panelled dining room, Stanley's familiar bonhomie and the new prime minister's joviality could not conceal the tension. At the very moment when the famed Johnson clan should have been rejoicing, the family's relationships were splintering.

Just over a year earlier, when he resigned as Foreign Secretary, Boris and his wife Marina had left Carlton Gardens, the minister's formal St James's residence, in separate cars. After twenty-five years of marriage, they had agreed to divorce. Some were surprised that the marriage had lasted that long. After several humiliating exposés of Boris's adultery, Marina had tried to repair their relationship but those efforts were wrecked by his most recent affair with Carrie Symonds, the thirty-year-old Tory Party communications chief. Too many lies, betrayals, confessions and apologies had been offered over the years to make any credible amends. 'He's a shit. He's utterly selfish. He's destroyed the family,' exclaimed one of the Johnson clan. Those raw emotions were barely concealed during Stanley's birthday celebrations.

Rachel and Jo Johnson, Boris's younger sister and brother, the

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latter an MP, had both come with their spouses and children. (Leo, the fourth sibling, had not returned from holiday in Greece.) To Stanley's disappointment, Boris's and Marina's four children had rejected the invitation to the party. Not only were they angry about their grandfather shaking Carrie's hand at a public meeting about the environment, but they also refused to speak to their father. On top of that resentment was the friction between Stanley's older children and his new family, one that had simmered for years but only intensified in the wake of Boris's latest achievements. In recent months Jenny, Stanley's second wife, had openly denounced Boris and had even forbidden him to visit Nethercote, the Johnsons' family farm on Exmoor. Boris's brother and sister were understandably surprised that Jenny, an intelligent woman, and Max, her son, had agreed to come to Chequers. Stanley tried to brush the troubles aside and, to explain her presence at Chequers to the three older Johnson children, Jenny said that Stanley had insisted that she join his birthday celebrations and under duress she had agreed.

During all the media appearances over the previous years, the striking similarity of appearance, mannerisms and jokey tone shared by Stanley and Boris would suggest that the two men were closely bonded. Few people noticed during the Tory party's leadership campaign the cold stares Boris shot as he walked past his father, invariably standing in the front row. The ambiguity of Stanley seeking his son's recognition was partly explained by Boris's first wife, Allegra Mostyn-Owen. Boris's worst habits, she discovered, were inherited from his father. But even Allegra, after their eight-year relationship, was unaware of the real reason for Boris's deep anger towards Stanley. Only Charlotte Wahl, Boris's seventy-seven-year-old mother, could explain her son's cold stare. It reflected the family's great secret.

Stanley, the star after twenty days in the jungle of the 2017 series of *I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here!*, could not understand how his son had become prime minister. Earlier in 2019, he said that Boris, despite a masterly understanding from Pericles about risk and power, was not personally ambitious and never took risks. Looking across at his son during the dinner, Stanley imagined that in life

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everything happens spontaneously without much forethought. In his self-centred approach to life, Stanley misinterpreted much about the world, not least what his son had learnt from his father's mistakes.

As usual, Boris's enthusiasm and jokes during the Chequers dinner hid his own feelings. Secretive and untrusting, his accomplished performance concealed his vulnerability to stress. Compartmentalisation has been a key to his public success. Few outsiders could imagine any anxiety provoking an occasional meltdown. An extra gear in his life, fuelled by defiance, set him apart from his contemporaries. Ruthless ambition had allowed him to exploit the natural reserve of his competitors. Any sadness about his children's absence was cancelled out by his triumph. 'It's all about Boris,' many of those working with him would frequently assert. But even for his family that truism merely highlighted the enigma. Did anyone, they wondered, know the real Boris? They agreed he was a loner with few close friends. Among those few had been Marina, his anchor and consigliere, and the ghost at the feast. 'Marina's Magic' had held the Johnson clan together for years, especially more recently at the family parties in Chevening, the Foreign Secretary's official country home. Boris's disloyalty to Marina had generated intense hostility towards him and deep sympathy for her.

Marina blamed Stanley for her marriage's collapse and refused to speak to him. Like Allegra, she said that Boris's adultery and his other misdemeanours mirrored his father's habits. The same unhappiness Stanley had spread among his own children, she said, was being repeated by Boris towards his four children with Marina. 'Like father like son' echoed across the Chequers dining room.

To understand the new prime minister required forensic examination of his relations with his father, both as a child and as an adult. Naturally, the fracture of their close relations was concealed from the public. United by intelligence, charm and their blond hair, the Johnsons were lauded by the media as a dynasty of achievers although a profile written two years earlier by Prue White in *The Times* had, after focusing on Stanley's successful appearance on *I'm a Celebrity*, concluded 'All his wit, charm and self-deprecation were a

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smokescreen for narcissistic, rapacious ambition.' Stanley gave the impression that he was never hurt by the truth. That was an illusion. The seamless friendly competition generated by Stanley among his eldest children, endlessly described by the media, had been both remarkable and destructive. The first fractures of their relationships had appeared many years earlier but Brexit had become the public lightning rod for their disagreements.

Rachel was openly opposed to Boris's Brexit campaign and her husband had rarely missed an opportunity to express his dislike of his brother-in-law. By contrast, although Jo, the quietest and most intelligent of Stanley's six children, was a committed Europhile, he remained a loyal MP and minister in Boris's new government. His wife, Amelia Gentleman, a *Guardian* journalist, opposed Boris but she had remained silent in public. Likewise, Leo was a Europhile displeased by Boris's leadership of the Brexit campaign, but he also remained diplomatically silent. The major surprise was Stanley's stance. Unlike his children, the patriarch of a previously united family had abandoned his lifelong passion for a united Europe to share the limelight with his son. Anxious to stay close to the flame, he had switched from an ardent European to a Eurosceptic.

Amid so many conflicting emotions, especially the mix of Brexit and Marina, no Johnson family gathering could escape a meltdown argument, and that evening was no different.

Looking across the darkened fields at the end of the meal, Stanley was naturally proud that his eldest son was prime minister. His own political ambitions had largely failed but he enjoyed basking in his son's triumph. He had eagerly accepted the opportunity to stay the night at Chequers with all his family. The campaigner, adventurer and celebrity could not miss the chance to sleep under the same roof as Britain's past leaders and see the magnificent house's remarkable collection of paintings and artefacts, especially those from the Cromwellian era.

At breakfast the following morning, Boris expected everyone to stay for Stanley's birthday lunch. Instead, Rachel and Jo had other long-standing arrangements and departed with their families. To those who remained, their departure appeared ungracious. Suddenly,

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it was rather quiet. At lunchtime on the sunlit lawn, Boris was as usual in good spirits, pleased when the staff brought a birthday cake. After the traditional good wishes, Stanley blew out the candles and enjoyed the cake. Soon after, he too left.

One year later, on the eve of Stanley's eightieth birthday, the unforeseen circumstances of Boris's premiership had severely tested the nation and the Johnson family. During 2020, as the prime minister battled to save the nation from the Covid pandemic and bankruptcy, the family tensions simmering at Chequers erupted into an irreconcilable feud. Throughout extraordinary roller-coaster weeks in the spring, as Boris faced the possibility of his own death from the Covid virus and the birth of his sixth child, the tensions did not abate. The four older Johnson children had become more bewildered about their father's second marriage, just as they all queried Boris's relationship with his fiancée. As Boris struggled to protect 67 million Britons from disaster, his own family – still heralded by many as an enviable model of love, laughter and glory – was disintegrating in the shadows.

The question asked during those distressing summer months as Britain struggled to return to normality was whether the unseen collapse of the Johnson dynasty was a metaphor for Johnson's premiership. Besieged by critics that he had ignored the early warnings about the pandemic, that he had failed to oversee his ministers' chaotic mismanagement of the government's response, and finally that he ignored his own warnings and caught the virus himself, he emerged hollow-eyed from illness to complaints that he had lost energy and authority. Some of the more detailed complaints have proven to be unfounded, but the long-standing rebuke about his laziness, disorganisation and lack of attention to detail have come to haunt him. Some blame his divorce from Marina, who was 'unafraid to dispense home truths', for the absence of an anchor and reality in his life. Contrary to Stanley's imagination, Marina had held the dynasty together, and the prime minister's fate was determined by both his loyalty and disloyalty to his friends and family.

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ACT I

Origins

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Chapter 1

The Truth

The birth of the Johnson dynasty had a dreamlike quality. Amid the breathtaking beauty of Oxford, the citadel of Britain's self-confidence, the fellows of All Souls College hosted in summer 1962 a celebratory dinner. Among the guests was Charlotte Fawcett, an undergraduate studying English at Lady Margaret Hall. Seated next to her was Stanley Johnson, nearly two years older and studying English at Exeter College. Charming and amusing, Stanley instantly captured Charlotte's affection. In Stanley's opinion, it was not by chance that Sir James Fawcett, the college bursar and an outstanding international lawyer, had placed him next to his daughter. Well liked across the university, Stanley was also the winner of that year's Newdigate Prize for poetry. Winning the prize – an award he would still proudly mention nearly sixty years later – was a blessing for Stanley. Not only was it a passport to his career after Oxford, but it also introduced him to a remarkable woman.

One of five children, Charlotte was educated at Mayfield then Westminster Tutors and had enjoyed a happy, social childhood in a large house in St John's Wood, an affluent area in north-west London. The Fawcetts were politically active liberals and outspoken campaigners for human rights, women's equality and against racism. Beatrice Lowe, her mother, was the Jewish daughter of two distinguished academics. Financially and emotionally secure, Charlotte had been in love with another student, a left-wing president of the students' union, before meeting Stanley, but she quickly embraced her new boyfriend.

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Stanley was exceptional. Dynamic, intelligent and intensely social, he had a wide range of friends in Oxford, had already travelled across the world and was sufficiently impressive to be identified as a recruit for MI6, the foreign intelligence service. He had, however, already discovered his intellectual limitations. He had entered Oxford to study Greats but had switched to English, an easier subject. The wisdom of his decision was not only the Newdigate Prize but also the award of a Harkness Fellowship which would finance a study trip to the USA after graduation.

Bowled over by Stanley's energy, Charlotte agreed in 1963 to delay her final year's study and exams and join him for one year in America. Before leaving, they married in Marylebone registry office and, with little money, spent their honeymoon at a friend's farm. Some years later, she realised that instead of a loving and deep friendship, she had become infatuated with a man who deliberately minimised the seriousness of anything and ridiculed intimacy. The intellectual and emotional values championed by the Fawcetts were scorned by her new husband. In the whirlwind of their romance, too headstrong to care for her family's reservations, she had also failed to notice that bluster and bonhomie camouflaged the scars of his own childhood.

Stanley was understandably intrigued by his family's history. In the nineteenth century in Anatolia, Turkey, his grandfather, Ali Kemal, a fearless Turkish journalist, became a famous opponent of the corrupt Ottoman Empire. After the empire's collapse in 1918, Kemal was appointed Turkey's interior minister. Vigorously but forlornly he campaigned against Kemal Ataturk, the ardent nationalist, to align Turkey with Britain, and was abruptly forced to resign. Returning to journalism in a febrile atmosphere, he continued as a newspaper editor to oppose Ataturk until, in November 1922, he was kidnapped by his enemies and lynched by a mob. His corpse was hung from a tree.

