

## INTRODUCTION

It's early 2007 and I'm standing on a ship off the coast of north-eastern Australia. We're moored right by Lizard Island, named by my fellow Londoner and Great Briton Captain Cook, and I'm making this film called *Fool's Gold* starring Matthew McConaughey, Kate Hudson and my old mate Donald Sutherland, who is a blinding geezer.

Donald is playing an Englishman and I'm playing a Yank, but in hindsight we should've swapped roles because I was fucking diabolical in that film – I should've got nicked for impersonating an actor. Anyway, I digress . . . a big word for me – seven letters.

So there's a bit of a buzz going on with a few people running about on deck, and all of a sudden we're summoned downstairs to this big room with a telly in it. This is the whole fucking crew by the way, with me and Donald hiding at the back like two naughty schoolboys. Then somebody announces it's the 'Most Beautiful Man in the World' Awards.

Well, obviously me and the Don think we might be in the running here, but hold up, the next announcement tells us that our very own Matthew McConaughey is one of the nominees and he's up against

that other alright-looking geezer, George Clooney. Anyway, the show begins and Matthew is giving it the old ‘Woo! Woo!’ like the Yanks do when they get excited. After about five minutes of this bollocks I wanna be somewhere else – anywhere else. Yeah, I suppose I might be a little bit jealous. I mean, he ain’t a bad-looking fella . . .

As they’re building up to the big moment the television shows this satellite going across the world from east to west. Funny how everything and everyone seems to travel from east to west. Maybe they’re following the sun – wanting to find out where it goes before it comes up the other side again – or maybe they thought it went down a hole. Anyway, this satellite is travelling across Europe and as it’s getting closer to London, I’m thinking, ‘You never know . . .’

Bang! It hits London and with all the lapping up that’s going on I can’t contain myself any more. I shout out, ‘Stop right there, my son! That’s me!’ The Aussies, who have a great sense of humour – well, they’re cockney Irish, ain’t they? Or at least the majority are – are all giggling. But as far as the others are concerned, it goes straight over their heads.

Eventually the satellite gets to America and we’re into Clooney and McConaughey territory. We creep quietly past George and slip loudly into Texas, and at this point it’s announced that Matthew is the winner. He goes absolutely potty – like he’s scored the winning goal in the World Cup final and won the Heavyweight Championship of the World in one go.

I’m thinking, ‘Fuck me, what a prat!’

The whole thing just seems a bit embarrassing, but then on reflection I start to think maybe this is the big difference between us – apart from my good looks, of course. Maybe this is what makes Matthew a film star, which he is – at the time of writing he’s just won an Oscar, and deservedly so.

Anyway, once I finally get back up on deck, the whole thing kinda makes me think about where I've come from. Looking at Australia, 14,000 miles away from home – literally on the other side of the world – I start thinking about me and my mate Tony Yeates as kids in the East End, and I start thinking about Captain Cook. There's a plaque on the Mile End Road which marks the start of his journey to Oz. It's just opposite the place a club called Nashville's used to be, where me and Tony had a few adventures of our own in the late seventies. We'd often find ourselves gazing unsteadily up at that plaque after we'd had a few on a Friday night – dreaming of travelling the world, the places we might see and the people we might meet. And suddenly standing on that ship in the southern hemisphere, it comes to me: 'I've made that journey. I've done what Cook did!'

Alright, he did it on a sailing ship and I did it First Class British Airways, but I've done it just the same. I'm not trying to book myself as being on Cook's level as an explorer, but for someone who comes from where I do, getting to the Great Barrier Reef was still some kind of achievement. That was when the idea of paying my own tribute to the places and the people that made me what I am (I won't be demanding actual blue plaques: 'Ray Winstone narrowly escaped a good kicking here' etc.) started to make me smile. I hope it will do the same for you.

## CHAPTER 1

# HACKNEY HOSPITAL

When I look back through the history of my family, we've done fuck all for this country. I don't mean that in a bad way. The Winstones weren't villains. We've always been grafters, back and forthing between the workhouse and the public house. But at the time I was born – in Hackney Hospital on 19 February 1957 – the Second World War was still very much on people's minds. It's probably a bit of a cliché to say 'everyone had lost somebody', but in our family, it wasn't even true. Maybe it was more the luck of the draw in terms of their ages than anything else, but there was no one you could put your finger on and say they had sacrificed themselves in any way.

