



Neutral Citation Number: [2023] EWHC 1940 (KB)

Case No: QB-2022-002500

IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE
KING'S BENCH DIVISION
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS LIST

Royal Courts of Justice
Strand, London, WC2A 2LL

Date: 27/07/2023

Before :

THE HONOURABLE MRS JUSTICE TIPPLES DBE

Between :

Denver Dorsetra Adams

Claimant

- and -

Associated Newspapers Limited

Defendant

Robert Sterling (instructed by **Carruthers Law**) for the **Claimant**
Alexandra Marzec (instructed by **ACK Media Law LLP**) for the **Defendant**

Hearing date: 23rd May 2023

Approved Judgment

This judgment was handed down remotely by circulation to the parties or their representatives by e-mail and by release to the National Archives and publication on the Courts and Tribunals Judiciary website.

The date and time for hand-down is deemed to be 27 July 2023 at 10am.

The Honourable Mrs Justice Tipples DBE:

Introduction

1. This is a libel action which arises out of the publication of three articles on 8 August 2021. The first article was published in ‘You’ Magazine and had the title “‘I want to be honest ... about everything’ Nicola Adams The Olympic champ turned *Strictly* star on the bitter family rift that’s broken her heart” (“**the first article**”); the second article was published on the You website and had the title “Nicola Adams: ‘the boxing ring was less dangerous than home’”; and the third article was published on the Mail Online website and had the title “Nicola Adams: Now I know what an upbringing should be like, I know how bad it was for me growing up”.
2. The parties agree that there is no difference in meaning between the three articles, even though there is a slight variation in the headings. The first article is set out in the Annex to this judgment with paragraph numbers having been added in square brackets.
3. The defendant is the publisher of ‘The Mail on Sunday’, which includes a separate colour magazine called ‘You’, and is also the operator of two websites www.dailymail.co.uk and www.you.co.uk. There is no dispute that these are publications which are widely read.
4. On 4 August 2022 the claim form was issued seeking damages, an injunction and costs.
5. The claimant describes herself as “a highly respected individual, particularly in the area of Leeds where she has resided for many years. She is also well-known as the mother of double Olympic gold medal boxing champion, Nicola Adams”. The claimant alleges that, at all material times, she has enjoyed an unblemished reputation.
6. The claimant’s case is that the words in each of three articles, in their natural and ordinary meaning, meant and were understood to mean that:

“After a childhood, where because of her upbringing she suffered poverty and neglect and even had to steal food and on one occasion because of neglect by her mother Dee Adams was close to being put into care by Social Services, and where her father was physically violent to all the family, Nicola Adams, the double gold medal Olympic champion, has had a new and quite shocking fallout with her mother Dee, caused by drunken, insulting and hurtful texting by Dee to her, often throughout the evening. These texts are so abusive that Dee has perpetuated the physical violence Nicola has suffered at the hands of her father and ruined the relationship between her and Nicola. Dee’s misconduct has caused Nicola such loneliness and isolation that she has only now begun to recover and to be in a better place through her relationships with Ella Baig and friends.”
7. On 10 February 2023 Master Sullivan made an order by consent for the trial of the following preliminary issues, namely:
 - a. the defamatory meaning or meanings of the words complained of in paragraph 10 of the Particulars of Claim (“the words complained of”), in their proper context;

- b. whether the words complained of, in the meaning(s) determined by the Court, are defamatory of the claimant at common law;
 - c. whether the words complained of, in the meaning(s) determined by the Court, are statements of fact or expressions of opinion; and
 - d. if the answer to 1(c) is yes in relation to any or all of the meanings determined, whether those words indicated, in general or specific terms, the basis of the opinion(s) stated.
8. On 22 May 2023 the defendant served an amended notice of its case on meaning. It takes issue with the claimant’s meaning, and maintains that in its natural and ordinary meaning the first article meant and was understood to mean that:

“the Claimant had sent her daughter Nicola Adams insulting, abusive and hurtful messages, and this behaviour has (in Nicola Adams’s view) perpetuated the abuse Nicola suffered at the hands of her father during her childhood.”

