

★ ★ *The* ★ ★
LONGEST
FIGHT

EMILY BULLOCK

myriad **m**[∞]

First published in 2015 by

Myriad Editions
59 Lansdowne Place
Brighton BN3 1FL

www.myriadeditions.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Excerpts taken from *Boxing* by A.J. Newton,
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN (pbk): 978-1-908434-53-1

ISBN (ebk): 978-1-908434-54-8

Designed and typeset in Palatino
by Linda McQueen, London

Printed and bound in Sweden by
ScandBook AB

For Robin
Always in my corner

PROLOGUE

Meet John James Munday. Jack the Silent Killer to those who read the cheap ink papers. He is a man who could knock you down; not today because his hands are strapped behind his back. And never again once he steps into that final rope. We only have a few minutes left. The guard checks his watch.

I remember the first time I saw Jack in here. Being sealed behind these stone walls makes most men small. But not Jack. Even now he stands the tallest of all. His white shirt does not cover his wrists and the metal cuffs bite his skin. Jack stares straight ahead.

This plain brick cell is unlike any other in Pentonville. It has two doors: one for the taking in and one for the taking out. Yellow tiles blank as a new page. All graffiti quickly scrubbed off the walls: there is no humour in reading another man's thoughts at a time like this. No windows, no draughts; I cannot hear any breathing, everything is still. Life left outside those iron doors.

Fingernails scrape against metal as the unseen jailer pulls back the bolts. Some noises you can never forget, like a screaming baby, the echo of laughter. The door slowly opens; it cannot be slow enough for Jack. He turns and nods to me, he is too close: is that a smile? It is too late to ask questions now. But I remember the things we spoke of.

There is nothing more alive than a boxing match. Jack told me all about it. He talked about the bubble of anticipation in his gut, one of life's surprises about to happen. Only sometimes in a match there are no winners. The jailer counts us in;

we will be one down when he counts us out. Twenty paces and we are in the centre, not the dead centre, of the pale green room, and it paints us all with its sickly tinge. The doctor stands to the left. The guards step back, their duty done. Two men, one old and one young, in dark blue suits, clean-shaven, buttoned-up to attention, step forward. Jack strides to the wooden platform. No one follows him.

He stands by the rope as the men strap his legs together. The brown serge rucks around his ankles. Jack is at the end of the fight now. All he said was, *I done it*, and he has never told them anything else, not at the trial, not in the cell. The guards have been taking bets all day. They know that the threat of that most final of silences will make most men talk.

I step forward until my polished shoes touch the lip of the platform. The black leather book falls open in my hands, *Watkins & Co. Bible Factory* embossed in gold on the inside page. The scarlet-dipped edges flutter apart and it sounds, for a moment, like the beat of a bird's wings. Jack glances up to where the sky should be. Silence. Mine should be the only voice left to speak.

When we first met in here, Jack asked me if I wanted to know the truth. I said it was not my place to judge. They whisper it at night, he said, asking him did he do it? If I were a gambling man I would put a bob down that he will not say a word, although like you I do not know the outcome yet.

The white cotton hood comes out of the younger man's pocket, a crisp crack as the starched edges settle like a dove on his arm. Two minutes left if Pierrepont's weights and measurements are correct, and they always are. Jack took a wager too: *you can't go against a holy oath*, he said to me. Some say it takes a brave man to face death, but it takes more courage to look back and see where it all started. Jack named the year, 1953, but really it began long before that...

★ COURAGE ★

'Learn to submit yourself to punishment, and you will often be able to weary an opponent who is infinitely stronger than yourself, until the joyous moment when he leaves an opening and you step in to do your share of the fight.'

Boxing, A.J. Newton

— PROGRAMME —

Friday, May 22nd 1953

North v South

Grand 10 Rounds National Contest

PAT O'CONNOR

Kensal Green

versus

JOHNNY HALL

Sutton

6 Round Contests

BILL MADDOX

Enfield

versus

CHARLIE PETCHER

Kingston

FRANK BULL

Lambeth

versus

ERNIE DONALD

Harrow

Special Notice

Free Seats For Patrons.

Seats for this Hall will be given away at each show to holders of lucky programmes. All programmes are numbered; please check your number with those called from the ring.

