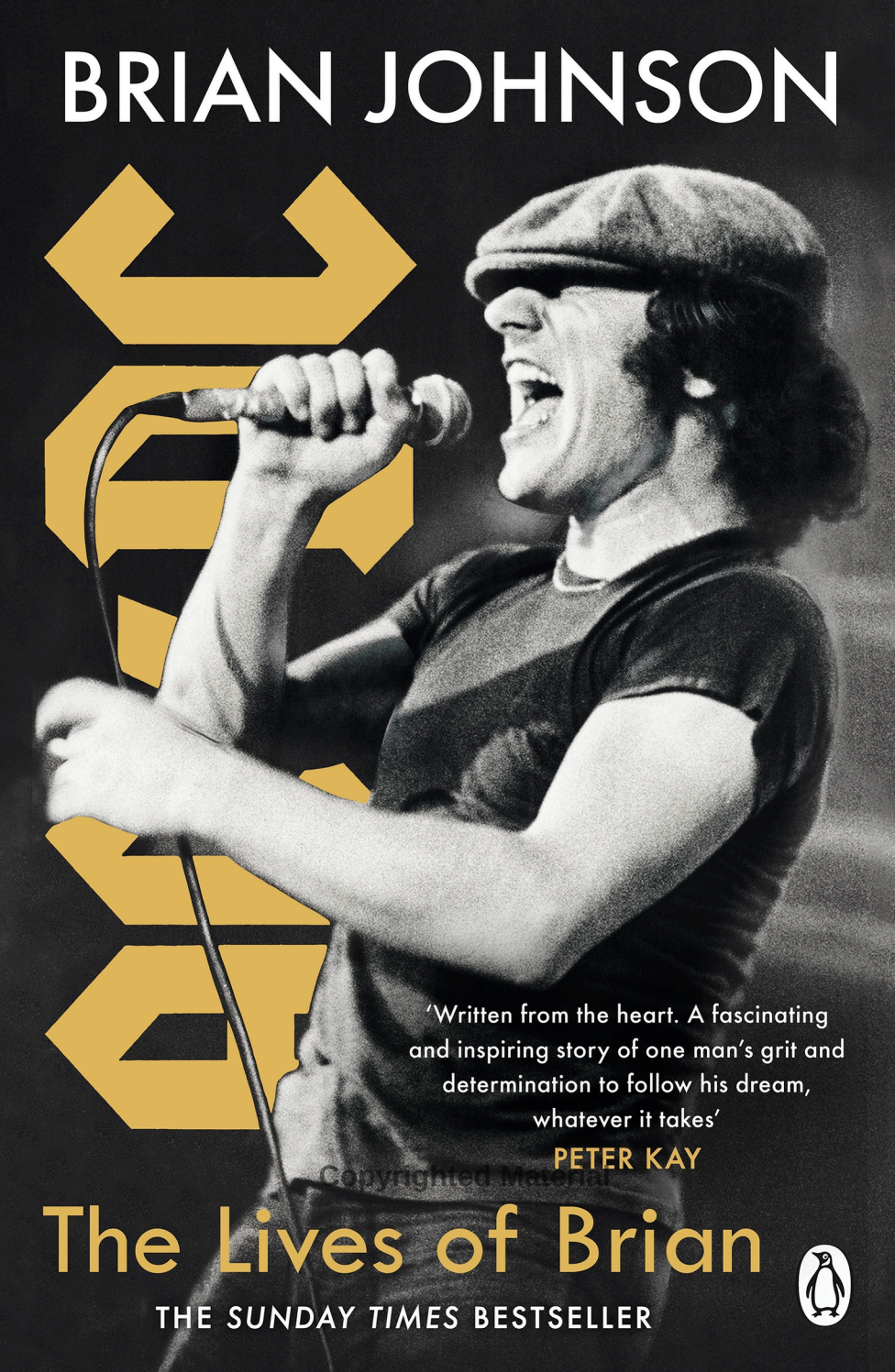
# BRIAN JOHNSON



'Written from the heart. A fascinating and inspiring story of one man's grit and determination to follow his dream, whatever it takes'

PETER KAY

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# The Lives of Brian

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

PENGUIN BOOKS

# The Lives of Brian

Brian Johnson was born in Dunston, Gateshead, in 1947. After fronting local band Geordie, he joined AC/DC in 1980. His first book, *Rockers and Rollers*, was published in 2009. He lives in Sarasota, Florida.

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# The Lives of Brian

*A memoir*

BRIAN JOHNSON



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To my Great, Great, Great Grandchildren, who I'll never meet. It's nice to know we'll connect through these words. I wish you the very best in life whoever you are.

