

HOT STUFF

Chapter One – The Life of Brian

For Life is quite absurd
And death's the final word

Brian's Song, Life of Brian

When I meet someone and tell them my name is Jenny Roberts, they usually acknowledge me politely. They might even engage in small talk about the unseasonably-whatever-for-the-time-of-year weather or the tube strike or football or the price of fish. But if I tell them my real name, they are fleetingly speechless. They look at me wide-eyed and knowingly and say something like 'Oh ... gosh ... I thought you were um ... a man.' And then they talk at length about Brian Edge as if he were a good mate.

For many years, Brian was more than a good mate to me, but recently he'd become overpowering. I could no longer express myself in my own words – only Brian's. I had no feelings left of my own – only Brian's. I had no original thoughts – only Brian's. He was becoming oppressive, an over-bearing force in my life, over-shadowing my very existence. Can I claim mental cruelty? That might be something of an exaggeration, but his ubiquitous presence was certainly stifling. I could feel his pervasiveness, the way he permeated my every thought and deed. I simply couldn't take it any longer, so in a crime of passion (or more likely a fit of pique) I killed him. I have finally killed the goose that not only laid the golden egg but laid them steadily year after year after year. Do I regret it? Not really. It will leave a void but it will also allow my creative spirit to flourish unhindered by Brian and his pernickety little ways.

Do I need the money? Not really. Forbes lists my net worth at £1bn, which is on the conservative side, but I'm not going to point out their mistake. Thankfully, they list my real name and not Jenny's. If they had listed me as Jenny Roberts, life around here could be awkward. Can you imagine going into the local Tesco Metro and hunting the bargain shelves or scavenging in the discount bins for the specials (hefty coffers in the bank doesn't just wipe out an upbringing of parsimony, you know) only to hear Maisie and Daisy on the checkout gossiping about you?

'Imagine that, all that money and she's such a tight old bag.'

'Yeah, right old skinflint. If I had that sort of dough, I defo wouldn't shop here.'

'If I had that sort of dough, I wouldn't even live around here.'

I suspect they would have the decency to wait until I'd left the store, but then sitting back-to-back at their matching tills, in their matching overalls, they would chatter endlessly about what they would do with all that money – a spa weekend, a luxury cruise, fast cars, fast men, a shopping spree or two or three, a yacht in the Med, a home cinema system – and they would daydream, fantasizing that money brings untold happiness and a passport to the glamorous, gorgeous lives they long to lead. Their conversation would be peppered with the peeps and beeps of the bar-code reader as their matching glitterly decorated acrylically nailed hands sweep sausages, sweets and Smirnoff from the conveyor belt to the

packing area. God help anyone that tries to interrupt the flow of chatter with a question that is actually relevant to shopping. My paranoia is, however, probably unfounded as fear of that sort of gossip is predicated on the unlikely scenario that Maisie (or Daisy) reads Forbes Magazine.

Brian has earned me a good living over the last thirty years, with more than £100m rolling in during the last few months. How did I thank him? With a sprinkling of *amanita phalloides* in his stroganoff, that's how. Yes, Brian met his end after eating the death cap fungi, not available in a store near you; neither it is available from the "Fruit & Veg" aisle in our local Tesco. It is easily obtainable if you know what you're looking for, and sometimes even if you don't, for it is not dissimilar to the straw mushroom, which abounds in both our woodlands and the shelves of all good supermarkets.

But the fates are avenging Brian's death and they have bestowed upon me the illness I've been dreading: Writer's block.

