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BOXER

ANNA WHITWHAM

HANDSOME

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Boxing runs in Bobby's blood. His Irish dad was a boxer. So was his Jewish grandfather. Yanked up by their collars at Clapton Bow Boys Club, taught how to box and stay out of trouble.

So Bobby knows he shouldn't be messing in street brawls a week before his big fight with Connor 'the Gypsy Boy', an Irish traveller from around the way. They're fighting over Theresa: a traveller girl with Connor's name all over her. But Bobby's handsome, like his dad; boxer handsome.

Set against the backdrop of contemporary East-End London, *Boxer Handsome* is an unsung hymn to tribal boxing history and to an angry and austere Britain, a community up against itself, 'all fighting a corner; all fighting for space. All up for a fight.'

For Bobby, the ring is everywhere and he can't afford to lose.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Whitwham was born in 1981 in London, where she still lives. She studied Drama and English at the University of California, Los Angeles, Queens University Belfast and at Royal Holloway, London. *Boxer Handsome* is her first novel. It is a world Anna knows well: her grandfather, John Poppy, was a young featherweight boxer at Crown & Manor Boys Club in Hoxton. He is the inspiration behind this book.

To my granddad, John Frederick Poppy;
featherweight, Crown & Manor Boy, and my champion.
And to our latest little Poppy, Sylvie, his great-
granddaughter.

Boxer Handsome

Anna Whitwham

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

ONE

BOBBY KNEW HE would win.

He was shirtless, his head low, neck naked and stiff with fight. He smacked Connor hard.

Bobby the Yid and the Gypsy Boy. Same weight, same height. Dragged into the same boxing club as boys. They'd skipped and sparred together for thirteen years. Won and lost the same. Trained on the same bags, on the same pads, at the same club, at the same time. They'd shared a childhood. Their bodies growing, battered and beaten and better again. Two faces of the club. The tale of the tape read the same for both fighters. Both brick-jawed, strong-legged boxers, built for the fight under white lights. Nothing between them but the places they came from. And her.

Connor's shot came back hard with a groan that came from his gut, cutting the corner of Bobby's eye. Bobby first felt the sting and then the blood. Connor gave him two more, below the chin and another to the eye. Bobby rocked on his legs, willing his head to keep him up. Connor's punches were wild and hard. Bobby could feel the sharp pain from each gold ring stacked on his brawler's fingers, and breathed in against the blows. They picked off skin. He heard shouts in the dark. Heard his own voice, choking through blood.

'Connor, how long we known each other you cunt, she's just some fucking girl.'

Rain began to fall on the canal. He saw Theresa's thin shape under the moon, leaning on the damp, cool archway he'd nearly finished fucking her in. Just for a moment, she moved like smoke before Connor pushed Bobby's face down

in the bank so he could taste the blood and mud, could smell the ground against his nose, the belt buckle digging into his groin. Bobby tried to get up and couldn't.

He started to count as Connor's knees dug into the back of his neck. Counted away the night sounds, one by one, until it was quiet again. Then it happened fast.

Bobby whipped himself round, grabbing Connor firm by the throat. Both hands round the back of the neck to pull himself up, meeting face to face, their lips so close they could kiss, and then cracked the bridge of his nose wide open. Skin split. Blood spat. Connor stumbled about, headless.

Bobby was on his feet again. Tired, but he found his legs. Panting, his head down and his curly hair wet with sweat, plastered to his forehead.

Connor's punch back was big. Bobby felt his jaw begin to swell straight away, from his right temple down his cheek, and his knees buckled. He almost went down a second time, but didn't. Bobby knew he was going to win.

Those thick gold rings on Connor's fingers burned his jaw. Hot and nasty punches. A bottle lay on the ground between them. A large Grolsch, within reach of them both. It was wrong but it was there, and Bobby was bleeding and desperate. Each caught the look in the other's eye, each saw a red fire deeper than skin and tissue.

It was Bobby who limped to it quicker, licking his lips clean, and as Connor lifted his head up and came for him again, Bobby smashed it over the side of his face. It broke, leaving half a bottle in Bobby's hand.

Connor fell to his knees. He held his cheek, the cry stuck in his throat, as if he'd swallowed the broken glass.

'Stop now, Bobby. You fucking won this. Enough.'

Bobby couldn't stop.

He knelt over him and cupped the back of Connor's head in his hands. Connor stared up at him. A face Bobby knew well. He had laughed with him. Learned to fight with him.