With Love your Great, Great, Great Grandfather
Brian Johnson

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# Contents


Author's Note ix
Prologue 1

PART ONE

1. Alan and Esther 11
2. Out in the Cold 27
3. A-Wop Bop A-Loo Bop 41
4. Showstopper 59
5. A Ruff Business 71
6. The Apprentice 89
7. Eine Kleine Rockmusik 105
8. Crashing and Burning 113

PART TWO

9. Oops 121
10. A Horrible Shower of Shit 141
11. Geordie Boy 153
12. Wardour Street 175
13. Highway to . . . Nowhere 197


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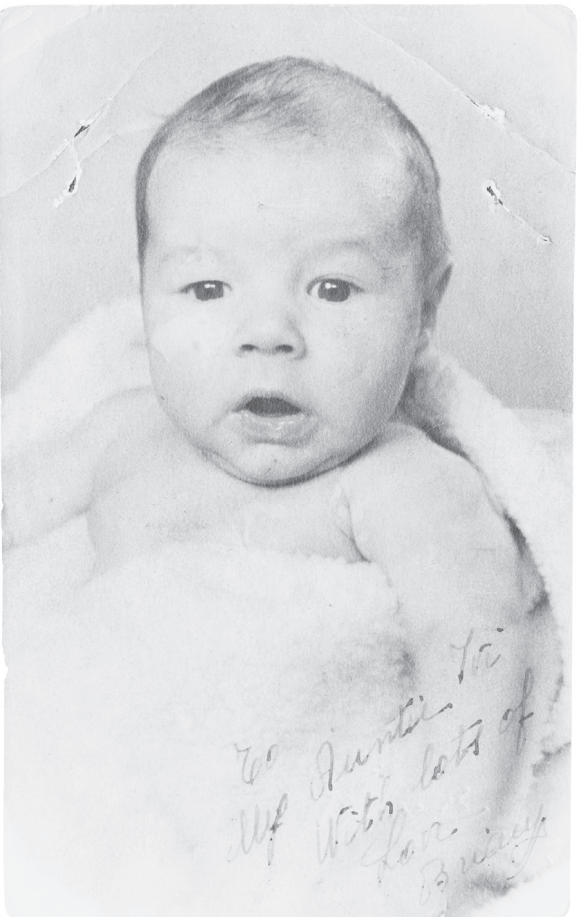
14. Stowaway 213
15. Bailiff Blues 223
16. A Sign from Above 233

PART THREE

17. Lobley Hill 241
18. Beautiful Mover 261
19. Grand National Day 275
20. Breaking Up 287
21. Welcome to Paradise 299
22. Rolling Thunder 307
23. Back from Black 321
24. The Last Bit before the End 331

Epilogue 339
A Rock'n'Roll Family Tree 354
Acknowledgements 357
Picture Permissions 359
Index 361

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# Author's Note



Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want.

This is a book about what happened when I didn't get what I wanted, but never stopped believing, and never gave up. Luck also played its part, of course – but I truly believe that you can achieve just about anything if your dreams are urgent enough, and if you don't just sit around, waiting for something to happen.

Others will have different memories of the events that I describe in these pages. It's been more than forty years since the making of *Back in Black*, after all – and half a century since the glory days of my first band, Geordie. This is just *my* version of how it all went down.

Finally, I'd like to say a big thank you to Angus, Malcolm, Cliff and Phil for rolling the dice and giving me a second chance at a professional music career under some of the most difficult and tragic circumstances that any band could face. Malcolm, if there is another side, mate, when I get there I'll be buying you and Bon a beer.

B. J. – London, 2022

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# Prologue



I'd taken some hard blows before. But this time felt different.

This time, barring a miracle, there'd be no getting back up.

The first hint that something was about to go very badly wrong had come in Edmonton, Canada.

It was the end of September 2015, halfway through AC/DC's *Rock or Bust World Tour*, and we were playing Commonwealth Stadium, the biggest outdoor venue in the country – packed to capacity with more than 60,000 people. It was extremely cold and extremely wet, with buckets of rain coming down in front of the stage.

Angus already had a bad fever, and I could feel myself starting to come down with the same thing.

Being Canadian, the crowd didn't seem to have even noticed the weather. But of course, they were bundled up in the kinds of clothes that you can only buy north of the U.S. border, which protect you from everything from raging blizzards to pissed-off polar bears.

As for us, we were just in our usual gear. Me in a black T-shirt and jeans. Angus in his thin white school shirt and shorts. The stage was at least dry, with some warmth from the lights, but Angus and I always like to go out onto the walkway to be with the audience. So, that's where we spent a lot of the show – and after a few songs, we'd worked up such

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a sweat from all the moving around, we didn't care that we were getting soaked to the bone in near-freezing conditions.

Two hours, nineteen songs and a couple of encores later, we came off stage, feeling great about the gig. The sound on stage had been perfect. The fans had been screaming and cheering and singing along. Angus had played like a man possessed. But there was no time to hang around – we had to get to our next show. So, we said our goodbyes and climbed into our minibuses, which sped us straight to the airport.

As we boarded the jet that would take us to Vancouver, the adrenaline of the show was starting to wear off – and the physical toll that it had taken was starting to become clear.