Brian Edge entered the world on the 1st November 1982. He was fully formed and a constable on the beat in Cheltenham. Over the next thirty years, he grew up, developed, married, had children and was promoted. By the time he met his untimely death, he was the Commissioner of the Met. The life of Brian has been depicted in ninety novels, fifteen TV series, any number of commercials promoting everything from motoring organisations to (ironically) mushrooms, but the real money came from his success in Hollywood and the merchandise spinoffs. I still have no idea how a copper from the Cotswolds caught the eye of the movie moguls, but he did. Another film is due out next year, but in the meantime, you can buy a Brian police-station, a Brian panda car, available in both matchbox size and pedal variety, a Brian doll, with or without his plush dog (which he never had in the novels, but the ad-men thought the addition of a canine friend would have more merchandise appeal), Then there are Brian uniforms – simple for small children and kinky for large adults, the latter having been especially tailored for strippers and hen-parties. For the budget conscious, there are plastic helmets, plastic badges, plastic notebooks (or monogrammed nice little black moleskine ones for the not so budget conscious), pencils and all the other paraphernalia that a British copper requires to solve a murder. For the iPeople, there are covers for their phones, pads and pods, all in a specially created metropolitan navy pantone bearing a silver insignia. And, of course, there is a range of handcuffs – plastic for the under-fives, metal for the over fives and furry for the bored housewives – the latter available in black and pink with (optional) matching high-heeled mules. Yes, Brian was a licence to print money, a licence that the death cap fungi and I conspired to revoke. Brian is dead, although I expect his memory and the merchandise will live for a little longer. But what does this mean for me? I could retire, travel the world, do something good like start a Brian foundation for the educationally challenged or retired police dogs or wounded police officers or I could write another book. And therein lies the real reason for Brian's demise. I don't want to be a crime-writer anymore. I want to write serious, award-winning literary novels. I want the Orange prize for fiction and the Man Booker and the Pullitzer, but above all, I yearn to be the Nobel Laureate. With Brian's help, I have won every crime

award. My special glass cabinet is overflowing with polyurethane tombstones, silver plates and trophies of daggers, but they are not enough.

I now understand exactly what Thomas Mann meant when he said: 'A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.' I never found this to be true when I was writing about Brian. The words just seemed to flow from the keyboard and rearrange themselves into meaningful characters around the plot arc. The chapters emerged, the story unfurled and one book after another just appeared. Writingwise, I am struggling to get beyond Brian.

For the writer, the block is the condition we fear. The daunting prospect of the blank page, the agonies of rummaging the depths of the mind for a glimpse of inspiration, a hint of an idea, a sniff of a plot, a ghost of a character or just some words. Anything to break this stalemate. We see writer's block as a disease, an illness, an ailment, a suffering and to us, it feels just as real as any other virus. Medically, it is not a condition. It has no Latin name, such as *scriptor quaestio*. It is not a mental illness. There is neither a silver nor a magic bullet; there is no medication and no treatment, for we are the only ones who see this condition and only we can understand it.

In all the years I have been writing about Brian, I have never suffered in this way. I contrive a murder, plan the plot, devise a perp and write and write and write. Usually, Brian solves the crime; and, usually, there is a happy ending. Occasionally I have strayed from this path. In *Edge of Reason*, no arrest was made because the perp was such an interesting character, I felt he needed to get away so that he could make a come-back at a later date, although now that Brian is no longer with us, that's not very likely. In the *Edge of Darkness*, they caught the perp but not without poor old WPC Kendall losing her life, so not much of a happy end for her. And then, of course, there was *Close to the Edge*, where Brian was murdered, so neither happy end nor happy ending there.

I'm giving myself thirty days to break the block and if I don't succeed, I'm returning to the crime genre. Maybe Brian could have a brother? Cliff Edge – always living on the brink? Maybe I'll cross the pond and pen an NYPD series, but for the next month, it's literary fiction or bust. The golden Nobel coin, so small, yet so precious, beckons. I want to hold Alfred and his chiselled profile in my hand. I want to join the other Nobel Laureates, all 113 of them; admittedly I haven't heard of half of them, let alone read them, but then Brian was a full-time job. Maybe that's a good place to start, with a bit of reading, put it down to research and try to identify what sort of verbiage those Nobel judges look for. I turn on the computer. I open the Amazon page and wonder why there isn't a list of Nobel winners, then I could just order the lot. I then open the Nobel literature page so I can hop between the two and fill my basket with award-winning fiction. This is not looking good. There is no such thing as a Nobel winning book. The Laureates are granted their status for their overall contribution to literature, so even if I write an exceptional erudite, learned, literary book, Brian will be taken into account when they do the tally. And Brian is not going to win me the Nobel prize.