ONE

Jack looked up at the painted advert on the dirt-slicked brickwork. Take Courage. The gas flames at the end of the street flicked blue shadows across the letters. He straightened his tie. And he wondered for a moment if life was as layered as those bricks, each join carefully worked into place with the next. Each one over with the ringing of the bell and on to the next round. He rubbed his thumb in the palm of his hand and crossed the road to the gym. His nose twitched against the sour stink of the Grand Surrey Canal. Someone had a sense of humour, as there wasn't anything grand about the back end of Camberwell.

The doors slammed behind him. Men stood around the ring, packed tight like traders down Waterloo Market, eyes and ears open for the prize. The fighters' shadows fell on to the crowd, casting a darkness that wiped out features, turning faces into skulls.

It wasn't the fight Jack was interested in that night. He had been watching the red-haired boy for a couple of weeks, first training down the gym, then out in the booths at Rosehill. It paid to keep an eye out for talent; there wasn't much fight left around those crumbling streets. He didn't have one decent hitter left on his books. Jack shrugged off his jacket, slung it over his shoulder. He was tall enough to see over the wall of macs and overcoats, his long legs giving him a few inches on everyone else, and probably thin enough to slide in between them. But he kept to the back, eyes searching the corners of the gym not the ring. No one else thought to turn their heads from the fight.

Light leaked from under the store-room door. He made his way towards it; the floorboards creaked like his knees on a damp day. Only a couple of years past thirty but already he felt the cold creep of age. He eased the door open an inch. Inside, old rolls of canvas were slumped against the flaking walls, but the boy had cleared a space for himself. A thick rope hung from the middle of the high ceiling, a bag, big as a man's body, suspended on the end, sawdust and stitching swirling about. The boy was punching smooth and fast. Each throw timed to graze past leather, the updraught of air swinging the bag. What if Jack had left it too long? Timing was everything, any decent boxer worth his silks and leathers knew that.

'Ain't going to get much return out of that old bag, are you?' Jack raised his voice above the cheers from outside, walked around to stand in front of the boy; he looked younger up close, probably no more than seventeen, eighteen at most. Not a cut or bruise on him. White-faced, pink-cheeked, but his breathing came steady and slow.

'Newton said... no one'd mind... me using it.'

The muscles on his arms tightened into ridges as he shrugged. Jack resisted the urge to pinch the boy's thigh and measure for fat.

'Newton's only the caretaker. Suppose you're not signed up for membership, then?'

Jack took out a cigarette. Hot smoke kept his voice steady and his hands busy. The boy kept moving, hair standing up as if lightning was about to strike.

'Spider said... he'd sort it.'

'That your mate?' Jack dropped ash on the floor.

The boy nodded, pressing his thick lips together until they turned white.

Jack caught the bag. 'Listening to other people's never going to get you nowhere. Your mate's been telling you porkies. No one gets to use the equipment, less he's signed up.'

'I can't... afford no subs.'

The boy had nothing to lose; that would up Jack's cut. He let the bag rock free again. 'Ever tried the fairs?'

He had seen the boy himself: one time he landed a punch so quick and straight that half the crowd at the booth didn't even know why the gypsy in the ring dropped to his knees and bounced forward on his head. Jack didn't feel old when he saw a left hit like that.

'Won me fights... I had down there... but the lads take a cut. The purse don't stretch far.'

The boy nodded as he spoke; he was Irish not far back. The voice south London but a soft turn to his vowels and a face just stepped off a farm: milk round.

'I should tell the management straight – it ain't allowed, you being here. But suppose I could square it?' Jack pulled down hard on the cigarette.

'What... you want to... do that for?'

He wasn't suspicious, just interested. The perfect combination: a killer in the ring but soft enough to mould and train up. Jack wanted to laugh – his luck was changing.

'Someone did the same for me long time back, helped me out. It'd just be a loan, and I get it back out the winnings.' He dropped the cigarette to the floor, ground it out.

'Spider... wouldn't want no one... getting a cut.' The boy landed hooks, slicing up under the bag. It crashed against a mouldering pile of mats, tumbling them to the floor.

'I'm not talking about Sunday afternoons down the fairground – they're full of pros fallen on hard times and gypsies bred not to care. An old one-two job. Only the booth owner wins at them things.'

Jack spun the bag back to the boy; leather whirled its way around them both. The boy knocked it off course with a left, didn't even break his rhythm. He weaved in and out of the tight circling, tying it in knots. Jack held his breath, certain any moment someone else would come in. If one of those punches landed it could smack the bag off its hook, crumble plaster from the ceiling, and deafen the noise from the ring.