I couldn't stop shaking.

The thought crossed my mind that for someone just a week away from celebrating his sixty-eighth birthday, maybe all that time in the freezing rain hadn't been such a great idea.

Then again, Angus wasn't faring much better – and he was just a wee nipper of sixty.

Touring is always hard on the body, I reminded myself, no matter what your age. Coming down with the occasional bout of flu between shows is just part of the deal.

I ordered a big shot of whisky, which helped, while Angus had his usual mug of steaming hot tea – and before we knew it, we were wheels-down in Vancouver and heading to our hotel.

But something wasn't right.

It was my ears.

They hadn't popped.

I tried all the old tricks – yawning, swallowing, holding my nose and blowing – but nothing worked. I gave up, thinking that they'd clear themselves during the night.

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But when I woke up the next morning . . . oh, shit. I felt like I was wearing a bearskin balaclava.

If anything, my hearing had gotten even worse.

I couldn't bring myself to mention it to anyone at breakfast. When you're the lead singer of a band, your bandmates, the crew, the management, the support staff, the record label and, most important of all, the hundreds of thousands of fans, are all depending on you to get up on stage and do your job, no matter what.

My ears would pop eventually, I told myself.

They always had before.

By the time we got on stage that night at BC Place – another stadium, but this time with a roof – Angus seemed to have shaken off the worst of the fever. But I was still struggling.

Then disaster struck.

About two-thirds of the way through the set, the guitars lost all their tone in my ears, and I found myself searching for the key of the song. It was like driving in fog – all reference points suddenly gone. It was the absolute worst experience that I'd ever had as a singer, made all the more terrifying by the fact that it was happening with several more songs to go . . . in front of tens of thousands of paying fans. But somehow, I made it through – and if anyone noticed, they were too kind to say.

With only two more shows to go on this leg of the tour – AT&T Park in San Francisco and Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles – I convinced myself that I could keep going, that my ears would eventually pop. It seemed impossible to me that they wouldn't.

But the exact same thing happened at both shows. Two-thirds of the way through, I lost the key of the song and

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couldn't get it back. Worse still, I couldn't hear the conversation in the dressing room afterwards – or later, when we went out to a restaurant for dinner. I just smiled and nodded along, pretending that everything was fine.

But inside, panic was setting in.

Since Angus formed AC/DC with his brother Malcolm in 1973 – first with Dave Evans on vocals, then the great Bon Scott, then yours truly – it's always been an all-or-nothing kind of band.

Just take the giant stack of speakers that we use on stage.

A lot of bands, they use fakes or real cabinets with empty compartments to get the same aggressive, awe-inspiring look. Not AC/DC. With AC/DC, what you see is what you hear – and what you hear as a result is the loudest band on the face of the earth.

Then there's Angus.

The intensity that lad brings to the stage, the whirlwind of energy he can keep up for more than two hours . . . it's frightening. He can't turn it off. When he comes back to the dressing room after a show, he's spent, dead on his feet, gulping down oxygen.

The normal, off-stage Angus is just this nice, softly spoken, five-foot-something guy. But on stage, something happens to him. He transforms. When he goes for a piss before the show, he's still Angus. But when he comes back and he's at the side of the stage, you've lost him. You can't look into his eyes and tell him, 'Have a good one.'

He's gone. Dr. Jekyll has become Mr. Hyde.

And then off he goes, walking out in his schoolboy outfit, Gibson around his neck, lifts his fist to the crowd and 50, 60,

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maybe 100,000 people lose their fucking minds. He hasn't even played a note. It's just the poise. The growl in his eyes. Who else can do that? Maybe Elvis Presley or Freddie Mercury could do it back in the day. But now it's Angus alone. And the guy can move like the best dancer. The hips. The legs. The whole thing. He out Chuck Berrys Chuck Berry. When you're up close on stage with him, it's the most incredible thing to see.

For most of AC/DC's history, of course, Angus also had his opposite on stage in the form of Malcolm. All of the Young kids – who were born in Glasgow, but emigrated with their parents to Sydney, Australia in the early 1960s – were musical. Another of Angus's brothers, George, was one of the biggest pop stars in Australia with The Easybeats. He also wrote one of the greatest songs of all time, 'Friday on My Mind'.

Malcolm was never any less intense than his younger brother. He just didn't care about being the centre of attention. He'd run up to the mic and sing whatever lines that he had to sing, then he'd walk back to his amp stack and stay out of the way. But make no mistake – Malcolm was the beating heart of the band.

Over the many, many years that I spent with Malcolm on the road, I saw just about every great guitarist you could think of take him aside and ask him how he got those thick-wound strings on his battered Gretsch with a missing pickup to sound that way.

'I just hit 'em hard,' he'd reply with a shrug.

Malcolm also had this uncanny ability to simultaneously watch every single move of every single person in the band, listen to their performance, study the audience's reaction,

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and at the end of the night, give the kind of feedback that might not have been easy to hear, but made the show better the next night. I've never known any musician to command so much respect from their bandmates and crew.