Connor mouthed something but Bobby looked away. He didn't want to see what he was saying. He picked up a shard of broken glass to his right. Connor's legs thrashed the air and his body twisted in pain. Bobby held the glass to Connor's throat, so tightly that the palm of his own hand began to bleed. Then he looked up at the stars and breathed out. This was for the gold rings that had chewed up the skin around his eyes. He took the glass and cut Connor from cheekbone to lip. Deep enough to leave a scar. The bright blood rolled down Connor's face.

Bobby rolled away to rest on all fours, his chest rising and falling. Trying to breathe again as his body slowed down. It was an ugly end to an ugly fight. A fight about nothing but her. He turned, coughing up phlegm and the sickness he felt from his stomach.

Theresa came running. Half-cut and scared, almost naked in a skirt and bra. Her hair extensions twisting around her neck. Her beautiful long back bending over Connor's body.

'Bobby - what you done?'

Bobby looked up at her. They'd been at the pub. She was walking about in heels too high, and Bobby was drunk. They were kissing and cuddling by the bar like old sweethearts. Halfway through their short cut home they'd kissed again, moving under the bridge where the homeless went to sleep. He didn't know he'd been followed and didn't even know Connor cared enough to fight for her. He thought everyone had been somewhere on Theresa. She was fair game.

The pain was better than no pain at all. Bobby needed to be hit back too. It haunted him if a fight only went one way. In the ring there was an art to it: you hit and tried not to get hit back. You used your space; you used your body and your head. You mapped out your punches. But here in the dark, without the bright lights, you lashed out hard and kept going until it was finished. As quick as possible. Except Bobby hadn't just hit harder, he'd broken codes. He'd won ugly and

it would not end here, by the canal. He'd left a scar between them. Bobby walked. He could not find the air he needed.

'Bobby, what am I going to do now?'

Bobby sniffed and spat more blood on the ground.

This was a cheat fight. A brawl for street scrappers.

The one Connor and Bobby would have when they met in the ring was real. They would face each other in the first stage of the North East Divisions.

The fight. The fight. The fight. The drum and the bang and the war. Bobby picked up his top and wore it like a veil. He walked away the way he should have done from the start. He knew it hadn't ended there. This would follow him.

TWO

HE WOKE TO pain, damp and hangover, and brilliant white walls, kept bare to make his room look bigger. His jaw howled in agony. He took two painkillers from the packet on his bedside table.

The black and silver clock ticked towards noon. One poster. A shot of Tyson cast in shadow, his Everlast gloves raised high and just below his shark eyes. Baby-face grinning. Bobby had a mirror opposite his bed so he could see every part of his body. Full-length and silver-framed, it picked out the metal of the clock and the glint in Tyson's tooth. When he got out of bed he took a good look at himself.

Maggie was walking up and down the landing in her dressing gown, holding a can of air freshener in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. She held down the nozzle as she sipped.

'Morning, love.'

Bobby walked through the mist with an arm over his nose, covering his face so she didn't see the evidence of last night's fight. He scratched his bare belly, right hand dipping into the waistline of his boxers for comfort. He waved the fumes of her freshener away. She was too close. She leaned in and lowered her voice.

'You got someone in there?' She was used to him bringing girls home.

Bobby shook his head. It was sore to move it.

'Get us a cup of tea, Mum.'

He went into the bathroom, shutting the door on the acid-peach smells. She went down the stairs to put the kettle on.

At the mirror, Bobby saw his nose was still fat and the bruising under his eyes bright and black like grease. His jaw a little fatter on the right side. His knuckles were puffed up and sore, his ribs hurt.

He was angry with himself. Weeks of training for a big fight he couldn't walk away from. North East Division's finest thrown together in a final. Two from the same club, going head to head. The stars had crossed to make them meet. Connor and Bobby. The Gypo and the Jew. It was bad for Bobby to fight on a feud. Faces to save, neither would step down. The club had said it was a shame to have them against each other, but it was better to have one of them through.

'A show fight. Can only make us look good, can't it?'

And he'd only had a week to go. All he had to do was keep his head down. Bobby's body was ready to do brilliant things. He'd been off the drink, working and running hard. Kept his weight down, eaten right, stopped smoking. His mum had cooked him up the porridge, the fish. Everything he knew he had to do and be, he had done and become. He was lean and spare; hard and ready, winding down to save something for his fight.