Doodlebugs rained down on Hackney – I remember being told about one going straight up Well Street – but none of them hit my nan and granddad's flat in Shore Place. They had to go in the air-raid shelter round the front a few times, but their three young sons – my dad Ray and his two brothers, Charlie and Kenny – were safely evacuated out towards High Wycombe. The village they were lodged in lost three men on HMS *Hood*, so that was about as close as the war got to them.

Uncle Kenny, my dad's younger brother, got a start as a jockey and rode a few winners for Sir Gordon Richards' stable. I've always surmised that he must've picked up his way with horses when he was evacuated to the countryside, because there weren't too many racecourse gallops in the East End. That said, his dad, my granddad, Charles Thomas Winstone, did work as a tic-tac man, passing on the odds for bookmakers at tracks all around Britain, so horse-racing was kind of in Kenny's blood.

When he got too tall to be a jockey on the flat any more, Kenny became a butcher. I guess that was one way he could carry on working with animals. He ended up with a couple of shops – one in Well Street, and one just round the back of Victoria Park – so he did alright. But before that he'd been a pretty good boxer as well. He boxed for the stable boys, and once fought at the Amateur Boxing Association (ABA) finals against a mate of my dad's called Terry Spinks, who went on to win a gold medal at the Melbourne Olympics aged only eighteen, and would later be known for raising the alarm as the Black September terrorists approached the Israeli athletes' quarters when he was coaching the South Korean team at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Apparently he gave old Spinksy a bit of a fright.

This wouldn't have come as any great surprise in the Winstone household, because boxing was what the men in our family did. My granddad had been drafted into a Scottish regiment and stationed in Edinburgh for a while just to be on their boxing team, and when my dad did his National Service with the Royal Artillery, he spent virtually the whole three years in his tracksuit, boxing out of Shoeburyness. I think Henry Cooper might've been doing his stint at around the same time, and the only actual service I ever remember my dad telling me about was helping out after the great flood of 1953, when all those people died on Canvey Island.

He said he'd got really angry because the Salvation Army wouldn't give him a cup of tea when he didn't have the money to buy one. From then on if he ever saw someone selling *The War Cry*, he'd just tell 'em to go away. He had no time for those people whatsoever, to the extent that I even remember asking him about it once as a kid: 'Surely there must be some good people in the Salvation Army, Dad?' But he just told me, 'Nah, son, they wouldn't give me a cup of tea.'

Hopefully this has given you a bit of an introduction to the kind of men I grew up around. I'm going to have to go back a bit further in time for the women, because I came across a story recently which really answered a lot of questions for me about the way I think, and the way the women in my family live their lives. It all started when the Winstones got turned down by the BBC TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Now, I like that programme – I get right into it (although I have seen some boring ones) – but the first time they asked, I didn't really want to do it. I enjoy watching them go through other people's ancestors' dirty laundry, but when it came to mine, I just didn't really want to know. That's all in the past, and it's the future you want to be thinking about. They kept coming back to me, though, and in the end I thought, 'Do you know what? Maybe it would be good to find out a few things.'

I knew I had a great-uncle Frank – my granddad's brother on my mum's side – who played centre-forward for West Ham. He was at Reading first, and then he moved to West Ham in 1923, the year they got to their first Wembley final. Maybe if they'd bought him before the big game instead of just after it, they might actually have won. As it happens, they got beat, and my great-uncle Frank was a kind of consolation prize, but still, I thought that might be a good starting point.

Unfortunately, it seems that on the show they stick to the direct bloodline, i.e. parents and children only, so an uncle can't be the story, or at least that's what they told me. And after giving due consideration to the mountain of material that their researchers had unearthed, they had come to the conclusion that the various roots and branches of the Winstone family tree were just too fucking boring to make a show out of. They were lovely about it – 'Sorry, Ray, but there's nothing in here we can use' – and I did get the giggles on the phone. That can't have been an easy call to make: 'Listen, Fatboy, there's just nothing interesting about you or your family.'

It's funny looking back, but I was quite depressed about it for a while – not depressed so I wanted to kill myself, just a bit disappointed and choked up. But then I sat down and went through some of the stuff they'd dug up, and I actually got really enlightened by it.

The one thing that did come out of *Who Do You Think You Are?* was that both branches of my family had been East Londoners for as far back as they could trace. Right the way back to the 1700s my mum's side came from Manor Park/East Ham and my dad's from Hoxton and the borders of the City.