But even an all-or-nothing band like AC/DC sometimes has to compromise when faced with the setbacks and tragedies that can't be avoided when you spend a lifetime on the road.

A year before the *Rock or Bust World Tour* began, Malcolm had to leave the band to get treatment for early-onset dementia. He'd been suffering from lapses of memory and concentration since the *Black Ice* tour of 2010. So, he stepped back – with his nephew Stevie filling in.

It was the biggest shock to the band since Bon's death, thirty-five years earlier.

And it wasn't the only shock. The master of bass, Cliff Williams – AC/DC's Essex Boy to my Geordie, with the band since 1978 – made it known that *Rock or Bust* would be his last tour. Meanwhile, Phil Rudd had to bow out due to legal problems in New Zealand, with Chris Slade – who'd played on *Razors Edge* – taking over on drums.

And then . . . well, there was me.

It's strange to talk about my own part in AC/DC . . . never mind my own voice. You have to be a pent-up, wound-up animal to hit those notes in 'Back in Black', 'Thunderstruck' and 'For Those about to Rock'. Before a show, I feel like my feet are in the blocks at the start of a gold-medal sprint at the Olympics – because I know that it's going to take every last piece of me to produce that roar of power, rage and attack, and keep it up, for song after song after song. It's like singing with a fixed bayonet.

But without my hearing?

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I couldn't escape the feeling that, after thirty-five years with the band, maybe I was nearing the end too.

After the three shows in a row where I couldn't hear the guitars, we had October off, which I hoped would be enough time to rest my body and ears and make everything fine again.

But back home in Sarasota, Florida, it was more obvious than ever that there was something very wrong. It had been six weeks now since my ears hadn't popped.

I needed to get help.

The next leg of the tour was due to start in Sydney, Australia. As it happened, I knew that one of the world's best ear, nose and throat doctors was also there – Dr. Chang. So, after talking to the band's tour manager, Tim Brockman, I decided to fly out ten days early to get my ears properly checked out. I also knew that Malcolm was being treated for his dementia nearby. I hoped that I could pay him a visit.

It was a relief to see Dr. Chang and finally confide in someone about what had been going on. But the relief didn't last very long. After an examination and some tests, he turned deadly serious and said that he would have to put me under and operate.

'After the tour?' I asked.

'No, right now,' he replied.

When I'd contracted the fever in Edmonton, Dr. Chang explained, fluid had built up in my ears. The flight to Vancouver had then caused swelling that had trapped it there. That's why my ears hadn't popped. And because I'd kept touring instead of getting treatment, the fluid had crystallized – and for every minute longer that it stayed in there, the more damage it was doing. So, it had to be removed, immediately.

'Will the operation fix it?' I asked.

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'I don't know,' Dr. Chang replied. 'But we can certainly try and stop it from getting worse.'

'But I've got a gig in ten days . . .'

'We'll do everything we can to get you better by then.'

'One more thing, Dr. Chang,' I said, now feeling very nervous. 'How will you get the crystals out?'

'Are you sure you want to know?'

'I mean . . . yeah . . . ?'

'With a chisel.'

He didn't look like he was joking.

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# PART ONE

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# 1

# Alan and Esther



The soundtrack of my early childhood was the clatter of my mother's sewing machine, followed by the muffled sobs of her crying herself to sleep every night downstairs.

She was Italian, my ma – Esther Maria Victoria Octavia De Luca was her maiden name – and she'd moved to the North East of England with my dad after the war, not realizing that it would be absolutely nothing like her home town of Frascati, just outside Rome.

I can only imagine how much the poor lass's heart sank when she first set eyes on Dunston, the part of Gateshead – just south of the river from Newcastle upon Tyne – where my dad was from. The factories and coal staithes. The back-to-back terraced houses on the steep slope of the Scotswood Road. The soot-faced men trudging home from work. Bombed houses everywhere. The constant wind and rain.

On top of that, of course, there was the rationing, which went on for another nine years after we 'won' the war – the food made worse by the British custom of boiling it until every last atom disintegrated, turning every meal into a plate of grey sludge.

I mean, I've got to hand it to my dad – who served with the Durham Light Infantry in North Africa and then Italy, where he met my ma – that he ever managed to persuade such a beautiful, well-to-do young woman to come home with him.

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What made it even more impressive was that my mother was engaged at the time to a tall, handsome Italian dentist who probably had a fabulous name like *Alessandro* or *Giovani* or something, while my dad was a five-foot-two Geordie sergeant called Alan. But my old man's secret weapon was his voice. It was so massive and commanding, he could make you simultaneously stand to attention and shit yourself from a thousand yards. Even when he growled – which he did a lot – he could somehow make the words come out at the same terrifying volume. His secret was he learned to speak Italian and promised my mother he would speak Italian in England. For the rest of his life, he never broke his promise and we kids listened and wondered why no one else spoke like that. It was a little confusing going to school and hearing English.