By then, his thirteen-year-old son Osman Ali was living in Britain. For her safety, Ali Kemal's first wife, half-British and half-Swiss, had given birth to her son in Bournemouth. She had died soon after his birth and her mother, Margaret Brun (née Johnson), adopted her grandson who was renamed Wilfred 'Johnny' Johnson.

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After a truncated education, Johnny farmed in Canada, visited Switzerland and headed to Egypt to manage an estate. Standing in a Cairo bar in 1932, he spotted Irene Williams, a twenty-five-year-old Anglo-French Oxford graduate being accosted by a British serviceman. To everyone's surprise, Irene walloped the serviceman. As he hit the floor, Johnny walked across to offer his congratulations and Irene, instantly attracted to the cool Englishman, introduced herself as 'Buster'.

Johnny had struck lucky. Irene's father was a Lloyd's insurance investor whose wealth and status were inherited from his grandfather, Sir George Williams, the founder of the YMCA and a successful businessman, and her mother was a descendant of Baron de Pfeffel, a rich Alsatian family living in a grand Versailles house. Surrounded by maids, nannies and seemingly unlimited wealth to fund an exciting social life filled with music, Irene was educated at Cheltenham Ladies' College followed by Oxford. Uncertain about her future, the amusing dilettante was sent by her father to Cairo to escape some unsuitable relationships. After three years tutoring in Cairo, she returned to England in 1935. Johnny followed. Once he was employed by a City timber broker in 1936, they married.

Financed by Irene's family, Johnny had a comfortable life, commuting daily from Bromley to Cannon Street and returning with pleasure from London's smog to the luxury of domestic staff and his first two children. Soon after the war broke out, Johnny volunteered to fly for RAF Coastal Command and was absent when in 1940, in the midst of the Battle of Britain, Stanley was born. To escape the Blitz, Irene moved with her three children to live first with her parents in Cornwall and then in Devon. Her idyllic life snapped towards the end of the war. Standing on a hill to watch Johnny fly past and tip his wing in salute, Irene stood thrilled until she watched the plane crash following engine failure. Burnt and permanently lame, Johnny left the RAF in 1947 poor and unemployed. His good fortune was Irene's devotion and her family's money. Convinced that his best fate was to escape suburbia and return to farming, he bought West Nethercote, an isolated 250-acre sheep farm in a high but shady valley near Winsford on Exmoor by the River Exe.

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Without reliable electricity, proper sanitation or adequate heating, the rapidly expanding family of four children shared their rambling, cold, stone house with cows, sheep, poultry, dogs, mice and the occasional horse. Seemingly, Buster's love for Johnny smothered any regret for the comforts she had abandoned.

Hard physical graft dominated Stanley's childhood. Daily, during his holidays from his boarding prep school, he helped his father with the sheep, collected hay, picked fruit and learned to survive on the hillside. There was no washing machine or fridge. Newborn lambs were kept warm by the kitchen wood-burning stove. The idyllic setting belied the truth that Nethercote was not a happy home. As well as being an unsuccessful farmer, Johnny was a silent alcoholic who never read books and ignored sickness. The sullen hangdog regularly whacked Stanley and his other children. And in front of his children, he often beat Irene. Stanley would tell Charlotte how he resented his father's behaviour, especially hitting Irene. In hindsight, Stanley's feelings were ignored by his parents and he in turn had little affection for his brothers and sister. 'He didn't think they were good enough,' observed Allegra Mostyn-Owen. In particular, Mostyn-Owen was struck by Stanley's poor relations with his brother Peter, whom she assumed was ruined by their father's cruelty. In contrast, Stanley found Irene's eccentricity endearing. Whenever cake crumbs fell onto the floor, Stanley watched her lie on the floor and blow the crumbs under a chair. 'I protested,' he recalled and she replied, 'I'll do what I want.' Seventy years later he reminisced, 'I learned from my mother that exaggeration with a purpose is a price well worth paying. She was always ready to do things, even if it looked ridiculous. Being contrary was what she taught me.'

In 1953, aged thirteen and with what would become the trademark mop of blond hair, Stanley was sent to Sherborne, a public school in Dorset. Irene's family paid the fees for this blimpish, third-rate teaching establishment, big on flogging and games, and mentally and sexually truncating. Adapting himself to the school's frenzied competitiveness, Stanley drilled in the army cadets in preparation for service in the empire, played sport every day but had

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enjoyed no artistic activities. Despite being regularly flogged, he won prizes and was appointed head boy. 'Whenever I walked through the school,' he would remember, '660 boys stood to attention and took their hands out of their pockets.' The result, he would admit, was a 'swollen head'.

Before going to Oxford, he set off in 1958 to Greece and Turkey, to trace his family roots, and then on an adventurous trip to Brazil and across South America. He returned to Nethercote with a taste for endless travel.

With that self-confidence, Stanley arrived in Oxford in 1959 eager to win what were called at the time 'the glittering prizes'. On graduating in 1963 and having secured the Harkness Fellowship, he sailed in August from Southampton with his new bride. On the New York quayside he was given a new Chevrolet and directions to drive to Iowa College to start a creative writing course.

Stanley is the first to admit that he wasted his opportunity to learn the craft of writing which undermined his lifelong ambition to become a bestselling author. With a short attention span and not able to master the detail of the course, he abandoned Iowa and headed for New York to study economics at Columbia. Their new home was a single-room loft near the Chelsea Hotel in mid-Manhattan. By then, Charlotte was pregnant and Stanley, always impatient to travel, suggested they head to Mexico for a holiday. Since their car was not licensed across the border, it was abandoned in Texas and they headed for Mexico City in a twenty-hour bus ride. Resisting Stanley's domineering enthusiasm was impossible for his amenable wife. Soon after arriving in the city, they introduced themselves to Boris Litwin, the generous parent of an Oxford friend. Stanley, as his family would discover, was a professional guest, always searching for a free bed. By then, Charlotte was suffering morning sickness. To save Charlotte the long return bus journey, Litwin bought the couple airline tickets back to Texas. 'If it's a boy,' said Charlotte with relief, 'we'll call him Boris.' On 19 June 1964, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, weighing just over nine pounds, was born in a New York hospital used mostly by Puerto Ricans. His father missed the birth while out

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buying a pizza. 'De Pfeffel' was added as a marker of Boris's mother's aristocratic background. To the family, he was always known as 'Al' or Alexander.

As had happened at Oxford, Stanley once again failed to follow the meticulous study course at Columbia. He wanted to resume travelling but Charlotte persuaded him that they return to Oxford with Boris so that she could complete her degree. By autumn 1964, Charlotte was once again studying English at Lady Margaret Hall. Baby Boris often slept in a drawer in her room. Occasionally, he was fed boiled eggs, creating a lifetime aversion. After Christmas, Charlotte was again pregnant and her relationship with Stanley changed.

The return to Oxford and fatherhood did not suit Stanley, nor did his lifestyle. Unable to focus on establishing a career, twenty-four-year-old Stanley had started teaching in a state school. Dissatisfied, he switched to an Oxford graduate course in agricultural economics and earned a small amount as an editor of a technical quarterly. Although he relied on the Fawcetts' money to survive, he mocked them. 'They're champagne socialists,' he told Charlotte. He derided their thoughtful, socially responsible intellectualism and their affection for the *Guardian*. 'He was rude to them and made fun of them,' said Charlotte. 'He didn't like their Catholicism or their support for Labour but without them, we would never have had enough money.' But there was worse. During a series of bitter arguments, Stanley accused Charlotte of seeing too much of her friends. 'He resented that I cared about my friends,' she recalls, 'and that's when he first hit me.' Boris was asleep in the same room. Charlotte blamed herself for Stanley's anger and continued her studies.

The incident was buried after Stanley was approached to join MI6 and began an intensive training course which separated him and Charlotte during the week. In June, she passed her degree and celebrated that Boris had walked in the kitchen at eleven months. By the time Rachel was born in September, the fifteen-month-old boy understood exactly that he would need to share his mother's attention. Boris's expression on seeing his sister for the first time

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was not joyous: 'When Boris arrived at the hospital to see Rachel in my arms,' Charlotte recalls, 'his look was shock, disbelief and fear.'

By then, the Johnsons had moved to north London and Stanley was once again edgy. The anonymous spy world did not suit a man ambitious for fame. He successfully applied for a job at the World Bank in Washington. At twenty-five, he would finally be able to support his family.

The four Johnsons flew to Washington in February 1966. Boris was proving to be a temperate, smiling baby, keen to sleep even when his cot collapsed. Eighteen months after arriving in Washington, Leo, their third child, was born. Despite being a mother to three young children, Charlotte went to art classes and encouraged her children to paint. Boris seemed particularly keen on drawing and painting buses in oils. His mother would keep his sketchbooks in a box together with other momentos of his early life including his hair and milk teeth. Even before he was two years old, Boris told his mother colourful stories about bad children at nursery school. 'And then he would answer my questions in an amusing and creative way.' Aged three, Boris had begun to read, in particular he enjoyed a 'Look and Learn' comic strip depicting the science-fiction story of the Trigan Empire, based on Ancient Greece. 'He was gripped by that,' said Charlotte, 'and that gave him an idea. He said to me, "I want to be world king." '

Stanley missed those milestones. He was flying around the world seeking to improve the condition of poverty-stricken countries. But within two years he was bored once again. After pulling a prank on his boss, he quickly moved on in 1968 to research global overpopulation for the Rockefeller Foundation in New York. While Charlotte and their three children lived by the sea in Connecticut, Stanley flew thousands of miles across the world to produce *Life Without Birth*, a polemic denouncing the lack of birth control and the dangers of the Pope's ban on contraception. Bursting with indignation and pride, he would claim that his book paved the way for a UN agency to control the world's population.

He returned to Connecticut and a troubled relationship with Charlotte. Although in their hectic social life, Stanley was adept at

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placing himself at the centre of attention as the life and soul of any gathering, Charlotte noticed his impatience with those who were neither intellectual nor rich. Status was important for Stanley and he was unusually selective of whom he liked. For those he favoured, he speedily spotted the moment to break the ice and start conversations with a joke. But back at home, the humour disappeared. 'He was always hitting me,' says Charlotte, 'and Boris saw it.' Ignoring the unhappiness caused by his violence, Stanley has described that American period of his life as 'wonderful', not least because he also wrote *Presidential Plot*, a novel about the assassination of Lyndon B. Johnson. Although published, it was not successful.

In 1969 Charlotte demanded that the family return to London. After a series of violent arguments, he relented to her ultimatum that she would travel without him. Renting a house near her parents' London home in Little Venice, Stanley used his friendships to find a temporary and unpaid job at Conservative Central Office to produce the party's 1970 election programme on the environment. Since his only income was a grant from the Ford Foundation for a programme about population, the family could not afford to send the children to a nursery. Happily, Charlotte taught Boris and Rachel English, history and maths at home. At five years old, Boris had started to read the *Daily Telegraph*'s editorial column. Although the Fawcetts were again helping financially, Stanley grudgingly admitted that his income was insufficient to support his family. The solution, he decided, was that his family should live with his parents at Nethercote. To fulfil his Ford Fellowship, he would travel for one year around the world, leaving Charlotte to bring up the three children. On the eve of his departure from Exmoor, there was another violent argument in front of Boris.

'You're selfish,' Charlotte told Stanley. 'You only do what you want.'

'No, you're selfish,' replied Stanley, 'not wanting me to do what I want.'