OK, my family never changed the world. They never invented penicillin or found the Northwest Passage or won a VC at the Siege of Mafeking. They were basically just people who sometimes fell on hard times and ended up in the poorhouse for a couple of weeks – or longer. But there was one extraordinary thing about them, as there is about any family that's still around today, and this was that they survived. On top of that, it turned out we did have one story worth telling after all, because some time afterwards the same TV company came back to me and said they were making another show that they did want me to be a part of. The subject? There's a thick ear for anyone who's guessed it: asylums.

The researchers had discovered that my great-great-grandmother (on my dad's side) was originally married to a Merchant Navy man called James Stratton, who ended up in the old Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum at Friern Barnet. That was somewhere I'd end up too a century and a bit later, albeit for slightly different reasons – I was shooting the movie version of *Scum* – but poor old seaman Stratton had got syphilis.

I didn't find out until we were researching the programme – they like the historians and other experts to break the news to you as you're going along, so they can catch you looking surprised – just how rife syphilis was in Victorian London. Even before that, going back to Hogarth's time in the eighteenth century, all those wigs they were wearing in his paintings weren't just fashion accessories, they were there to cover the fucking scars.

One strange thing that happened was that at one point it actually became fashionable to be syphilitic, so people would wear false noses and ears to make it look like they had it when they didn't. Wearing a false nose to show you were a proper geezer – how nutty was that? No crazier than covering yourself in tattoos or having plastic surgery you don't medically need, I suppose.

As far as the unfortunate Mr Stratton was concerned, they thought he'd probably picked the syphilis up in the Navy, before he was married, but then he might have had a dabble again, because the sixth of his eight children was born with it too. Either way, he died a terrible death, leaving my great-great-grandmother alone with all those kids, and no real means of support – visible or invisible.

At this point in the story, the odds must've been on her drifting into prostitution. That's certainly what I thought was going to happen. Because all these events were unfolding around Whitechapel, and the name she went by at the time, Hannah Stratton, had a



familiar ring to it – like Mary Kelly or one of those other tragic victims – in my head we were heading towards Jack the Ripper territory. Obviously the programme-makers don't tell you what's going to happen because they want you to cry. In fact, they want that so badly they're practically standing behind the camera with a big bowl of freshly chopped onions.

They'd taken me to Christ Church, Spitalfields, the big white church opposite the market my dad used to take me to as a kid when he was in the fruit and veg game. I didn't remember ever having been inside before – me and my family not being churchy kind of people, and in any case it was boarded up and virtually derelict for most of the sixties and seventies – but it looks amazing now it's all been restored. So I'm standing there in this beautiful place, waiting for the bad news about Hannah getting gruesomely done in by the Ripper, and then they tell me that it was in this church that she married her second husband.

It turned out that Stratton wasn't actually my great-great-grandfather at all, because Hannah managed to marry again within a year of his death. She would probably have been ostracised at first because of the syphilis, and could easily have headed for the nearest gin palace and ended up in the gutter somewhere, but instead she thought, 'Fuck it, I'm fighting for my kids.' So she stood her ground and her neighbours rallied round to help her – which was incredible in itself, because that kind of thing doesn't happen so much today, at least not in cities, where no one tends to know who the people living next door to them are any more.

After Hannah remarried and became Mrs Durham, she and her new husband lived round the corner from Christ Church – for a while, and then moved to West Hackney. Her syphilis became dormant and she had more kids, so that was when my granddad's

father was born. Her second husband had only been twenty-seven when they married – effectively a toyboy, and she never marked his card about exactly how old she was. So, while he thought she eventually died at the ripe old age of sixty-one, it was probably a good bit riper than that.

You couldn't blame her for dangling the carrot a bit, though, given that she had kids to look after. And if she hadn't done it, I wouldn't be here today, so it was a happy ending for me as well. (And for the programme-makers, because Hannah's story did make me cry. It broke my heart, to be honest, but it also made me very proud of her, and glad I'd done the show as now I can pass the story on down through my family to make sure she's not forgotten.)

All in all, Hannah Durham was an amazing old girl, and I could see a lot of the characteristics of my sister Laura and my auntie Irene, my dad's sister, in her. Not that either of them have ever had syphilis, but I've got a lot of strong women in my family. Obviously my mum's is a different line, but it's the same on her side as well. We'll get to my maternal grandma and her three husbands in the next chapter . . .