He grabbed the bag, held it still. 'I'm talking about real battles, no more pissing around with mates. Go professional, make a life out of it.' He offered the boy a cigarette; he shook his head. 'What you need is someone in your corner.'

'Spider sees me right... I told you, he's a mate.' The dark patches of sweat swelled together, turning the boy's grey woollen sweater black.

'Your parents like the idea of you getting knocked about the head for fun? Turn pro, put some real work in it and you could be sending money home, not living on floors and under bridges. Make 'em proud.'

'How... d'you know me family?'

The boy stood up straight; Jack had found his soft spot.

'London's not such a big old place. I heard they're good sorts.'

'I'm the oldest now. My brothers died.'

'My brothers are gone too. They all look up to you, don't they?' Jack dropped his voice low and soft, drawing the boy closer.

'They've gone... back to Ireland. I want them to be proud... what you said.' He didn't even question how Jack knew so much about him.

'You need taking care of. A proper manager could do that.'

'That what you are?'

'As it happens, I am, but you'd take a lot of work and money. Not sure that's for me. You'd be good though.'

'You think?' His eyebrows lifted closer up to his hairline. It wasn't disbelief.

'A lot of work.'

'I work hard.'

'I'd have conditions.' Jack shook his head.

'I'd have to clear it with Spider.' The boy swiped thick strands of hair out of his eyes.

'This ain't some kid's game, it's the real McCoy. Know who that was?' Jack closed his teeth over the smile. The boy stared. 'What's your name, kid?'

‘Frank.’ The boy put out his hand.

Jack kept his arms close to his body. ‘Ever heard of Big Maddox or the Tooting Tiger? They were my fighters – won some big purses too. Southern Divisionals, Southwark Championships. But someone like you... These things don’t happen overnight. Time and investment, son.’

Frank’s hand dropped, but a smile crept up at the corner of his mouth. Jack had him hanging on for it now. Frank swayed on his feet.

‘You could be my manager?’

‘It’d be a big job.’

‘I want to fight.’

‘I can’t help you if you just want to fight. You’ve got to want to win, and know that the only way you’re going to do that is by listening to me.’

Jack tugged on his earlobe. The boy’s eyes were wide as if they were glued open. He followed every wave of Jack’s fingers.

‘Well, Frank, you’ve talked me round. I’m Jack. You shake this hand I’m holding out here and it makes me your manager and you my fighter. That’s like writing it in blood. You can’t go back on it and you can’t break the trust.’

Jack held his hand just out of reach from the boy. He glanced over his shoulder; he could hear voices and laughter: the fight was over. He didn’t have much time before the poachers came out.

‘Going to shake or what, boy?’

Frank grabbed for Jack’s hand as if it would save him tumbling off a cliff. Jack snatched his fingers away, rubbed his nose.

‘Dust in this place gets right up your Harry James... Trust, Frank. That’s what we got to have or we ain’t got nothing. Get that?’ He looked into the boy’s brown eyes, big as a horse’s.

‘I get it, Jack.’ Frank’s head bounced on his neck.

‘Think on what I’m offering here. Spider’ll understand. He wants you to do well, don’t he? Make money.’

Jack smacked his lips around the last two words. Frank's hands seemed to swell in size as he made fists and took a fighting stance for Jack. A strong one.

'Come and find me when you're ready to shake this hand. Trust, that's what we got to have, Frank.'

He closed the door behind him. Jack Munday, he'd had a few names, but this one was finally going to bring him success. At the other side of the gym the bell for the next fight rang out. Jack knew the deal was sealed. He had his fighter, a partnership to last; this time he was sure of it.

The electric lamps behind the mirrored bar flickered day and night, but the old smoke-stained glass absorbed all the light. Jack blinked, adjusting to the darkness of the long room, ears still ringing with the sounds of his and Frank's first fight. Only two weeks of training and already landing knockout blows. An open competition over in Fulham; on the quiet, no brouhaha. The match was over in fifteen minutes, the same length of time Jack'd had to wait before Frank had come running out to sign the contract – that was a sign of some sort, surely? Jack jingled the prize money in his pocket. Picking a winner was hard work, and the hunger churning inside him threatened to spill over into sickness; the smell at the Man of the World wasn't helping. Beer was soaked into the wooden floor and panelled walls, slowly dripped into place over the years from the sweat of drinkers – no one was careless enough to spill a drop.