The defendant contends that the natural and ordinary meaning of the second and third articles is the same.
9. The defendant maintains that this meaning is defamatory of the claimant at common law and therefore, to the extent that each of the articles bears the meaning identified (and no further), the words complained of are defamatory at common law. Further:
 - a. the first part of the meaning set out in paragraph 8 above, namely the words, “The Claimant had sent her daughter Nicola Adams insulting and abusive messages”, is a statement of fact.
 - b. the second part of the meaning set out in paragraph 8 above, namely the words, “this behaviour has (in Nicola Adams’s view) perpetuated the abuse she and the Claimant suffered at the hands of her father”, is an expression of opinion.
10. The defendant further maintains that the words of each article indicated the basis of the opinion stated. The basis of the opinion were the following matters, set out in each article: (a) during her childhood Nicola Adams’ father had violently abused her mother and she (Nicola) had witnessed that abuse; (b) her father had also used violence against her (Nicola); (c) Nicola had suffered emotional distress as a result of her father’s abuse; (d) her mother’s recent messaging has damaged Nicola and the claimant’s relationship.
11. The trial of the preliminary issues took place on 23 May 2023.
12. This judgment concerns that trial and only relates to the meaning of the three articles. The defendant has not yet been required to file a defence and so no substantive defences have been raised. The court is not, at this stage, adjudicating on any issue concerning the three articles other than meaning. Specifically, the court is not determining whether allegations made in the articles about the claimant (or anyone else) are true.
13. I read the three articles in advance of the hearing. I did so knowing the identity of the parties to the claim, but I did not know anything else about the claim. I therefore knew the

claimant was complaining, but I did not know what she was complaining about. Further, I read the articles without any reference to the parties' rival contentions or submissions on meaning. That was to capture my initial reaction as a reader and which is, of course, the accepted general practice in a trial of this nature.

Relevant legal principles

14. The relevant legal principles were not in dispute between the parties.
15. The court's task is to determine the single natural and ordinary meaning of the words complained of, which is the meaning that the hypothetical reasonable reader would understand the words to bear.
16. The law to be applied by the Court when determining the single meaning of a publication complained of is now "conveniently distilled" in *Koutsogiannis v The Random House Group Ltd* [2020] 4 WLR 25, Nicklin J ("*Koutsogiannis*") at [11]-[12]: see *Corbyn v Millett* [2021] EMLR 19, CA ("*Corbyn*") at [8]. The law is settled and very well known, and does not need to be repeated. The context of the words and the medium of the publication is all important when assessing meaning: *Stocker v Stocker* [2020] AC 593, SC at [40]. The court is free to choose the correct meaning: it is not bound by the meanings advanced by the parties (save that it cannot find a meaning that is more injurious than the claimant's pleaded meaning): *Koutsogiannis* at [12(iii)].
17. The principles for the determination of fact/opinion are also well established: see Nicklin J's summary in *Koutsogiannis* at [16] and, more recently, *Triplark Limited v Northwood Hall (Freehold) Limited*, per Warby J ("*Triplark*") at [14] to [18]. In *Triplark* Warby J explained:

"[15.] ... The first requirement is that the words should be recognisable as opinion. Opinion has been defined as "something which is or can reasonably be inferred to be a deduction, inference, conclusion, criticism, remark, observation etc". It is common ground that the test is an objective one and that, as with meaning, the ultimate determinant is how the words would strike the ordinary reasonable reader: see *Butt* [39] (Sharp LJ).

[17.] ... Although an inference may amount to a statement of opinion, the bare statement of an inference, without reference to the facts on which it is based, may well appear as a statement of fact: see *Kemsley v Foot* [1952] AC 345. As Sharp LJ DBE, pointed out in *Butt* at [37], not every inference counts as an opinion; context is all. Put simply, the more clearly a statement indicates that it is based on some extraneous material, the more likely it is to strike the reader as an expression of opinion."

Impression

18. The impression I formed of the first article when I read it was as follows. It tells the story of Nicola Adams' life in the context of a new Amazon documentary about her called 'Lioness'. The reader is told about her background, what got her into boxing in the first place (being dropped off at a boxing club, when her mother could not find a babysitter), and her well known success winning gold medals in the Olympics. It tells the story of Nicola Adams' tough upbringing on a housing estate in Leeds; the domestic violence she

and her mother suffered at the hands of her father; and how her mother ended up in hospital with meningitis, which meant she had to care for her younger brother; and how the local community rallied round so she and her brother did not end up in care. The reader is told of the happiness in Nicola Adams' life now with her partner Ella Baig, her desire for children, and that she has turned her hand to acting having left the boxing ring. The article also tells the reader about Nicola Adams' sadness that, having been so close to her mother, that is no longer the case and that she has fallen out with her mother. This is because her mother sends her drunken abusive texts, and that the abuse she suffered at the hands of her father, is now perpetrated by her mother in a different form. The article concludes by telling the reader that Nicola Adams has happiness, however, with her partner and friends.