In the meantime, the long and the short of it is that the men in my family seem to like marrying strong women, probably because we need them to keep us in line. But the other thing I realised standing in that old Hawksmoor church – and I know this might sound overly romantic, a bit pony even – was the depth of my family's connection to the area.

My dad was born in Hoxton. You could definitely hear the bells of St Mary-le-Bow on Cheapside from there, so that makes him a proper cockney. And as I've said, the family had been basically there or thereabouts since the 1700s, until his generation started to move away in the late sixties. Yet now, just a few decades later, I've got

cousins in Dunmow, Braintree, Watford, Bushey, but there's none of us left inside the M25: we've all got let out for good behaviour. How and why that change came about, and what it meant to us and to others, is one of the main subjects of this book.

I still think of myself as an East Londoner rather than a Londoner. And as I was driving in to do that filming in Spitalfields from where I live now, out in Essex, I seemed to pass places that had some relevance to mine or my family's lives every few hundred yards from Whipps Cross onwards. None of the actual people are there any more, but that doesn't make the memories any less vivid. It might even bring them through more strongly – after all, you don't need to remember things that are still happening.

We were a big old tribe, and when I was a kid we used to have a big get-together more or less every Sunday, but now we're much more dispersed, and the unit has kind of contracted much more to immediate family. My cousins all keep in touch, but I've been guilty of letting that go a bit in recent years. The way people perceive you is part of it as well. You start living in a bigger house and they'll tell you, 'Oh, we went past yours the other day', so you'll say, 'Well, why didn't you fucking knock on the door?' But if the door's behind a security gate, then the fact that they don't knock on it is as much your fault as anyone else's, isn't it?

Looking back now, I can clearly see the staging posts by which the old closeness started to leave us. When my mum and dad brought me back from Hackney Hospital in the winter of 1957 (the building's still there, up on Homerton High Street – I think it was the tall Victorian-looking wing to the east, not the lower section where the entrance is – but last time I looked they'd turned it into a nuthouse in my honour), they didn't have a home of their own yet. From what I've gathered, there was never any question but that the three of us

would stay in the flat in Shore Place with my dad's parents for a little while after my birth.

At a time when families would generally stay in the same place, nans and granddads were the nucleus of everything – everyone else would circulate around them. Now they just tend to get left where they are when everyone moves away, and then you see 'em when you can. It's no wonder they get a bit grumpy. I feel lucky to have grown up at the tail-end of the old way of doing things, because the world of my childhood could not have wished for a better focus than my granddad Charles – Toffy they called him, I suppose because he was a bit of a toff – and Nanny Maud.

He was a real one-off, my grandfather; an old-fashioned gentleman. I'm sure a lot of people say that about their grandparents, but in this case it was definitely true. Toffy was a short, wiry man who always dressed immaculately and never forgot to lift his hat to the ladies as he walked down the road. By all accounts – at least, all accounts of his own – he was the man behind the modernisation of tic-tacking (the complex sign language for communicating book-makers' odds which you used to see John McCririck doing on the telly, until Channel 4 Racing gave him the Spanish – as in Spanish Archer, the El Bow). I think he definitely simplified it, him and another fella . . . there's always another fella.

Nanny Maud was a similarly upright individual. I think she'd run a café as a younger woman, but by the time I came along everyone called her 'The Schoolteacher', because she had a lovely proper way of talking. She wasn't all gorblimey, she was much more 'telephone voice'. Even nowadays, when you meet the really old East London boys and girls, I find they have that almost Dickensian style of speaking which is nothing like how I sound. There's still an accent, but it's all very clipped and correct, and it's a beautiful thing to hear.

I don't have any specific recollections of sharing a home with Toffy and Maud as a child, because we moved out of there when I was about a year old. But some of my happiest early childhood memories are of the days when Maud would take me to the toy shop in Mile End – just by the junction where they've put that silly grass roof over the main road – and buy me Airfix kits, or the Batmobile with a Bat-boat that fired little rockets out the back. And in my teens I'd actually end up living with my granddad for a year, which would turn out to be one of the most influential, as well as the funniest, times in my life.

