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opening extract from

My Brother Johnny

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CHAPTER ONE

When Johnny came back from his missions in the sky Over There, there was no one waiting for him at the station. He arrived on the last night-train and was the only passenger to get off before it moved on, creaking in the fog and darkness, to continue its journey through the emptiness of the plain.

Johnny crossed the shining tracks, his blue airman's bag over his shoulder, passed by the greasy windows of the office belonging to Old Zenya, the stationmaster (who at that time of night was always fast asleep in his swivel chair), slipped out of the exit that led into the avenue and headed for the village.

It was very foggy. A damp, white veil hung from the trees and hid everything – you couldn't see ten metres in front of you – and besides, it was Hallowe'en, so no one noticed him.

Marione from *The Big Bite* said, later on, that he'd thought he heard someone go by outside while he was preparing another lot of hamburgers for the grill; he was waiting for the Hallowe'en crowd to arrive. But he hadn't been paying attention: he was alone in the place right then with all the lights on –

like being in a grounded flying saucer – and he still had to go downstairs to bring up a couple of barrels of beer and sort out the counter and the snacks. *The Big Bite* was a good place to end an evening.

He didn't so much as see him, he said, as hear the clicking of hobnailed boots on the wet tarmac; he glimpsed a sort of shadow, walking slowly, dragging its feet. He didn't imagine it was Johnny, otherwise he'd have woken up the entire village even if it meant closing the bar and losing out on business. He'd do that for Johnny, and much more.

So Johnny was able to slip along the deserted streets, avoid the piazza, skirt the terraced houses where big carved pumpkins lit with candles shone in the gardens, and finally get home without being seen. Not even the dogs barked as he went by, as if he were a ghost.

He opened the door with his keys, went straight up to the first floor, making the wooden stairs creak, and shut himself in his room.

Mum was lying down at that point, waiting for me to come home, flattened by the headache that drives her mad and her first tranquilliser of the evening. Dad was in the living-room watching the war repeats on cable that filled the room with a greenish light and the red trails of tracer bullets. He'd turned down the sound so as not to disturb Mum, so he heard the noise in the hall. He went in his slippers and pyjama bottoms, to see what it was, made out the large shape in blue uniform at the top

of the stairs and called out twice, "Johnny, Johnny," in a hesitant voice, but Johnny didn't answer.

Johnny didn't answer for the next 36 hours either, nor move from his room, and even when you put your ear to the door you couldn't hear anything except the bedsprings squeaking every now and then.

While Johnny was on his way home, I was in the *Biberon*, a stupid disco decked out like a cross between a chocolate box and the spaceship in *Alien*, stuck somewhere in the fog among muck-covered fields and frost-blackened stubble, shoe factories and those Sunday hypermarkets you enter in the morning and don't emerge from until evening. Then you wonder how you've spent the day and what you did but you know that if you hurry up you can still catch *90 Minutes*.

I was in the *Biberon* with a *Guinness* in front of me (I knew if I wanted to I could have another one), dressed up as a ghost with the customary pumpkin on the round table at the edge of the dance floor. A DJ who was off his head mixed techno and Gigi d'Alessio, while The Best Young People from the village were grooving madly all around me.

I wasn't enjoying myself at all.

I was thinking: *I'll bite the first person who asks me to dance*. And then I thought: *What am I doing here, for God's sake*?

OK, two stupid questions, because I already knew the answers.

One: the likelihood of someone asking a fourteen year old (thirteen and seven months to be exact) to

dance, one with very little in front or behind and a bit of a punk, was zero point something per cent so there wasn't much to bite. Also, though you're not allowed to say it, I am Johnny's sister, after all. Since Johnny went off to war my credit-rating had rocketed. Otherwise the Older Kids would never have invited me to the Fabulous Hallowe'en Ball.

Two: I was here after months of all-out war with M and D, stuff that made the American War of Independence look like a joke.

No, Mum, I won't be late. No, I won't drink alcohol.