And now he'd have to spend the next few days mending. Now he would fade. To rest is to rust.

He needed a shave. His dark hair grew quickly. The hair on his head was thick, long at the top and curly. Oily with last night's sweat.

Outside his bedroom door, waiting for him, was a mug of tea. Maggie had put a plate of toast beside it. She had done this since he was a little boy and had started at the club. He never had time to sit down at the table, so she left it outside his room, setting her alarm with his to get up at dawn and put the kettle on. Now when she heard him get up, she got up too. She shadowed him.

Bobby downed the tea, holding it with both hands. It hurt to bend his fingers. He looked through the crisp line of

ironed-flat clothes in his wardrobe. There was a pile of the same white T-shirts, folded high on his shelf. Gently he pulled the one at the top off the others, keeping the rest in their pile, and threw it on with the jeans hanging over his chair.

He stood in the kitchen doorway with his head down.

‘Seen my jacket?’ His voice was bunged up.

Maggie knew every angle of her son. She knew if there was something wrong.

‘Come here, what’s happened to your face?’

Bobby smiled. It hurt. He looked away.

‘It was nothing, Mum.’

She got closer. She’d seen her son hurt many times before. She never got used to it.

‘Nothing doesn’t look like that. You got one cheek coming out there like a pillow and a mouth that looks like you kissed a snake. What happened?’

‘They fight with gold. Makes it look worse than what it is.’

‘They? That lot, was it?’ Maggie made a face. ‘Looks like they went and hit you with hammers.’

Bobby kissed his mum on her forehead. ‘Don’t be silly, Mum. It’s a fucking bruise, that’s all.’

‘It is not a fucking bruise and you got your fight coming up. How can you fight like that? Let me put the kettle on.’

‘No, I’m going down the cafe.’

His mum looked hurt.

‘Sit down. I’ll do you something right now. What do you fancy?’

‘Just fancy a walk.’

Maggie moved to the kitchen and tightened her gown. Bobby’s face was a reminder of a long history. Bruises and scars she’d seen before.

‘You shouldn’t be eating food from the cafe. I’ll do you a porridge. Save your money. Go on, sit down.’

Bobby had his jacket on.

‘I need to walk.’

Maggie raised her hands, shaking them at her son. 'You had your body ready and now look at you.'

Bobby sniffed and opened the door. He gave her a painful wink and stepped out.

Down the lift, twelve floors, out of the flat and into the open. Fresh damp air after spring rain. Nappy smells and lamb curry, chicken heart stews and boiled bacon. No huddled mountain bikes this afternoon; no fights near the swings. Across the rows of green doors and silver letterboxes, he heard the tick of a beat in a room somewhere. Young boys with nowhere to go and nothing to do. The party falling asleep on sofas, the night on its sloppy last legs. The large metal bins were full and boxes of fried chicken scattered wherever they fell, the bones picked clean by foxes. Old men shuffled back home with their papers and waved to Bobby. Heading back up the lift to their small flats in a leaning grey block, squashed in, keeping quiet. No bother or trouble to no one. Bobby smiled back.

Two peeling plastic-seated chairs had their backs up against the wall of a flat opposite, a few yards away. A door opened and Theresa came out into the light with a cough.

There, under the sunlight, was mad, fit Theresa. No extensions now. Just a short, blonde bob and long legs in little shorts. She told Bobby she kept her hair short to stand out from the rest of the traveller girls. She faked it when she needed with clip-on extensions. That way she was always her own person. Except she wasn't: she was theirs. Bobby kept his eyes on her when she turned around to pull out her chair.

Denny's grown-up little girl. Denny's dangerous and beautiful little girl.

'How's your face?' Her voice curled its way over to him. Silky and soft. A different girl to the night before.

Bobby clocked her in the chair, making her legs look leaner by turning them to the side, propping them up on the wall.

'S'alright.'

'You scarred him, you know.'

Bobby didn't want to look at her. She'd led him there, the kind of girl who liked men fighting over her.

Bobby shrugged. 'He'd have done it to me.'

Theresa pulled at her top.

'Would he?'

She looked at Bobby. She studied him, from the top of his head to the white trainers on his feet.

Bobby felt the sharp ache in his jaw again, and he felt the pull of Theresa. Her racehorse legs and skinny hips. Her fleshy lips puffing on a cigarette. Freckles on her shoulder blades, a mix of gold and silver chains dangling at her cleavage. She set him on fire.

'It went too far. It got stupid.'