'Stanley was very bad-tempered,' says Charlotte. 'He was always shouting, angry and then he hit me.' Without apologies, Stanley drove off from Nethercote for his next adventure. As Rachel

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Johnson would write nearly fifty years later, 'He is never happier than setting off to live with some remote tribe many thousands of miles from his loved ones . . . He cares far more about other animals than even his own family.'

Being left behind at Nethercote, in those days an eight-hour drive from London, was a punishment for his wife and, as Charlotte believed, an opportunity for serial adultery. Asked many years later if he was, as Charlotte believed, 'completely unfaithful' and 'an amazing womaniser', Stanley replied, 'Total garbage. Honestly.' In his self-deprecating way, Stanley has also said that 'Human relations remain a mystery to me.' His ebullient personality always winning new friends, he loved to travel and, despite any discomfort, seemed unaware of anyone else's feelings. Selfishness was a criticism Stanley could not understand.

*

Life at Nethercote was chaotic. As Boris approached the start of school, the family moved into a dilapidated, unheated house next to his grandparents, Johnny and 'Granny Butter' as 'Buster' became known. With little money, Charlotte was marooned. 'Stanley left me there for a year without a car,' she recalls. Once a month, Buster drove Charlotte in a battered Volkswagen to the cash-and-carry in Minehead to stock up on food. Long before she returned to Minehead four weeks later, their remaining food was stale, damp and mouldy. 'There was no point saying to Stanley, "Give me a car",' Charlotte explains. 'He wouldn't.' In that isolation, she taught her children friendship and loyalty to each other. While they played or read, she painted dark, troubled and remarkable images in oils that reflected her anguish. Nearby, Boris would sit on the unswept floor enthusiastically painting and fluently replying to Charlotte's questions. When asked to play, he would reply: 'Let's play reading,' or 'Let's see who can be quietest for longest.' Untidiness became a way of life. Toys were strewn around the home just as in his later life, rubbish was either thrown into the back of his car or out of the window. Their domesticity was frequently interrupted by sickness. While

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Stanley was saving the rainforests, his family were sick because Nethercote's water was contaminated by lead pipes. 'We were all lying ill on the floor,' says Charlotte. Compounding that sickness, Boris often screamed with pain from agonising earaches caused by grommets. If camphorated vapours and aspirin failed to work, the ever stoical Buster agreed as a last resort to drive through the night to a hospital for antibiotics. The consequence for Boris was periods of deafness.

Getting three children to Winsford's village school every day was a problem, especially in winter. Without a car, Charlotte walked with them nearly two miles to the main road to wait for a lift from Phil, owner of a local garage, who regularly passed in his Land Rover. Charlotte returned home and repeated the walk in the afternoon to collect the children. There was no chance that Johnny would allow Charlotte to use his Land Rover. It had smashed headlights, severely dented bumpers, its roof squashed after a cow pushed it over into a ditch and a piece of twisted metal as replacement for the ignition key. Johnny did not trust her to preserve the wreck. Moreover, he needed the vehicle. Most evenings, he left his wife alone and drove down to the village pub and, after closing time, went to see his girlfriend Kate nearby. His affair had lasted twelve years and, as Charlotte knew, he had simultaneous relationships with other women. Throughout their marriage, Stanley's mother tolerated Johnny's serial adultery – and his miserliness. She was allowed just one new dress every year which he chose and bought without her being present. Similarly, Stanley refused to conform. To adultery and violence, his family could add deserter. Charlotte's only relief were the visits by her parents, James and Beatrice Fawcett.

During those days and over the following years, James Fawcett, a classicist who had won a double first at Oxford, introduced ancient Greece and Rome to his grandson. From the books they read together, Boris learned to admire their civilisation and literature. He became fascinated by the ceaseless competition between macho males driven by self-belief. He learned to adore Rome's heroes, worshipped by the crowds in the Forum and on the battlefield, and

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was intrigued by the Greeks' exaltation of their gods. 'It was a world,' he would write, 'that believed above all in winners and losers, in death and glory.' While other boys imagined themselves as football players, rock stars or doctors, Boris's introduction to the classics conjured a dream of victory and the spotlight shining on the leader. 'As the oldest,' he later wrote, 'I've always known that my position is unchallengeable. It is the fixed point about which my cosmos is organised. I smile indulgently on everybody else's attempts to compete with me. Bring it on, I say.'

In that isolation, the only constant male influence was Johnny, the grandfather. Unaware of his misconduct, his grandchildren loved him, all proudly bearing the special names he gave them. Boris was Beetle, Rachel was Spider, Leo was Fly. Jo, born later, was Flea. Unlike Stanley, Johnny did not smack his grandchildren nor criticise their appearance.

In summer 1970, Stanley returned to Nethercote. He remained frustrated that he had found neither fame nor fortune. In their shambolic world, Boris saw his father write a book about his recent trip and occasionally emerge from his study to teach his children to love the beauty and natural harshness of country life – animals being born and slaughtered and stags hunted to their death. He also told gripping tales about his family's remarkable background – his Muslim father and Boris baptised as a Catholic. Still to come was the discovery that Buster's grandmother, Karoline von Rothenburg, was the illegitimate daughter of a nineteenth-century German prince directly related to Britain's Hanoverian king, George II. For Stanley, an impoverished writer and humanitarian campaigner dependent on his in-laws, the exotic family tree partly satisfied his aspiration for status in a class-conscious society which frowned on foreigners.

Success, Stanley believed, was generated by competition. Instinctively, he pitted his three children against each other – at snooker, reading, maths and table tennis. After Rachel beat Boris at table tennis, she watched his fury: 'he kicked the garage door so hard he broke his toe'. Once, after Rachel got onto a table to make a speech, Boris, with uncontrolled anger, pushed her off to make his own

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speech. There was even Stanley's film to prove Boris's defiance. Sitting calmly alone in a yellow inflatable boat, his six-year-old son was recorded being swept down the river Exe and dropping over a weir. The celluloid does not reveal a glimmer of fear.

The coloured images of a small boy's determination concealed the family's suffering. Charlotte had openly confronted Stanley about his affairs and he denied it. 'Stanley wanted to be loved,' she recalls, 'and wanted sex and he wanted power. And when I contradicted him, it threatened his power.' Charlotte never thought of leaving: 'I stayed because I loved him, despite the abuse.' She sympathised with the frustrations in his life, especially his inability to become a famous writer. 'He wanted to be as famous and successful as his hero, P. G. Wodehouse,' says Charlotte. Stanley found anonymity intolerable. His family understood he would go to the ends of the earth to find fame and new relationships.

Boris agonised over his mother's fate. Not only had he watched his mother suffer from being regularly hit, but he also saw his father blatantly deny the truth. Unwilling to confide in others about his father's violence, he became a loner. In his solitariness, his competitiveness was off-set by self-doubt. To mask the misery and hurt, he demanded attention. Just as his father wilfully amused friends and strangers to conceal the wretched chaos at Nethercote, Boris adopted his father's performance. Rachel, his only confidante, did the same. The beauty of rural life at Nethercote, plus their grandparents' love, inspired their overwhelming resilience. Their survival was assured. Their parents' secret was protected. After many more arguments, Stanley bowed to Charlotte's demand that the family should return to London for the children's education.

With the Fawcetts' financial help, Stanley bought a house in Primrose Hill and Boris went to Princess Road Primary, the local state school. To earn a living, Stanley accepted a job with the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) to encourage birth control. The natural attraction was endless global travel at his employer's expense. The irony was that Jo, Charlotte's fourth child, had just been born. The IPPF was yet another temporary job while Stanley pursued his latest ambition, to be elected to Parliament.

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Joke Aarnink, the Johnsons' Dutch au pair, was the eyewitness to that ambition. One evening, she opened Stanley's front door to Ted Heath, the Tory leader, and Alec Douglas-Home, the former prime minister, for dinner. The evening failed to secure a safe Commons seat for Stanley. But Aarnink's brief employment did seal her memory of Boris as 'insecure and very sensitive'. His lack of self-confidence was well concealed. Any display of vulnerability, Boris learned from his father, was unacceptable.

Finally, in 1972 there was good news. Aged thirty-two, Stanley was offered a well-paid job. Britain had just joined the Common Market (the EEC) and Stanley, as a passionate environmentalist, was asked to be the head of the Prevention of Pollution and Nuisance Division at the EEC's headquarters in Brussels. At public expense, the Johnsons moved in 1973 to Belgium and rented a splendid house. With a good income, Stanley had status, Charlotte was painting and the four children were healthier than previously. In the prestigious social world which the Johnsons now enjoyed, they were reunited with Charles Wheeler, an outstanding BBC broadcast journalist. The families had previously met in Washington. In the small British community, the Johnsons and Wheelers became further united by their children at the European School. Boris (aged nine) and Rachel (eight) met Charles's daughter Marina, although Marina would later say that she was not impressed by Boris's flamboyant showmanship. He would roll around on the ground and throw hard balls at children. Her disapproval was echoed by Mary Kidd, a Norland nanny employed by the family. Some families in Brussels, she said, banned their children from playing with the 'too rough' Johnsons. Nevertheless, after ten years of marriage, the Johnsons appeared a picture of stability. Few guessed from his performance that Stanley revelled in any opportunity to be an unconventional rule-breaker. At parties, Stanley's bonhomie delivered a stream of opinions, occasionally suffocating any chance of a reply. No speech, Stanley believed, was worthy without a succession of jokes. Across the international community, his charm and comic act were appreciated – although Stanley, they learnt, was always about Stanley. 'I can count the seconds,' Rachel would write

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in 2017 about meeting her father for lunch, 'until he says, "So what I've been up to . . . ".' Only a few registered the unfortunate impression that beyond his generosity and good-natured friendship, he seemed to lack sympathy and judicious contemplation. Imitating Stanley, Boris assumed that his life was always going to be about Boris. Like his father, he would entertain to get the laughs and become the leader.

Visitors to the Johnsons' home in Brussels marked out Boris as extraordinary. Aged ten, he read *The Times*, *The Economist* and an eclectic range of novels, not least by P. G. Wodehouse. During that year's holiday in Greece, Boris asked a group of visiting classicists if he could join their game of Scrabble. They agreed, only to be beaten. Believing their defeat to be an aberration, they agreed to a second game only to be beaten again.

The boy's excitement masked deep unhappiness. His parents' marriage had become irredeemably fractured. Charlotte was convinced that Stanley was rampantly unfaithful and a serial womaniser. Images of scantily clad au pair girls were mentioned. Charlotte found the pressure of his neglect and philandering overwhelming. He was inaccessible, neither a friend nor a confidant. 'He hit me,' she says. 'And hit me.' Boris aged ten and nine-year-old Rachel became the guardians of the secret. His family was safer if outsiders did not know.

That year, 1974, the dam broke. Overwhelmed by severe depression, Charlotte suffered a nervous breakdown. She was rushed from Brussels to the Maudsley Hospital in south London. Isolated from her children, she felt wretched. For her four children, the circumstances were unusually difficult.

On an overcast day forty-five years later, in autumn 2019, handicapped by Parkinson's and other illnesses, the accomplished artist who lives with a carer in a small but comfortable Notting Hill Gate flat, disclosed that their marriage 'was ghastly, terrible'. In particular, Charlotte describes the 'difficult times' at the Maudsley. 'I want the truth told,' she said.