Hospitals take away as well as giving, and in my early teens Nanny Maud would die in the same place I'd been born. She had a fall and never quite got over it, and I don't think the family could ever forgive Hackney Hospital for the feeling that a bit more could've been done. I was a kid on the cusp of being a young man by that stage, and I remember the sombre, grown-up mood of the family gathering in the Jackdaw & Stump – the pub just along the high street from the hospital – when everyone had come up to visit Nan together after her fall.

We were all worried about her, and at times like that you obviously feel an atmosphere of foreboding in the air, but I don't think any of us realised how big a change was coming. People often think of the granddad as being the head of a family, but I think it's the nan, really. Obviously once she's gone, you still go and see him – and Toffy did a pretty good job of managing by himself, he even got himself a nice girlfriend after a while – but you can see how lost the men in the family are once the maternal mainstay is gone. From then on, there's less and less reason for everyone to get together, and the whole family starts to break up.

It was probably a good job I didn't know all that on the day of her funeral, because I was upset enough already. This was the first loss

I was old enough to really feel properly. I remember being outside the flats where all the flowers were laid out ready to be taken to the cemetery, when I heard some local kid ask ‘Who’s dead?’ quite rudely and I lost the plot. I couldn’t cope with that at all – it seemed very disrespectful – and things went pear-shaped for a few seconds, before I was told in no uncertain terms to keep quiet and have a little bit of dignity about myself.

‘Who’s dead?’ is never the right question to ask, though, is it? If someone says, ‘Who’s passed?’ you can tell they’re making an effort, but ‘Who’s dead?’ is just too brutal. That’s not to say there’s no room for levity when someone’s died. Quite the reverse. I remember it used to be a big event for my dad and his mates – and we still do it today – when someone would say, ‘There’s a bit of underground sports on Thursday.’ What that means is there’s a funeral, and a funeral means a wake, which means a blinding party.

The funny thing about ‘underground sports’ is, it’s OK for us to talk about them, but we’d still reserve the right to take it amiss if someone else did it at the wrong moment. I love that kind of hypocritical cockney morality. That is very much the tradition I was brought up in, like with the old boys off the docks, they’d be telling you some great stories and effing and blinding all the way through (the expression ‘swear like a docker’ doesn’t come from nowhere), but heaven help you if you swore in front of their wife on the bus: ‘Scuse me . . . ’scuse me . . . oi! ’Scuse me! Not in front of the wife.’ I do understand and respect that way of doing things – it’s kind of my way of doing things too, if I’m honest – but it does have its flaws.

## CHAPTER 2

# CAISTOR PARK ROAD, PLAISTOW

When I started writing this book the first thing I did was go back to the street I lived on as a kid. I wanted to have a look around to see if people or incidents I'd forgotten would come flooding back to me. What I couldn't get over was how much smaller everything was than the way I remembered it. Obviously when you're little you're down at hedge and gate level, so the world looks massive to you, but there was more to it than that. Going back to Plaistow now, it feels very quiet and suburban, whereas in my childhood there seemed to be people everywhere, and something was always happening.

Of course at that time – in the late fifties – the London docks were still working at full speed and strength. The southern end of our road wasn't far away from the Royal Victoria and Royal Albert Docks, so a lot of the hustle and bustle of the neighbourhood (not to mention the odd bit of unofficial bounty from shipping crates that had accidentally on purpose fallen open in transit) could be traced back to there.

The docks are long gone now, or at least the idea that anyone would use them for unloading stuff from boats is. But my home from

the age of one to the age of eight – 82 Caistor Park Road, Plaistow – is still very much there, looking more or less unchanged over the intervening half century.

It's a boxy, two-storey house near the end of a terrace. When we first moved in, we lived upstairs while an old lady and her sister kept the ground floor. Then after my sister Laura came along – in February 1959 – the Winstones took over the downstairs as well. There was never a bathroom (I'm assuming they've got one now). We had an outside toilet in the small back garden, and a tin bath would come out in the front room when it was time for a scrub-up.

In my early years my mum had to keep me on reins, because as soon as I saw daylight, I'd be off like a greyhound out of the trap (my eldest girl Lois was the same). But from pretty much the moment Laura and I were old enough to walk around unaided, we played outside in the street all day. There were very few cars about in those times, and we still had a milkman with a horse-drawn cart. He'd come round the corner at a set time every morning, and since all the kids knew he was coming we'd have plenty of time to put bricks in the middle of the road so he'd have to go round them like he was doing a slalom, shouting, 'You little bastards!' as he went.