My dad had joined the army in 1939, just before conscription, to try and get out of working down the pits. But then Hitler invaded Poland, Britain declared war and, all of a sudden, then-Private Johnson found himself shipped off to North Africa, where he fought with the Desert Rats. Now, as any history buff knows, Germany's Afrika Korps were a far superior fighting force to the British in those early days of the war, so the fact my old man survived two blood-soaked years in the Tunisian desert is nothing short of a miracle. But he didn't just survive. He rose all the way to sergeant – not that there was much competition for promotions, given that most candidates were dead before they could be considered for the job.

My dad almost didn't make it back in one piece himself.

His most terrifying near-miss came when he was in the back of a truck that ran straight into the path of a German half-track with a 20mm anti-aircraft cannon on it. After a pause of about two seconds, the truck and anyone still in it

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were turned to ashes and dust. My dad managed to jump out in time with a few others, and they all piled into a nearby cave for cover. But the Germans just trained their cannon on the cave and let loose until they got bored. When the shelling finally stopped, my dad was the only one left in there alive. He was convinced that the Germans saw him crawl out, but they let him go anyway, probably not wanting the bother of dealing with a shell-shocked prisoner of war who could barely walk.

That didn't mean he was safe, of course.

Once he'd finally limped his way to the nearest Allied position – several miles away – the British sentry panicked and opened fire with his rifle. But luckily my dad was armed with an even more powerful weapon: his voice. 'I'M A BRITISH SERGEANT, YOU IDIOT!!' he roared. 'YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO ASK ME FOR THE WATCHWORD!!'

There was a sheepish pause. Then a little cough. 'Er . . . sorry, Sarge. What's the watchwor—'

'I CAN'T REMEMBER! JUST LET ME IN!'

My dad and his unit made it all the way to Sicily in the end – which earned them an invitation to take part in the near five-month Battle of Anzio. Tens of thousands more men were killed or wounded in that monumental cock-up of an operation, when the hesitation of the U.S. commander, Major General John Lucas, left my dad and his pals stranded on Nettuno beach, where the British had attacked just a few kilometres away.* Once again, however, Sergeant Johnson lived to tell the tale.

By the time it was all over, my dad had seen enough

* 'I had hoped that we were hurling a wildcat into the shore,' Winston Churchill later said of the landings, 'but all we got was a stranded whale.'

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carnage and misery to make him an atheist for life . . . but he kept that to himself when he got to Rome and realized that there was a city full of gorgeous young Catholic girls waiting to be swept off their feet.

My mother's life before the war could hardly have been any more different than my dad's.

The De Lucas were wealthy and well-connected, for a start. In the photographs taken of them in the 1930s, they look so carefree, happy and tanned they could have all been movie stars. In the North East, people like that just didn't exist.

My ma and her sisters were expected to marry well and they did. One of my Italian aunts landed herself a husband who owned a tile factory. Another married into the family that still owns the Frascati equivalent of Boots the Chemists. Meanwhile, one of my cousins on the De Luca side, Giacomo Christafonelli, served as a member of the Italian parliament for years.

'Love at first sight', was how my mother described meeting my dad in Rome at the end of the war.

She said he looked just like the American movie star George Raft, who starred in the original *Scarface* from the 1930s and, later on, *Some Like It Hot*. I mean, Sergeant Johnson was a bit on the short side, aye, but she was tiny herself, so what did it matter?

Sometimes I wish I'd been able to meet the version of my dad my ma fell in love with – smiley, jokey, everything going his way, the war not just over but *won*, a 'home for heroes' waiting for him in Dunston. It's a side of him that none of his kids ever got to see.

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When Rome fell to the Allies, of course, the British army didn't like their men consorting with the female enemy – especially not if they were Catholic. And the top brass would do anything in their power to pour cold water on any romances, so the victorious British soldiers could be saved for the lasses back home. But my dad was a sneaky bugger, and he realized that they would have less to object to if he converted to Catholicism himself. He also thought this would help with my ma's family, who were livid about her calling off her engagement to the handsome dentist.

My dad had barely recovered from the piss-up to celebrate his homecoming when he realized that Sergeant Johnson was surplus to requirements. I mean, the only thing he knew how to do was kill Germans, and there weren't very many of them in Dunston after the war. And while the Americans were printing money to rebuild Europe, they were taking Britain to the cleaners on its debts. To the returning soldiers like my dad – who was sent a medal in the post and discharged from service – it felt more like we'd lost the war than won it. Everything was bombed and broken. There was no money for anything. Britain didn't even get its first stretch of motorway until 1958, after just about every other country in Europe. The only work my dad could find was at the Smith Patterson foundry in Blaydon, County Durham, where they made castings for everything from manhole covers to railway lines. He had to clean out the insides of the furnaces there – a job so disgusting there must have been times he wished he was back in the desert, being shot at by Nazis.

