

Real Talk

Shadow People speak out ...



Martin Glynn

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Introduction:

First let me say a big thank you if you are reading **Real Talk - Shadow People speak out**. This collection of monologues has been a long time in the making. For many years I have worked in prisons, engaged with the disaffected sections of the community, and have been through my own rite of passage. Throughout my journey as a writer and criminologist I have encountered many amazing people whose stories have gone with them to their grave, have not been told, been ignored, or have been too uncomfortable for many to hear.

Having seen the success of the '*Vagina monologues*', been an avid reader of Alan Bennett's work, combined with a love of the dense narratives of Samuel Beckett, I feel that the monologue is a literary form than can more than adequately articulate the inner city experience. Having recently watched HBO's groundbreaking series '*The Wire*' (*that depicts inner city people and their struggle for survival in an increasingly corrupt world of bureaucratic corruption*) I was struck how marginalised voices of were both seen and heard. It was '*The Wire*' that has provided me with the ideal *tipping point* for me to give voice to '*shadow people*'

These individuals are always present in our lives, but linger in the background. Many '*shadow people*' are socially labelled as '*Hard to access*' or '*Hard to reach*'. In truth they are neither. They merely exist in their own world of darkness and fear, a world that they are familiar with, and one that generates fear within us. Other '*shadow people*' are victims of circumstance; losing loved one's in tragic circumstances, struggling with terminal illness, coping with a mid-life crisis, or struggling with the day to day running of having a mental illness.

The need for space to reflect, think, have fun, and generally explore the world has diminished over the years. As a child growing up I remember, how much space I used to occupy, when streets were safe, youth clubs were about adventure, and open spaces weren't restricted. Young people now share stories of not being allowed into shops, where shopping centre's restrict their movement, older people feel a threat from their presence, combined with the daily struggles to occupy space in their own houses. Being a step-child who doesn't have a bedroom, living in an environment which has limited access to facilities such as sports, parks, outward bound, and so on, has created a generation craving their own space. We now have young people who 'ring fence' space in their communities and will defend the right to occupy it by 'post code' designation. Take crumbling inner city communities, who are starved of resources, with people living on the edge, where the daily battle to keep young people off the streets is being lost. Combine this with a volatile, but coping generation, who are fed up of being the target for media sensationalism, the police, and an assortment of corrupt individuals, hell bent on exploiting the crumbling infrastructure, and you have **Real Talk - Shadow People speak out.**

Real Talk - Shadow People speak out. has the sting of a grime track, the pulse of a Hip-Hop beat, and the fire of a Reggae bassline, combining the pace and claustrophobic tension of roller coaster ride, with the hard edge reality of contemporary inner city street culture. Most of all they are stories about people, community, survival, a determination to succeed, and testimonies that must be heard.

Martin Glynn (April 2010)

The stories



WARD 17

*Love is like a seed, it does not choose the ground on which it falls
(Zulu Proverb)*

*How do I tell my son who stands before me a proud stubborn man that
he's still my baby of years before?*

*How do I tell my son I love him so but do not for fear of hearing him say
"I'm not five anymore, don't be silly"?*

How do I tell my son, when his heart is heavy, mine is too?

*How do I tell my son that I cannot cut the chord because the knot is too
firmly tied?*

How do I tell my son "I am here when you're troubled, come to me?"

*How do I tell my son "Put your arms around me and hold me tight, I
need you too, and we will make the hurt go away as it was when you
were little"?*

*How do I tell my son "Cry my son, don't be ashamed of tears, God gave
us the gift to cry"?*

*How do I tell my son "I think you should do this or do that" without
sounding like an interfering busybody?*

How do I tell my son "I am part of your life if you wish it to be so"?

*How do I tell my son "You are part of me like an arm or a leg and miss
you when you're not around"?*

How do I say to my son, all the things I want to, but don't know how?

I can say

My son ...

I am and always will be your ever-loving mum

She wrote that poem for me in Aug 1992 and I'm only reading it now! Guilt .. shame .. why didn't I read it before? It's not the time for regrets. Today's date is Oct 20th 2002.