The Nobel is now off the table, at least until I've written as many noble books as I have Brian books. I'm not giving up. I could adopt another nom-de-plume, or

just write as Jenny Roberts, the nom-de-non-plume I took when my real name became synonymous with Brian. I know I have it in me to write this great work of literature. I just need to find a subject, a plot, some characters and a title. But first, a trip to Vintage Cavern is beckoning. I might be more inspired if I had an old typewriter. A Royal Quiet de Luxe might bring out the inner Hemingway or Fleming, but then a Remington was the choice of George Orwell and dear old Agatha. Yes, a typewriter will be my portal to the literary greatness that thrived in the analogue age.

The Vintage Cavern is a junk shop. It is a house on the High St covering three floors and every room is jumble of stuff, junk stuff similar to stuff you used to own. If you are looking for something, you have to explore and excavate. Dear old Mr V, who inherited it from his father, has no idea what stock he has. He just clears houses and piles the new stuff on the existing stuff. I don't have time to explore every room, but on the first floor, I see a typewriter carriage amongst two oil lamps, a portrait of Queen Victoria, a few rusty biscuit tins, a pile of Picture Posts, a chair with one leg missing and a mangy looking one eyed fox head that is attached to the collar of a moth-eaten fur coat. Trying not to touch the coat, I lean over and pull out the typewriter. It is a honey. A 1920s Corona travelling typewriter with its own leather case. I can already feel the start of my new work surging through my veins.

I take it home and with gleeful anticipation put a sheet of paper in the roller. I tap out 'A NOVEL By JENNY ROBERTS'. The V is not true and sits slightly above the rest of the text, but isn't that the idiosyncratic mark of every typewriter? Without the wonky 't' of the typewriter on the Sports Desk, Brian would not have been able to deduce that the killer worked at the Albion Telegraph in *Edge to Edge*.

I need a title. Once I have the title, the rest of the book will fall into place. It was easy with Brian. I simply chose one of the many phrases from the dictionary that contained the word "edge". I look around pleading with the room to offer me inspiration. I gaze out of the window. I am lucky to have such a spectacular view from the penthouse. There's a stunning sunset. I absent-mindedly begin to type. 'Imperial purple velvet sits on an orange-golden crown' ... what utter bollocks and too long for a title. I throw the piece of paper away and make a note to try and find some Tippex, otherwise this is going to be a voyage of forest destruction.

The Shard, Eye, Cheesegrater, Walkie-Talkie are all silhouettes now as the sun goes down. Weird shapes and weirder names. London is changing. I see a row of books about London on the windowsill: Secret London, Literary London, Hidden London – why doesn't someone write something original about London? I wonder how "secret" the places in these books are now. "Unsecret London: Things that happen in public spaces" might be an interesting avenue to pursue. What things happen in public spaces? I write the idea on a bright pink post-it note and stick it neatly on the wall; it's the best idea I have so far, it's the only idea I have so far. On the shelf are hundreds of CDs, all with names that would make great novel titles, but I don't want to be accused of unoriginality or even worse, plagiarism, but who could resist a good sex scandal entitled Beyond the

Realms of Euphoria? In front of the CDs are a pair of headphones, a bottle of Taitinger (I must put that in the fridge), a vase of dead flowers (I must throw those away) and a framed picture of Dad, taken in Austria many years ago. He's sitting on a rock somewhere up a mountain. Oh, how I miss him. He shuffled off the mortal coil shortly after Brian and left a trail of chaos in his wake (as in metaphorical ship, not the post-funeral party). He was a bit of a rascal in his day, although I suspect my mother would prefer the term Lothario. The journey to probate has been fraught with revelation. There were four claims on the widow's pension (the result of the Casanova years) and a number of half-siblings emerging to claim "what's rightfully ours" (the result of being careless during the Casanova years).