'Because of you.'

'Me and Connor aren't even together.'

Bobby looked around him, already watching his back.

'You know what you're doing, Theresa.'

'What you talking about?'

'Connor and me have our fight coming up.'

The fight that would bring everyone together for one night, mixing up myths and blood from these streets. Theresa had not wanted Bobby to get hurt. But she wanted his attention and she got it.

'Next time walk away then.'

Bobby laughed, but she was right. He went to say something nasty but couldn't. Bobby walked on and left Theresa sitting and smoking. She would stay there until there was no daylight, moving the burning tip around her empty day.

Apart from a few dog walkers, the road was clear. Bobby liked walking. Walking was real. He walked until home was far behind him. He put his knuckles into fists at his sides, letting his arms get heavy, letting them hang, relaxed, as he walked the long way around the Marshes. His jacket was

snug. The clouds were close. He gently put a hand in his pocket to see how much money he had, holding a few pound coins in his palm. He'd nicked his life line where he'd held the glass.

Most days in the week he helped out at Clapton Bow Boys Club to train the youngster boys. He couldn't get a job anywhere else that paid enough to help his mum out and buy clothes. But it was more about the free boxing time and days spent away from his bedroom than how much he got paid. It was his home away from home. He even had his own set of keys to come and go as he wanted. They were his family and a fight like that with Connor broke all the rules.

'Some boys just want to fight,' his granddad used to tell him. 'Those are the boys that aren't worth fighting; the ones looking for it.'

Boxing ran in the blood on both sides. His dad was already a long-serving Clapton boy when he took Bobby by the hand on his seventh birthday and paid their dues. They were happy to have him: his granddad on his mum's side had been one of the club's early fighters in the Fifties, dragged there by their dads to toughen up when they first moved to the area. Some little Jewish kid always getting his nose broken, until one day he hit back harder.

Bobby was proud of his granddad. A man who'd come to the East End as a boy, got over diphtheria and learned how to fight. Bobby had a picture that he'd taken from his mum's room of him mucking about with his pals on a beach in Clacton-on-Sea, his face too kind for a fighter.

Bobby had been proud of his dad too. Proud that he didn't back down, even though he was thin and pretty-looking. His dad's face was fresh out of Hollywood, not Hoxton. Even after his face changed from fighting, he was still a looker. He needed those few knocks to look tough. Bobby took after his dad; both needed their good looks beaten up a little.

New arrivals learned of Bobby's background at the club and looked up to him. He was good-looking and angry. They

liked that he'd had real fights. They loved his broken nose and bruises. Bobby's first real fight came after a group of Millwall boys had started to follow him when he was leaving a rave in Battersea. He'd tried walking on. They followed him. Trying to shake him up. Make him frightened. Over nothing but drink and the way Bobby looked.

Always be the one to get the first punch in. Don't wait to get hit, his granddad had warned, in his curling mix of Belfast-Jewish boxer tongue. 'If you are going to fight, hit first. Otherwise you've lost.'

Feet shuffled around in a scrappy circle. A drunk dance, with Bobby in the middle. Knuckles that couldn't get a clean shot and stabbed around. He didn't know how it stopped, but it did. Those early fights always stopped. They had to. Two minutes of misfired clumps. And then enough. No energy for more. He was on the floor when they left him. The boom of his heart beating in all the places that hurt. Each muscle begging him to lie back down as he moved to his knees. And then the thrill of standing up again. They hadn't knocked him out.

He'd gone to bed that night unwashed, sleeping with his sour fighting sweat and the scabbing on his knuckles that had showed he'd given back. Sleeping with a smile. Knowing he'd wake up tougher and harder.

There were others. Some where he'd really hurt people and some where he'd been really hurt. He found himself on streets in Luton and Romford, visiting friends and getting stuck into everyone, from BNP thugs to gangs of Bengali boys. They were all fighting a corner; all fighting for space. All up for a fight.

Bobby walked down the road, and with the sun on the back of his neck, he put a finger and thumb to his nose, going over the bit where the bridge didn't meet and could click under the skin. He never got round to getting it fixed. All the hiding from his Mum made it too late for a hospital

appointment. By the time she'd seen it and had her cry, Bobby had become attached to it.

He looked at his reflection in a car he was passing and smiled. Dark hair, curly and thick, shaved at the back but falling into his eyes at the front. In fights he had to gel it back to get the head guard on right. He was tall, just off six foot two, with a good stride and honey-coloured skin that Maggie said came from her side of the family. He had a big heart and big hands and a battered nose that twisted up his good looks. Gave him a good stare, but just stopped him being as handsome as his Dad had been.