19. The impression I formed of the second and third articles was the same.

Meaning

20. It was common ground that the words complained of mean that the texts and messages sent by the claimant to Nicola Adams were abusive, insulting and hurtful, and that is a statement of fact which is defamatory of the claimant at common law.

21. Beyond that, the parties' submissions are set out below.

The claimant's submissions

22. Mr Sterling for the claimant, in his oral submissions, referred to how he said the article was structured. He submitted there were two major themes. First, danger and violence in the home. Second, Nicola's bad upbringing. He said he wished to rely on that structure as it shows that the references to the claimant sending abusive text messages were interwoven with, or interlinked with, references to Nicola's background.

23. The claimant submitted that the words complained of mean that the texts sent by the claimant to her daughter were a continuation or perpetuation of the violent abuse Nicola Adams suffered at the hands of her father. The claimant again referred to the themes of violence and danger in the article, and the number of times violence by Nicola's father, Innocent Adams, is referred to or described: see paragraphs 7,13, 15, 17, 18, 20 and 27. The claimant further submitted that the reference to the perpetuation of the abuse (violent or otherwise) is a statement of fact, and not an expression of opinion by Nicola Adams. In support of that the claimant referred to the language of paragraph 27 in which the claimant contended that Nicola Adams merely stated that the claimant was perpetrating the abuse.

24. The claimant submitted that the words complained of also mean that she was responsible for neglectful conduct in her upbringing of Nicola. For example, Nicola Adams is quoted as saying: "We used to steal things because we were hungry. You'd hear stolen cars and whatever going past" (paragraph 10). The claimant maintained the quoted words portray an element of fault, and misconduct on the part of her parents, including the claimant, that Nicola was in a state of poverty and hunger and needed to steal.

25. The claimant also referred to the description in paragraph 24 of her being in hospital when she had meningitis. The claimant maintained that the article fails to mention any attempts she made to care for Nicola and her brother, and there is a strong implication of "abandonment by the claimant to the point that there was a serious risk that there would be

intervention by Social Services resulting in Nicola and her brother being taken away” (see paragraphs 3, 4, 10, 24 and 35 of the article).

26. Finally the claimant submitted that the words complained of also mean that they are drunken texts. This is because, in each article, the texts are described as being drunken and insulting and that abusive texts will start when the claimant has been drinking.
27. The claimant submitted that the imputations in the claimant’s meaning are all defamatory at common law.

The defendant’s submissions

28. Ms Marzec, for the defendant, submitted that the article focusses on Nicola Adams and her heroic story of triumph over extreme adversity. The obstacles and disadvantages she faced as a child are set out vividly in Nicola Adams’ own words, for example in relation to her bad health, growing up in poverty, living with a violent father. The claimant is referred to in this narrative in relation to Nicola Adams’ childhood in a positive way.
29. The defendant accepted that the article included an allegation that, more recently and during Nicola Adams’ adult life, the claimant has sent her daughter abusive texts. This is referred to early in the article (paragraph 7), before being explained more fully later on (paragraphs 26 and 28) after the narrative about Nicola Adams’ childhood. The defendant maintained that, in the context of the article, the claimant’s recent behaviour is a new and surprising twist to the story of the relationship between the claimant and her famous daughter. The rest of the information given about the claimant presents her in a positive light as someone who managed to overcome appalling personal circumstances to bring up an extremely successful child, and maintained a loving and supportive relationship with her. The defendant referred to a number of matters set out at paragraphs 7, 9, 11, 17, 25 and 26 of the article and, in particular, the description of the claimant as Nicola Adams’ mother “and long-time supporter” (paragraph 7) and the fact that the claimant has sent drunken and insulting texts to Nicola Adams was “a new and shocking fallout”, which was a “terrible twist in this tale” (paragraph 26).
30. The defendant says that the most significant difference between the claimant’s meaning (which contains a number discrete imputations) and the defendant’s meaning is that the claimant’s meaning includes an imputation that the claimant was a neglectful mother during the childhood of Nicola Adams and, as a result of that neglect, Nicola Adams was forced to steal food, and was almost put into care. The defendant submits that no reasonable reader would understand the article to be making such an accusation against the claimant, and the articles do not allege that Nicola Adams came close to being put into care by Social Services because of neglect by her mother.
31. The defendant does not dispute that the article contains an allegation to the effect the claimant has sent her daughter nasty texts, but the defendant’s meaning is to be preferred because (i) the description of Nicola’s fall out with her mother as “new and shocking” is no more than editorial spin; (ii) it is nonsensical to say that the claimant’s texting has perpetuated the physical violence Nicola Adams suffered as a child, as the articles do not say that; and (iii) the word “drunken” in the claimant’s meaning adds nothing to the defamatory element of the words and, even if it is part of the meaning, it is a statement of opinion and not fact.