I stare forlornly at the new blank sheet of paper in my new vintage Corona and contemplate writing a book about Dad. It's what he would have wanted, which is not only true but makes for an intriguing title.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that every good novel needs a good opening line. 'The hook', as it is called, needs to be memorable and pique the reader's interest sufficiently to lure him, or her, into the story. Do great novelists start with the opening line or the plot? Perhaps the opening line inspires them to develop a plot and characters? Or perhaps they already have a plot populated with credible characters and write the first line last? Perhaps I'll be inspired by looking at some first lines of the greats?

Despite being from my all-time favourite novel, 'Last night I dreamed I went to Manderley again' is hardly a headline grabber. There is nothing more tiresome than other people's dreams, even if they are Mrs de Winter's. Furthermore, at that point in the book, we have no idea what or where Manderley is. We are, however, aware that a road leads there, a road along which travelled Nellie the Elephant. Whether she ever arrived, we do not know, but if memory serves correctly, at no point in the dramatic Cornish tale does Danvers enter the breakfast room and announce that an elephant has turned up at the de Winter residence.

Three years later, and du Maurier nails the concept of the opening line. 'When the east wind blows up Helford river, the shining waters become troubled and disturbed, and the little waves beat angrily upon the sandy shores.' The line elegantly presages the turbulent times ahead for Lady Dona St. Columb and her French buccaneer. It also presaged my own turbulent time on BRMB. It was a fairly straightforward game, Tony Butler would play a sound, ask 'Wharr am oi? Wharr am oi?' and to achieve your fifteen seconds of fame, you had to phone in and say where you thought he was. After hearing the howling winds, I knew exactly where he was and phoned in to tell him. I swiftly replied 'Frenchman's Creek' in response to the frightfully well-spoken producer asking me where I thought Tony was. I could tell she was impressed by the way she said 'Oh, someone knows their Daphne du Maurier' without a hint of sarcasm. I had to wait until the end of the record, then for the news headlines, then the weather and the traffic update, but eventually, I was live on BRMB – what a coup! 'So, Jenny' came the voice in stereo from phone and radio 'Wherr am oi? Wherr am

oi?' Now confident of winning the jackpot, which was piling up, I assertively gave my answer. I heard that deliberate pre-big win silence and was just about to start my victory dance when, to my embarrassment, the whole of Birmingham heard Butler ask 'Where the chuffing hell is that?' Three contestants later, Stanley from West Bromwich scooped the jackpot by correctly answering 'the Austin Rover wind tunnel'.

Although Daphne is my favourite author, she doesn't feature very well in the best-books-of-all-time lists – in my opinion, a gross oversight by the compilers. According to Time magazine, this list is headed by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but I feel that vote of confidence cannot have been based on the first line: 'When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow.' My old English teacher would not have given this first line a pass mark, let alone hailed it as one of the best ever opening lines. It contains the cardinal sin of writing, namely, an inflected form of the infinitive "get". There is always, always another word that can be used, Doopy used to yell at any hapless pupil who had inadvertently used the g-word. He would have also chastised Ms Harper for use of the passive voice, two adverbs and the superfluity of words. And doesn't every twelve year old boy break the odd bone? It certainly felt like a monthly occurrence in our household, but maybe that's because my parents never stopped my brothers playing Batman and Robin. This involved adorning their shoulders with a sheet or towel – or on one occasion, mother's brand new poncho – and 'flying' off the roof of our garage. No, Jem's injury is not sufficient for me to read on. I think my brother's split knee-cap and particularly the way it poked through the skin aroused my curiosity far more than Jem's elbow.

'Call me Ishmael'. Hmmm, well that's certainly going to have them queuing outside Waterstones at midnight to be amongst the first to buy the sequel.