He could see the cafe straight up ahead. Inside, he looked over the tables. Workmen let out their cackling laughter and the dull greasy eyeballs of the waitress took him in as he opened the door. And there, no surprise, was his old man, back bent over a mug of tea.

'Alright, son.'

His dad wore a white T-shirt too, and had his hair scraped and gelled. It receded a little, and had thinned to look wet against his skull.

Blood was blood. His dad was his dad. Bobby made the effort.

'Want another tea, Dad?'

The day when his dad could treat him to breakfast had long gone. Bobby could see that his dad hadn't touched the tea; he was just holding it, hands on either side of the mug, filth under his nails. Trying to keep his hands steady in front of his son.

'Nah, I'm still working on this one.'

Bobby nodded. 'Alright, Dad.'

He bowled over to the counter and ordered himself a full English. The woman looked up at the board with drooping eyes, the mascara on her lower lashes thick and black. She wrote it down, took his money, and told him to sit.

'I'll bring it over to you.'

He went back to the table. The gel slicking his dad's hair back made him look like he'd had a wash. But when Bobby sat down opposite him, he could smell that he hadn't. The waft of old man lifted in the air. Even with the cafe's fug of frying meat, his mixture of must and drink was strong. The same air that sat around his flat, moving only when Bobby's dad walked in and out of rooms. His nails were long on fingers that were slender. His upper arms were sticks. They didn't look like they could carry the mug to his mouth.

The years had been unkind to Joe. He looked up with yellow eyes, one of them sinking into a well-worn scar, revealing yellow teeth as he went to say something and couldn't. His gaping mouth yammered and said nothing.

They sat there, listening to the chatter of other men getting stuck into plates of meat and yolk and baked beans.

'What's happening, Dad?'

'Much the same as ever. How's your mum, alright?'

'Yeah she's good.'

Maggie had got rid him for the drink a year ago but he still thought well of her. She said she'd had enough of sleeping next to a sack soaked in brandy. He'd chosen the bitch in the bottle over his wife. Couldn't help himself, his body needed the drink more than it needed Maggie. He regretted it now. Now, he was stuck with it.

'Who'd you piss off this time?' Joe made a nod to Bobby's face.

'That lot. Nothing serious.'

Bobby's dad rubbed his quivering right hand over his face like he was waking himself up.

'Anyone to worry about?'

Bobby looked at his dad, and took the sugar from the middle of the table. He poured it into a small mound in front of him and began to push it around with his finger, making a circle. Bobby remembered the time his best friend Mikey had come round after he'd cracked his leg in a car accident and was in a wheelchair for a bit. Bobby had helped Mikey

to the sofa, so he could put his leg up when watching the TV. His dad had wheeled himself to the doorway, banging into walls, laughing into his right-hand turns, before it tilted and fell. A laughing lump on the floor, with the wheel spinning next to him.

Bobby wished he'd kept his hands off Theresa.

Everyone had girlfriends now. He didn't see his mates anymore. And he didn't want to anyway. They'd chosen their beds and their boredom. Sitting next to their men like a bunch of ducks. All of them wearing the same, tight V-necks and saying nothing. All of them fat and dumb.

Theresa was thin and smart. She'd done him over.

'Just Connor.'

Joe winced.

'What you do that for?'

Bobby's dad bent low to take a sip of his tea, his mug still on the table. His mouth didn't make it, and he put his head up again.

'Must be cold by now, Dad. Sure you don't want another?'

'No, no. You're alright.'

Bobby's food came. A plate of bacon, eggs, sausages, toast, tomatoes and a thick wedge of black pudding. It all slid around the plate when it hit the table. He looked down at it and let his hunger take over. Cutting up the meat quickly. Getting it down as fast as he could. Looking at his dad made it harder to swallow, the sickly sight of Joe's face tested Bobby's hunger. His dad stared at his son's plate, taking in all the food, imagining the pleasure of tasting it. If he could still taste.

'What did Connor do to you?'

'He came for me.'

Joe moved his mouth around his gums.

'Well, did you win? Don't fucking look like it.'

Joe's voice was raspy, his throat stripped away through the years.

'I was still standing. He wasn't.'

Joe smiled. 'When you fighting again?'