No, I won't let anyone touch me (I'm actually afraid nobody will – see above).

Months. In the end I won and now I was here: my first night in a disco, my first beer, etc etc. Only to discover I didn't like beer and I was totally bored.

I'm complicated, I know. I'm a stupid mess.

Just like when Liga sings, "*There's some nights you can't stay here alone . . .*" so you get in a car with some idiots and sail the sea of Great Nothingness, in and out of the fog – there's always fog here – and hope that at the next crossroads you don't bump into another guy, like the one driving the car you're in, who doesn't bother to slow down and see what's coming. And then, when you finally get to wherever, it's exactly the same as the place you've just left so it wasn't worth the bother.

Then when I get home Mum will be awake crying – Mum often cries, to tell you the truth – and she'll tell me, "I was so worried", and then she'll say, "Did

you have a good time?"

So what should I say to her – no?

She wouldn't understand. Anyway, I don't really understand it myself. Liga probably knows how to handle things better. He's sound, Liga, I like him.

Because I'm absolutely certain he'll come one day. He'll park his car in the piazza and, with everybody watching, he'll walk through the arcades, loping along like a cowboy with his guitar bumping against his back, then he'll stop in front of me while I'm eating an ice cream and even if he doesn't carry me off – what happens next is a bit of a blur – at least he'll answer my questions because he knows about the World. Because here in this village, no one knows the answers and, as far as I can see, no one even asks the questions.

That's why I was in the *Biberon* the night Johnny came back, because I couldn't be on my own on Hallowe'en or Valentine's Day or Any Other Day. And that's why I was sitting at a beer-stained table dressed as a ghost, wanting to get out fast and find someone who'd give me a lift home, which was pretty unlikely. That's why there was no danger of anyone asking me to dance.

I know what they say about me in the village: Belinda's strange; she's weird; she's not like other girls; she wears awful clothes; she's got a pin in her nose; she's got hair like the Last of the Mohicans; she's dyed it green; she's always in dirty baggy jumpers; Belinda's stuck up and thinks she's God's gift; Belinda will give her poor parents a heart attack . . .

Maybe they're right.

Air. I go out and smoke a cigarette. Before I go home I'll have to suck a packet of mints – that's all I need, to have Mum smell beer and cigarettes on my breath.

It's cold, you can't see the sky, you can't see a thing, only white everywhere. Johnny's out there somewhere. There's no fog where they sent him, the sky's always clear, cold and clean, full of stars. That's what he wrote to us.

Please let Johnny come home safe and sound.

Everyone here says Johnny's a hero but I don't want a hero for a brother, I want a brother who's alive. Johnny's fighting a war, and no one seems to understand that. According to everybody here, war's something you watch on TV. In *Bar Grande* in the piazza they spend their evenings watching the war and saying how great it is, better than *PlayStation*. The whole village is bathed in a green glow at supper-time, and the only sounds you'll hear are bombs whistling and the rattle of anti-aircraft guns.

If you look through the window they're all sitting at the table passing one another the salt, and there are these blurry shapes on the screen – the targets – in the square of the viewfinder.

Then you see dust rising from an explosion in a huge mushroom cloud and the target's disappeared, and they move on to the next.

"Don't worry," Johnny wrote. "There's no danger."

How can a war not be dangerous?

You get to see soldiers too, every now and again. Ours I mean. They look happy, not worried at all. They're not dirty or wounded or mangled. It's not like in war films. Not yet, anyway.

"What's happening there," says Dad, "is different."

How is one war different from another?

Perhaps I should ask Liga. I wonder what he thinks about it.

"They might even show us Johnny one day," Dad says happily.

When they finally took me home, I could see from a long way off that all the lights were on. Usually, there's just the light in the kitchen where Mum's bound to be waiting up for me, counting the minutes on the big clock with the *Fernet* ad.

They were both still up and they were so upset they didn't even ask why I was a quarter of an hour late.

"Johnny's here," Dad murmured.

