

# RIDE

JOHN BUULTJENS

**BMX GLORY**  
AGAINST ALL THE ODDS

WITH  
CHRIS SWEENEY



NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

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# 1

## Into The Fire

**B**URNT flesh. That's my first memory. Not exactly the normal thing a person remembers from their childhood, and even worse, it was my own.

I began life with my parents – Thomas and Margaret – in Whiteinch. It's an area in Glasgow, north of the city's River Clyde, which became a busy hub for shipbuilding during the British Empire's heyday. Whiteinch itself grew after it became a popular ferry crossing point.

Back then I was John Craig. That's the name I was given when I was born on 16 March 1972 and it'll become pretty clear why it changed – but let's put it this way, if I'd stayed John Craig, I wouldn't be alive now to write this book.

Glasgow was going through a tumultuous time and a massive transformation was under way to help rescue thousands of families by setting them up in new housing schemes – all outside the city centre.

They were being shipped out of the old tenement buildings, as the level of deprivation was off the charts with no indoor toilets, a lack of hot water and homes were basically riddled with squalor and unhygienic living conditions.

There was also a famous bin strike in 1975, which saw rubbish piled high, and the rats got so comfortable that the city faced an infestation of the buggers. It got so bad that eventually the army was called in to help resolve the situation.

And we were right in the middle of all that, living in one of these same tenements in what's known locally as a room and kitchen – two rooms and a toilet. Even calling one of them a kitchen is a stretch, but it did have a sink. At the back of that was a double bed where we all slept huddled together, apart from my dad, who slept in the other room, on his own a lot of the time. So that was our home. We did have pets though, well if you can count the mice that scurried about the place as that.

To be frank, it was a dump and wasn't much more than a lair for my psycho dad to rule with his violence and bad temper. I think back to living there and what stands out is that it seemed to always be dark and cold. There were no creature comforts. Nothing to think back on and smile about.

I was the third child to arrive and I was only there for the first three years of my life. My older brother Thomas later told me that he started breaking into bakeries to bring some food home as quite often our

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cupboards were bare. It was seriously grim. And my only real memory is a horrific one. For a long time I actually wondered if it was a dream. Well, a nightmare would be more appropriate.

But my mother told me in later life that it really did happen. Even now I think back and sometimes say, 'Surely it didn't happen like I remember.' But it did.

It happened when I, naive like only a young child can be, was excited to see my dad come home from work – he was a box maker at the shipbuilding firm Yarrow, which manufactured frigates and destroyers for the Royal Navy. Anyway, how was I to know that he'd drunk himself daft on the way back?

He was slouched into the chair in our lounge. It was the sort of chair that screamed 1970s. It had that retro mustard felt and those long, narrow wooden arms. If you watch the TV show *Mad Men*, you'll see something similar.

So he's sitting there, thinking about God knows what, and I decide to run over. I had barely got my arms around his neck when he saw red. Whether I had startled him or woke him up, I don't know. I was three for Christ's sake. But he wanted to make sure I didn't do it again.

He reached over his head, grabbed me around the arms and then hurled me back like a sack of potatoes. I was so small that I flew through the air but as if that wasn't enough, he had thrown me right in the direction of our two-bar electric fire – which was battling in

vain to remove the permanent cold chill of our home. They don't exist anymore but it was one of the big iron fireplaces, where the bars light up and glow red with heat. And normally you'd have a grille to stop the chance of anyone getting burned or things catching fire.

Of course, ours didn't. My dad had probably spent the money on booze rather than buy an essential like that. When you've got three kids running around it was hardly something you'd do without. But that was the mark of the man and as I flew through the air, I smacked into the fire. My right foot somehow wedged itself between the bars and was dangling on the red-hot element.

So picture it. I'm lying there, sprawled across the lounge floor. My foot is melting and my dad is still sitting in his chair. The skin was burning off as my sock was melting into my foot. I don't remember the pain but I do remember the smell of my burning flesh. God knows what it would have been like. I'm a father myself now and I can't think of anything worse than seeing my kids suffer like that. But he sat there.

My mother rushed in and prised my foot out of the fire. I can't recall properly but our next door neighbour was a nurse or some sort of paramedic; I just remember they were called in as they had some medical skills. But they took one look and told my mum, 'John has to go to hospital immediately.' We didn't have a car so my poor mum scooped me up and rushed down the stairs in our block. We were going by public bus.

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I was being carried along the night-time streets as my mangled foot was still hissing and sizzling away. Clear watery liquid was seeping out of my foot and the puss was dripping off my toes.