Over the years, Stanley has professed ignorance about the causes of his wife's depression. 'I never got to the bottom of it,' he said in

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2019. 'It was too complicated for me and a mystery. Charlotte also never understood the causes. Freud and the mind is a particular mystery.' Strangely, Stanley also feigned ignorance about Charlotte's paintings completed at the hospital. One shows her at the top of a tree, her small children below, arms outstretched while Stanley, standing apart, looks on, completely uninterested.

Charlotte corrects Stanley's recollection: 'The doctors at the Maudsley spoke to Stanley about his abuse of me. He had hit me. He hit me many times, over many years.' On one occasion, Stanley had hit Charlotte especially hard. 'He beat me up and broke my nose,' she recalls. After that attack, Charlotte was treated in the St John & St Elizabeth Hospital in north-west London. The children were told that a car door had hit their mother's face. Boris, however, knew the truth.

'Although Stanley hit me, he made me feel I deserved it,' she explains. Her parents, who lived near the hospital, visited their daughter daily. 'My parents confronted Stanley about it,' she continued, 'but he denied it.' Although Boris was just ten years old, Charlotte forensically discussed her marriage and condition with her eldest son. On the one hand, she realised, her son 'admired his father's humour and dash'. With some sadness, she recalled that Boris had witnessed her being hit by Stanley. 'That was terrible for the children,' Charlotte admitted. 'Unfortunately,' she told Boris, 'I'm driving your father mad.' Her stoic bravery and silence taught Boris never to reveal vindictiveness or bear grudges. He learned to act without revealing his motives. Most important, Boris has never revealed how those events permanently influenced his life, character and personality. Psychologists agree that the children of battered women are worried, frightened, confused and vulnerable. Without sufficient stability, security and protection, they are exposed to substantial risk.

While Charlotte was in hospital, Stanley was responsible for his children. But he was absent from their home in Brussels for much of the time, leaving an au pair in charge. The young children were often expected to look after themselves, even making the arrangements to travel from Brussels to London to visit their mother.

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Neither then nor later did Stanley voice any sympathy for Charlotte's illness. 'Depression wasn't allowed in Stanley's book,' Allegra Mostyn-Owen would discover. Even now, Rachel refuses to blame Stanley. 'It was difficult for my dad too,' she wrote. 'I can't pretend it wasn't bleak, but he did brilliantly to keep it all going. He very much kept the show on the road. And my mother is a brilliant, brilliant mother . . . I feel fiercely protective towards my parents.' Boris understood the cause of his mother's condition. 'I have often thought,' Charlotte would later say, 'that his being "world king" was a wish to make himself unhurtable, invincible, somehow safe from the pains of your mother disappearing for eight months.' Her stoic acceptance of her fate during Boris's visits to the Maudsley imbued in him an absence of malice. If his mother was not angry, then Boris could not be angry. After all, Stanley had promised him that he would never leave his beloved mother. The lesson he did draw from witnessing the violence was to avoid overt confrontation.

On Charlotte's return to Brussels, Boris assumed that she was cured. Among her first paintings was a self-portrait. Sitting in a chair surrounded by her family, Charlotte's head is thrown back and her mouth is wide open, screaming. She called her painting *Hasn't Worked*.

During those weeks, Stanley decided that his children needed a better education than was available in Brussels. His ambition was they should all follow him to Oxford. Based on his own upbringing, it was quite natural to send very young children to boarding school and, in his words, leave their upbringing to the school. Charlotte had no alternative but to agree. He chose Ashdown House in East Sussex, a prep school renowned for teaching classics and coaching its best pupils to win a place at Eton.

Aged eleven, Boris arrived with Rachel, the school's first girl. Stanley cannot remember whether he delivered his children on their first day. He assumes that Boris and Rachel travelled alone from Brussels. In the pre-Channel Tunnel era that meant a train to Ostend, a boat to Dover and then a train to the school – carrying luggage from train to boat to train. 'It was tough,' wrote Rachel.

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'We were in the throes of my parents' ice-stormesque open marriage and that was the end of family life. We learnt very quickly, very early, not to have emotional needs.' Boris has never spoken publicly about his feelings at that time. Charlotte is certain that her suffering played on him. He was happy reading, going alone to museums or painting. The untidiness of his childhood was deeply embedded. Unlike his siblings, he could never shed Nethercote's chaos. At Ashdown House, denied his mother's embrace and the absence of any home warmth, there was a vast emotional hole. Some called the result, the 'frozen child'. Stanley however dismissed the notion that his children were abandoned or suffered pain: 'It's a strange idea that parents should talk to their children at home. I didn't have much influence on my children. I never read to them or asked about their homework. I relied on the schools.'

The introduction into Boris's life of Clive Williams, Ashdown's classics teacher, was fortunate. Sitting at the back of the class for the first days, Boris remained unnoticed until an English teacher brought his first essay – a laugh-aloud piece – into the common room. The teachers agreed that their new pupil was exceptionally well read and a potential scholar. After the first Latin and Greek lessons, Williams declared that his new pupil could master the classics from scratch and could, with hard work, be sufficiently proficient within two years to get a place at Eton. 'He was better and faster than anyone else I had taught,' Williams would report – not only in the tests, but Boris also quickly learnt the lines of the king in the Greek play *Rhesus*, for example, and acted with 'a sense of drama and understanding of the language'. His personal qualities also emerged – warm hearted and competitive to perform at the centre of the stage, unable like his father, to bear anonymity.

At the heart of his performance was an adaptation of Bertie Wooster, P. G. Wodehouse's buffoonish upper-class character. Wooster is repeatedly saved from disaster by Jeeves, his erudite manservant. There is good reason to adore Wodehouse, one of the finest and funniest prose writers of his time. His plots and dialogue are remarkable. Imitating Wooster, however, is to confess to being a bit of a life's clown oneself. Wooster makes light of

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everything and gets away with everything. Absolution is always at hand. The question raised in later years was whether Boris was really an unserious, spontaneous Wooster-like buffoon or rather was presenting himself as a clown in a calculated act to conceal that at his core, his serious life was best approached with invincible optimism and indefatigable hope. He played it both ways by adopting Wodehouse's mantra that those who are principled and clever should wear their learning lightly.

The summer of 1976 in Nethercote was memorable for the extraordinary heat and nudity. Sometimes Stanley and Charlotte walked around their homes without clothes. That summer, Stanley told the two au pairs that since there was a water shortage – the river had run dry – they would be unable to wash their clothes so they should just as well not wear any. Both complied and walked around in the nude. Stanley insisted on two au pairs in case one resigned. In the event, both stayed for the summer not least because Stanley, in the knowledge of his children, embarked on an affair with one of the girls.

At the end of two years at Ashdown, Boris's mastery of classics was acknowledged by his entry into Eton as a King's Scholar, a remarkable achievement which classed him among Eton's elite. He left Ashdown House with a glowing testimonial praising his optimism, gamesmanship, debating skills, and with no criticism about his character or morals. Charlotte credited the school for instilling his ferocious ambition. His critics would later say that feeding that ambition damaged his character. His own only criticism of Ashdown was corporal punishment. 'I remember being so enraged at being whacked for talking at the wrong moment,' he wrote, 'that it has probably given me a lifelong distrust of authority.' His other legacy was to arrive at Eton in 1977 with a perfected Wodehousean performance.

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Chapter 2

Effortlessly Superior

With his mop of blond hair, wearing his scholar's gown over his tails and white tie, Alexander Johnson stood out among Eton's 1,200 pupils. For more than most of the entrants, the school exposed him to a new world. Boris's ambitions were transformed. The provost's introductory speech encouraged the scholar to regard himself as a future leader. No fewer than eighteen Old Etonians had been prime minister and, as Robert Birley, a famous former head master had said, 'We are turning out the human material to run the nation.' With brutal expectations, Eton chose its elite with an emphasis on winning. Each pupil was bestowed with a 'sense of his own importance' and instilled with a conviction that nothing was impossible. While emphasising courtesy, bearing and a duty to care for society, scholars felt protected by a glass ceiling through which others could not break.

Eton liberated Boris. During the ransack of his room by other pupils, his passport was found and defaced – de Pfeffel became Pee-Pee – and his fellow pupils, amused by his non-establishment second name, decided to call him Boris rather than Alexander. Charlotte noticed how Eton changed him. He became a bare-knuckle boy, anxious in full public view to get everything out of life. 'He was a very good member of College,' said John Lewis, his housemaster. 'Humorous, loyal and, in the politest possible way, irreverent.' These qualities were attractive to others, who enjoyed him quoting Nigel Molesworth ('girly swot', 'down with skool'), and shared his obsession for *Private Eye*. Combined with P. G. Wodehouse, a new person was emerging.

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The happiness was interrupted during his summer holidays at Nethercote in 1978. Stanley told his children that he and Charlotte were divorcing. They had been married for fifteen years. 'Why did you have us?' Boris asked his father alongside the three other children. Stanley would subsequently claim not to understand why his marriage collapsed, or whether his children suffered, 'because I never asked them'. Charlotte made no secret to their friends about her reason for demanding an end: 'I couldn't stay with him. He was inaccessible, not to say completely unfaithful.' His flippant insincerity, she said, was intolerable. Her close friends in Brussels knew that the fact that she was no longer prepared to put up with the violence was the tipping point. She also revealed Stanley's violence to Nick Wahl, a charming American academic whom she had met that year in Brussels at a dinner hosted by Roy Jenkins, the Labour politician serving as the European Commission's president. The following morning, Wahl came to see her paintings and then invited her to Paris where he lived. Since Stanley was, as usual, away, she accepted and began a regular commute. Her children endured benign neglect. Clive Williams, the classics teacher at Ashdown, noticed that Jo, the most gifted of the four children, 'became very quiet'.

'I was upset when they broke up,' was the limit of Boris's disclosure in 2004, adding, 'It had some effect. They handled it brilliantly.' In truth, Stanley's violence has forever haunted Boris. 'My father promised me that they wouldn't divorce,' he told a girlfriend years later, 'and I could never forgive him for that.' The 'divorce' was code for Stanley's rage towards Charlotte. What followed compounded the damage. They were abandoned as children after the divorce. They had to bring themselves up. They had no home.

The family house in Primrose Hill was sold and Charlotte bought a two-bedroom maisonette in Elgin Crescent, Notting Hill Gate, for herself and the four children. By installing partitions, three extra bedrooms were created. With little money, Charlotte survived by selling her paintings and letting out the bedrooms during term time. 'There was nothing in the fridge,' recalled Rachel.

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'There wasn't much to eat.' Thereafter, Stanley declared, he had little influence on his children. 'I paid for all the children's education,' he insisted. Financed by his EU salary, the school payments were reduced by Eton's and Bryanston's scholarships. But, Charlotte recalls, the Fawcetts also made regular contributions. The schools, said Stanley, were responsible for his children's fate. The children disagreed. During the holidays they were often alone in Notting Hill Gate while Charlotte was in Paris, or they travelled unaccompanied to Brussels, and later to New York after Wahl moved there, joined by Charlotte.

Before his return to Eton at the end of the summer, Rachel noticed Boris's insecurity, as did a visitor who entered the table-tennis room at Nethercote and saw Boris banging Leo's head into the wall because his younger brother had just beaten him. In Boris's world, winning was essential. Etonians were about to witness his determination to defeat others.