It wasn't even like they provided him with overalls and gloves or eye protection to do the work. Like all the other

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men, he just wore his everyday jacket with a handkerchief tied around his face. It must have been torture for the poor guy because, as a former sergeant, he couldn't stand it if he didn't look absolutely immaculate.

As for my ma, she'd become pregnant with me before even leaving Italy, and on 5 October 1947, a mother and father were born when I arrived. A year later would come my brother, Maurice, followed another year later by my youngest brother, Victor. The last of the Johnson kids was my little sister Julie, who was born five years after me.

My dad couldn't afford any kind of mortgage on his labourer's wages, of course, and there was a ten-year waiting list for a council house. So, he and my ma had to live with his parents at No. 1 Oak Avenue in Dunston, along with various other family members. These included my unmarried and obnoxious Uncle Norman, who stood at four-foot round and liked to scratch various orifices with his fork at the dinner table. Then there was my Aunt Ethel and her daughter Annette, both of them tough as old boots, and Aunt Ethel's lovely husband, a miner from Scotland whom I came to know as 'Uncle Shughie'. His name wasn't actually Shughie, of course – it just sounded that way when my Aunt Ethel said it. Also living there was my Uncle Billy, who had a tiny moustache, dressed meticulously, and drove a pre-war Vauxhall. At one point, after me and my two brothers and Julie had all arrived, it was a household of *seventeen*. Or, as the neighbours called it, 'a bloody disgrace!'

My mum didn't know much English back then, but even when she started to learn, she almost never spoke it in the house. My dad spoke Italian in a thick Geordie accent, and when my ma didn't understand what he was saying, he'd just repeat himself, but louder. None of which went down very

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well with the other Johnsons in the house, not least because they'd just been at war with Italy and hated foreigners. Even my grandfather, bless his heart, would refer to his own grandkids as 'Italian pigs' under his breath.

I mean, this was Dunston in the 1940s, you've got to remember. Other than the French onion sellers with their berets and Gauloises cigarettes, foreign folk were few and far between. I don't think that I saw a single Black or Asian person during my early years growing up – and because it was such a closed society, outsiders were treated with extreme suspicion. Even people from Sunderland were hissed at. The Scots were practically extraterrestrial. I suppose that's why, when I was a kid, I never wanted to learn Italian myself. I just wanted to keep my head down and fit in.

Aunt Ethel was the worst when it came to picking on us for being 'foreign' – which is shocking, given that she was family. One of my first memories is of her taking me with her to the Post Office when I was about four. It was about a three-quarters of a mile walk. And it was winter – and snowing. But Aunt Ethel didn't put any socks or shoes on me. 'You bloody foreigners don't need any of that,' she sniffed.

By the time we got there, I was basically an ice cube in child form. The older lady behind the counter almost had a heart attack when she set eyes on me. 'What are you doing?!!' she screamed at Aunt Ethel, who explained that it was 'Alreet, 'cos he's foreign like.' The older lady grabbed me, found a towel, and wrapped it around my feet – while her husband went to the shop next door to buy me a lollipop. I've no idea how I got home. I just remember the Post Office lady ripping into Aunt Ethel, going, 'You stupid, *stupid* woman – the little lad will catch his death!'

***

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I dread to think of how alone my mother must have felt after the war. All of the women on our street – who seemed *ancient* to me as a kid but must have been only in their twenties or thirties – would gather every day on the corner with their headscarves and bags, and they'd gossip for what seemed like hours. But my mother could barely understand English, never mind broad Geordie. As the years passed, though, all the neighbours came to realize that she just was the loveliest, kindest, most generous woman, always happy and smiling, always giving away home-cooked food and mending people's clothes. And the way she'd say 'Allo!' was just so infectious.

If anything kept my mother sane during those early years, it was her sewing machine. A foot-powered tabletop thing at first, then a little electric Singer. She'd go at it all day and well into the night – and she really was the most incredible seamstress. In fact, she would eventually build herself a nice little business making wedding dresses for all the local brides. Not to mention stage outfits for a certain young lad after he became a professional singer . . .

My mother loved to knit too. She'd knit *anything*. Balaclavas. Mittens. Tea cosies. Jumpers. One time, when the Johnsons decided they'd have a day out at the seaside – the sea in question being the North Sea, which is only a fraction of a degree warmer than a continental ice sheet – she knitted me and my brothers each a pair of swimming trunks because she couldn't afford to buy real ones. They were dark blue, I remember, and kept up with pieces of old knicker elastic. We'd never set foot in the ocean before, I should add – none of us even knew how to swim – but we were incredibly excited to put on our new kit and start splashing around.

Our excitement about the beach started to wear off pretty quickly as we approached the shore. 'Alright lads, *gerrin*!'

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barked my dad. And he pushed us in. The cold water took our breath away.