My thoughts turn to that great Irish author, the master of the written word, for surely if anyone has a humdinger of an opener, it's going to be Joyce. Ulysses disappoints. 'Stately, plump Buck Milligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed.' I rest my case. Sorry, Sunny Jim, but there is nothing enticing about a man's shaving things (or were they a woman's? I didn't actually get any further.) Sex is always good – at least within the context of an opening paragraph it is. Ken Kesey nails it with his opening gambit: 'They're out there. Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped up before I can catch them.' But wait ... morning ablutions and sex ... an idea is forming. I put a sheet of paper in my typewriter,

"IT'S WHAT HE WOULD HAVE WANTED

A NOVEL BY JENNY ROBERTS – JEN JENKINS *The greats all have alliterative names, I need one too.*

'Jane stepped out of the shower, a water droplet clung to her nipple like a drop of dew on an early morning rose.' That was the infamous opening line to one of my essays at the age of (nearly) thirteen and it was written by my father. He was a brilliant man, an engineer, mechanical, electrical and civil – always very civil, apart from when the neighbours chucked their dog shit over the garden wall or when the phone rang during Heartbeat or when someone phoned to tell him he'd

been mis-sold PPI. One of his great strengths was his ability to explain things to me. Whenever I was awarded top marks at school, it was because of Dad. He approached problems logically and explained things in an old-fashioned way. I was on the cusp of an education system that was saying farewell to traditional methods and welcoming a superficial surface approach, where we just learned facts, phrases and formulae without understanding what they did or how they did it. It was all very liberal and contemporary, so that even the thickest most disadvantaged girls felt neither thick nor disadvantaged. One evening, I was in tears over my homework as I could not find a way to tackle an essay that was due the next day. My father started pacing, adopting the same pose as when he dictated to his secretary and began talking about Jane stepping out of the shower.

He saw me scowl.

'You have to grab the reader's attention,' he said 'you have to stand out from the crowd.'

'But Dad,' I protested 'it's a chemistry essay about the periodic table.'

'Well then, you simply go on to say "her hair still held traces of ammonium chloride, which is NH_4Cl , ammonium lauryl sulfate, which is the common name for ammonium dodecyl sulfate, which is $\text{CH}_3(\text{CH}_2)_{10}\text{CH}_2\text{OSO}_3\text{NH}_4$. It is made up of a nonpolar hydrocarbon chain and a polar sulfate, which together make it a surfactant, which reduces the surface tension of the liquid in which it is dissolved. Then there is glycol, which is $\text{C}_2\text{H}_6\text{O}_2$, or carbon, hydrogen and oxygen." What you have to remember is that everything, every single thing can be broken down into chemical compounds. And don't forget the sodium lauryl sulfate ($\text{C}_{12}\text{H}_{25}\text{SO}_4\text{Na}$) which adds the froth to toothpaste, shampoo and bubble bath ...'. And thus began my chemistry essay, for which I received the ignominious 'U' for unclassified and a trip to the headmistress for 'being facetious'. I don't know to this day, whether my problem with the periodic table stems from that essay or the fear that my destiny as an adult would be shaped by my knowledge of the periodic table, since all grown up conversations would contain a smattering of gossip about the periodic elements, as our chemistry teacher seemed sadistically keen to impart..."

I read what I've written. I remove the paper from the Corona, tear it into little pieces and consign them to the bin. A nostalgic childhood memory is not going to win me any prizes. And our teacher was right. If I had taken more notice of the periodic table, I might be on my way to the Nobel prize for chemistry by now. No, no regrets, je ne regrette rien, je ne regrette pas killing Brian, je ne regrette pas not knowing the periodic table.

I have to temporarily abandon the novelling quest as we need to start packing up Dad's house, something we've been putting off, but can defer no longer. Once I've been through the rest of his papers, I'm hoping that the starting point of the novel might present itself.

I start with the financial papers, which need to be kept for twelve years. They can go into storage. I wrap his silver cups and note the surprising number of trophies for football. I realise that I never really looked at Dad's trophy cupboard, because I was far too busy building my own. I know Dad liked football as FA Cup day was always an occasion for our family, but I didn't realise he'd been such an active player. I'm taking the photo albums home. I can't bear to put

them in storage and I shall enjoy sauntering down the early years of memory lane. I pack up the objects from the desk. Once we've modernised the house, we'll be moving back in and I'll be using the study as my writing room. Maybe the illusive inspiration is lurking in the study? The house itself might have secrets to share that will make a good foundation for a tale or two?