At the north end of Caistor Park Road was, and is, the main drag down to Stratford, and beyond that thoroughfare stretches the wide open space of West Ham Park, which is still a lovely bit of grass to have a walk around. Returning to the area now, I can see that the houses at the top of the road tend to be much better finished off, whereas our bit is more of a khazi. Don't go down my end – it's a shithole.

I don't recall it being that way when I was a kid, but then again, in my memories the sun has always got his hat on. Even though my rational mind knows Londoners were still afflicted by deadly



pea-souper fogs at that time, all I can remember is clear skies and long days of unbroken sunshine.

In my mind, Plaistow in the early sixties is like one of those adverts filmed in New York where it's a hot day and someone knocks the top of the fire hydrant off, except done the English way – with a hosepipe. Over the years you do colour your memories in a bit (at least, I have done), but I'm going to try and keep them as toned down and close to reality as possible. Obviously you're only going to be seeing things from my point of view, because that's what an autobiography is all about. But I realise there's at least one other side to a lot of these stories – just ask Matthew McConaughey – and if someone's given me another perspective, I'm not going to hold back on it.

For instance, I look back on myself as a little boy and I think I was alright, but my aunties always tell me I was a right little fucker. I'll insist I was a nice kid and they'll say, 'No, you were an absolute fucker – always up to something.'

Now that must be true, because it's not the sort of thing they're gonna make up, so I have to start thinking about how they might've got that idea. I do remember there was a little parade of shops round the corner from our house where I used to sing for the greengrocer and he would give me a banana – well, every showbiz career has got to start somewhere, hasn't it? I was still in the pram, so I couldn't have been that old, but one day I sang for him and he didn't give me one and I told him to fuck off. My mum would laugh telling me that story years later, but she was embarrassed at the time because she very rarely swore, so wherever I'd picked that word up from, it hadn't been from her. And 'No, you'll have no banana' was my first bad review. There've been a few more since . . .

In Plaistow in the fifties and sixties, there used to be a shop on every corner, and the one change to my immediate childhood

surroundings which I really couldn't get my head round when I went back on my fact-finding mission was that the old corner shop is now just a normal house. The shopkeeper's name was Mr Custard, which was obviously a gift to us as kids. He had a big shock of unruly white hair and looked a bit like Mr Pastry. We used to terrorise him, going in there and shouting 'Cowardy, cowardy Custard, can't eat mustard!' You know what kids are like. I feel quite sorry for him now, as he was probably a nice old boy.

A lot of good people lived on Caistor Park Road. A couple of doors up from us was a girl called Sylvie who lived with her mum – I don't remember a dad, and there might not have been one. She must have been in her mid-teens and she used to babysit for us and take me up the park. One day, before my sister was born, she was pushing me to the swings in my stroller when a geezer jumped out in front of us and flashed her. I was only a baby, so I don't seem to have accrued any deep psychological scars, but when my parents told me the story they were still really impressed that she hadn't just fucked off and left me. She was a lovely girl, Sylvie, and it was very sad that a few years later she committed suicide. I always hoped it wasn't what happened in the park that day that upset her.

Everyone living on Caistor Park Road knew everyone else, and all the stuff you always hear about windows being left open and it being OK to leave a key hanging behind the door was still true. There was even an old girl living on her own over the way who my mum used to cook dinner for. She had no connection with our family, other than that she lived near us. I know this sounds corny, but people looked after people. They really did. Every time you went out of the house in the morning you'd see women doing their steps and their windows. I know that sounds a bit chauvinistic now, but how can it be a bad thing for people to have taken pride in themselves and in their community?

Our home was always spotless, inside and out. My mum made sure everything was in its place and everything was done properly. She'd learnt that from her mother, who was not a woman to be trifled with.

My nan on my mum's side was called Dolly Richardson, but she was always Nanny Rich to me. We called her Nanny Rich because she was . . . rich. By the time I was born, she owned a fair bit of property in the Plaistow, Manor Park and Forest Gate areas, and I think it was down to her that we ended up living where we did. She was a furrier by trade – not a farrier shoeing horses, a furrier making coats – and she'd done well enough to move out of East London to Shoeburyness, just along the Essex Riviera from Southend, after the war. There are a few fur coats left in the family somewhere, but obviously you can't wear 'em any more because someone will throw paint over you. I presume there must have been a few quid poking around when Nanny Rich – God rest her soul – eventually went away in the early eighties, but I never saw any of it.