And as if that wasn't enough, it was also smack bang in the middle of what became known as the Winter of Discontent and the bin strike was in full swing. But bigger than that, it was a time of massive upheaval as the miners had also taken industrial action and the country was suffering from electrical blackouts due to the lack of coal. So my mother was dodging the mounds of rubbish on the dark streets as the lights were out.

I think the pain heightened my other senses and I was overcome by the stench. As my mum ran through it, avoiding the army of rats, it was like breathing in dog shit all the way to the hospital. You couldn't escape it – and instead of being tucked up in my bed or having a game of dominos like the other three-year-olds, I was out in it.

Finally we got there. I must have passed out. My mother told me when I was an adult and I could stomach it that the staff were actually peeling off my sock with my skin. It had all become one big melted mess. I was so badly burned that they then had to do a skin graft, so a chunk was shaved off my ass and then transferred on to my foot. It healed pretty well and there's only a small amount of scarring left today. But I was left with an odd birth mark on my foot, which is the exact same size and shape as the birth mark on my backside.

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So that's all my father gave me in this world. A weird birth mark that's split between my ass and my right foot – thanks for nothing ya prick.

\* \* \* \* \*

After quite literally going from the frying pan into the fire, I got out of hospital and the Craig family moved. Following my horrendous time you would imagine that it could only get better. Surely the new place would be happier and give me, and us all, the chance of a new start. Sadly, no.

Our time at 18 Glenkirk Drive was even more traumatic. I didn't know it then but it was to be the last place I'd live with my parents. It wasn't much of a step up but at least it was a 'four' apartment – there were three bedrooms and a living room. But you'd still call it a dump.

It wasn't too far away but we were now in Drumchapel, known locally as The Drum. It's one of the famed housing estates where Glasgow's working-class families were dropped into. Sadly it didn't prosper as gangs took over and it was a cut-throat environment – not somewhere you'd ideally want to raise a young family.

The one highlight for me was it was brighter than our first home at least. We were up in the top left apartment. And soon after we arrived my mum fell pregnant with my younger sister Agnes, but she nearly never made it

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as my pathetic dad became even more vicious. Even his biggest supporter could argue that he didn't plan to melt my foot but what he did to my mother was totally intentional.

As usual he was pissed. He stormed in from work and my mother was in the kitchen making him his dinner. She had chips – a Glasgow staple – on the go but the fucking clown wasn't having it. He wasn't prepared to wait so he marched into the kitchen, grabbed the boiling hot frying pan and splashed some of the bubbling oil across her face. Then he used the leverage of the steel pan to snap her arm like a twig.

As the poor woman was left as a crumpled mess on the floor, he turned around and snarled, 'Make sure my fucking dinner is ready next time I get home, bitch.'

That was our home. I had my own beating in that kitchen, that I endured after being caught stealing some biscuits.

I was about five. I'd dragged myself up on to the counter and I was looking to chow down a cheeky snack. Now, we were poor so there were no fancy chocolate chip cookies or anything like that. It was fucking dry tea biscuits, that's all our coffers stretched to. But as a kid I didn't know any different and they were a serious treat in my eyes.

Just as my fingers reached the tin and began dragging it across the shelf, in walked my pathetic excuse for a father. Incensed by catching me – I don't know if he felt I was challenging his authority or if he

just enjoyed hurting others – he got me by the scruff of the neck and launched me backwards, slamming into the opposite wall. I helplessly slid down to the floor. He'd winded me badly and left me lying there like a wet bath towel.

Another nice addition my old man made to me is the scar I have on the back right of my head. I'd been out the back at the bins again. I was what is known in Glasgow as a 'midgie raker', basically a dirty wee bastard who was into everything and played around in the bins. I fancied a glass of milk so instead of coming up via the stairs I shinned up the drainpipe and got to our kitchen window. It was three floors up so I was fairly high – and it had a big set of windows that slid sideways, but the smaller top pane opened outwards.

It was open and I hauled myself in. Either my dad heard me or happened to come into the kitchen, just as I was half in, half out. He smacked me on the back of the head with a thick walking stick, opening up a gash on the back of my napper. And the force meant I came crashing down into the sink, banging my face on the taps and basin. I was like a yelping puppy, leaping out of the sink and crawling away through his legs out of the door to safety. The pain was unreal and I still have the scar today to prove it.

That was what our house was like on a daily basis but my brother actually got it worse than me. Not only had he been around longer, he was bigger of course so my dad must have thought he could take more punishment. But

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Thomas started hanging out with a gang and was getting himself into trouble, causing mischief in the area.

I was too young for that so I started just not going home. Sometimes I would jump on the train into Glasgow city centre to beg for money and occasionally I'd sleep on the streets. I'd wander around, basically just killing time so I didn't have to be at home. Any minute not spent there was a positive for me.