The objects evoke memories of school days. The globe. Brownish colouring for the sea and half the world is pink. I used to know the capital of every country in the world and now there are countries I haven't even heard of. I like the feel of the globe, smooth and solid. I like the way it spins around silently and effortlessly, jumbling the countries into one long blur. If school-children today learn all their geography via the Internet and a map-app, do they think the world is flat? I waste a few hours researching the idea that the earth is flat. I'm astonished to see that The Flat Earth Society not only still exists, but has a website and a Facebook page with over 40,000 likes. The Society offers a blog with posts that consider various flat-earth theories such as 'the case of the infinite plane using a Gaussian Pillbox to show its finite gravitational pull'. And not wanting to miss out on the commercial opportunities afforded by the worldwide web, there is a shop. Flat-earth globe anyone? These are maps of the world that are round and ... well, flat. They look like plates suspended in a round frame. It would appear the flatters accept that the earth is round, but do not accept that it is spherical. This is getting weirder and weirder and I still can't decide if it's all an elaborate hoax or if the map-app generation really believes it. I'm sure there's a novel in this, but that's now verging on fantasy, which is definitely not my genre.

I pack the pen holder, beautifully engraved, with its matching letter opener and ink-pots. There is a blotter, covered in strange fading blue Rorschach shapes and hastily scribbled telephone numbers without names. That might make an interesting book. I could phone each of these numbers and find out who is on the other end of the line. What is their story? How do they all link to Dad? I pick up the slide rule. There is something special about the way the pieces glide together and something remarkable about how such accurate calculations could come from three strips of plastic and a dog-eared book of log tables. I play with the slide-rule, moving the middle until some of the numbers line up under the cursor, but can't remember how to read the answer.

I never read the diaries while he was alive, although I had occasionally glanced over his shoulder when he was writing them. I don't remember them being very interesting, rather a lot about gauge glasses and cylinder relief valves. But he did used to write them every day, so I'm tempted to nose through them. It might be better if I burned them or packed them away for the great grandchildren to read one day. On the other hand, I don't see why I shouldn't read them. He was writing his memoirs before he died, and I've already the first few chapters of that. It doesn't make much sense and contains some odd neologisms, although I feel that has more to do with his typist being a lush, evidenced by the constant companion of a bottle of fruit juice that started each morning a bright orange colour and became more vodka coloured as the day wore on. The memoirs are based on the diaries, and now that we know about

those foreign women and their money-grubbing offspring, the diaries can surely hold no further surprises.

I make a ritual of preparing the coffee, but once I've chosen the strength and type, selected my cup, added frothy milk, I can procrastinate no more. I pick up the first diary. It's all fairly straightforward and not terribly interesting to someone who wasn't there. It's mainly about Sheila and her illness, which all sounds terrible. I can't recall a Sheila. Was she a neighbour, one of our many cousins or aunts? It is not until I realise that Arthur is a vet that I remember Sheila was mum's horse. The rest of that year and the beginning of the following year are equally as uninteresting. Various domestic incidents (the ghostly music in the night, which turned out to be mice running up and down the strings in the piano), decorating the nursery, a lot of engineering scribbles (Kyham Pattern Pumps and Freezing with Cardice, sublimation at -109.2, none of which make any sense to me) and details of a number of business trips. Just before Easter, there's an entry "Winni is expecting", which would be me, and since I remember Sheila, she must have lived a good many years after her illness. The entry for Dad's birthday makes me pause "Met Madzi in Paris". Madzi? There can only be one Madzi, surely? But I introduced her to him years ago and neither of them said anything about knowing each other then. But it's such an unusual name. Madzi and I first met at the local college, evening classes learning French. Although she's twenty three years older than me, we palled up because we were both mature students. Dad and his chums had a French lunch every week, part of their keeping the senile brain active missions, so I introduced Madzi to them. I'll go and see her tomorrow and see if this is just a remarkable coincidence or whether they actually knew each other. Oh dear, I fear the literary masterpiece needs to be put back on ice. There is still so much here to sort out, but once it's done, my head might feel clearer, the block will be vanquished and I can once again focus on my goal.