32. Finally, the defendant submitted that the allegation as to abusive texting is a statement of fact, but Nicola Adams' comment that her mother's conduct has perpetuated the childhood abuse she suffered at the hands of her father is her opinion, that is Nicola's opinion, based on the emotional impact of her mother's conduct.

Conclusion

33. The claimant's meaning is presented in one unified paragraph which contains a number of discrete imputations, some of which refer to the claimant, and some of which do not. I agree with Ms Marzec, counsel for the defendant, that the claimant's meaning can be broken down as follows:

[1] After a childhood, where because of her upbringing [Nicola Adams] suffered poverty and neglect and even had to steal food and on one occasion

[2] because of neglect by her mother Dee Adams [Nicola's Adams] was close to being put into care by Social Services,

[3] and where [Nicola Adams'] father was physically violent to all the family,

[4] Nicola Adams, the double gold medal Olympic champion, has had a new and quite shocking fallout with her mother Dee, caused by drunken, insulting and hurtful texting by Dee to her, often throughout the evening.

[5] These texts are so abusive that Dee has perpetuated the physical violence Nicola has suffered at the hands of her father and ruined the relationship between her and Nicola. Dee's misconduct has caused Nicola such loneliness and isolation that she has only now begun to recover and to be in a better place through her relationships with Ella Baig and friends.

34. I agree with the defendant that it is important to identify the individual imputations, given that "the architecture of the modern law is largely based upon contests about individual imputations": see *Sube v News Group Newspapers Ltd* [2018] EMLR 693, Warby J at [32].

35. Having identified the individual imputations it is plain that the third one, [3], does not concern the claimant at all. It is also clear that the central difference between the parties is whether the words complained of mean that the claimant neglected Nicola Adams when she was growing up, such that she was forced to steal food and nearly end up in care.

36. 'You' magazine is the colour supplement which comes with the Sunday newspaper, The Mail on Sunday. The hypothetical reasonable reader is a reader of the Sunday newspapers, whether in hard copy or on-line. The article must be read as a whole and the governing principle is reasonableness.

37. The hypothetical reasonable reader would not understand that the claimant, as the mother of Nicola Adams, was responsible for neglecting her daughter during her childhood, which meant that Nicola had to steal things because she was hungry, or that Nicola almost ended up in care because the claimant had abandoned her when she was ill in hospital.