I had to scavenge food to satisfy my hunger pangs – I was a growing boy after all. So I'd live up to my nickname and rake through the bins at the Chinese takeaway near our house. I remember eating some of the leftovers and looking over to see a dead dog's carcass being devoured by maggots. Even to this day, when I walk past a bin that rancid smell hits my tongue and causes me to gag.

That isn't something a five-year-old boy should be experiencing, although I did at least get to indulge my biscuit cravings when one of the shops had thrown out custard creams in the same bins. I'd never had them in my life. These were the upmarket things we never had in our cupboards. I was so naive and I wolfed them down. But they were actually covered in mould – that's why they were chucked away. Plus they'd been lying in the bin. They tasted fucking horrible. But what choice did I have?

I don't even remember having any wee mates or going out to play. My only friend was Graham Hughes, who lived downstairs. He seemed to get a hard time off his dad but I don't think it was up there with my living

hell. I think in some way that made us more comrades forced together rather than big pals. We used to play fighters around the back of our flats, knocking seven bells of shit out of each other – both hands and feet were allowed, it was serious stuff and blood was spilled. I must have been an able sparring partner as Graham went on to become a decent amateur boxer at lightweight.

We also developed a fascination for the flat on the bottom opposite Graham's place as we were convinced it was haunted. I recall looking through the letterbox and seeing the hand from *The Addams Family* running around in there. So that was my recreation, aside from keeping myself safe and fed, by hook or by crook.

But if you thought I had it bad, my poor mum was sharing a bed with this demon of a husband. If you're wondering why I had so much time to do my own thing it was because my mother was petrified of him too. She didn't want to be at home either. Any excuse and she tried to get out. I had butterflies every time she left as I didn't want her to go. In some ways, she was my safety net.

I felt better and more comfortable when she was there – like I had someone who wanted to protect me. But I don't blame her. How can I?

Looking back now, what kind of life was it experiencing the horror of seeing your sons slapped around and being used yourself as a punchbag? Due to my mum being absent, I somehow got in tow with a local girl, Yvonne Musley, who was double my age.

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She was the first girl I kissed and we sort of ended up with a twisted younger brother/older sister thing, with benefits. Until I was a lot older, she was the only female I was able to relax around.

Even when my mum was there, I was on tenterhooks that she was about to flee – so I was never relaxed. I paid the ultimate tribute to Yvonne by using a match and burning the skin off my arm to tattoo her name – but I thought it was spelt Evon.

I'm sad to say that Yvonne died in a car accident 20 years ago and from all accounts didn't have the best of lives. I hope that was nothing to do with me, but it shows that the part of the world we were coming from was no easy ride.

That was also highlighted by my own auntie Evy – my dad's sister – and her boyfriend Ian Adams, when they callously chopped up their neighbour. The story went that Ian owed the guy downstairs some money and when he came up to ask for it back Ian murdered him. They both then gruesomely chopped up the poor guy's body. First they tried to burn him in the coal fire but that didn't work, so they stuffed the severed limbs and torso in black bags and threw them in a wardrobe. The smell got so bad that eventually people called the authorities and Ian ended up getting a hefty prison sentence.

That was the type of thing we lived with and in among. My mum's family cut us off totally as because of my dad they didn't want to know, and you can understand why.

Part of my mum's coping strategy was that she would spend time at the house of another guy in the area, but she'd always come home at night. I don't know if they were having an affair or if it was just her getting shelter. Maybe that was one of the reasons for my dad's even more volatile behaviour. But that's no excuse.

I could never make a case for that bastard. I can't believe my ears when my sister Rachel does. She does it to this day. I've heard her say things like, 'he wasn't that bad'.

What the fuck. Maybe it's because he didn't beat her as due to some fucked-up moral code, he didn't hit my sisters. It wasn't a woman thing as my mum was regularly knocked about.

Maybe my sister is in denial or it could be her way of dealing with it. I've told her straight, 'What fucking planet are you on? He almost murdered our mother and destroyed our family.'

And he even caused me to end my own part in it forever, on Christmas Eve 1979.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christmas is normally a time full of happy, joyous memories. Sitting around the tree, opening presents, pulling crackers and telling the awful jokes inside them to the rest of the family – or watching your dad carve up the turkey before everyone tucks in; Christmas songs blasting out.

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But not in the Craig household. The first Christmas I remember is harrowing. The clock had just turned over into Christmas Eve in 1979 and God knows why I was still up after midnight as a seven-year-old, but I was.