Bobby laughed. 'You winding me up?'

Joe grinned and showed the gaps where his teeth should be. 'I mean in the ring. Proper.'

Bobby nodded and chewed on a bit of sausage, picking up his toast and sponging up the yolk and tomato with it. He spoke with his mouth full. He was ashamed to tell his dad he had a fight coming up. Drunk or not, Joe knew you didn't start messing about in street brawls a week before.

'I'd love to see you fighting again.'

Bobby swallowed.

'Got one coming up, actually.'

Joe moved his body forward. 'When's that then?'

'In a week. Me and Connor meet at York Hall. All them London clubs and us two from Clapton end up fighting each other.'

Joe shook his head. He still worried about Bobby.

'You can't fucking fight like that.'

Bobby shrugged. 'Have to.'

'Well you played that one fucking stupid then, didn't you?'

'Can't *not* do it.'

Joe breathed out of his mouth. A gummy, petrol-smelling sigh. 'Denny's lot will make a load of noise. You know that, don't you?'

Bobby had tried not to think too much about it. Denny struck a chord with Joe. They'd had their run-ins.

'There'll be too many there for noise. Can't start too much trouble in public.'

Joe smoothed back the slick hair on his head. 'You're stupid for heating things up like this. You look a mess.'

Bobby looked up at his dad. He changed the subject.

'You still handy, Dad?'

'Not half. Sharp and strong. Look at these paws.'

His dad held out his filthy, quivering fingers. Shaking and spluttering and laughing. Then coughing, wheezing, holding

on to the table for support against the breakdown of his body.

Bobby put his knife and fork on the plate and pushed it to one side. He swallowed more bread and looked away embarrassed, his eyes to the window, on the road. Back to that Saturday sun, much softer now behind the clouds. He could see the faint fuzz of his bruised reflection sitting up, and the crippled, bent back of his dad.

Maybe he'd go back home and walk through the afternoon's sweet laundry air. Get a paper and lie in bed.

Joe put his hands on the table for support and stood up. Up and standing he shook Bobby's hand like he'd always done. He wiped his mouth, cleaning it of the spittle.

'Next Saturday, is it?'

'My fight? Yeah.'

Joe smiled. 'I'll be there.'

They looked at each other for a moment.

'Good to see you, Bobby.'

Bobby watched the door of the cafe open and his dad shuffle out, taking his time to do up his coat, his fingers fiddling with the zipper before giving up. He spotted the end of a cigarette on the pavement and went to bend down. Joe's legs shook so hard he left it alone and shuffled away, patting his pockets.

Blood was blood but it had thinned, and even though they were made of the same stuff Bobby felt his dad disappearing. He'd looked for the sharp blue in his dad's stare that had eyed up other fighters and left them cold. It was gone. There was nothing between Bobby and Joe except their past.

Bobby had seen his dad knock back beer after beer in the pub and walk home calm as a monk. Being in the pub with his dad was like being with a king. Joe would be stood by the bar, dapper and dandy. His neat torso sinewy and hard in a collared shirt, tucked into jeans that stopped a little off the ankle to show shining, black loafer shoes. A black porkpie

hat at a tilt. No one dressed like Joe. He was rock and roll, and that bothered people. It bothered them when they sloped into the pub in parkas and fading Lees and bad shoes and trainers they tried hard to keep white and clean. Trainers that had to survive winters. Or in their work gear, straight off the site, their faces dry from dust. Their lungs too. But after a while, they stopped being bothered. When they saw Joe's fights and heard what he was about, Joe's wardrobes started making sense. He'd earned those shiny shoes. The tough little pretty boy with the mean right hook. Joe's hair was Elvis-black and he creamed it to the sides. Kept it the same through each decade, up until the Nineties. Always out of fashion, he'd made his look his own. He had an all-year tan from years of working on building sites with his top off and was freckled at the nose. Joe was the best-looking man in this manor.

Men used to move out of the way for his dad. Bobby remembered his twelfth birthday, when his dad had taken him down to the pub with real men. It was the day he'd tasted his first drink, and that sip of a brown, bitter pint had been the best present Bobby had ever got. Joe had walked slowly to the table, looking about him, left to right. How the crowd of men in the pub had parted to let them through. He was a rover. A rogue. A black-haired, dark-eyed darling. And Maggie, his beautiful blonde bombshell wife, sat away at another table with the girls. They had met when she was eighteen. She was young and pretty. He was ten years older and scarred. Maggie and Joe looked good together.