The contrasts in the school were unique. Boris found himself surrounded by the children of Britain's aristocracy with seemingly unlimited wealth who had also suffered difficult childhoods. 'We were the children of fathers who failed their sons and created troubled boys,' recalled one early friend. Boris shared that destabilising neglect. The pain, said Rachel, made him impetuous. The romanticism of his beloved classics justified his recklessness. In Greek and Roman literature, there is contempt for the risk averse: fortune favours the bold, sacrifice is noble and even the brave are prepared to die in the ditch. Like magic, after reading Jasper Griffin's lucid *Homer on Life and Death*, he had understood the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the principal characters of Athens, their relationship between death and glory, and that there could be no glory without death. According to Homer's *Iliad*, heroes are more virtuous than the gods because mortality compels them to develop the supreme virtue of courage.

Boris also found a hero, Pericles, a revered Athenian who, with charisma and shameless populism, pleased the crowds to win constant re-election. Blending the influences – Wooster, Molesworth, *Just William* and Pericles – Boris developed a unique oratorical style

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in the school debates combined with the belief that every speech must include humour. But unlike Stanley, he remained noticeably sensitive about his audience, always searching for approval. In the same way, he was loyal in sport, leading the charge in rugby, a zealous overperformer, excising his unstable background.

Poor, scruffy, haunted yet shrewd and able to conceal his self-doubt, Boris gradually emerged as a leader, usually captain of the team. He chose his friends, not for their wealth, but to share their 'parentlessness'. Roger Clarke, at Eton thanks to his adopted parents' sacrifice, enjoyed long discussions about literature and admired Boris's 'slightly wonky poetry jukebox'. Blessed with an excellent memory, Boris could recite hundreds of poems, Shakespeare sonnets and the first hundred lines of the *Iliad* in Greek. His more infamous friends were Charles Spencer, the brother of Diana, later Princess of Wales, and Darius Guppy, a louche, iconoclastic Anglo-Iranian. All three shared emotional hardship during their childhood.

Boris and Charles Spencer shared an interest in writing. Frequently, Boris mentioned his father – dubbed 'Stanley the Steel' – as a writer, mirroring his need to emulate and outperform Stanley. As in all his friendships with men, Boris disguised his hurt and solitude beneath brash humour and personal warmth. Without revealing his true thoughts, especially to Spencer, he nevertheless sought his approval. That summer, Spencer invited Boris to Spain. He returned dazzled by Spencer's fame and fortune. In return, Spencer was invited to Nethercote. The viscount was noticeably appalled by the conditions but soon enjoyed the games – especially 'Murder in the Dark' – and the drinking. Darius Guppy was not invited to Nethercote. Boris's relationship with that 'exotic creature' was unconventional. Byronic and romantic about mysterious cult forces, Guppy's exaggerated qualities amused Boris, especially his obsession with ghosts and witches. Like Boris, Guppy sought reassurance. Some doubted whether in Eton's fiercely competitive atmosphere those were genuine friendships. Etonians were not encouraged to be mutually supportive, but rather to take each other down. In any event, unlike his contemporaries in the school,

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in 1979 Boris was not just a romantic adolescent but also was beguiled by politics.

On 4 June, Founder's Day, Stanley paid a rare visit to Eton, to watch the annual cricket match on Agar's Plough. Parking his dilapidated Fiat alongside Bentleys and Rolls-Royces, his car stood out for many reasons, especially because the scratched paintwork was covered with 'Vote Johnson' stickers. For some months, Stanley had sought a parliamentary seat. The Labour government was collapsing and Margaret Thatcher was on the eve of entering Downing Street that May. To have become a candidate required Stanley to cultivate relationships. His early efforts had been sabotaged by his own risky language and careless attitudes. When asked in Leicester whether he had ever previously visited the city, he replied, 'No, but I have often walked through Leicester Square.' Charlotte noticed that while Stanley had always chortled about rejection, Boris learned not to tread on people's toes and, unlike his father, to be kind. Charlotte credited herself with inculcating in her children genuine politeness.

After repeated failures, Stanley was finally placed that year on the shortlist for East Hampshire in Europe's first parliamentary elections. His competitor was Bill Cash, an old friend from Oxford. Johnson won the nomination for the safe Tory seat. 'Stanley,' recalled Cash, 'was not a Tory and he had no political convictions. He was just passionate about environmental laws.' Three days after the cricket match, Stanley won the election. He drove Boris down to Portsmouth for the count. On the way, the Fiat caught fire and all the rosettes were singed. Just days before his fifteenth birthday, Boris watched his father, wearing a burnt rosette, claim victory and, as the new MEP, bask in the applause. There was no prepared speech, merely an outpouring of words intended only to grip the audience's attention and without much care about their accuracy. Success, Boris evidently concluded, depended on an energetic performance and good jokes.

Within months, Stanley was disillusioned with politics. Life in the impotent European Parliament, he discovered, was uninteresting. He applied again to be a candidate for election to Westminster.

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'I made some silly jokes,' he admitted, 'and didn't get the seat.' He abandoned his parliamentary ambitions and returned to a post in the Brussels Commission. By then, Boris had learned some of the lessons of his father's failure. Unlike Stanley, he recognised the importance of concentration, beliefs and principles; and details were more valuable than generalities, although as the master of opportunism he often struggled to implement all those lessons. When faced with unfortunate difficulties, Boris embraced one motto that Stanley preached: 'Nothing matters very much and most things don't matter at all.' And, he could add, avoid apologising.

At school, Boris had established a relationship with one particular teacher – Martin Hammond, a noted classicist. Hammond was delighted to encounter a student who not only shared his enthusiasm for Latin and Greek but also shone as an outstanding intellect. In September 1980, he wrote to Stanley: 'I've found Boris a quite delightful person, a real life-enhancer. I like his open friendliness of manner and his ready wit.' Seven months later, Hammond again wrote to praise Boris for 'asserting his intellectual ascendancy powerfully but modestly'. His caveat was that the sixteen-year-old could undermine his ability as a 'considerable scholar' and 'a classicist of real distinction, one of the best we've had for years' by a lack of focus and tardiness to deliver his homework on time.

Proud of what he called 'my benevolent disinterest', Stanley ignored the warning. 'I didn't read Hammond's reports,' he says, 'or perhaps I gave them a cursory read, but I never sat with the children to discuss their reports or told Boris to behave.' He rarely went to 'tedious' parents' evenings. 'I wouldn't want to take up the teachers' time,' he explained. Regarding his eldest son's education, Stanley's only stricture to Boris was, 'If you're working hard, don't show it. You should be paddling underneath but show effortless superiority.' Hammond was invited once for dinner with Stanley but Boris was not mentioned.

Stanley was focused on his new marriage to Jenny Kidd, a young widow and the stepdaughter of Teddy Sieff, the chairman of Marks & Spencer. Within one year, Jenny gave birth to Julia. Between his marriage and daughter's birth, Stanley's relationship with his other

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four children changed. They found that there was no bedroom provided at their father's new home in Brussels. All four blamed Jenny for the rupture. Jo in particular found the distancing from Stanley difficult. Over the following years, Stanley and his new family would create a separate existence, whitewashing the reasons for the breakdown of Stanley's first marriage and rejecting any description of Stanley which did not accord with their version.

In 1981 Boris was elected to Pop, the society for Eton's most popular and outstanding pupils. Spencer joined him, as did Guppy who, unlike Boris, was forced as a Non-PLU – 'Not People Like Us' – to campaign for his election to Pop. For some, Guppy was 'exotic' while for others he was 'slimy'. For his admirers, Guppy's self-mythologising was electric. Working himself into a frenzy, he held his audience's attention by boasting, 'I'm off to fight the Russians.' On another occasion, proffering his pilot's licence, he related how in mid-air he had frightened a passenger by turning off the plane's engine. Styling himself as a poet and womaniser – he had sex before anyone else in his year – he beguiled Boris by his adventures with the mother of a London friend. Still a virgin, Boris was impressed by Guppy's account of regularly slipping through a garden window into the married woman's Chelsea house. Later, Boris offered stories about himself, boasting about sex with some of the family's au pairs and about a relationship with Alex de Ferranti, a school friend of Rachel's. Sex had become ever more important in his life. The wonder of male superiority in ancient civilisations was free sex and unrestrained relationships enjoyed without rancour or guilt. In ancient Greece, endless sex was perfectly acceptable. Christianity, Boris would later curse, suppressed that idyllic world.

Fortunate that he could read and absorb textbooks much faster than others, he began busking his studies. Disliking solitariness, he was immersed in rugby, cricket, debating, acting, learning to play the piano and running the Political Society. In everything, Boris sought to excel and, with the exception of the piano, succeeded. In rugby and the wall game, Eton's unique test of brawn and courage, he led the pack, renowned for hurling himself – do or die – at his opponents. Reckless to some, he loved the uncontrolled

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aggression – breaking bones and egos – with one objective: to win. The price for his hyperactivity was angry teachers, annoyed by his tardiness and waning diligence. Conformity had become for him an anathema.

'Rubbish,' growled Eric Anderson, a remarkable English teacher and later head master of Eton, while Boris was reading an essay about a subject which bored him. And if he was bored he was idle. 'Unacceptable,' carped the drama teacher after Boris failed to learn his lines for his part as the king in *Richard III* and stuck slips of paper on the props across the stage. 'Johnson's atrocious acting did not quite destroy this production,' was the sentiment of the review. Boris was perfecting the art of playing himself, but as an actor he was wooden. Busking and cutting corners annoyed some, but his jokes and good nature appeased the rest. The casualties were miffed. Roger Clarke, the joint editor for three months with Boris of *Chronicle*, the school magazine, was shocked when Boris disappeared leaving Clarke to do all the work. If the choice was sport or engaging in the solitary editorship of the magazine, Boris chose the fun. Clarke paid a high price. He failed exams to win a school scholarship – which still rankles forty years later.

In April 1982, Hammond issued a stark warning to Boris's parents about their unconventional showman son: 'Boris really has adopted a disgracefully cavalier attitude to his classical studies and the scandal . . . would be if he did drop a grade at A level through sheer fecklessness.' Hammond concluded that his prize pupil 'sometimes seems affronted when criticised for what amounts to a gross failure of responsibility (and surprised at the same time that he was not appointed Captain of School for next half) . . . I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else.'

Stanley did not read the report, while Charlotte urged Boris to improve but that did not influence his teacher's stark conclusion at the end of the academic year: 'Boris has something of a tendency to assume that success and honours will drop into his lap: not so, he must work for them.' Nevertheless, as one of the school's most

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popular pupils, a charmer and a friend to everyone, Boris was elected a member of Pop, Eton's elite club of elected prefects. The appointment brought duties and influence, the first rung on the 'greasy pole' to power.

Hammond's criticism spoke of Eton's ambition to stretch pupils and juggle their lives so they learned the true sense of self-worth. 'You have to give them the tools to shape their destiny and change the world,' said a later head master. 'We should be unashamed about excellence and celebrate elitism. But also teach how to deal with failure and sticking with it. Be ambitious, have self-belief but don't be arrogant.'