Nanny Rich was married three times – once more than old Hannah Durham – and she outlived all of her husbands. We'd started to look at her in a different way by the end. Her short-lived first husband, my auntie Olive's father, wasn't my grandfather. That was Husband Number Two. My mum's dad was Mr Richardson (no relation to the notorious South London clan), but he died before I was old enough to really get to know him. By all accounts he was a very tall man, and the only one in the family who ever fought in the First World War. True to form for my family he came out of it in one piece, but it's possible his death in the late fifties may have been caused by the lingering effects of mustard gas forty years before. I remember being in bed one night and hearing my mum distressed and crying, but not really knowing why he'd died or what that meant.

My nan's last husband, Reg Hallett, who she married after a decent interval, was a terrific old boy. I had a lot of time for him. Reg was a mason – a very well-to-do man from Shoeburyness, which sounds like an Ian Dury song. I think he worked in Churchill's Treasury during the war. When I got a bit older he used to beg me to become a mason too, but I wasn't having it.

Whoever she ended up marrying, mason or otherwise, Nanny Rich never stopped being her own boss. I believe she made fur coats for the Royal Family, although that is the sort of thing that sometimes gets said without too much evidence to back it up. She definitely made them for Donald Campbell, though – the Bluebird man who held the land and water speed records simultaneously and died in that terrible crash on Coniston Water – which is no less impressive in a way, as Campbell was renowned for enjoying the good things in life, and no doubt knew a nice bit of fur when he saw it.

This is probably as good a moment as any to tell the story of my childhood brush with another snappy dresser: Ronnie Kray. I think how my dad knew the twins was that when they were kids they'd all boxed at the New Lansdowne, a club on Mare Street in Hackney which my granddad Toffy was on the board of. Reg and Ron were actually pretty good boxers before other more nefarious activities began to take precedence.

I was still a baby the day Ronnie Kray came round to Caistor Park Road to see my dad, but I've been told this story so many times that I can see it unfolding in my head. Obviously everyone's on their best behaviour, but then Ronnie picks me up, and by all accounts I've pissed all over him. He's got a new Mac on, which has probably cost a few bob, and I've absolutely covered it. Everyone's laughing. Well, not at first. At first they're all thinking, 'Fucking hell, he's pissed on

Ronnie Kray!’ But then Ronnie cracks up, so everyone else knows it’s safe to join in.

Cups of tea get drunk, and him and my dad have a talk about whatever it is they need to talk about, and then everyone breathes a sigh of relief when Ronnie leaves. The Kray brothers hadn’t yet reached the peak of their notoriety by that time, but people still knew who they were. The funny thing was that earlier on the same day my dad had got in a row with a bloke who lived up the road, and after Ronnie fucked off to get his coat dry-cleaned, this guy came round going, ‘Look, we’ve only had an argument – there’s no need to bring them into it.’ Obviously there was no way my dad would ever have done that. If he needed to have a fight with a bloke up the road, he was quite capable of doing that on his own initiative, without calling in the Krays for back-up.

Readers are entitled to a measure of curiosity about what mutually advantageous business Ron and Ray might have been discussing. There was a time while I was still very young when my dad was possibly up to all sorts, with or without Ron and Reg, but I think something happened that he didn’t like when he was out with them in Walthamstow once. He only told me this years later – and even then in quite a cryptic, Edwardian kind of way – but I think my dad saw someone get stabbed, fairly brutally, and he just thought it was unnecessary. When is that kind of violence ever anything else? But for my dad I think that was the moment he thought, ‘Not only is this wrong, but also it ain’t for me.’

He wasn’t going to be joining the Salvation Army any time soon, but from the time I was old enough to remember, he was mostly working on the markets. Not only my dad’s two brothers but also most of his friends seemed to work in either the meat market, the fish market or the fruit market, so we never went hungry. My dad

started off on the meat at Smithfield Market, but then moved to fruit and veg. Either he got caught nicking something, or they were trying to guarantee the family a balanced diet (given that his brother Kenny already had a butcher's).

There was a fair bit of ducking and diving going on in those days. It still wasn't long since the end of the war, and people needed a bit of a lift – especially as even though we'd won, we seemed to be rebuilding places like Berlin and Munich (which had admittedly been smashed to pieces) before we got started on our own cities. At that time people reckoned that the best job was the bread round, because you'd get your wage and pay your little bit of tax – whatever that was at the time – but you'd also have your own bread. That was your bunce. It was allowed. The company knew it went on but turned a blind eye, and the bread-man lived a good life.