Time ... approximately 2 o'clock Afternoon ... sun's out. Can't forget what the weather's like. Somehow that bright light means something. I fold the beautifully crafted poem neatly and place it gently into my jacket. This poem is precious. Didn't know it at the time. It would be 5 days later when I would realise its true value. I'm travelling with a great friend. She's the kind of person who if defined in the dictionary would be labelled dependable, compassionate, and supportive. She reassures me I'm going to be fine. I want to believe her, but I'm resistant. I need a hug. She gives me one. A genuine hug at that moment is worth so much. Just that little bit of contact prepares me for what is to come. I feel grounded. She's grounded me.

Like mum has done so many times before. Being grounded makes me feel safe and secure. She gives me that feeling. It's important. Can't take too many demands being made on me right now. I smile at my friend, but inside I'm quivering. She knows that, but doesn't let on. I know she knows. Like a mountaineer I stand at the entrance of this daunting building. It doesn't matter how many times I go to this hospital it never gets easier. This time it's harder. Mum's dying. Mum will die here. Did I want that? Who does? Had no choice though. Two years of pain, suffering, and terror needs to give mum a dignified and pain free exit. Confused thoughts dig in. Couldn't get her into the hospice. The family can't administer the medication she needs, either. So she's here. It was a shit decision to make, but it had to be done. My sister Wendy, a loving caring individual, who had nursed mum throughout the whole of this ordeal, decided she couldn't take that decision. So I did.

So I'm here. Ready? Am I? No! Have I a choice in the matter? No! Meandering in an out of this labyrinth of corridors makes my heart beat fast, like an African drum pattern. Nervous people ... visiting sick people who are being cared for by good people. I hate it! Not the people, but the hospital stench! It's unavoidable though! That's the nature of hospitals. Weird feelings of fear, anxiety, and caution reverberate inside my head. Legs feel weak. Covering up nerves with fake smiles. Here goes! Deep sigh! Becoming aware of people watching me. I style it out. Don't want them to know mum's dying. Want them to think I'm here on business. Don't want to reveal my vulnerability. My friend comes to the rescue again. "*Focus on your mum*" she insists. There's a slight serious tone.

She's pissed at me for letting other things get to me. My feet just seem to be moving without any support from my brain. For years I've struggled to find mum's ward, but today my internal radar enables me to zoom in on the right place. I'm here Ward 17. How many times have I walked this corridor? It's a nice ward. Full of people who care and know mum's illness intimately. It's a specialist ward dealing with Myeloma, a rare form of cancer. But this ain't no normal cancer, it's Mum's cancer. The 'C' word strikes so much fear and terror into people's hearts and minds. It's debilitating. Mum's not done anything to anyone and gets struck down by the big 'C'. I hate you cancer. Right I'm here. My friend holds my hand. We enter. I hesitate. Hold myself back. I want to be told that mum is not really here and I'm dreaming. Fat chance! I am here. I walk down the long corridor observing the other patients.

Like a scene from a horror movie I come face to face with despair being made comfortable before the grim reaper arrives to take them on an eternal bus ride. *"She's in the side ward at the bottom,"* I'm told. The nurse offers her condolences and pledges she'll do the best for our mum. I pull up outside the ward and stand. Compose myself. Breathe deeply. I enter. I hear music playing out of a small radio. There is a weird silence bursting through. Then there's the smell. Anti septic meets hospital food. I look at the window trying to look at something else. And there she is semi-conscious and looking terrible.

First feelings. Fear. Fear and more fear. I cry. It's good to see my sister Wendy, her husband Tony, and nanny's loyal servant Alex, my nephew. A 14 year old boy, who is every bit a man. Been with mum from day one and intends to see her through this. No-one has demonstrated their loyalty to mum more than Alex. At that moment I realised that we needed to be there for him, as he was losing his best friend. He smiled through his pain. It was good to see him. Part of my family was here. I'm relieved.

Don't have to go through it alone. My younger brother Malcolm wasn't here, he was in Spain. I'm frustrated that he went but only because I miss him right now. He took a gamble and it hasn't paid off. I love my brother, so I pray his return won't be too stressful for both him and his lovely wife Neah. He had to get back! I know he will. His love for mum is and always has been unconditional. I was supposed to be in the States, but intuition forced me to cancel. I was glad anyway as I was going to the same place as the Washington shootings and I didn't want that. My sister Anne will be here shortly too. I really hope we'll all be here when that time comes.

