BLOOD ON FIRE

When you step in that ring,
it all goes quiet.

The minute you put your foot
to canvas,
    you're all alone.
No one can save you,
    but you.

It's proper powerful.

It's like, even though
    you're gonna
    get punched,
nothing can hurt you.

    You're
    invincible.

    You're
    free.

    You're
    blood on
    fire.

The devil, God
and all his angels
can't get you there,
let alone the world.

It all just fizzes away
and, for once, life seems
    fair.
It's just you and them,

A BOXER IS BORN

NOWADAYS

It's Friday evening, the day before my first ever competitive fight – the under-sixteen's East London tournament. Denny's been prepping me solid. I should be on top form, but I ain't. I know it and Denny does too.

'Molly, for Christ's sake, put your back into it,' Denny says with proper angry, stupid eyes. 'Your fight is tomorrow night. Focus!'

I look to the other side of the ring. Frank, Denny's coach, is stood bogging at us. *What is his problem?*

I jab,
one-two,
one-two.

Denny glares back. Frank yanks his hat off, shakes his head, storms into his office, slams the door. Denny huffs.

'Straighten those wrists. Come on, Molly!'

I narrow my eyes.
One-two,
one-two.

A voice inside me whispers,

You can't do it.

You're going to lose.

You'll look like an idiot.

I can't shut it up.

'Focus! Dig deep. Where's the fire in your belly?'

Denny's voice rings through me till I feel fire burning inside me. He's never this hard on me. Never this mean. I hate letting him down.

I square up.
Try again.
One-two,
one-two.
I

S
T
U
M
B
L
E.

'Ah, sod this, I'm going for a fag.'

His voice venom. Doesn't sound like my Denny.

I whack the punchbag. 'Fine. I don't need you anyway.'

Denny slams the door. I feel the other boxers' eyes piercing into me. All of them in their designer boxing gear and me in my supermarket-bought trainers. They must think I'm a joke. *I* think I'm a joke.

Them voices come again.

They're laughing at you.
Low . . . life . . . wannabe.

I clench my teeth, steady my weight, punch hard.

One for Denny –
two for him being a massive git.

One for being born on an estate –
two cos I'm never getting out of this dump.

One for *you can't do it* –
two for . . .

WHAT THE . . .?

I slip carefully into the front room.
Mum's sitting on the settee, smoking a fag.
Staring.
Like she ain't even there.
I don't know what to do.
So I sort of hover, feeling like a tool.

Thoughts buzz round me.
Denny wouldn't do that.
. . . Would he?
Nah,
he's a good guy.

But then, he did miss my fight.
And I had to admit,
that was odd.

I tiptoe back to my room.

Break into Mr Weaver's internet,
cos we can't afford our own.

Send a bunch of WhatsApps,
my fingers sprinting
across my phone.



Maybe I should look up more about this blimmin' crime Denny's meant to have done. I'm so desperate. I type in the name of the bloke who was found beaten: *Harry Wi–*

Delete, delete, delete, delete, delete, delete . . . finger hovers . . . nah, delete.

I'm too scared about what I'm going to find.

I climb back into bed. Feel cold as hell, even though the heating is on full blast. Even the heaviness of my duvet doesn't take away this deep dark feeling inside my tummy. All I feel is empty.

'I'm sorry, Denny,' I say. Cos something in me makes me feel like all my anger made him go missing, made the Old Bill turn up. After all, I did say those nasty words about him. I did say, *'I don't care if he never comes back again.'*

I've got the day off school. Mum said it was better and, to be honest, it is, cos I don't wanna go anywhere in case Denny comes back. And God knows what people would be saying at school. I've spent all day checking my phone, rung him a thousand times. Every time I've looked at my messages, a spark of hope's bubbled in my belly, but I ain't even got a blue tick, never mind an answer.

Morning turns to day.

I overhear Dad crying
in the bathroom.
The sob sob sobbing
leaves a sick giddy feeling
all over me.

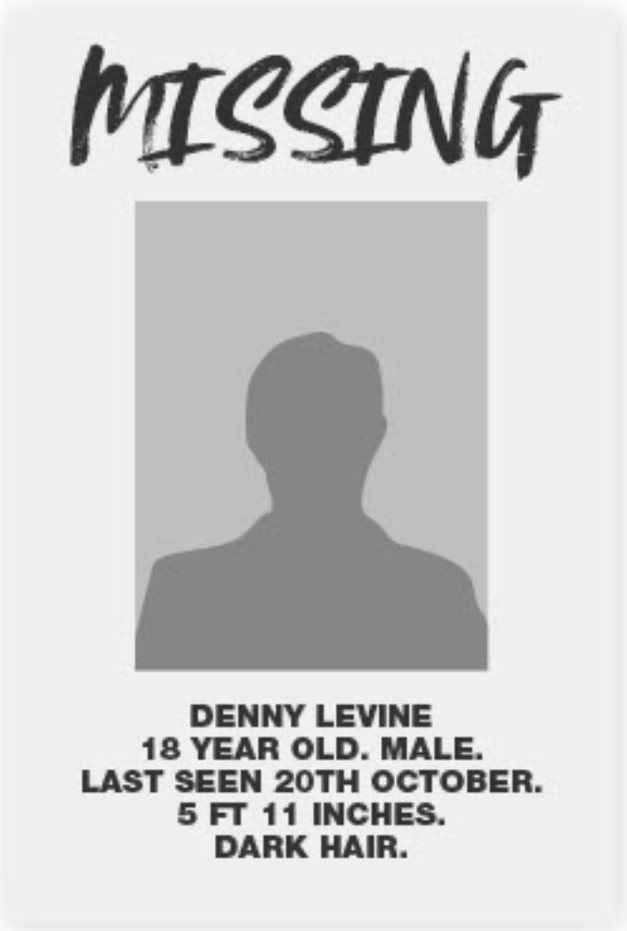
The police are back,
getting narky with Mum,
like she knows something
and is hiding Denny.

Even if she is,
even if Denny's done in
ten people . . .

Nobody round our way's a grass.

WAITING

I wait.
Wait for Denny to answer.
Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait.
Wait – tick, wait – tock. Wait – tick, wait – tock. Wait – tick, wait – tock.
Waiting is nothing but time chucked away.
Click refresh.
Click refresh.
I wait.
I wait.
I wait.



POSTERS

We're handing out posters.

I dream.

Imagine
Denny reading one
and laughing at us
for overreacting.

Then

coming right through the door.

His cheeky grin.

Dimples,
like Granddad's.

Saying,
'Put the kettle on, Molls,
I'm parched.'

But he doesn't
and he isn't.
Or he won't.
Or can't?

I dunno.
It's too confusing.

And now
I'm getting
proper
scared.