38. Rather, the hypothetical reasonable reader will understand that, until recently, Nicola Adams had a good and supportive relationship with her mother and, although Nicola had a tough upbringing, that was not the fault of her mother. I agree with the defendant's submissions that, in the narrative in relation to Nicola Adams' upbringing and childhood, the article paints a positive picture of the claimant, and recognises the tough circumstances she faced bringing Nicola and her brother up. The article describes what Nicola's family did to address her asthma when she was six (paragraph 9), how she got into boxing by accident because the claimant took her to an after-school boxing class, as she could not find a babysitter (paragraph 11); how the claimant left her violent father for a safe house, and then took her children with her (paragraph 17); how the claimant was "really understanding" when Nicola Adams came out as a lesbian (paragraph 25).
39. As to when the claimant was in hospital with meningitis, the reasonable reader will understand that this illness was sudden and unexpected and that it was in those circumstances that Nicola, then aged 13, was left looking after her brother, Kurtis, who was seven. The article also explains how the neighbours rallied round to help, so that Nicola and her brother did not end up in care. The reasonable reader will understand that the neighbours did so because Nicola and her brother were both children and they both needed looking after, as their mother was unexpectedly very ill in hospital. The reasonable reader will not understand that the claimant had abandoned Nicola at that time.
40. The hypothetical reasonable reader will understand that Nicola Adams has fallen out with her mother recently, and in her adult life. This is clear from a number of different passages in the article. For example, the reader is told early on in the article that the new documentary about Nicola Adams reveals "a new and quite shocking fallout with her mother and long-time supporter, Dee" (paragraph 7) and, later on, that the claimant and Nicola were "obviously very close" when Nicola Adams was a teenager, but "there's a terrible twist in this tale when Nicola starts telling the documentary cameras about the messages from her mother these days" (paragraph 26).
41. There is no dispute that the hypothetical reasonable reader will understand that the claimant sent Nicola Adams abusive, insulting and hurtful text messages. The reasonable reader will also understand that those were drunken text messages. That was my impression when I read the article for the first time, and that has not changed in the light of the defendant's submissions. This is because the reader is told in paragraph 7 that the fall out between Nicola Adams and her mother is because Nicola accuses her mother of "sending drunken, insulting texts". Then, towards the end of the article at paragraph 26, the reader is told more about the messages which Nicola Adams gets from her mother "these days", which are "normally of an evening and then the abusive text messages will start, when she's been drinking ...". Further, the word "drunken" in this context would strike the ordinary reasonable reader as a statement of fact, and there is no dispute that that is the case in respect of the words "abusive, insulting and hurtful".
42. The hypothetical reasonable reader will understand that Nicola Adams recognises that she, and the claimant were both abused by her father, and that her mother is continuing that abuse. However, the reasonable reader will understand from the article that the claimant, and Nicola Adams, were physically abused by Innocent Adams, and that the abuse by the claimant is in a different form. There is nothing in the article which would lead the reasonable reader to understand that the claimant physically abused Nicola Adams or that the sending of abusive text messages was equivalent to physical abuse. Rather, it is clear

from the article that Nicola Adams’ regards this as abuse by her mother but in “a different form”, and that is what is said in terms in paragraph 7.

43. Further, the hypothetical reasonable reader will understand that Nicola Adams is describing, her own experience, and what has happened to her and the claimant has done, and the consequence it has had on their relationship. The reasonable reader will also understand that the claimant is “perpetuating” or has “continued” the abuse she suffered at the hands of her father and that is Nicola Adams’ opinion of the abusive text messages received from her mother.

Decision

44. I identified my initial view of the words complained of and have received oral and brief written submissions from the parties. The court has to be careful not to be too analytical in its approach. I have to determine the impression that would have been conveyed to the hypothetical reasonable reader reading each of the three articles once.
45. Applying the principles I have identified, my conclusions are that the natural and ordinary meaning of the words complained of, read in their proper context as they affect the claimant is:

“The claimant has sent her daughter, Nicola Adams, drunken, insulting and hurtful text messages and, by sending these abusive messages to her daughter, the claimant has perpetuated, in a different form, the abuse Nicola Adams suffered at the hands of her father when she was a child, and that has ruined her relationship with her daughter.”

46. This meaning is defamatory of the claimant at common law. The words complained of are a statement of fact, save for the passage which is underlined which is an expression of opinion. As for the underlined passage, the words complained of indicated, whether in general or specific terms, the basis of the opinion.
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ANNEX

You Magazine Hard Copy (8th August 2021)

Front Page

YOU

[A] [PHOTOGRAPH OF NICOLA ADAMS]

[1] 'I WANT TO BE HONEST... ABOUT EVERYTHING'

[2] NICOLA ADAMS The Olympic champ turned *Strictly* star on the bitter family rift that's broken her heart

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COVER STORY

[3] 'The boxing ring was less dangerous than home'

[4] Born into poverty and growing up in a violent home, Olympic boxing gold medallist NICOLA ADAMS learnt to fight from an early age. Now, just as she's hung up her gloves and found the love she always craved, a new heartache threatens her happiness

INTERVIEW: COLE MORETON PHOTOGRAPHS: MATTHEW SHAVE

[5] Nicola Adams is dropping her guard. She has been ducking and weaving all her life, blocking out emotion to succeed as a pioneering gay black female fighter and double Olympic champion, but now she is ready to change. 'I want to be totally honest about everything,' says the 38-year-old. 'When I was boxing, I didn't want anything to distract me from the sport. Now I'm a lot freer to express myself, able to be me a lot more. I've grown as a person.'