Nervous! I needed to be here. Nowhere else. *I know Malcolm will come.* I think again. Hope he gets that flight. He will! Mum's energy's with him. We're all looking at mum. Don't want to, have to, need to. Can't describe it, other than, not well meets awful meets don't do this to our mum. It's not quite something you can prepare for. Deathly quiet! It's the quiet that really gets to me. No tubes ... machines or invasive gadgets, just a dying woman and serenity. Not just any woman. That's our mum we're looking at. It's a full moon now. It was brighter this morning. Bright like the hope we don't have any more. We're worried. Sad. Devastated. Mum, our mum, that woman who we thought would last forever is dying.

We wanted her to be at home with it all went down, but it was way beyond that. We needed a dignified end before family squabbles over where mum should die. I know it was a tough decision, one that the doctor agreed to without hesitation. The nurses were with us all the way. They've always been there. Respect due to the max for all their hard work and effort over the years. That day was the toughest for all of us. Two years of waiting, hoping she'd get better, was dashed when we were confronted by the awful truth. And then you hear that fateful sentence "*Sorry we can't do any more*". And here we are. Ward 17. A place that's been home for mum on and off for two years. It's amazing how the senses kick in. You become aware of every sound, noise, colour, shape, and smell. We are introduced to a new term .. *chain stoking* .. a deep raspy breathing sound .. referred to in cruder terms as the *death rattle*. Trust me it's horrible to listen to and even more horrible to watch. Sounds come together like an orchestrated hospital symphony.

I drift in and out of moods. Each one intensifying as mum's chain stoking becomes deeper and more accentuated. She turns aimlessly, staring at some playback memories. She beckons to be fed a small sip of water. Or is it she's trying to tell me something? I'm confused .. I'm sad .. I'm crying .. I'm hurting. I need mum now, but she's lying there helpless, dying, and unaware of what's going on around her, but internally preparing for her new journey. A journey that I'd like to make with her. Don't wanna see this, but I have to it's our mum. Shit! I'm struggling! It's only been a few hours. How long will it last? How long? Should I be thinking like this? She sips the water and rolls back onto the high pillows. I look at those dry lips and remember all the wisdom they have imparted. My sister Ann arrives, looking scared but beautiful. She reminds me so much of Mum at that age.

We embrace and surround our mum, feeling quite helpless and useless. We can't do anything. A brief meeting with the doctors hammers the point home .. *"She could go at any time,"* we're told. We ask numerous times if they're wrong, but we know they're telling the truth. We don't want to accept it. I watch my brothers and sisters all responding ... coping ... observing in their own special way. I realise how much I love them, but haven't told them. Maybe it's time to redeem myself. Our once fragmented family was going through a process of real bonding. We were back together. Mum knew this. Mum's brought us back together. A reconciliation. It was always like that. Christmas's and other festive times we'd come together. Not enough though. Can't think about what might have been now. Let's deal with here and now. Today beats all of those past times. If there was one time when you must be with your mum it's this time, as there'll be no other opportunity ever again.

At that moment I didn't want to be the older brother, but felt obligated out of love and loyalty to mum. I wanted to fade into the background. Coz I'm scared. Scared I won't hold up. Scared I'll crumbled. Scared I won't be there for my brothers and sisters, and more importantly, mum. She drifts back and forth like a see saw, meandering in between consciousness and incoherent speech, with the odd word we all recognise. That word offers false hope where for a brief moment we think mum's back, until a sudden nosedive into unconsciousness grounds us in the reality. I'm trying to be brave, but my emotions get the better of me. I'm sobbing. Like a waterfall. I grab mum's hand, she squeezes, and it makes it even worse. I don't want her to go.