I don't know how, but I was aware of a commotion between my mother and father. I think my developing virgin brain purposely didn't retain every detail, for its own sake. I went into the room and there was my old man, pinning her to the bed. His left hand was wedged across her throat, keeping her from getting up. And his right hand was chopping back and forth, smashing into her face. It was like a mechanical piston in a car engine, just firing up and down. I remember seeing it almost in isolation, as if I couldn't see anything else apart from his arm.

Then my brain went into self-preservation mode again. No young child should be arming themselves with a blade, but I did. I must have gotten it from the kitchen. My memory kicks back in at this point.

As I charged at my dad, my plan was to stab him in the abdomen, to ram that knife right into his vital organs and get my mother to safety somehow – but I was seven. He saw me coming out the corner of his eye and as I came racing across the room, he turned around and smash. That's when it goes black.

I was told in later life by my mother than he knocked me out cold. I'm pretty sure I was concussed as I don't remember a damn thing, from surging at him brandishing the blade until the next lunchtime.

Somehow I was woken up, dressed and packed off to school for the final day before the Christmas holidays.

My memory cuts back in here as maybe the daze from being socked by my dad had worn off – and I'm in the lunch hall. We'd been served up a festive treat of sponge cake with custard. Bloody delicious. And in my house, it wasn't something we got laid down in front of us.

So I was lapping it up, happy as Larry, proving just how dysfunctional a family we were. There I was, sitting without a care in the world, devouring my pudding – literally 12 hours after I'd tried to knife my own father while he brutally attacked my mother. Jesus Christ.

As I cheerily licked my bowl clean, I was summoned to the headmistress's office. I swaggered in; that's how I walked in those days – I was a hard man, or so I thought anyway. Waiting for me there was a social worker and a policeman. I didn't know at the time but they were all aware of the previous night's high jinks.

After some chit-chat, I was bundled into the cop car and we drove away. We stopped to collect my sister Agnes from nursery as she was only two at the time. And that was it. I never, ever went back to 18 Glenkirk Drive and I never, ever lived with my parents again. The Craig family was no more. Over in the blink of an eye.

But because of the immediacy of the situation, there was nowhere for us to go. We hung about at the social work department for hours. We didn't realise, but they were obviously scrambling about, trying to put a roof

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over our heads. Then at 10.30pm, we were driven across a dark and dreary Glasgow. Most kids our age were putting out the milk and cookies for Santa, hanging up their stockings and struggling to sleep due to all the excitement. We weren't.

We were being checked into Glenrosa Children's Home, which was a detached villa that had been converted. It's not there anymore as it was shut down by the city after years of complaints from nearby residents of unruly kids involved in violent and booze-related incidents. And even in my day, it was as far from a cosy and cheery family house as you could get. But it was certainly a lot better than what I'd left.

It was where kids who had problems or no one to look after them ended up. I ended up in a cell with three other lads. It was grim. But it was by far and away the best Christmas present I've ever been given. And who gave it to me? My own mother.

She was the one who had tipped off the police about the knife incident. I only found out as an adult that she bravely did that, knowing full well they would take her kids off her and knowing my dad would have killed me. And not in the metaphorical sense – literally. He was the sort of character who was capable of it.

And with me standing up to him, it was only a matter of time. He couldn't have dealt with his son standing up to him and the next time he got home drunk, I was sure to be on the hit-list. I didn't know it then but my mum saved my life – sacrificing being with us, to get us to a

safer place. And while it was a still a long way back to normality and having a future, it was the first step – and I thank my lucky stars every single day I got to take it.

The staff at Glenrosa even did their bit to welcome us. I was furnished with two gifts from the home. They would have told me they were from Santa – and that the big fella obviously got the call late on, but still knew where to leave my presents. The thing was, I didn't believe in Santa. It was never mentioned in the Craig household and we didn't get presents. So as well as a new home, I was ripping open wrapping paper for the first time.

Maybe in the rush, the elves got my name mixed up – it's understandable. I was given a Buck Rogers gun but on the tag, it had David scored out and John written beneath. It's an easy mistake to make, they both sound alike! I never did find out who David was or what happened to him, but if you're reading this – I'll buy you a beer any time if we're ever in the same place as compensation.

The other thing I was given was a panda teddy bear, wearing a red and white polkadot waistcoat. You might think that a hardened wee guy who was capable of stabbing his dad would have been embarrassed by such a soppy present. But, no. I adored that teddy and it was in my bed every single night I spent in Glenrosa until I left. And if you manage to see the movie that's been made of my life you'll see it in there too, although the producers swapped it for a dog. Maybe that's a bit cooler.

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But I didn't give a shit. I loved my panda, although I would never had admitted it. It became like my comfort blanket.

Although that wasn't the only thing going on under the sheets in Glenrosa.