Pearl was up at the bar, her head buried in a comic. She spoke without looking up. 'Cousin Alf said I could wait here.'

He sat down next to her, prodded her bandaged finger. 'How's the factory?'

'Making blackcurrant pastilles, same as ever. I caught my fingertip on the belt. It's clean.'

'My new fighter won his first bout. Should have seen him going at it.'

She nodded, and turned a page.

‘Could look a bit more interested. It’ll keep you in Dan Dares.’

Sixteen, but she still wore those stupid pinafore dresses and long cardigans. All elbows and scuffed knees.

‘It ain’t a comic. Newton lets me borrow *Nature*. It’s a science journal. King’s have got plenty of copies. This one’s about families, about their insides being the same, me and you – like twisted threads of spun sugar, they called it.’

‘That what you making at the factory, is it? Innards. Tasty.’

‘Newton works up at the hospital with all them scientists. He says –’

‘Don’t listen to his fairytales. Emptying bins for a living don’t make you an expert. He told me once his uncle wrote a book about boxing. Newton can’t even stand straight on his tin leg, let alone talk straight.’

Newton belonged with the group of dockers: caps still in place, spines fused to the curve of the wooden chairs. That wasn’t going to be Jack’s life, nursing warm stout until the next wage packet came in. He pushed Pearl off the stool. ‘Exercise cures all ills.’ That was what the trainers spouted down the gym, but nothing was going to fix Pearl.

‘I’m fine, Jack. See.’ She swung up one leg at a time, thin ankles and knees on display. ‘Nothing twisted, nothing swollen up. Not today.’

He looked away from the white threaded scars and green shadows of fading bruises. The new barmaid was in, polishing glasses at the other end of the counter. He lit a cigarette, flicked a stray tobacco crumb off the tip of his tongue. She had flounces on her blouse but he calculated the weight of her breasts to be as heavy as eight-ounce gloves with hands inside.

Pearl was dragging him back. Telling him there was a reason their hair was the same colour, when he knew it was the rotten cheap soap his mum had used to wash their heads, brown as tar and not as sweet-smelling. When she died he

still kept using the stuff until he and Pearl had hair the colour of winter drain-sludge. At least he used Brylcreem to blacken his down. He smelled the overripe fruitiness of blackcurrant trapped in her clothes.

‘You should brush that mop.’ Jack talked to the thin pink line on top of her head, the dark strands hanging over her ears.

‘If you buy me a hair set I’ll use it. This new fighter of yours going to make us rich, is he? That’ll make a change.’

She ran her finger along the page. He studied her reflection in the bottles lined up behind the bar. Her face round and flat, not much of her mother about her, and the thinness of her neck carried straight down to her long fingers. She did have the look of a Munday, though. Maybe that was what those science magazines she read were on about – using the same soap when there was a shelf of new ones to choose from down at Simmonds’ Grocers. They were both trapped in that mirror of the past. But they weren’t the only ones; the pub was full of faces. They would all want to be his mate now he was on the up. The new barmaid was rolling his way too, swaying one pretty hip after the other. Her skin as creamy as the head on the pint of Courage she put in front of him.

‘Evening.’ Jack winked at her. ‘First day?’

The barmaid made some reply but he couldn’t hear her voice over the noise in the pub. He nodded anyway, hoped she didn’t sound like a yapping puppy as the last girl had.

‘Well, don’t know if Cousin Alf told you, but he only marks down every other pint in the book for me. We’re close.’

She flicked the cloth at him. ‘He told me not to listen to nothing you lot said.’

That quick movement sent a buzz down Jack’s spine. He reached across the bar, caught her wrist before she could snap the damp rag again. She let him stroke the sides of her fingers for a second. It really was her first day: hands soft, not cracked and dry from rinsing glasses; neatly filed nails, polished tin jewellery. The gold-coloured rings reminded Jack of Rosie but

he pushed the thought from his head. He concentrated on the pumping pulse in his neck.

The girl nodded in Pearl's direction. 'She with you?'

Jack nearly blew beer from his nostrils but swallowed it back in time. 'Christ, I ain't that hard up. She's my little sis.'

'She looks too young to be your sweetheart but I thought she might be your daughter.'

'Don't make me laugh. I ain't ready to be six feet under yet.'