Can't handle it. I run out the room, compose myself, and return. She fumbles for my hand. *"I'm here mum, I'm here"*. A half smile followed by a rasp, gives me some comfort. *"Malcolm will be here later,"* Wendy tells me. He's managed to get a flight back from Spain. What a relief that is! We hope and pray he can get here before she goes. Signs, gestures, dwindling consciousness. There must be more they can do for her *"She'll go soon. Be strong for her"* they utter again. Don't wanna here that. I'm in denial mode right now. Dying isn't supposed to be distressing, more of a calm exit. Bullshit! That's films and posh theatre plays. They avoid showing what it's like. I wasn't prepared for this. I'm crying again. Mum's hands squeeze mine. It makes my cry harder. Imagine that ... she squeezes my hand reassuring me. Am I weak or what? Or is it I am my mum's son. I'm not that man I thought I was. Watching mum fade mixes my emotions like a scratch DJ. I want her to be the mum I knew, but wanting her to be at peace. Tears and laughter, reflection and pondering on my new future, erupts into my consciousnesses.

I'm floundering. Remember you're there for mum. Thoughts no longer concentrate on the trivia of life, but more about things that matter. Time seems to have no currency in this dimly lit room. I pick up on the colours of the walls, the pastel shades of the curtains, and the sight of a ludicrous painting of a woman and a dog. But somehow today .. in here .. they mean something. They're part of the landscape of mum's exit. So they're meaningful and important. I'll never forget them. All the trivial stuff .. the bullshit .. the arguments.. the money I don't have seems so irrelevant.

Not that I've put value on them in the past, but now it doesn't matter. Mum taught me that "*What's the worst that can happen?*" she would always utter. Right now the only thing that matters is that I'm here and I see mum through this final or next stage of her life. Malcolm's here! Great. He looks concerned. Straight towards mum. He's reassured, she's still alive. He kisses her with tender loving care and then acknowledges everyone. Finally we're all together. Like the four musketeers, my brothers and sisters are all here. All for one and one for all. It feels strangely comforting. I feel a deep energy and love towards them, but I'm holding onto my big brother mask. We're in for the long haul. They're looking for leadership .. guidance .. strength .. from me. The question is .. do I have it? I feel so sad. Can't show it though. It's not right is it? Bullshit! Stop being so brave or stupidly brave. They're here for you. Let them in. My friend comes to my aid and reassures me that it's okay to feel bad right now. I watched the nurses who've known mum a long time, struggle with seeing their friend go.

Trust me she was their friend. Always helping other patients, cheering others up, never complaining, but knowing her time was coming soon. She never showed us how bad it was to anyone for that matter. Why? That was mum.

Never one for wanting to distress others with her distress. I love you mum, I muttered under my breath. Scared to say it too loud in case I heard my own voice and lost it again. Stuff that! I LOVE YOU MUM, I LOVE YOU.

Friend, what a word. Where are they when you need them? Not that they have an obligation, but I'm feeling lonely right now. I need a hug a conversation, some relief from this awful dreadful scary pain. My friends here and she's cool, but I reflect on all of those who know me who know what's going down. They're not here. Why not? Because it's private you dickhead! That's what people do at moments like this. They leave you to get on with it. Stop expecting stuff. You're families here. So much misplaced energy. It's not good for me. Then it happens, we swap family stories around the bed. We're laughing .. joking .. playing around. In fact we direct so many questions to mum, it's like she's part of the conversation. She is the conversation. What a relief? As I sink yet another Red Bull, I'm aware I'm playing for time. I wanna be awake if the end comes soon. The taste is harsh on my tongue, and I belch, which reminds me 6 hours have passed and I haven't eaten anything.

I wanna leave her, but I can't. This experience is a reality check... that's what it is .. It's not happening .. I'll wake up in a minute. Rubbish! It's happening. A nurse ushers me out the room and orders me to eat and rest. She reassures me mum'll be okay. I leave reluctantly, glancing back so as to let Mum know I'll be back. I return to catch Eminem's song about his mother.

Hate! What's that about? A self-destructive emotion that can make a rap artist rich. Could I make money with a song about how much I loved mum? In saying that, I wouldn't swap places with him. Being here with mum, giving her that love and support she needs from us is all that matters right now. Stuff Eminem! Glancing though the window at the blue sky I'm reminded of those hot days when mum would provide us with home entertainment on our street. Street games, reading, cardboard sledging on grass, conkers. She taught it all to me. Balsa wood planes, knitting with all the boys on the street. It was her unswerving commitment to her children that has brought out so much loving respect for my mum. It was only recently when my youngest son wanted me to help him build a plane. The sort with a propeller and elastic band. It didn't work, but it didn't matter, it was about bonding with my son. The same bonding mum always did. I look at her again. My mum. Lying still and graceful. Her spirit occupies this gloomy room and reminds me that simplicity is best. Wise. Sophisticated. That's her. I watched her in fact I stared in amazement at her calm exterior.

