Costa Award-winning Author

BRIAN CONAGHAN

SWIMMING on the MOON

BLOOMSBURY

Praise for Brian Conaghan

WINNER OF THE COSTA CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD

WINNER OF THE AN POST IRISH BOOK AWARDS TEEN/YOUNG ADULT BOOK OF THE YEAR

WINNER OF THE UKLA BOOK AWARD (WITH SARAH CROSSAN)

SHORTLISTED FOR THE CILIP CARNEGIE MEDAL

'So much heart [his writing] bounces off the page'
Irish Independent

'Conaghan is a sublime storyteller who can make the reader hang on his every last word (and all of the others)'
The Times

'Laughter is inevitable'
Irish Times

'[Writing] packed with energy and a brilliant distinctive voice'
Bookseller

SWIMMING on the MOON

Books by Brian Conaghan

Cardboard Cowboys
Swimming on the Moon

For older readers
When Mr Dog Bites
The Bombs That Brought Us Together
The Weight of a Thousand Feathers
The M Word

And with Sarah Crossan
We Come Apart

SWIMMING on the MOON

BRIAN CONAGHAN

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Brian Conaghan, 2023
Illustrations copyright © Levente Szabo, 2023

Brian Conaghan and Levente Szabo have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author and Illustrator of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-5392-5; eBook: 978-1-5266-5390-1;
ePDF: 978-1-5266-5391-8

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters

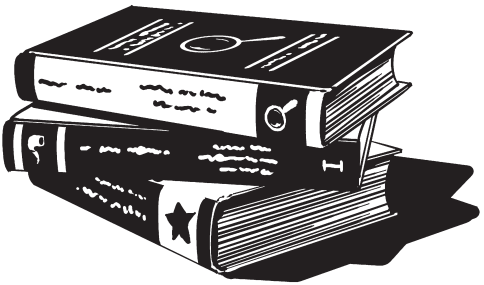
For Rosie and Larry

Contents

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	8
Chapter Three	14
Chapter Four	17
Chapter Five	27
Chapter Six	42
Chapter Seven	52
Chapter Eight	62
Chapter Nine	69
Chapter Ten	78
Chapter Eleven	116
Chapter Twelve	132
Chapter Thirteen	144
Chapter Fourteen	154
Chapter Fifteen	168
Chapter Sixteen	181
Chapter Seventeen	194

Chapter Eighteen 218
Chapter Nineteen 231
Chapter Twenty 239
Chapter Twenty-One 253
Chapter Twenty-Two 290
Chapter Twenty-Three 296
Chapter Twenty-Four 304
Chapter Twenty-Five 308
Chapter Twenty-Six 314

About the Author 322



One

Here I am once again. Sitting on the edge of the bed. Just sitting. I gnaw on a loose pinky nail. Staring. Thinking. Dreaming. Hoping. There's space on my bedroom wall for another poster. Or maybe a family photo. A happy-snappy one with tons of teeth on show. Maybe from that camper-van holiday we went on two years ago.

'This thing's a tent on wheels,' I remember Dad saying.

He used to be dead funny. These days not so much. I can't remember what Mum said in return, but the laughing caused the camper-van seats to bob up and down. She's dead funny too. Or *was*. I used to be a *proper wee comedian* myself, but now I just stare. Think. Dream. Hope. It's really hard knowing there won't be any more family holidays. Like so hard it makes you cry. It's worse wishing for them though. It's so bad that I'd even settle for an actual *tent on wheels* one again.

My mind takes me back there loads. I remember how the colours in the sky were different to the sky outside my bedroom window at home and how the smell of sun cream didn't leave my hands the entire time we were there. I want the salty taste of the seaside to touch my tongue again. I want the moon to be so huge and close that I can reach up and touch it. Dance on it. Swim on it. I'm always imagining what it'd be like to go back … I stare hard at the empty section of my bedroom wall until I see it. Like actually see it. Our family picture slowly appears. We're all in it, bursting with joy.

Right, so, we're all in this big clapped-out camper van. Mum and Dad are up front while me and Anto are bouncing around in the back. It's scorching outside, but we're definitely somewhere in Scotland. One of those summer days where everything looks hazy yellow, and all the adults talk about wanting to live in it forever. The windows are open and Mum's singing like a champion to the music, her tonsils going like the clappers. She does have some voice. In another world she'd have been the lead singer in a wedding band instead of working in Asda.

'But she's high up in Asda,' Dad always said to anyone who'd listen.

By high up he meant that she works directly above

the food section, in clothes. It's not exactly a laugh-out-loud joke, but it never failed to crack him up.