I rushed upstairs, knocked and called out, but Johnny wouldn't answer or open the door to me. I stayed a long time in front of that closed door then tried lightly scratching on the wood like I used to when I was little and wanted a cuddle from my big brother. He used to call me "dumpling" back then because apparently for a very short time I was chubby and not stick-thin like I am now.

I went to my room and lay down on the bed without even undressing.

"Johnny," I whispered, "what's going on?"

At some point in the night I woke up. I felt cold and strange. There was a message on my computer. It was from Magda.

"Johnny's home, right?"

"Yes," I replied. "How do you know?"

"I know."

I had to believe her. Magda's a witch; everyone in the village says so. She feels things. And also she's been madly in love with Johnny since she was in nappies. Madly and hopelessly.

Magda was a year older than me and even thinner, if that's possible, with hair shaved even shorter than mine.

"Magda," I typed, "I'm frightened."

"Open the window," she typed back.

The fog had gone. The sky was clear, cold and clean, full of stars. And it was red.

I don't know how long I stayed there, curled up in front of the windowsill, with the cold biting my nose, looking out at the identical houses and streets, a drunken car speeding through the night and that awful weird sky. I didn't know what to think, and it was no use asking Magda for explanations. She wouldn't have given me any.

But I was sure about one thing. Johnny's unexpected return meant something: it was like an omen and it was better not to mention that sky to anyone. Not even to Mum and Dad.

They wouldn't have believed me.

Adults sometimes don't understand a thing, you know.

CHAPTER TWO

Next morning the sky was back to normal, grey and threatening snow.

Johnny was still shut up in his room. I tried the secret signal again, but he didn't reply this time either. I knew he wasn't sleeping. I guessed he was sitting looking out of the window on his ergonomic Swedish chair – a weird contraption he'd been mad about when he was at school. According to him it kept your spine straight.

"Johnny," I whispered. "Johnny, answer, for heaven's sake!"

At breakfast Mum was putting on her The Situation Is Perfectly Under Control face.

"Don't disturb your brother," she ordered, "he's very tired and he needs to rest."

Then she looked at me and couldn't hold back a miserable little sigh.

OK, Mum, I know.

I don't exactly match up to your idea of a perfect daughter.

I don't wear nice fashionable clothes. I don't use perfume with exotic names. I don't have little

crushes on my mates (someone please explain to me what a little crush is!). I don't have posters of TV stars in my room. I kill at least two hours a day with Heavy Metal ("That's why you're always irritable, precious"). I've got a terrible personality. I'm often bad-tempered. I swear now and then.

Apart from that, everything's fine.

I listen when you talk to your friends on the phone and you say in that resigned voice of yours, "Belinda's going through a difficult phase, you know, rebellious. We have to be patient . . . "

Just think how patient I am. I've been going through a difficult phase for thirteen years and seven months and the next thirteen don't look like they're going to be any better.

And don't say it's your fault, or Dad's. Honestly. If it's anybody's . . . fault . . .

I dunno . . . It's got to be someone's.

Sometimes I want to disappear. I could be the Invisible Girl. In the meantime, I'll put on a jumper three sizes too big so no one can see me.

That way at least they won't look at me *like that* on the street. They won't crack jokes. They won't giggle. They won't all call out together: "Belinda, Belinda . . . "

I already have to put up with this stupid name.

I know other people like all that stuff, and they go all red and self-conscious. I don't, OK? There's a whole load of things I don't like.

Being continually compared to Johnny for example.

Johnny's always been Number One. The best-looking boy in the village, with everyone swooning over him. The best guy at school. Captain of the football team. Captain of the basketball team. Captain of everything. Responsible. Trustworthy. Sound. The Son everybody would like to have. Johnny the Airman, daring Sky Rider. Johnny the Hero, defending our Liberty and fighting for us Over There as well. A Shining Example.

Capital letters are always wasted on Johnny.

But if anyone deserves them, he does.

Don't get me wrong, Mum.

I'm not jealous of Johnny. I love my big brother to bits. I'd take the pin out of my nose for him.