With Hammond's encouragement, Boris won a place to study classics at Balliol, one of Oxford's top colleges. A first in Greats, classics teachers believed, was a passport to a dignified life, not necessarily rich but correct in a social and moral sense. That myth hardly matched Boris's lifestyle or his aspirations. He did not seek a conventional, dignified life. Content to be the insider's outsider, he sought to be flamboyantly exceptional, a trait Hammond recognised and condemned. Winning the Balliol scholarship irritated his teacher. Hammond disliked his pupil's 'effortless superiority', excelling without apparently much effort. 'My fear,' wrote Hammond in his last message to Stanley in January 1983, 'is that Boris may take his easy-going ways with him to Balliol and add to the statistics of Etonians who do little work at Oxbridge.' Anticipating that Boris would not work hard enough to win a first, Hammond concluded that despite his 'very sharp intelligence . . . I think it true to say that Boris has no real academic bent, and he'll be an easier prey than some to the temptations of Oxford life.'

Hammond's judgement was accurate. In his farewell to Eton, Boris inserted in the leaving book a photograph of himself wearing two scarves and holding a machine gun, with his pledge to score 'more notches on my phallocratic phallus'. A bold gesture, bordering on inappropriate, but nothing if not memorable. Two years later, the relatively invisible David Cameron recorded a forgotten message in Eton's leaving book.

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Chapter 3

Uncertain Star

Fellow students would later say that Boris arrived in Oxford in 1983 planning to reach the Cabinet by the age of thirty-five. Eton and Balliol are enviable starts for those with political ambitions. Eton has produced innumerable Cabinet ministers and dozens of Balliol graduates have become famous statesmen. The added ingredients to fuel Boris's ambition were observing Stanley's attempts to become a politician and his own admiration of Roman and Greek history. Students of history often become mesmerised by a particular character. For Boris, fascinated by the two ancient civilisations' outstanding leaders, he unashamedly sought to emulate his heroes. Adopting not only their ideas but also their oratorical style to win popular appeal, he dreamt of hearing millions applaud his achievements. The first steps to advance his ambitions coincided with an unusual burst of heroics and leadership.

The year 1983 was a watershed in Britain – the eve of a revolution. In the wake of her victory in the Falklands the previous year, Margaret Thatcher won a landslide general election and the country was about to shake off the shackles of a socialist economy and the label as 'the sick man of Europe'. The nightmare of the 1970s was over. Starting with Ted Heath's 'three-day week', through endless strikes, shortages and devaluation ending with the destructive Winter of Discontent in 1979, the decade had been worse than a waste. Ever since Harold Wilson imposed socialism on Britain after 1964, the country's decline had been marked by a crippling brain drain. To escape confiscatory taxation and punitive state control,

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the most talented of Britain's wealth creators had fled abroad to earn their fortunes. For Boris, bred as a natural Conservative by his father and Eton, Thatcher was the harbinger of a new dawn and new hope. Boris had just enjoyed a gap year in Australia with Hillie, his father's sister and his cousins, teaching Latin and English in Geelong Grammar, the country's leading private school. He returned with little to say about his experience but proudly wearing Stubbies shorts and R. M. Williams boots.

Balliol excelled in teaching classics. Jasper Griffin, the author of *Homer on Life and Death*, was the college's fellow in classical literature. To be taught by a cult figure famous for his wit, enthusiasm and scholarship, enthused the new arrival. Less exciting were Boris's fellow students in the common room. Most were 'to the left of the Communist Party', observed Anthony Kenny, a philosophy teacher and Balliol's master, and 'Trots were the main people so Boris did not find it congenial. As a conventional Tory, he preferred palling up with fellow Etonians.' The most notable were Charles Spencer and Darius Guppy at Magdalen. Eventually, Boris also met David Cameron. Since Cameron was two years younger and had been neither a King's Scholar nor elected to Pop, Boris would honestly claim to have only the vaguest memory of his new acquaintance. Boris's most notable friend was Justin Rushbrooke, a Harrovian living in the neighbouring room at Balliol and also studying classics. Unlike Boris, Rushbrooke was not ambitious and uninterested in fame.

Drawing on his experiences at Eton then perfected in front of elite students in Australia, Boris arrived with a mature showman's hunger for celebrity and ultimately election as president of the Oxford Union, the student debating society. Famous throughout the world for the high quality of debates and the star guests invited to stand in its hallowed chamber, the Union cast a spell over every student aspiring to impress themselves upon history. The Union was a natural magnet for Boris. Standing in raffish clothes at the Union bar, he entertained his audience as the life and soul of the party (although he was markedly reluctant to pay for drinks). Some would say that his routine was a camouflage to protect himself

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from rejection but they would be mistaken. Although sensitive to criticism, he was fearless when he challenged his opponents in Union debates.

Facing other students and occasionally famous guests, the new arrival immediately demonstrated his established and repeated music-hall routine rehearsed at Eton. After patting his pockets to ask his audience 'Where am I? Am I in the wrong place?', he started off in the rhythm and deliberate hesitation of Churchill's speeches to support one side of the argument, then switched to advocate the opposing argument leaving the audience baffled but intrigued. Next, he appealed to the audience's sympathy by highlighting his own emotional vulnerability. To win laughs and applause, he appeared to forget his lines, although that was often a well-concealed truth to manage the repetition of old jokes. 'Humour is a utensil that you can use to sugar the pill and get important points across,' he would say. While his opponents stuck to the normal Oxford Union rules, posing as veteran politicians to make themselves appear as authentic, Boris set his own rules to appear more honest than his rivals. Then, with the audience's attention and embrace, he made his pitch as a trustworthy orator who would not try to fool them. Debating at the union about the abolition of capital punishment, he impressed Toby Young, a fellow student, as 'something of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. He had an electrifying, charismatic presence of a kind I'd only read about in books before.' With his imposing build and huge head decked with an unruly mop of blond hair, his way of speaking projected, recalled Young, 'a state of advanced dishevelment and a sense of coiled strength, of an almost tangible will to power. He was the finished article.'

Within weeks of the new term, as the unrivalled star at the Union, the student gossip was about 'this amazing person just up from Eton'. Even at this stage, a few mentioned him as a future prime minister. He was not the cleverest but possessed a magic combination of intelligence, wit, cunning and exhibitionism.

His showmanship disturbed Charlotte when she visited Boris at Balliol with Nick Wahl, a graduate of Nuffield College. Beneath her son's sparkle, she saw that his childhood grief about his parents'

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relationship lingered. Ignoring his mother's new happiness and Wahl's warmth towards the Johnson children, Charlotte noticed how Boris 'hated Nick'. Normally shy in one-to-one encounters and uneasy to look people in the eye, he was, Charlotte concludes, 'jealous about Stanley. He wanted his parents to be married. Boris's reaction was primitive.'

Boris needed a soulmate, someone with whom he could speak heart-to-heart. That, he found, was impossible with men. Only a woman could ever be his confidante. His requirements rarely changed: good-looking, intelligent and sophisticated. On that scale, few girls in Oxford exceeded Allegra Mostyn-Owen, a student at the neighbouring Trinity College. Students spoke of Allegra as one of Oxford's most beautiful women, a judgement confirmed when she was photographed by David Bailey for the cover of the re-vamped aristocratic *Tatler* magazine, which transformed her into the most desirable trophy. Her father, William Mostyn-Owen, was a landowner and a director of the auction house Christie's; her mother, Gaia Servadio, was a well-known Italian journalist. The family lived in an imposing house at Woodhouse in Shropshire, and also owned Aberuchill, a seventeenth-century castle in Scotland. 'I don't know how many bedrooms there are,' Gaia Servadio had once said about the castle, conjuring the impression that her Eton- and Cambridge-educated husband was rich.

Allegra was an amazing catch way beyond any student's approach. Except for Boris. During the first term, he arrived in her room with a bottle of wine for a party, only to discover it was the wrong night. He stayed, they shared the bottle and Allegra, despite her many boyfriends in London, became attracted because 'I'd never met anyone like Boris. I felt happy and relaxed. He was non-threatening, so easy and he made me laugh.' His striking hair, use of absurdly unusual words and his self-entitlement as an Eton scholar and head of Pop made her feel special: 'I felt secure with Boris.'

He was also cool. Unlike the proposals and declarations of love from others, Boris just made endless jokes. Over the following weeks, he dispatched funny messages through the colleges' internal mail to his new girlfriend in the self-conscious style described in

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Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. As they established a close relationship, Allegra's attraction to Boris intensified.

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After a trip to Turkey to trace his family history and some time at a kibbutz, Boris returned to Oxford for his second year ready to be shaped by his classical education and become a confident politician. Sincerity is not always relevant to classical studies. Originality of thought is prized, even though it can occasionally lead to flights of fancy that have little purchase on evidence. As in chess, the pieces are there, and new and ingenious ways to move them and dismay others can become an obsessive goal for bright students. Verses and prose are marked by teachers according to the quality of the rendering, not for innovation; but a critical understanding of great poetry and literature requires intensive thought and sympathetic engagement. More than other subjects in the Humanities, classics supplies a framework for thought, accuracy and self-confidence. In the classics, there is grammar, there is scansion, there is an apt quotation and a wealth of historical and political teaching concerned not just with winners but with the foundational ideas of society and civilisation. As a grammarian and student of rhetoric, the classicist is a master of language, seeking to persuade others of the merit of his case and of himself. In short, the classicist cannot be phoney; but a lesser student may be something of a bluffer, as a good chess player can be, by giving the impression to his or her opponent by mere verbal dexterity that they are pursuing a deep and well-thought-out plan.

In drawing on the classics, Boris's critics would say he replaced sincerity with parody, an act and a promise where his ruthlessness was dressed up as integrity. That would become Boris's smokescreen while concealing the weakness of his classical education. Unlike other classical scholars, however eloquent, Boris failed to master the dialectic and forensically destroy his opponent's arguments. Like Cicero, when Boris lacked a good case, he relied on improvisation, bluster and playing to the gallery.

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Boris's goal now was to be elected president of the Union, a milestone for many aspiring politicians. His plan coincided with Margaret Thatcher's new government being threatened by Marxist trade unionists, especially the miners, in a febrile political atmosphere.

Like his predecessors, Boris ignored the Union's rule expressly forbidding canvassing for support. He recruited what he called 'a disciplined and deluded collection of stooges' to gather the vote. The delusion, he admitted, was to promise his 'stooges' a return favour to help their own election campaign for other posts. Their relationship, he later admitted, was 'founded on duplicity' because he could not support every stooge who helped him. Each of them 'wants so much to believe that his relationship with the candidate is special that he shuts out the truth . . . The terrible art of the candidate is to coddle the self-deception of the stooge.'

Boris entered the presidential race to win. His defeat taught him a salutary lesson. He had limited his appeal to Etonians and other public-school undergraduates, isolating himself from the majority of students. That was folly. 'Boris hated losing,' recalled Allegra. 'I was uninterested in his Union stuff but I agreed that he could invite potential supporters to my parties. Hacking to get their vote.' Allegra was also reluctant to hear Boris speak at the Union. She went just twice, once to listen to the Greek actress and politician Melina Mercouri. 'I wasn't interested,' says the strong-willed Allegra. Her steely demeanour added to her attraction for Boris, if not for his close friends. The antipathy was mutual. 'Charles Spencer,' she declares, 'wasn't charming or popular so it was hard to understand the basis of his friendship with Boris – except that he was useful.' She was also critical of Darius Guppy: 'He was an irritant who needed reassurance that he was liked, but his exaggerated qualities amused Boris.'