'Hello, Joe. Good to see ya. Sit down, sit down.'

'Your boy stopping by, is he?'

Bobby was always big and brave when he was with his dad. Joe had sat him between his two friends, Little Freddy and Big Frank. They were all smiles and patted him on the head. Freddy pushed forward his pint.

'Go on, boy. Have a bit.'

Bobby had looked at the drink in its thick glass, sitting still like treacle. Joe looking on. He remembered hating the sickly, bitter taste, but kept drinking to make his dad proud. Maggie looking over every so often to make sure Bobby was behaving.

‘Alright, steady. Your hands a bit tight round the neck, son.’

Always laughter when he was sat between these two men. Bobby had always joined in.

Frank and Freddy. Their rolled-up sleeves on muscled, hairy arms and hands that built, carried and lifted; folded betting slips neatly into shirt pocket with nimble fingers and brains that had sized up the odds.

Frank was always tired. ‘Been up four in the morning for a month running now. Back after dark. Knackered. I’ll need shooting down like a carthorse by Christmas.’

They knew working hard got you nowhere. Eventually they stopped clocking in and gave it up. Started drinking, like Joe. They became old quickly. They wanted Bobby to get rich and take care of them.

‘You gonna make a bit of money like your dad, Bobby boy?’

Bobby had blinked and folded his arms. ‘Like fighting?’

‘Yeah, like fighting.’ Bobby tasted Frank’s cigarette smoke in the air when he spoke.

‘Yeah, I’m gonna fight like my dad.’

The door of the pub had swung open then and a hulk of a man, ducking under the frame, walked in. Followed by two other men of about the same size and a small red-headed boy. The pub grew a little darker. Like at the Millwall and West Ham games Bobby had been taken to, he felt the grit in the air. His mum had shifted in her seat, her double gin gripped tight, staring over at Joe by the bar. Bobby had kept smiling to make her smile too. He didn’t like her looking worried. Both Freddy and Frank muttered something about letting the dogs in.

'I wouldn't say I was from the same Emerald Isle as them.'
Frank had put his fag out and grinned at Bobby, winking.

'There's Irish and then there's them, Bobby. Remember that. This is an Irish pub. For grafters, not a fucking tinkers' inn.'

'I'm not just Irish.'

A silence. Both men working out what to say.

'There's green blood in you.'

'I'm Jewish too.'

Freddy had glanced at Frank and winked, and Bobby had laughed, thinking they would too.

'On your mum's side.'

'Don't knock a Four-by-Two, Freddy. They're clever cunts. Know how to fight too; they've been at it since the start.'

'I'm a bit Irish on my mum's side too.'

The men had soothed him.

'Yes you are, boy. You're a tough little mongrel.'

Joe had clocked the door and watched the big man come over to the bar and stand beside him. Denny was bigger than Joe, untidy and sprawling. His sideburns were bushy, his shirt wrinkled and unbuttoned to the chest, his wiry hair brushed through with fingers and water, not combs and cream. His eyes were black, wild and watching, twitching beneath the thick brows.

Bobby hadn't liked seeing his dad look so tiny.

'You alright, Dad?'

Joe had pulled his son towards him and ruffled his hair, messing up the curls with his fingers. Bobby had smelt the mix of spices from his aftershave. Joe always used to smell good. Used to smell like he had money.

'This your lad?' A thick Irish accent that had more of a song and swing to it than Little Freddy's.

Joe squeezed Bobby's shoulder and nodded. 'This is my boy, yeah. My birthday boy. Bobby, this is Denny. He's from around the way.'

He'd been watching his dad's lip twitch when Denny asked.

He had looked over to his mum. She had beckoned him over with her lovely long fingers that wore her grandmother's stones. Bobby had wanted to put his hand in his dad's but remembered not to. Instead he had looked Denny up and down, from his wide feet in thin, leather shoes, to the scowling hot-faced, red-headed boy - Connor - who stood behind him. The other two men were thick-necked and lifted the boy on to the bar stool. Connor sat with his arms folded. None of them smiled.

From around the way. Years later, Bobby learned what that meant. It meant someone was local. Meant he was about, behind your back, round the corner.

Bobby left the cafe, the smell of grease and fried fat clinging to his clothes. The usual deep pain whenever he saw his dad. Today Joe was tinier than he'd ever been.

Bobby walked with his fists at his sides and let the pain sink and become silent. Walking was real.