Johnny's different from me, but he's the only one who understands me. When we used to share a room, it didn't bother him that I didn't change my gym shoes for months. And that time last year I ran away one night to go to a *Metallica* Concert in Milan, he came and looked for me on the road where I was hitching. He put me in the car, gave me two hard slaps on my backside which still stings and said: "One word and I'll give you two more". Then he took me back home – but he never mentioned it.

Johnny never tells tales.

Then the next day he asked me: "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"Mind your own business," I told him.

"OK," he said.

And now it's Johnny who's in trouble. He wouldn't have come back like a thief in the night if

he weren't in trouble. Maybe you don't understand him? I can't get to talk to him and you're here buttering toast while he . . .

"Johnny's on leave," said Dad. "I'm sure of it. He and the other lads have worked really hard Over There these last few months. And now he deserves a bit of a holiday."

"He would have let us know," I venture.

"He wouldn't have had time. You know how these things happen."

No, I don't know, Dad.

It's not like Johnny to behave like this, he's always been someone who writes and phones at every opportunity.

And don't say Over There. It's a place, a country. It should have a name, at least.

And don't say work, I beg you. What kind of work is it dropping bombs?

Johnny does it though, so that must mean it's all right. Perhaps.

I don't understand much about this war.

I know it frightens me and it seems horrendous and I don't want it to take my brother away. But it's not work. I don't know what ... But it's something else, I'm sure about that.

"Dad . . . " I tried to say.

"It's time you left, Belinda, or you'll be late."

"Watch out for the signs!" Magda had emailed me at 8 a.m., like saying good morning. There weren't any signs at school, only two hours of maths and a hissing

radiator. At 10 a.m. I finally managed to escape and meet Magda in the last cubicle of the girls' toilets.

We barricaded ourselves in, and Magda lit up one of those stinking cigarettes she rolls herself which leak tobacco everywhere.

Magda was dressed in black, as usual, with her round dark glasses and hair she hadn't combed for six days.

"He's in trouble," she said.

"I know."

We took two more drags.

"What's he doing?"

"Nothing. He's stayed shut up in his room since he came back. He doesn't even answer. Mum and Dad don't seem to notice. Perhaps they're right, and Johnny really is on holiday."

"No," said Magda. "I've felt for days that Johnny would be back. And you saw the sky too that night . . . "

"I don't know if it was real."

"It was real. Other things are going to happen in the next few days. Trouble. This is a horrible business, Lin. The war, people, everything. They act as if it has nothing to do with them. As if it's something distant, that doesn't affect them. But it's here too. You'll see."

I didn't always understand Magda.

Mum always said that she was a "one off", which means – if you get down to it – she didn't particularly like me going round with her. But she's the only person in the village I can talk to.

Subjects of conversation around here are a bit uninspiring: boys only talk about football; girls talk about boys and fashion.

It's a bit limited.

After a while you get bored and want something else. It's only a village, OK, I'm not saying anything bad, but sometimes I get the feeling we're on an abandoned sailing ship in a winter fog with a crew who don't know where they're going but keep on doing the same old things day in, day out.

I tried talking to Mum about it and she said, "It's your age, Belinda. It'll pass."

With Magda, though, I could talk about everything: we used to go off and hide out somewhere, far away from the morons, and spend whole afternoons chatting. Afterwards I didn't know what we'd talked about but I knew I felt better.

"Just the two of you, again?" my mates would say nastily, and then I'd hang out with them once or twice but it wasn't the same.

They were all nice enough people, I'm not saying they weren't, but I couldn't be myself and when I went home after spending a Sunday with them, I felt lonely and stupid.

And I cried a lot.

Magda and I only ever quarrelled about Johnny: she was convinced that Johnny was *hers*.

Just think! He's my Johnny, obviously.

In reality, as we knew only too well, Johnny wasn't mine or hers, he belonged to some twenty-

something bimbo plastered with make-up and with blood-red nails. We hated them all without exception.