More than ever, bohemian rule-breakers like Guppy attracted Boris. Despite Boris's financial constraints and middle-class background, Boris shared with Guppy an Old Etonian's aristocratic indifference to bourgeois conventions. Together with Charles Spencer, they jointly edited *Tributary*, a magazine inherited from Toby

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Young. Boris firmly refused to continue its seditious exposure of students' embarrassments. Aiming to stand for election again, he did not want any enemies. He wanted to be loved. The exception were the victims of the Bullingdon Club.

Limited to about twenty-four members, the club united Old Etonians and rich progenies to a night of excessive drinking and riotous behaviour to enjoy wrecking restaurants, bars and bedrooms. This was occasionally accompanied by performances of buxom strippers. Among the well-known members were David Cameron and George Osborne. As a pinnacle of reckless fun and debauchery, Boris adored the club's notoriety. Among his victims was Matthew Leeming who spotted Boris arriving to destroy his flat. 'I'm calling the police,' he shouted to protect himself. Radek Sikorski recalled that while asleep in the middle of the night, about twelve students led by Boris burst into his room, trashed all his belongings and, at the end, he heard Boris announce, 'Congratulations man, you've been elected.' Boris was also present when a flowerpot was thrown through a restaurant window and the premises wrecked. 'The party ended up,' he would later say, 'with a number of us crawling on all fours through the hedges of the Botanical Gardens and trying to escape police dogs. And once we were in the cells, we became namby-pambies.'

Boris's enthusiasm for the Bullingdon's raucous world stemmed partly from P. G. Wodehouse's portrayal of the Drones Club, in which loyalty to one's old school chums is the principal and unbreakable law. To outsiders, the Bullingdon cast were rich Old Etonian idiots who had never grown up, behaved like hooligans, treated women as goddesses or monsters, had no apparent parents, and were alienated from the lower classes. Boris was different. The Bullingdon mix for him was not to eulogise the exceptional qualities of Etonians but about embracing an anarchic passion to break rules, undoubtedly inherited from his father.

In 2013, Boris admitted that he looked back at the Bullingdon days with a sense of 'deep, deep self-loathing'. He added, 'This is a truly shameful vignette of almost superhuman undergraduate arrogance, toffishness and twittishness. But at the time you felt it

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was wonderful to be going round swanking it up. Actually I remember the dinners being incredibly drunken.' Since it was hard to get Boris to pay for drinks, extracting money to compensate for his vandalism proved impossible.

Membership of the Bullingdon did not harm his second attempt to be elected Union president in November 1985. He had learned the lesson. Since hardline Tories had an impossible hurdle to overcome, he would pose as a member of the new Social Democrat Party which combined right-wing deserters from the Labour Party and some Liberals. He also spoke in favour of Israel in order to get the Jewish vote and, to get the nascent green vote, about his passion for the environment. Grasping the crudity of elections, Boris, like Stanley, was not a conviction politician. 'He wasn't entrenched in his opinions,' recalls Allegra. 'I was an SDP Keynesian and he was a Thatcherite spouting trickle-down nonsense. He wasn't a libertarian.' Some, including Frank Luntz, an American student who would become a famous pollster and who had initially supported his efforts, were shocked by Boris's opportunism. But as so often in Boris's life, his critics' anger was fuelled by their own dissatisfaction. Luntz, called 'Frank Y Fronts' by Boris, did not enjoy Oxford. Unsuccessful with girls, he could not understand the class system and eventually resented helping Boris.

Among Boris's stooges was Michael Gove, the adopted son of the owner of a fish-processing business. Educated at a Scottish independent school and studying English at Lady Margaret Hall, a minor college compared to Balliol, Gove was lower in Oxford's social hierarchy than Boris, but nevertheless eagerly supported his election. During his strategic campaign, Boris was hyper-conscious of attacks on his own character, especially by Lloyd Evans and Aidan Hartley, the joint student editors of a satirical magazine. They planned to ridicule Boris as an incompetent exiled Armenian chicken farmer. In the middle of the night, Boris stormed into Hartley's Oxford home and demanded that the piece should not be published. Being a chicken farmer, Boris declared, was acceptable, but 'incompetent' was outlawed. The article was dropped. The two students – who would later write for the *Spectator* under Boris's editorship – understood that

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Boris saw himself in Oxford as special. He wanted others to believe in his destiny and favoured those prepared to empower his myths. Damage to his image was intolerable.

Boris convincingly won the election. In the aftermath, he wrote an unbeatable account of campaigning for the post in *Oxford Myth*, a witty anthology edited by his sister Rachel. Some have damned his elegant description of how he recruited gullible students including Gove to work for his campaign in return for false promises as Boris congratulating himself for the deception, but that's foolish. In 2003 he explained: 'I think my essay remains the *locus classicus* of the English genre of bogus self-deception.' He captured the unique self-absorbed madness of student politics. Yet, critics insist, his essay is a confession of dishonest politicking. Whether he told lies or allowed the electorate to be deceived depends on the mindset of the commentator. Anthony Kenny was equivocal: 'So far as I know, he told no actual lies, but his strategy recalled Macaulay's words about the difference between lying and deceiving.' Talleyrand, the French diplomat, 'never told a lie and deceived the whole world'. Boris's final sentence summarised the truth: 'The key thing seems to me that you pick up a load of self-knowledge.'

That summer, Boris went with his sister and Sebastian Shakespeare, another undergraduate who would become a noted journalist, to Spain and Portugal. Allegra came for part of the time, watching Boris and his sister filming wildlife, especially a chimpanzee sanctuary, for a charity campaigning against cruelty to animals. Allegra found the experience 'bizarre', and made arrangements to spend the nights with Boris at the homes of rich friends of her parents, leaving Rachel and Shakespeare to fend for themselves. 'It was awkward,' Allegra admits. She was 'not fond of Rachel' and decided to keep her distance. The stern woman found Rachel 'boastful. She was always projecting herself.'

Allegra returned early to Britain. Unknown to Rachel and Sebastian, Boris had proposed marriage to Allegra, although thirty-six years later she could not recall the circumstances. Insecure, with a fear of homelessness, Boris was to fulfil his ambition to marry up. Because his proposal was couched in uncertainties, she had agreed

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but was not completely committed. 'Boris's game plan,' she was convinced, 'was influenced by what Stanley had done.' His father had married a wealthy woman early and Boris decided to follow suit. In her absence, Boris was unsure whether his offer was wise. 'Should I marry Allegra?' Boris asked Shakespeare every night. 'You're too young,' Shakespeare replied, unaware that the marriage had already been agreed.

Boris's concealment and uncertainty illustrated a trait running throughout his life – his vacillation during his relationships with women. After agreeing to an idea, he then feared being trapped by reality and had second thoughts. Over the following decades, women would discover that Boris inhabited an inner or fantasy world. In those circumstances, they questioned whether his commitment was genuine. There was no doubt about his love for Allegra. His uncertainty was fear that he could not cope with her moods or with a permanent relationship. Even on the night before the wedding ceremony, he would ask a friend whether he should marry Allegra. 'Bit late now,' his friend replied.

After Christmas, Allegra's parents invited Boris skiing in La Plagne, France. To her mother's surprise, Boris arrived at the resort with a suitcase full of dirty sheets and no ski clothes. Standing at the top of a challenging black run in his tweeds, he launched himself downhill, zooming without fear or style over icy moguls to survive unscathed, thrilled by the danger. 'I am more or less addicted to the joy of hurtling myself down the slopes,' he would confess. Irritated by his appearance, Gaia Servadio was insulted by his disdain for Italian politics during dinner conversation, casting the government in Rome as a joke. Allegra's father shared Gaia's disapproval of their guest. 'What societies did you join?' Boris asked the fellow Old Etonian, knowing that William Mostyn-Owen had been neither a King's Scholar nor a member of Pop. Needling his host with one-upmanship delighted Boris. 'He's rapacious,' Mostyn-Owen warned his daughter. 'What do you see in him?' Servadio asked, a question she regularly repeated. At the end of the academic year and finals, Allegra announced their engagement. Both were still just twenty-three.

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Insensitive about others, and even incurious about his future wife's character and limited ambition, Boris failed to grasp the reason Allegra rejected a job in Washington DC which had been arranged by her parents. 'I wasn't interested in that career stuff,' said Allegra, whose family wealth meant work was not essential. 'I wasn't ambitious and I needed reassurance,' she admitted. To relieve her solitariness and neediness, she relied on Boris's self-confidence. She did, however, reluctantly agree to work at the *Evening Standard* in London edited by Charles Wintour, her mother's close friend.

Towards the end of his final year, Boris had feared he would not get a first-class degree. Instead of entirely focusing during those last months on his studies, he had been diverted into Union politics, social life and sport. By then, his reputation among his tutors was mixed. Oliver Lyne, a Horatian scholar, was one of several unimpressed teachers. At a tutorial he told Boris, 'I'm not going to teach you, with you sitting there all drunk and crapulous.' Boris later recalled obtusely 'I dimly formed the thought that I could not logically be both drunk and crapulous at once, but somehow it wouldn't come out.'

'Probably the worst scholar Eton ever sent us – a buffoon and an idler,' the ancient historian Oswyn Murray declared. Neither were impressed by a student who either arrived unprepared or relied on his remarkable memory to recite passages but failed to show deep understanding. Others were sincerely positive. Jonathan Barnes, another tutor in ancient history, called Boris 'a good egg' while Jasper Griffin, the tutorial fellow of classical literature, was enthusiastic. Griffin and Anthony Kenny agreed to give Boris extra tuition to achieve a first, but it was too late. He was awarded an upper second. Forever, he was disappointed.

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Chapter 4

Awakening

Two hundred guests were invited to Boris's wedding to Allegra on 5 September 1987 at West Felton church in Shropshire. Woodhouse, the Mostyn-Owens' country house, sitting in 1,500 acres, was the perfect setting for the reception. 'It was a very happy wedding day,' recalls Allegra, 'although my parents didn't like Boris.' Giving Guppy the task of collecting their wedding rings from Hatton Garden in London, Allegra sensed, was 'just inauspicious. I was side-tracked by Etonians.' The tension between the two families was a foreboding.

Unknown to Allegra, an argument had blown up the previous night. Stanley and Boris had stayed at the home of John Biffen, a well-known slightly eccentric Tory MP. Sarah Biffen was shocked by the Johnsons' behaviour at the pre-wedding dinner hosted by Lord Gowrie, also educated at Eton and Balliol, and his wife Alexandra. 'Stanley behaved disgracefully,' Sarah Biffen complained, 'sticking a sort of cine camera up everyone's nose.' He would compound his tactlessness by trying to make an impromptu speech at the wedding reception until Sarah Biffen abruptly silenced him. In the morning, Boris revealed that he did not have the required morning suit. Biffen agreed to lend him an old one and then Boris discovered he had no cufflinks. In Sarah Biffen's immortal damnation, 'The reason he didn't get married in my husband's shoes is that his feet were larger – he would have limped to the altar.' Boris wore his own shoes with holes in the soles. Both Boris and Stanley were insensitive to those blunders, just as Stanley was unaware of

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the Mostyn-Owens' disquiet about Stanley's flagrant infidelities. Since Allegra's parents were on the verge of separation for similar and other reasons, their sentiments may have been sanctimonious but Charlotte sensed their disapproval.