After maybe fifteen minutes, my father said we were useless and walked off. But that was also the moment when we realized why you never see anyone wearing knitted swimwear. It's because wool has the capacity to take in many, many times its own weight in water – it's like a sponge! – while getting incredibly heavy at the same time.* So, our little willies were on show to everyone. We had to scramble back up the beach red-faced with our hands covering our willies while our backsides were on show with our drenched swimming trunks slapping against the backs of our legs.

Gateshead in those early years of my childhood was a grey and grimy place. During the war, when 'Lord Haw-Haw' made his German propaganda radio broadcasts, he would say things like, 'We shan't be dropping bombs on Gateshead, we shall be dropping bars of soap!' Which, of course, made everyone furious and determined to build the tanks in the Vickers factory at twice the speed. But the truth was, everyone had a 'tidemark' where their clothes met their necks.

The food didn't add much to brighten things up and for my poor ma – who was used to fresh cantaloupe, smoked meats, crusty bread, olive oil and Parmesan – it was torture. The only thing that wasn't boiled was the liver, which was fried – and it was so hard, if you threw it out of the window, you could take out a street light. My ma would just sit there,

* After this revelation, I just assumed that my ma would throw them out. But no, nothing was ever thrown out in our house. Instead, when winter came around, our ma presented us with a set of suspiciously familiar-looking dark blue woollen balaclavas – which smelled of saltwater when you put them on.

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sobbing, going, 'I just cannot-a eat-a this!!' And it's not like she could rustle up some Italian home cooking of her own. I mean, you had to go to the chemist to get a bottle of olive oil in post-war Dunston. The only tomato sauce you could get was ketchup. Garlic was probably illegal. Even bacon – an Italian staple – was rationed to eight slices a week, four slices at a time.

My ma's lack of appetite wasn't helped by the fact my grandfather would be sitting there in his waistcoat, pipe in mouth, muttering about the fucking wops in his house, cutting up the previous day's newspaper into pieces so we could use it as toilet paper.

As if all that weren't enough to contend with, my dad fell ill after the war. While he was in that cave in Tunisia, he'd inhaled toxic fumes from the shells and tiny pieces of shrapnel along with all the dust and smoke, and it had basically poisoned him, leaving him with chronic stomach pain. Visibly, he was fine – the only sign of the damage he'd taken was a scar on his thumb. But his stomach kept getting worse and worse, until he couldn't keep down food anymore. And at that point, even for a man as stubborn as he was, he could no longer just keep pretending that everything was fine.

The first I knew about any of this was when I woke up one morning and he was gone. 'Brian, my son, your father . . . he had to go 'ospitale', said my ma, her voice trembling.

A few days later, we went to visit him at a convalescence centre, which was in a beautiful old stately home near Ryton, by the Tyneside Golf Club. I'd never seen such a magnificent place. When we walked in, there was dad, sitting in a comfy chair, doing some needlework to pass the time because he

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was in too much pain to move. I was like, wow, is *this* where he lives now? He's really gone up in the world . . .

Then I looked around and saw all these other dads sitting around with bandages on their heads and glass eyes and pieces of them missing. Some were even hobbling around on early-NHS prosthetic legs, which were wooden in those days and made horrible creaking noises. So, I realized it was some kind of hospital, but I didn't connect that to the war. I mean, at school, we used to all get in a line and chant, 'We won the war, in 1944!' We had no idea. We devoured all these Eagle comic books about handsome British soldiers with bulging muscles and names like Slogger Smith, who went around shooting Nazis. So, in my kid's mind, there was no reason to think that the war had anything to do with these very ordinary-looking people who'd somehow all managed to suffer the most horrific injuries.

My dad made several long visits to that place, each time after a new operation on his stomach. My ma would take the bus to see him every day, which meant we had to be babysat by Aunt Ethel, who treated us like the prisoners of war she basically thought we were. And by the end of it, our house was full of these beautifully embroidered table covers that my dad had sewn. In another time and another place, he and my ma could have gone into business together and made a killing. But not in those days. The second my dad was released from that beautiful old home, off he went, back to work.

He also worked as a labourer in London for a while, commuting there by steam train and staying all week before returning home for the weekend.

My brother Maurice and I once went with him. It was the most exciting trip that we'd ever made in our lives – not that

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my dad was living it up in London or anything. When we got off the train at King's Cross, I remember us walking towards a taxi rank, and my heart almost jumping out of my chest at the thought of riding in a black cab.

But when we got to it, my dad just kept on going . . . to the bus stop on the other side of the street.

It wasn't easy for my ma to stay close to her family in Frascati. But when she wrote a postcard to her niece telling her how hard things were in the North East, Ma's sisters wrote back to her asking for her telephone number. All the De Lucas had telephones in their homes, but Ma had to send them the number of the telephone box on our street along with instructions to call it at a certain time, on a certain day. Her sisters then all got together and huddled around the phone while they made their call. And they were so happy to hear each other's voices again – there were a lot of tears and '*Ti voglio benes*' – that many more calls followed, each one lasting no longer than precisely three minutes, because that's as long as you were allowed for an international call in a phone box back then.