Despite being on the cusp of death, she's mediating between my inner and outer thoughts. Mum you're dread! I'm so glad you're my mum. Stupid really, my mum was everyone's mum. Everyone that met her wanted her to be his or her mum. Unconditional sharing way her by word. So I'm glad to share her. Awful moment! My friend has to go back to her family. It's a painful goodbye as my brothers and sisters have their support. Mine's gone. I thank her and pledge I'll keep her updated on any events as they unfold. I'm going to miss her. She was there on every level, but never interfering. Silently supportive. Like magic my eldest daughter appears.

She's straight into the situation. Almost like she instinctively knows how to act. I'm so proud of her. What a woman. Can't tell her. I'm here Dad. Not again. Masking. Cool Pose. Stupid. Glad she's here. My Melanie. She loved her Grandmother. A love that was deep .. honest .. and loving. That day Melanie dragged me away from the hospital to rest for a couple of hours. A bath, food, and some powerful pieces of wisdom from my daughter broke the tension of my obsession of not wanting to leave mum's side. My daughter, what a star? What a mother? What a woman? Strength like her grandmother. Silent strength. No flag waving or slogans, she just acts and does what's right. She carries her responsibility like a well-packed suitcase. My other daughter Sherene came. She fought bravely to engage with the situation, but found it tough going. Well who wouldn't. Can't cuss her for that. She tried hard to comfort her Nanny, but the sights and sounds became too much. I saw my children differently at that time.

Less of them being daughters, and more being women supporting a man, who happened to be their Dad. How I loved them. I was confronted with my inner fears about my own job as a parent. Here we were surrounding our mother. I wonder if they'll be there for me. If not, that's not their fault. So many things I want to say and do, but this is not the time for either guilt or nostalgia. Just let go of that shit and move on. Let them know you love them. Never one for arguing or crying was mum. She just got on with the business of unconditional love. Those two words. How many of us can say those with sincerity. She dispensed it like a pharmacist. The essence of mum was contained in those words, wrapped around everyone like a shroud. Radiated love like a beacon from a lighthouse.

It always crept up like a thief, then BAM! It was thrown over you, like a pillowcase on a kidnap victim. Shit! What's she doing? She cups her hands and whispers silently. A prayer. Mum's praying! Hearts beating fast. Can't take it. I don't want her to go. I watch unable to intervene but wanting her to hold me. Me wanting to hold her. A beautiful but sad moment, as I question God's motive for mum's suffering. The nurses enter and break the moment. Mum stops and falls back into the cushions and continues her deep raspy breathing, which is starting to scare me. You can't describe the feeling, but it's frightening. She could go at any moment. Morbid fascination. There's nothing fascinating about this though. The pain team place a new gadget in mum's leg. How much more can she take. She shows signs of distress, through faint noises and gesturing. I panic and want to know what's going on.

They reassure me. I'm not convinced or don't want to be convinced. I'm looking for someone to blame. Not wanting to take responsibility or accept the inevitable. I snort deeply, take in a deep breath, and fight tears. It's too much to bear. But isn't mum whose going through this. No it's not; we're going through it to. Stuff bravery. She's brave. I'm just here trying to be her son. This is a natural process I tell myself. So why is it so damn painful? My status changes. I'm not longer the older brother in charge; I'm one of a team providing support. I'm just a player not the captain. Huge relief. Sharing the load is so much easier. The fan .. the damn fan .. It's deafening me. The blade's intruding on the peace in the room. I want to mash it up .. throw it away .. but then I'll be left with silence .. do I want that? ..