On the morning of the wedding, Charlotte arrived with her other children to a 'grand but uneasy' atmosphere. Gaia was 'difficult' and 'a terrible snob' casting 'her dissatisfied mood over everything'. Gaia disliked other women, Charlotte noticed; she spoke only about people's wealth and clearly disapproved of Boris. 'Gaia wanted Allegra to marry a lord or a rich man,' Charlotte knew. The premonitions were muddied. While Charlotte 'liked Allegra' and Allegra 'loved' Charlotte, Boris and Allegra seemed to expect the world at their feet. Allegra, Charlotte spotted, 'was strong-minded and would not compromise. There would be trouble. But because I liked her I did not warn Boris.' The best man was Leo, his younger brother and a favourite. After returning from a happy two-week honeymoon in Egypt, Boris was told that John Biffen had found their marriage certificate in his trousers. Boris had also lost his own wedding ring. 'I know where it is,' he reassured his bride, but never produced it.

Their first weeks living in unfashionable Olympia were unstable. Allegra found life on the *Evening Standard*'s famed Londoner's Diary irksome. Success as a journalist depends on survival in the gutter and swimming in the sewer. Allegra was unsuited to cajoling and charming the rich, famous and scurrilous to divulge embarrassing secrets. She left Fleet Street to become a solicitor. Boris was equally dissatisfied. Within one hour on his first day as a management consultant at £18,000 p.a. he admitted defeat. 'Try as I might,' he would recall, 'I could not look at an overhead projection of a growth-profit matrix and stay conscious.' Unlike his wife, to escape the commercial world he had discovered a sudden passion to be a journalist. Personable, masterful with words and intrigued by the exercise of power, it was a natural next step. By chance, he bumped into Miriam Gross, the arts editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. Impressed by his charisma and intelligence, Gross arranged for Boris to be introduced to *The Times*'s editor, Charlie Wilson. Hired as a trainee,

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Boris was sent to the *Wolverhampton Express & Star* to learn the craft. Living in provincial lodgings was neither fun nor healthy for his new marriage, but did expose the Old Etonian to the reality of Britain's working class. Too many, he thought, lacked ambition and relied on benefits. Margaret Thatcher's glory was to destroy the poisonous welfarism of the 1970s and she became his hero.

His reunions in London with Allegra were uneasy. Seemingly depressed, she saw the glass was always half empty. Unlike their friends, she refused to host dinner parties and preferred restaurants but, conditioned by his parents' marriage, Boris was unaware of the brewing problems.

His arrival at the headquarters of *The Times* hardly improved their spirits. Working at the end of the news desk – the bottom of the heap – his chore was to rewrite stories supplied by news agencies, an unglamorous life for a man of destiny. Through graft, trial and error, he needed to master the skill of devising an 'angle' to enliven a dull story. So it was that the glamour boy was asked to rewrite a tedious report about the discovery of the 'Rosary', the palace of Edward II, at Hay's Wharf on the Thames Embankment. Boris decided that the story needed sexing up. In his rewrite he added, 'According to Dr Colin Lucas of Balliol College, Oxford, this is where the king enjoyed a reign of dissolution with his catamite Piers Gaveston, before he was gruesomely murdered.' A catamite is a boy kept for gay sex.

In his insubordinate manner, Boris ignored a salient fact – Piers Gaveston had been murdered in 1312 and construction of Edward's palace began in 1325. Not only could the catamite story not be true but Colin Lucas, Boris's godfather and Stanley's best friend, was not an expert in medieval Britain but in modern history, especially France in the eighteenth century. At the time, Lucas was a lowly tutor at Sheffield University but he was a Balliol graduate with ambitions to become a pre-eminent scholar.

Hurt by his fellow academics' scorn about his ignorance as reported by *The Times*, Lucas complained to Charlie Wilson. After hearing from Boris that the quotation was accurate, Lucas's objection was rejected. But after compounding his lie in a second article,

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Boris was summoned by the editor. In his defence, Boris declaimed that most of the quotations in *The Times* were fabricated. Shocked by his insolence, the editor fired the anarchist. 'I was angry that Lucas complained to Wilson,' said Stanley indignantly. 'He put a whole new interpretation on the word "Godfather".'

Boris's good fortune was Miriam Gross, willing to help him escape from a sticky corner. She appealed to Max Hastings, her editor at the *Daily Telegraph*, to meet Boris. Since his appointment in December 1985, Hastings had notably improved the conservative newspaper. The military historian and formidable journalist appreciated fast-thinking mavericks and was unfussed by Boris's abrupt departure from *The Times*. As an individualist himself, Hastings appreciated that every young journalist learns from their mistakes. Just as he had been given chances through personal connections, Hastings was willing, in 1988, to give Boris an opportunity to shine, and to be booted out if he failed. The result was positive. Boris proved himself to be a remarkably fluent, unconventional fast writer with a self-confident style of writing, identifying himself with the contemporary *Telegraph* reader's political opinions – middle class and middle of the road. And he offered eccentricity. Asked to write an article for a skiing supplement, he focused on the importance of clipping the ski sticks behind before schussing down the piste. The only complaint was his congenital untidiness and unpunctuality.

Within a few months, Hastings decided that Boris would be an ideal correspondent in Brussels: French-speaking, knowledgeable about the EU and eager to puncture the EU's growing complacency and corruption. He arrived in summer 1988 just as Thatcher's Britain was booming and she had denounced in Bruges the EU's plan to transform the continent into a federalist state. Behind a smokescreen, Jacques Delors, the French president of the Commission, was plotting to build a European super-state with its own borders, its own currency, and eventually its own army. For the moment, the EU's bureaucrats were intent on imposing unwanted regulations on Britain, and that, Boris rightly sensed, was just the beginning. Welcoming him to Brussels were his father and Jenny, his stepmother.

While Boris was excited by the posting, Allegra was ambivalent.

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First, she delayed her departure to Brussels by two months until her law exams were completed. Then, on arriving in Brussels, she disliked the apartment Boris had rented. To save money, he had rejected the flat used by his predecessor in the francophone town centre near other journalists and had chosen a dismal flat in a miserable Flemish suburb. 'Why did you do it?' asked Allegra, but she never extracted an explanation. Disheartened, she lacked the energy to even put up curtains. 'He was tight with money and he gave me none,' she says. 'He would always forget his wallet when we went shopping. I had to buy the food.' She relied on her income from family investments and her new job, promoting Italian cotton in the EU. Annoyingly, Boris also always used the red Fiat, a wedding present from her parents, so she was marooned. Yet, Allegra would always believe that Boris had married out of genuine love and not for money.

Dressed in a torn jacket, dirty trousers and a crumpled shirt, Boris began the daily routine of arriving at the Berlaymont, the European Commission's headquarters, for the briefing by the EU's spokesmen to over one hundred journalists representing the world's media. The club's rules dictated that being taken seriously by the Commission's staff was critical. But unlike other British besuited journalists, Boris did not feel beholden to curry favour with the well-paid Commission spokesmen serving platitudes about the EU's seamless achievements. With long experience of the institution and the Eurocrats' machinations during his school years when Stanley was employed as a Eurocrat, he felt no compunction to report uncritically the spokesmen's pronouncements. Why, he asked, should the EU's bureaucrats be assumed to be honest just because they were serious? Extracting the unvarnished truth about the Commission was difficult. First, because Commission officials often lied to protect their activities; and second, there was no single truth but just a conflict of policies between competing power groups.

Initially, to find his way, Boris charmed his competitors to give him help and advice. Acting the bumbling English gentleman, his image undermined his credibility. Joking, never malicious and

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always self-deprecating, his fellow journalists assumed as he glided past with a smile that he was an unthreatening innocent.

A succession of his reports overturned their assumption. 'Brussels recruits sniffers to ensure that Euro-manure smells the same,' appeared on the *Telegraph*'s front page. 'Threat to British pink sausages' was followed by reports from Boris about Eurocrats dictating the acceptable curve of bananas, the size of condoms, an order that women must return their old sex toys, that euro notes make people impotent, that euro coins make people sick, and a plan to blow up the Berlaymont because asbestos cladding made the building too dangerous to inhabit. Berated by their editors in London for missing good stories, Boris's rivals spluttered in outrage, 'Boris is making the stories up.' Embellishing was usually more accurate, but that was a charge rejected by his opponents. 'He was fundamentally intellectually dishonest,' said David Usborne of the *Independent*. 'He was serving his masters in a very skilful way . . . He was writing things without really believing in his heart what he was writing.' Sarah Helm, also of the *Independent*, agreed: Boris was 'a complete charlatan . . . His writing was a cheap thrill – a stunt and quite a dangerous stunt actually.' James Landale of *The Times* blasted: 'Boris told such dreadful lies, it made one gasp.' Their anger that his imprecision had become secondary to witticisms was ignored by the *Telegraph*'s editors. Max Hastings was a Eurosceptic keen to expose the idiocies of the Brussels bureaucrats. Boris's real success, ignored by his carping rivals, was to dredge up documents and decisions made by unknown Eurocrats intended to propel the EU into a federal state. 'Put that on page one,' his editors ordered. 'We never had a single complaint that Boris was lying,' says Jeremy Deedes, the newspaper's managing editor. 'Boris understood better than anyone what was going on in Brussels.' Their correspondent might be 'exaggerating but it was all too good to check. His reports were all correct in spirit if not in detail.'

Untroubled by the accusations, Boris was on a roll. For a man in a hurry to impress the world, his accusers were an undistinguished pack, regularly seen in the middle of the day gossiping in bars. He ignored those destined to be forgotten and constantly trawled the

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Commission buildings looking for more scurrilous tales to feed his insurgency. Beating his competitors, he told Allegra, was bliss. 'He never lied,' she says loyally. 'He just has his own attitude to the truth.' Turning the circus upside down promised stardom, a mantra supported by Stanley.

'Exaggeration is OK,' said his father, the Eurocrat, 'because Boris had to ask, "How do I make my mark?" ' An ironic herogram from Hastings was stuck on Boris's office wall: 'You know how highly I think of you but you must learn to be more pompous.' In return, Boris hero-worshipped Hastings, grateful for being catapulted to prominence.

Among Boris's most serious critics was Sonia Purnell, the number two in the *Telegraph*'s Brussels office. She would later write about 'rumours' that Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary, had asked Hastings to fire Boris, but that was inaccurate. She would also write that 'the Foreign Office even set up a Boris unit, a team of people tasked with rebutting negative Boris stories or trying to stop them appearing in the first place'. That was an exaggeration. The European Commission, according to Charlie Pownall of the Foreign Office's communications team, did establish the 'Rapid Response Unit' to combat Euromyths but that was directed more against Christopher Booker and Richard Littlejohn, two other prominent British journalists. In Brussels, Purnell would later summarise Boris's demeanour as: 'under a well-cultivated veneer of disorganisation lay not so much a streak of aspiration as a torrent of almost frightening focus and drive'. That antagonism would later prompt Jeremy Deedes to visit Brussels. 'Purnell,' he concluded, 'always behaved as if the cards were dealt to her from the bottom of the pack. She was permanently disgruntled. She was tricky with a capital T.' Having agreed to lunch with Boris, Deedes went to the Commission's daily briefing. While one hundred journalists carefully wrote down the spokesman's announcements, Boris stood at the back, hands in his pockets not taking a single note. To Deedes's surprise, at the end, many journalists queued to ask Boris in different languages to explain what it all meant. For thirty minutes, he held court and belatedly the two went for an oyster lunch.

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