"Tonight," said Magda, "if Johnny doesn't come out, we'll go to him."

"Are you mad, how are we going to do that?"

"We'll find a way. God, Lin, he needs us, don't you see?"

"Yes, but . . . "

"Until then, keep quiet. They'll all be wanting to know what's going on."

"No one knows Johnny's here."

"So you say. You'll see."

As always, Magda the Oracle was right.

They began arriving during break, and then the whole morning, there was a steady stream. Mobiles were going off right, left and centre and the news flew about like wildfire: Johnny's back!

My friends from middle school came over, even people from the years above; several teachers came; some came down from the upper school on the second floor, even people who would never have normally condescended to come down to the lower floors and speak a single word to us Snotty Kids.

The crowd from *Bar Grande* came round straight-away, led by Max, who won a local championship in scrambling and always goes around in the leather jacket of his bike club and a cap signed by Valentino Rossi – or so he says.

When they came by, everyone drew back as a sign of respect: the crowd from *Bar Grande* are the

ones who call the shots in the village.

They're the ones who decide what's in and what's out; who's OK and who isn't (better to be OK); who you've got to be a fan of; which bar you should go to on Saturday night; which girls are attractive and therefore worth paying attention to and which ones aren't (better to be attractive).

That they should put themselves out for a Nonentity Without Tits like me was unheard of, but Johnny was their idol and, either way, I was part of the family.

The time Johnny went off to rejoin his squadron, the whole village went with him to the station.

They got a band and majorettes to come from a nearby centre and the Mayor made a speech full of exclamation marks and long words. Everyone laughed and clapped: it seemed like a festival for some patron saint.

The *Bar Grande* crowd had even made a banner with the words:

JOHNNY
TAKE ONE OUT
FOR US TOO!

And they cheered as if they were at the stadium.

Why don't you go over there then, you bunch of chickens! I thought. This isn't a game of football, this is a war.

I looked at Mum. She was crying but she seemed happy. Dad tried not to let anyone see he was upset.

"You should be proud of your brother," he'd said the night before.

The only one who was very serious was Johnny – he said goodbye to everyone and boarded the train without even turning round. I'd hoped right up to the end he'd say something to me, something special just for me.

The evening before, when I'd gone to say goodbye to him in his room, he was already in bed.

"Johnny," I asked him, "why are you going there?"

"Because I have to, sis'," he replied.

"What do you mean, you have to?"

"I have to, that's all."

It wasn't a great explanation.

I'd looked at his blue uniform, newly ironed and folded over the chair, the bag with his things and the basketball with the signatures of everyone in his team that was presented to him after their win in the Student Championships.

Is that what it means to be grown-up? I'd thought. *To have to do things you don't like?*

Anyway, Max was now standing in front of me. I hated him.

He was a cheap and nasty bully.

Of course I knew he'd always been jealous of my brother, and while Johnny was away he'd gone around looking more full of himself than ever. Someone like him, he wasn't even fit to clean Johnny's boots.

Max looked at me with an expression of disgust. "They say your brother's back."

"Mmm."

"They say he's shot down loads Over There, and he's on leave as a reward."

"Mmm."

"Cool. Tell Johnny we're expecting him at the Bar, one night soon. We'll have a party so he can tell us all about it."

"Mmm."

He turned on his heel and left, followed by his gang.

I looked for Magda in the middle of the little crowd watching what was happening: she was furious.

Dad – !

Dad has a little shop in the centre of the village. He sells a bit of everything and everybody goes by his shop at least once a day. They have a chat. Dad's pretty easy-going and well respected by everyone.

Of course he couldn't resist the temptation to tell everyone proudly his Johnny was back. And news spreads fast here.

The morning was never-ending.

Perhaps Johnny had finally left his room and was talking to Mum. I couldn't wait to get home.

Magda sent me a consoling text.

"Come on. J always knows exactly what to do."

"Let's hope so," I texted under the desk.

"Belinda," the teacher called out to me. "What are you doing?"