When my mother's sisters realized just how difficult my ma's situation was, they were eager to help.

Like my ma, they'd thought that a British sergeant would go home to a country cottage with a manicured lawn and a big garden full of flowers, like something out of a Victorian romance novel – not a council house in Dunston. So, they started to send over supplies. A beautiful set of new pots and pans. A mink coat that had belonged to a great aunt. Scarves and blouses. The essentials of life, in their upper-class minds. But in trying to help, they often just made things worse.

Half of the packages were ripped open at British customs,

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with most of the stuff getting 'lost', And whatever made it to Dunston was more often than not intercepted by Uncle Norman or Uncle Colin and pawned for cash. The way they saw it, my mother hadn't *bought* any of this stuff, and they needed money more than she needed expensive gifts from Italy, so what did she have to complain about?

Every time it happened, my ma would just cry and cry.

And this went on and on, week after week, month after month.

And the wind never stopped . . . and the rain kept on falling.

And the food never got better.

And it was always *freezing*.

And my dad was barely earning enough to pay his share of the rent, never mind get his own house.

Then one day, my ma snapped.

I was sitting in the living room, minding my own business, playing with some wooden blocks when it happened. My parents had been arguing about something in the other room – a bit louder than usual, but nothing out of the ordinary – when suddenly my mother grabbed me, put a coat on me, and bundled me out of the door.

'Where do you think you're going?!' my dad roared at her in his Geordie Italian. I didn't understand the words, but you didn't need to with my dad. The volume was enough.

'It's *horrible* here!' she shouted back at him, in tears. 'I'm going home. Your family are –'

She couldn't even think of a bad enough word.

'C'mon, Esther,' snorted my dad. 'You're not going anywhere.'

'I'm leaving!'

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'No, you're not.'

'It's horrible here. *Horrible*! I'm going back home!'

And that was that – she was out of the door, pulling me along with her. I don't think it was planned. It was just one of those heat-of-the-moment things. Although she had enough money with her, so I suppose she must have had a secret stash, just in case.

We jumped onto a bus before my dad could catch up, and soon enough it was pulling up outside Newcastle Central Station. And, of course, the drama of that place was just totally overwhelming to me as a kid. All the trains were steam-powered in those days, so they were huffing and puffing and whistling at such a volume I had to clamp my hands over my ears – and on top of that, there were P.A. announcements echoing, the *Evening Chronicle* seller crying out, crowds of people rushing between platforms, and uniformed porters pulling along trolleys piled high with suitcases, cursing whenever a suitcase tumbled off, spilling its contents everywhere.

And there's my poor ma, tugging me this way and that, and I'm trying to ask her what's happening, starting to feel a bit frightened. And her face is all wet and puffy, and she's straining her neck to study this massive paper timetable of departures – about eight feet tall and the length of a double-decker bus – looking for a service to London Victoria. It had to be Victoria, because from there she could take a 'boat train' service to Paris Gare du Nord, where she could change again, headed for Rome.

Eventually, she found the right train and just made a run for it, still pulling me along.

But at the same moment, there was this unmistakable roar behind us, loud enough to drown out the Flying Scotsman at full-throttle. It made everyone in the place stop and stare.

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'ESTHER!!!'

Standing there on the platform – just the saddest thing you'd ever seen – was my dad.

He knew what he'd done. What he'd promised his beautiful Italian wife. What he'd failed to deliver.

And, of course, my ma must have seen the pain in his eyes. And she must have known that he was trying as hard as he could, working himself into the ground.

'C'mon, Esther,' he said to her softly, as she began to sob like I'd never seen anyone sob before. 'You can't go. We'll get our own house. I'll call the council. I'll make it better.'

I don't think she believed him.

But it was enough to get her home.

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## 2

# Out in the Cold



It was a winter's day in Dunston, mid-1950s, a few years after my ma's escape attempt. We were now living in a council house of our own on Beech Drive, a ten-minute walk from my grandparents' place on Oak Avenue. We'd started out at No. 106, which had two bedrooms, before my dad, delivering on his promise to my ma, convinced the council to upgrade us to No. 1, which had an extra room in the back. It was still far too small for a family of six – my two brothers and I had to share a double mattress in one room – but with eleven fewer Johnsons than at my grandparents' house, it felt like Buckingham Palace.

Just as we were settling in, though, I did something that made me so ill, I was lucky to ever recover.

It all started with a silent documentary called *Nanook of the North* that I'd watched on our brand-new black-and-white television. The film had been made in the 1920s – you can still find it on the internet today – and it must have been shown on the BBC because the BBC was the only thing that our rooftop aerial could pick up at the time. (The North East didn't get any television at all until six years after the war.)

Now, usually I wasn't interested in the television at all. It was all horticultural programmes and church organ recitals and, if you were lucky, re-runs of Gregory Peck films and Mickey Mouse cartoons – boring, awful stuff that you

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