The barmaid turned her head. Glasses were building up at the other end of the bar, but Jack didn't want her to leave yet. He gripped hold of Pearl's wrist, rolled up her sleeve. Small teardrop-shaped scars, white as milk, marked her arm.

'I'll show you a trick.' Jack kept his voice low, reeling the girl in.

He took the cigarette out of his mouth, sucked the dry-paper taste from his bottom lip. The end was damp with spit so he gripped it nearer the ember; as if he were holding a pen he dabbed a full stop on Pearl's forearm then whipped it away again. The barmaid let out a shriek – the best reaction yet. Pearl turned a page and the girl closed her mouth. They fell for it every time.

He re-lit the end with a fresh match, handed the cigarette to the girl. 'Go on, try it. She's been like that since a baby. Smack her across the face and she just ain't going to feel it.'

'I don't know.' The girl twisted the cigarette between her fingers. 'Sure it won't hurt none?'

'Did you hear her make a peep? Doctors got some name for it, can't for the life of me remember what.' Jack sat back on his stool. 'Tell her, Pearl.'

'Idiopathic neuropathy.' She stared at the girl. 'It wouldn't hurt if you cut me open with a knife.'

The girl picked up the cigarette, tapped it against Pearl's arm, and let out a small squeal. It filtered through the growing fog of beer inside his head. Pearl snapped her lips tight, snatched her arm away. Those grey irises, always staring at

him. Sometimes a trick of the light or a fall of a shadow and it was like having Rosie back.

'Best leave it there.' He winked at the barmaid.

'At least she'll never get her heart broken.' The barmaid sucked down on the cigarette, drawing out the last spark. 'How can she, when she can't feel nothing? Lucky cow.'

'She's just a kid, not even interested in boys. Are you, Pearl?'

She shrugged. Too busy reading and dreaming; a lost cause, but still she was good around the house. Pearl rubbed antiseptic over the red bump; the pot of Clayton's she carried round stank of eucalyptus. The barmaid turned to serve one of the dockers. He gave Pearl a gentle push.

'Get supper on for me?'

'I waited here because you said you'd have money, Jack. I don't get paid until the end of the week.'

'Loan some grub from Mrs Bell.' He pressed her outstretched palm down before the girl saw.

'She'll make me stay for a chat.'

'Tell her I said you're to get dinner on quick.' He watched her roll up the comic, or whatever it was, and adjust the small bandage. 'It was a bit of fun. Not like you felt nothing, was it?'

'More than one way to feel things.' Pearl shrugged as she walked away.

They used to do the cigarette trick all the time. How was he supposed to keep up with her changes? Jack shook his head, turned back to find two big brown eyes in front of his. He smiled.

'Can't just call you "barmaid", now, can I? Tell me your name.'

'Georgie Smyth. Smyth with a Y.'

'Nice to meet you, Georgie. Call me Jack.'

He reached over, shook her hand. He thought he could see his own reflection in those eyes, light brown like the polished wood of the swing chairs at the summer fair. Higher

and higher he and Rosie used to ride. Jack looked down. The bottom of the glass peered up through the cloudy mist that was left of his drink.

‘You should come see my new fighter some time, Georgie.’

‘Maybe I will, Jack.’

She took his empty pot and moved on to the queue at the pumps. He wiped the sweat from his eyes with his handkerchief, pushed it back into the depths of his waistcoat. Slowly he eased himself off the stool, but he couldn’t help glancing at the pictures tucked behind the half-empty bottles at the back of the bar. The Bible Factory send-off; his dad at the front in his Great War uniform, proud and tall; his mum at the pub’s VE Day celebration with a Union Jack poking from her hair. More photos waited for him back at the house. He couldn’t leave that family behind; sepia eyes, sneaking up on him when his mind wandered: the boys in their East Surrey Regiment get-up; Winifred and Win lying on a fur rug, only ten months apart – the first was born sickly, never expected to make it, so their dad’s mother’s name was supposed to live on in the next girl. The Winnies at eleven and twelve, still side by side as if their dresses were sewn together, just before they left for good. And, half hidden: one of Jack, back when he was John. He’d had that photo taken after his first win, thirteen years old – hands up, hair slicked, shorts hanging low. He could list them all. But only one picture of Rosie survived; Jack kept it at the back of his bedside drawer. Sometimes it was as if she had never existed for anyone but him. The people on the front room mantel were from John’s life. John James Munday – the name he was born with. He wasn’t that runt any more, but he still couldn’t get rid of their faces.