

The Passage East

Anil Nijhawan

Chapter 1

London 1927

What Damon was seeing from the steps of the watchmaker's shop was a boy in a shocking red jumper sitting in the middle of the lane with his legs folded beneath him, and his face buried in his knees. Standing over him was a woman in a white coat, begging him to come away from the road.

Damon came down the steps to see what was going on.

'Your friend, is he?' the coal merchant shouted at Damon from his dray and snapped the rein, 'Git him outta here.'

Damon shook his head. 'Not my friend,' he said and went closer still, walking around an omnibus that had halted just a few feet short, its engine growling in anger, and the passengers gawking out the window.

The woman saw Damon looking and asked for his help. 'He won't come home. Can you talk to him?'

'Hey, what's up?' Damon said to the boy and extended his hand.

The boy pushed his head back down between his legs.

The woman threw her hands up. 'All right, you win,' she said, exasperated, 'I'll speak to your father. Now come home, p-l-e-a-s-e.'

The boy looked up askance, as if to see if she meant it.

‘Yes. I will.’

The boy got up onto his feet, grudgingly.

She prodded him on the back. ‘Now get out of the way of the bus,’ she said, and turned to Damon. ‘Thank you so, so much.’

Damon shrugged, said it was nothing, and started walking away.

‘Where do you live?’ the woman asked.

‘Just up the road,’ he replied.

‘Come over for a cup of tea.’

Damon didn’t see the point of going, and he hadn’t particularly liked the boy, who he thought was showing traits of a bully. ‘Thank you, madam, but I must be getting home now,’ he said.

‘But I insist,’ she said, ‘come for a cup of tea and cake. Robert will like that too.’

So, his name is Robert. The other Robert, whom he knew in the class, was a drag. He was forever showing off his fancy collection of Beano and Dandy. No one liked him, yet he seemed unaware of it, which grated Damon even more.

The home was a short walk away. They guided him through the kitchen to a back room.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked.

‘Damon.’

‘And what’s your family name, Damon?’

‘Finnegan.’

‘Oh, the Finnegan,’ she said aloud as if she wanted the neighbours to hear. ‘Sit down while I make the tea. Robert, keep your friend company.’

Damon looked around him. Leaning against a bookcase was a full-sized cricket bat. Too large for Robert to handle, probably belongs to his

father, he thought. On the floor lay a satchel with schoolbooks spilling out. He spotted a Beano and immediately wished he had declined the invitation to tea.

Robert picked up a rugby ball from the floor and held it up for Damon to see.

So, he's showing off his favourite toy, or is it the name scribbled on it he wants me to marvel at? It said: Robert Fletcher.

'I play rugby,' Robert said, 'do you?'

'No, but I like to watch. It's my absolute favourite sport.'

'I'm in the school team. I'll be the captain very soon.'

The stocky build and the excited tone of his voice convinced Damon he was telling the truth.

'Catch,' Robert said and threw the ball at Damon.

Damon put his hands out and fumbled cackhandedly. The ball fell on the floor. He giggled, making out he would have caught it if given enough notice.

Robert scooped the ball up. 'How old are you?' he asked.

'I'm thirteen. And you?'

Robert made a surprised face. 'I'm also thirteen.'

'Were you born in April too?' Damon said.

Robert's wide-open eyes stretched to the limit. 'Yes, April.'

The boys looked at each other's faces keenly, as if they were seeing mirror images of themselves, and it wasn't so bad.

'What were you doing sitting in the middle of the road?' Damon asked.

'They are forcing me to go to a boarding school,' Robert replied.

'You don't want to go?'

'No. I like it here,' Robert said, shaking his bulky shoulders. 'Do you want to go for a walk?'

‘Yes, why not?’

They walked out through the front door without informing Robert’s mother.

‘Which school do you go to?’ Robert asked.

‘St Joseph.’ Damon replied, making a face. ‘It’s a dump.’

‘I’m at Islington Boys.’

They saw the Hare and Hounds pub and went inside on impulse.

‘Out, out, out.’ Miss Hardy yelled from behind the bar. ‘You boys are too young to come in here.’

‘She’s a nympho,’ Robert said on the way out.

Damon chuckled. ‘It’s hard to imagine her doing anything sexy with anyone.’

‘Oh, yes, she is. I know.’

‘How do you know?’

‘My friend told me. He has seen her kissy-kissy David from the post office.’