It was the same on the docks, where a few of my dad's friends who didn't work on the markets seemed to earn a crust. There they even had a name for it: 'spillage'. A box would get dropped, and whatever the contents were, the people working there were allowed to keep. I suppose that kind of thing would be looked upon as theft today, but I prefer to think of it as 'garnish' – that little something extra which meant we didn't go hungry and always had a shirt on our back and shoes on our feet.

My dad's eldest brother Charlie was doing a little bit better than that. He'd got a job in the print when he was younger. Those jobs were so well paid that what they used to do was sub them out – some geezer would give you half his wage if you let him take over from you, and that gave you money to go and do something else. Charlie went on to own his own factory which upholstered settees. He was very generous and would always give us a ten-bob note every time we saw him. He usually had nice cars as well – often those big old

Rovers that look like Bristols – and he'd let my dad borrow them sometimes if we were going somewhere nice.

I think Maud and Toffy might've lost as many as three kids (ages ranging from infant to young child, and at least one of them to whooping cough, which was rife at the time) to leave them with just the three boys and my auntie Irene. That was the main reason people had bigger families in those days – to cover themselves, because you were probably going to lose a few.

Laura and I had plenty of other 'uncles' who weren't genetically our uncles to make up the numbers. A lot of them worked in the fish market at Billingsgate, like Frankie Tovey, who was a Catholic, and Ronnie Jacobs, who was Jewish. We were Church of England, but people's religious denomination was something you only tended to find out about later in life. Like with my best mate Tony Yeates: even though we basically grew up together from my mid-teens onwards, I only found out he was a Catholic when he got married. No one ever knew, and I think London's always been a bit like that. It's one of the great things about it in a way. Basically, who gives a fuck?

It was the same with my dad's mate Lenny Appleton – 'Apples' everyone called him – who was gay. He was a terrific guy, always immaculately turned out, and all the girls loved him, but no one ever worried about who he was having sex with. I'm talking about a load of hairy-arsed geezers here who didn't give a fuck for anyone. They were the chaps – out pulling birds and doing what they were doing – and what Lenny got up to on his own time just wasn't a problem for them. When someone's your mate, they're your mate, and that's all there is to it.

I found out some interesting things about the situation with homosexuality in old London – and sexuality in general – when I was making that TV show about Hannah Durham. It turned out that

people in those times were much less prudish than we tend to think of them as being, and than we are now. It was only towards the end of the Victorian era that everyone started to get more buttoned up.

In terms of public life, everything was still pretty much under wraps by the fifties, but looking back at the way Apples was accepted by my dad and his mates, it gives you a fresh perspective on people who weren't necessarily highly educated. They weren't moving in the supposedly enlightened circles of the art or literary worlds. These were geezers who worked in markets and had their own street education and would often be presented as quite brutal – shouting 'Fucking poof' at Quentin Crisp in TV dramas or whatever – so it's quite refreshing to realise that they weren't always like that. In fact, it was a shame the people who actually had power in the country weren't as tolerant as my dad and his mates. People who come from where I come from don't get to make the laws, we just get to break them.

There was a tradition on my dad's side of our family of naming eldest sons after their father, so my uncle Charlie's son got called Charlie-boy. My dad – as those of you who are on the ball will already have noticed – was Ray, so a lot of my relatives used to (and still do sometimes) call me 'Ray-Ray' to differentiate between us. When I got a bit older, my dad's mates also used to know me as 'Little Sugs', because his nickname was 'Sugar', in honour of the great Sugar Ray Robinson.

There were signs from very early on that I was going to carry on the family's pugilistic tradition. The nursery school I went to was up on the main road on the way to Stratford. I got suspended from it once for having a fight with another kid on a climbing frame. It was only a skirmish, and I don't think I was a generally disruptive presence, although you probably won't be surprised to hear that this was



not to be the last educational establishment I would be suspended or expelled from.

I loved that place, though. They used to get us all to lie down and have a kip in the afternoon, and you didn't just get free milk in a little bottle, you got orange juice as well. The only other thing I remember really clearly was that every kid was allocated their own special decorated peg for putting your coat on, and mine was a camel – probably because I always had the hump.