[6] And even as we begin to talk, the blank -frankly intimidating - warrior face, so familiar from all her boxing posters, begins to soften. Last year, Nicola was on *Strictly Come Dancing*, breaking new ground as part of its first same-sex partnership; this year, she is training as an actor - and it's transforming her. 'As a boxer, you're taught to be very poker-faced, and not to show pain or emotion to your opponent. Now I'm acting out the pains and emotions and opening up. It's awesome.'

[7] I want to test that by asking about her extraordinary life, which is detailed in a new Amazon documentary named after her old nickname in the ring, Lioness. She grew up in poverty and pain in Leeds, throwing herself into boxing as protection from a violent father. But the film reveals a new and quite shocking fallout with her mother and long-time supporter, Dee, whom she accuses of sending drunken, insulting texts. 'I suffered a lot of abuse with my dad and then it's just continued with my mum in a different form.'

[8] She'll happily talk about having to drop out of *Strictly* and life with her partner - the beauty blogger Ella Baig, who at the age of 22 is 16 years her junior - because Nicola wants us to know her. 'Everybody sees the finished article, the gold medallist. They don't actually realise how hard it was to get to that point. All the cards were stacked against me.'

[9] She was born in Leeds in 1982, a sickly child who says she should have been doomed. 'I was pretty much allergic to everything. I had asthma and eczema and was told I couldn't run about. That is quite a tough thing for a six-year-old to be told.' But with a determination that would become typical, she just wasn't having it. 'My family and I spoke to an asthma specialist and we started trying machines and things to improve my lung capacity. And I was able to start playing with my friends. The first memory I have of being able to just run around was playing British Bulldog. I'll never forget that day.' That's a pretty brutal game of playground warfare, isn't it? She grins. 'Oh, it was awesome.' What happened to those health issues? 'I still have asthma, still have an inhaler.'

[10] The documentary takes her back to the old high-rise estates in Leeds where she remembers poverty and hunger. 'We used to steal things because we were hungry. You'd hear stolen cars

and whatever going past.' With only a couple of black families on the estate at that time, Nicola says she suffered racism as a child. She still does now, even as a national hero. 'There's been plenty of times when I've been sitting next to someone who hasn't recognised me and they've moved [...]'

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[B] [PHOTOGRAPH OF NICOLA ADAMS] [CAPTION:] Nicola wears two-piece, Amaryllis Westend. Socks, Weekday. Loafers, Grenson

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[C] [PHOTOGRAPH OF NICOLA ADAMS] [Caption:] Cropped top, & Other Stories. Trackpants, Rag & Bone. Boxing gloves, Diane Kordas

[...] their purse away, or I've been followed around a store by security guards. They've treated me badly then someone's told them who I am and everything's changed.'

[11] Boxing entered her life by accident, she tells me in her flat but surprisingly playful Yorkshire accent. 'My mum couldn't find a babysitter for aerobics one night so she took me and my brother down to an after-school boxing class that was on at the same time. I guess I need to thank the babysitter for not turning up.'

[12] A lot of girls would have looked at that big room full of fighting boys and wanted to leave, so why not her? 'I absolutely loved it. My dad was a big fan of boxing so it was always on the TV. As soon as I got in there I had visions of Muhammad Ali training and I was like: "Wow, this must be what it was like."'

[13] Footage of an early fight shows little Nicky Adams from Leeds floating around the ring, even doing a little Ali shuffle, but there was insecurity behind the swagger. Her father was called Innocent but he was an angry man who would take it out on his wife, his daughter and his son. 'I [...]

[14] [Pull quote:] 'I WAS TOLD MY MUM WAS GOING TO DIE. I COULDN'T BREAK DOWN IN FRONT OF MY BROTHER'

[...] was fighting to survive. The boxing ring was less dangerous than being at home,' she says in the documentary. 'I would hope that he'd just use his hand to beat me and not anything else. If you hit an eight- or nine-year-old with a belt and you're a grown man, that's going to hurt.'

