

Out of the Ashes

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The restoration of a burned boy

Peter Gladwin
with Jan Greenough

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Contents

Foreword	7
Acknowledgments	9
1. Out of the ashes	11
2. Lost boy	14
3. Escape routes	32
4. Into the dungeon	50
5. Out of the darkness	64
6. Healing	80
7. A new life	95
8. Seeking guidance	114
9. Skilled and equipped	132
10. Into the future	147

*I would like to dedicate this book to
my Mum and Dad, who experienced a
harsh upbringing themselves and didn't
know any other way of life.*

Foreword

If I was a betting man, I would have said that from the word “go” the odds were pretty much stacked against Peter’s life. From being horrifically burned and scarred in a house fire as a baby, to being surrounded in his childhood by serious violence, petty crime, and a heavy drinking and drug taking culture, he was destined to be either seriously depressed, dead, or in and out of prison for most of his adult life.

Peter’s story is, however, one of the most compelling biographies I have ever read, and it doesn’t end where you would expect it to! Far from being yet another crime statistic or ending up on a slab in a morgue after a fight (and that could easily have happened), Peter tells us his story of triumph over adversity. This story gives us a profound demonstration that having the odds stacked against you at one point in your life doesn’t have to dictate your future. In a remarkable and frankly miraculous turnaround, despite incredible and devastating adversity, Peter is now a living demonstration of hope.

Just what happened to cause such a radical transformation is for you to read on and find out. I will just say that as for me, I finished reading this book feeling encouraged, full of hope, and in awe. If you know anyone who needs “hope”, anyone who has the odds stacked against them, then I suggest that you send them a copy of this book. However, I also suggest that

Out of the Ashes

you take time to read it yourself. You'll probably find it hard to put down. Be mindful though, this isn't just a good read, the contents of this book may just change your life.

Carl Beech
General Director
CVM

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

First I would like to thank Lynne Pugh, the artist and teacher who guided my first attempts to tell my own story, and who worked so hard to help me, despite her own illness.

Next, Bill Partington from UCB, who came into Café Oasis and heard my story: he took it to Tony Collins at Monarch Books.

Jan Greenough, my co-author, who made me relive some of the most painful and the most joyful episodes in my life to tell the story you read here.

My sister Annette, who shared a message with me that even today is transforming my life.

And finally and most importantly my amazing wife Sarah, for her patient and loyal support and encouragement, for our three wonderful children and for helping to build a solid foundation for our family life.

Chapter 1

Out of the ashes

“You be a good girl and look after the boys,” said Mum. “I’ll only be next door if you want me.”

Mum liked to go next door for a cup of tea some afternoons – she said it was the only break she got. “Three kids in the house and another one on the way,” she said to her friend Sheila. “It’s a good job I’ve got Annette.”

“She’s a proper little mother,” agreed Sheila, “even at four. How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” said Mum. “Seven months gone now. Too big to be chasing after toddlers.”

In fact my brother John was the only toddler – he was two, and he started whining as soon as Mum went out. But Mum knew Annette would soon calm him down. She’d left them both eating bread and jam at the table. I was the baby, just under a year old, and at least I wasn’t walking yet. She knew I’d stay where she put me, lying on the hearth rug. She’d lit the fire and got it drawing up nicely with some sheets of newspaper, so I’d be warm enough.

She settled herself down in Sheila’s armchair. “I left the Yale on the latch. They’ll be all right for half an hour.”

She wasn’t a bad mother. But the babies had come along so fast, and she was always worried about money, and what her husband was up to – usually at the bookie’s or the pub, drinking

his benefit money. Sometimes she was desperate for a minute's peace.

"This is lovely," she said, stirring her tea. "Just what I needed."

A minute later she heard screaming. Annette was banging frantically on the front door.

"Oh, what now?" she said. Sheila opened the door and Annette ran in, dragging John crying behind her. For a minute or two they couldn't make any sense of what she was saying, between her sobs.

"Fire, Mummy! The rug's on fire! I couldn't get hold of Peter – too much flames..."

Mum had been holding John and trying to quieten him down. Now she thrust him into Sheila's arms and ran outside. "The baby!"

She pushed at her own front door but it didn't move.

"I left it on the latch!" she shouted. "How can it be locked?" She kicked and hammered on the door, but she realized what must have happened. When Annette ran out, the door had slammed behind her, knocking the Yale catch out of position. The keys were inside where she had left them. The front window seemed to be full of smoke.

"Call the fire brigade!" she yelled at Sheila. Then she looked round desperately. She had to get in the house somehow. Under the window there was a heavy wooden hatch to the coal cellar. She lifted it and clambered awkwardly over the wooden rim, but it was no good. Her pregnant belly was too huge to fit in the small opening. Tears were streaming down Mum's face. "Peter! My baby!" she kept sobbing.

She heard sirens and the fire engine arrived. The firemen ran to fix up hoses. One of them led her away, crying and shaking, back to Sheila's house, but she wouldn't go inside. It seemed a long time before they broke the door down, and by then flames and smoke were coming out of the upstairs windows. They trained the hoses in through the hall: everything in the house would be wet.

When the flames finally died down she wanted to run over and see, but Sheila held her back. She saw one fireman shaking his head as another one went in to search the house. There was a horrible smell of wet ash and soot. The street was filling up as people came out of their houses to see what was going on, and an ambulance came screeching up the street. Two neighbours stood by Sheila's doorstep, talking.

"The baby was in there, you know."

"Poor little soul. Terrible way to die. Mary'll never get over it."

The street went quiet as the fireman came out again; his big body and padded jacket seemed to fill up the doorway. His leather gauntlets looked huge and clumsy, but he was holding a tiny blackened body with great gentleness. He looked up and shouted, "Get some medical help over here! He's alive!"