Dad's elbow is half in, half out. He's blowing cigarette smoke towards the sun. Green menthols, which don't damage you as much. At least, that's what he's told us. *It's like smoking Polo mints.* When finished, he flicks the butt over the roof and starts drumming the camper-van door. He should have been the wedding band's drummer instead of being a baker in Greggs.

'Someone's got to put all those sausage rolls into the oven,' Mum used to say to the neighbours.

Me and Anto like our neighbours.

Mum's singing gets louder. Dad's drumming fiercer. They look at each other. Lots of back-and-forth smiling. Their eyes are filled with sun. I imagine that if me and Anto weren't here Dad would've probably pulled over for a big sloppy kiss. I notice Mum's hand resting on Dad's knee, she taps her finger off it. A new song comes on now, a much slower number, one of those rap ballad things. Halfway through the second verse she moves her hand to the back of his neck. I taste menthol every-where, it's clinging to my new blouse. George at Asda, obviously. I smack my tongue off my lips. Polo mints my eye! Mum tickles the little hairs on my dad's neck. Anto, who's next to me, sticks his tongue out as if he's about

to cover my face with the contents of his stomach. The fish and chips we had on the beach. Erm, no thanks. I glare at him and point to his face as if to say: Don't even think about it. Anto might be the same age, but if it came down to it, I'd more than fancy my chances. I've seen enough Bullies Getting Owned YouTube videos to know how to handle annoying boys. We might've been born on the same day, in the same hospital, from the same mother, but technically I'm his big sister since I popped out a full six minutes before he did. So that's sister, with a capital BIG. But, whatever happened in those six minutes is beyond me, beyond Mum, beyond Dad and beyond the doctors. Anto is another story. He's just, well, Anto.

I squeeze my eyes shut and the picture disappears. Magic!

I let myself fall backwards so that I'm lying on the bed. My head's squished too close to the headboard but my imagination covers me like a soft, warm duvet; especially when I return to our holiday, remembering when Mum and Dad seemed to be bouncing around in a happy bubble …

Dad takes his hand off the steering wheel and drops it on to Mum's bare knee. She's wearing a fluttery dress. The George summer range. Staff discount. The

dress matches her headband.

When I grow up I want to look exactly like my mum. Beautiful, cool. But I won't. Everyone says I'm the spit of Dad. It's Anto who got Mum's dark hair and velvet skin. Both of them could pass for a Spanish Italian any day of the week. Dad just looks Scottish. Pink in summer. Sad in winter.

She thinks I don't hear when she leans into him and whispers, *Love you, honey.* And he replies, *Love you too, chicken,* before taking his hand off her knee cos we're coming up to a roundabout. My stomach goes all woozy. Anto's as well. I know the look on his face when his tummy tumbles. Maybe it's a twin thing.

Suddenly our shabby camper van has transformed into this mega-cracking jalopy; one you only see in American films and stuff. Like, you could dance in it if you wanted to, that's how big we're talking. And we're driving all the way towards the sun.

One big, mega-cracking family.

'Anna!'

Driving in the hazy yellow.

'Anna!'

Everyone touching necks and knees and loving each other.

'ANNA!'

I break from my trance. My breathing is heavy. The thud of the stairs is loud. Anto thudding down. Mum thudding up. And that's me back in normal land, with a bash. When the door crashes open I jump. Dreamtime over.

'Anna, I've been down there shouting on you for ages.' Mum's standing at my door squeezing the life out of a dish towel. 'Your dad's back and dinner's on the table.'

'Right.'

'Did you not hear me shouting?'

'I must have dozed.'

'Dozed,' Mum scoffs. 'Twelve-year-olds don't doze, Anna.' She looks up at the stars on my ceiling. 'Dozed, would you listen to it.'

'OK, I fell asleep then,' I say.

'Right, well, your dinner's getting cold.' Mum shakes her head and goes to leave.

'Mum,' I shout, mainly cos I don't want her to leave. She stops. 'What are we having?'

'Sausage roll and chips.'

I should have known, it is Saturday after all. Although sometimes Dad brings us a couple on a Friday too. Anto doesn't like much, but sausage rolls, well, he could eat them like sweets.

'I'll be down in a jiffy,' I say.

'Tonight, no reading to one in the morning, got it?'

'I've finished my book anyway,' I tell her.

Mum looks at the stars once more, twirls the dish towel and leaves.

What's the point looking at the ceiling? All the stars have lost their power to glow. I'm far too old for new ones.

I tiptoe down the stairs.

Another night, another sausage roll. These ones are a bit flaky. Probably been drying out in the shop window all day long. Another night, another dinner where no one speaks. Only Anto chomping on food like a starving wildebeest breaks the silence. The three of us who *can* speak don't utter a thing.

Wish I was still on that holiday.