[15] Nicola saw him push her mum downstairs, breaking her arm. 'He was abusive to me almost every day for seven years. The one time I did say I was going to call Childline I got a very harsh beating and I never said that again.'

[16] Then Nicola happened to catch a drama in which members of a family murdered an abusive husband and father. 'I remember going up to my mum and she was crying and I said to her: "It's OK, I've seen a TV show, we can get rid of him." I just didn't know what to do with the body.'

[17] That was when her mother finally decided to leave for a safe house, picking up the kids later. 'Now I know what an upbringing should be like, I know how bad it was for me growing up,' she tells me. 'At the time I thought that was just how it was. A lot of the kids on my estate either had the same [...]

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[D, E, F, G] [X4 PHOTOGRAPHS OF NICOLA ADAMS] [CAPTION FOR ALL PHOTOGRAPHS UNDER F] Clockwise, from top left: **[D]** winning the world title v Isabel Millan, 2018; **[E]** on *Strictly* last year; **[G]** with her first Olympic gold, 2012; **[F]** celebrating her MBE with her uncle, mum and brother, 2013

[...] thing or parents who were even worse.'

[18] ' So there was a powerful reason for the young Nicola to throw herself into boxing training: the desire to get stronger and able to stand up to her father's fists. 'Once I'd started boxing, that actually gave me a bit more fuel for the fire. I was like, "If anything was to happen to my mum or my brother or any family member I'd be strong enough to be able to protect them."' Did it ever come to that? 'Thankfully, no.'

[19] Nicola didn't see her father for years, until he suddenly turned up at a gathering of her family late at night on the day she won her first Olympic gold medal in London in 2012. 'This was around midnight, after I'd done all the drug testing and all the media and everything you have to do. I got to where my family was ... and he was there.' What did she do? 'I was like: "OK. It's been my goal since I was 12 to win the Olympics. I'm just going to enjoy this moment, no matter what.'"

[20] She did, however, confront him about his violence, over the phone a few months later. 'He denied everything, which I thought was really sad, because all I wanted was an apology and then I'd have moved past it. I believe everybody deserves a second chance and, even now, if he apologised and owned up to everything he did, I'd be fine with that.' But there's no sign of that? 'No.'

[21] When Nicola was 13 her mother was rushed to hospital with meningitis. 'They said she had two hours to live. She couldn't remember how many kids she had, or my brother's name. She couldn't remember my name. Her brain had started to close down.'

[22] That must have been terrifying. 'Yeah, I was really scared. Then I also had the feeling of trying to hold everything in. I didn't want to break down in front of my brother, because there was only really me to look after him. So I tried to stay strong for him.'

[23] Her brother Kurtis was seven. 'The only thing I could cook was beans on toast, so whenever I had to cook it was beans on toast for breakfast and beans on toast for our evening meal. I didn't know how to do anything else,' she says. 'I remember burning holes in my shirt [trying to iron it] for school. It was hard, really hard. Then when I'd finished school I'd have to pick up my brother from primary school and bring him home, then visit my mum in hospital.'

[24] Her neighbours on the Ebor Gardens estate saw what was happening and rallied round to save the children from the authorities. 'I had a bit of help from the community, because they knew that if social services got involved, then my brother and I would have been taken away.'

[25] That was also the year Nicola came out to her mother as a lesbian. 'I was working myself up for weeks, trying to figure out what I was going to say, asking my friends. Should I tell her while she's watching her soaps or wait until she's doing something else? Was she going to disown me? Was she going to kick me out? I just didn't know what to expect.' So how was it? 'I walked into the kitchen and spoke to my mum and she was just like: "Oh yeah, it's OK, I already know. Put the kettle on." And I was like: "What? I've been working myself up for god knows how many weeks and that's your response?"' She laughs. 'She was really understanding.'

[26] They were obviously very close back then. But there's a terrible twist in this tale when Nicola starts telling the documentary cameras about the messages she gets from her mother these days. 'It's normally of an evening and then the abusive text messages will start, when she's been drinking ... She'll say horrible stuff, like I'm a horrible person or the people who are around me don't care about me, [her mother and brother] are the only people who care about me, so if I don't have [the others] I'll be alone.'

[27] She is visibly hurt by this. 'Me and my mum both suffered at the hands of my dad but my mum is just perpetuating it and she can't [...]

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[H,I] [X2 PHOTOGRAPHS OF NICOLA ADAMS] [CAPTION FOR BOTH PHOTOGRAPHS UNDER I:] Top [H]: meeting the Queen in 2018 alongside David Beckham, Lenny Henry and John Major. Above [I]: with her partner Ella Baig earlier this year

[...] find a way out of it. And it's just ruined our relationship. I feel like I've lost my mum now. It makes me feel like I'm on my own.'

[28] I tell her this is very private, heartbreaking stuff you don't expect to see in a documentary, but Nicola bats that away. 'Yeah, it's sad, but it happens and you move on and you live on.'

[29] The film reminds us what a pioneer Nicola was, because boxing was illegal for women in this country until the fighter Jane Couch won a landmark court victory in 1998. 'I know, right? Even I'm amazed by that. I was so sure I was going to be an Olympic champion, even though it wasn't even an Olympic sport.'

[30] She did eventually become the great hope for Team GB, even overcoming a serious back injury to make the Olympics. How did her life change when she finally won gold? 'It was unreal. incredible. I'd gone from barely anybody knowing who I was to the whole nation knowing exactly who I was. People coming up and asking for photographs and autographs, then me going to movie premieres. I never thought winning a medal at the Olympics would open the doors to all those other things - receiving an MBE and an OBE.'

[31] Being famous can be hard, though, can't it? 'Yeah. At first it was really cool. Then came the people asking for things, saying: 'I'm your friend from way back.'" God knows when. I saw another side to being famous.' People assume Olympians are multimillionaires but it's not automatically true, is it? 'No. Because we don't get medal bonuses like they do in some of the other countries - they're given houses and everything. But with the British Olympians, our income either comes from sponsorships or the lottery funding.'

[32] Nicola won a second gold at Rio in 2016 then went pro, this time fighting without headgear. Wasn't she worried about getting dementia or ending up like her idol Ali?' 'The head guard blocks a little bit of your peripheral vision, so it's a lot easier to see things coming without it. You've just got to be defensive and quick.' But then an opponent caught her in the eye and tore her pupil. The doctors warned against carrying on. 'They said if I got caught again, I could end up going blind.'

[33] She was undefeated, but how did it feel to have to retire? 'I was scared, but my plan was to go into acting. I had another goal to work on.' Are there any big parts coming up. 'I can't really say anything.' Suddenly I get the blank, fierce Lioness face again. But the smile flashes back when our talk turns to her partner Ella.

[34] Nicola has been with Ella Baig for three years now, after meeting at a nightclub in Leeds. When did she realise this was the real thing? 'I think after we'd been dating a few months I was like: "She's a really nice person. She's friendly and open - she's just got a beautiful soul.'" Ella bares more than her soul on social media, including the site Only Fans, where devoted followers can pay a subscription to get material Instagram won't show. Ella tells the documentary that Nicola is 'hyper-vigilant' and finds it hard to trust people, saying: 'I'm still fighting for that trust.'

[35] After all the sorrow in her family, Nicola has admitted to feeling lonely and isolated in recent years. I'm not getting that vibe now, though. 'What's that saying? "You can't choose your family but you can pick everything else." I did feel very alone at one point. Now I have Ella and my friends that I've had for years.'

[36] **[Pull quote:] 'I WAS SURE I WAS GOING TO BE AN OLYMPIC CHAMPION ... EVEN THOUGH IT WASN'T AN OLYMPIC SPORT'**

[37] Would she like to be a mother herself? 'Oh, one day I'd love to have kids, for sure.' She's made it clear recently, though, that Ella would be the one giving birth.

[38] Seeing her smile so widely and happily, makes me remember something else she says in the film: 'I used to make wishes that one day I would be in a better place and have everything I've always wanted.' Has she got there now? 'Yeah, that's what I feel like now. I've got a beautiful partner, beautiful friends and the older I've got the more I've realised those are the things that really matter to me. I feel like my life's pretty much complete. I have everything

that I want,' says Nicola. 'After all the hard work through boxing, through life, to get to where I am ... now it's about living.'

***Lioness: The Nicola Adams Story* is coming soon to Prime Video**

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[J] [PHOTOGRAPH OF NICOLA ADAMS] [Caption:] Trench coat, Rejina Pyo, from Couverture & The Garbstore. Cropped top, & Other Stories. Trackpants, Rag & Bone. Boots, Grenson