I don't know what I want .. mum .. come on hurry up .. It's hard to watch this .. sorry I feel this way The scene from one flew over the cuckoo's nest comes to mind. The Native American guy smothered Jack Nicholson with a pillow. I did think about it. Can't say I didn't. I thought about Euthanasia .. death .. her death .. my death .. thought just shot backwards and forward like a table tennis match. I wanted to scream. Work ... status ... money .. bullshit! ... it made no difference .. It's not important .. life's too short for self-pity. what the ... is going on. Calm down Martin ... calm down ... it's death playing ticks with your mind ... I have to go for a walk .. I tell mum I need some air .. she moves her head gently not saying but knowing someone .. that's what it was like between us .. silent codes .. I knew she knew. I had to go ... got to the door .. came back .. got to the door came back .. five times later I was out of there .. gasping for some normal air ... air that reminded me about anything other than the ward mum occupied

Feelings of anger coarse through my veins as I'm faced with decisions about mum's life .. pain relief .. drugs pumped into to make her exit more peaceful .. I'm angry because I don't want her to lose consciousness ... but I know she must have the pain managed .. Why, me .. why us .. why her .. shit! ... I'm struggling to maintain my focus .. There's tension. We're all struggling. I find myself getting angry .. feeling isolated more and more ... I start to distance myself from everyone. I'm engulfed with rage. Everything anyone says makes me hyper sensitive. I clash with everyone until like a piece of elastic my brother snaps. Issues me a warning to stop acting like a shit and reminds me that this is not the time for drama.

Pride makes me walk off, but I know he's right. I was so proud of my younger brother who had just gone from little brother to man who was trying to hold it together, when his older brother had deserted the ship for a while. I loved him for that, but I was too bogged down with pride at the time to let him know. I eventually return, but the damage has been done. There's an uncomfortable silence and I caused it. I spend some time alone with mum. I tell her I've been stupid and am upset with myself for making everyone feel worse. I've been dominant in the family for so long, but for once I was totally and utterly wrong. How was I going to redeem myself? I watch from a distance not knowing when it's going to happen .. another day seems to be going away .. never realised how intense feelings are when you're watching a slow death .. who does?

It's a strange paradox languishing between composure and wanting to rip someone head off because there mum's alive and mine's dying. I'm feeling ballistic. I stare out the window at the bleakness of the day. Wish the sun was out. Wish I could listen to Miles Davis; wish I could have sex to relieve my stress. Small talk is irrelevant .. banished to the outside of the room. I watch my brothers and sister. We're still not talking. I want to but pride is still wedged firmly in place. There needs to be a change in energy. Trivial stories become the coping mechanism. Mum looks on oblivious but knowing we're there. The nurse told us she knows what we're saying. We laughed and joked. Despite the laughter we all knew what was happening. We'd occasionally take bets on whether mum's last breath would be. It killed the fear we had. When she did take a long breath we held ours... when she exhaled .. we let ours out to .. see saw ... see saw ...

Shaggy pumps out of the little radio .. whilst mum's breathing punctuates the reggae rhythm... she loved reggae mum did ... in fact she loved all type of music .. Just; like the people around her .. she loved everyone and everything . Mum opens her eyes .. scans the room .. what's she thinking .. what's she seeing ... I want to swap places with her .. I want her to live again .. I cry and I see her connect with my sister ... I want mum back .. I want mum back .. I want .. I want .. no I don't .. what I want is mum not to have cancer .. but she has .. accept it Martin .. accept it or you'll suffer if you don't Breath .. her breath .. It's getting deeper and shallower .. you need to hear it ... when you think it's all over she comes back .. I watch in amazement .. she's defying death .. she's defying death or is it she knows we're here and she doesn't want to go ...

If only I could bottle what she has and give it to the community ... deaths' not the issue it's how we deal with it .. I've got my brothers and sisters here ... not like others on mum's ward .. I hate knowing others don't have that support. It ain't right. I wished everyone had a support structure like our mum. I'm so fortunate. I'm feeling quite relaxed and calm .. she's passing her energy back to me .. amazing .. love ya mum .. They're washing her now .. anti perspirant .. can you believe it .. she smells nice .. hair combed .. that's mum .. it's the little things that count .. that's what the nurses showed us .. they love our mum .. they gave her attention .. love and most of all dignity through this ordeal ... Things took a nosedive. The ordeal was biting deep. Then out the blue Charmaine arrived. My eldest daughters mum. Brash, loud, and larger than life.

It was about 10 pm. Like a volcano she burst onto the ward, took over, lifted the mood and propelled into fits of laughter and made us realise the futility of all the fighting. For a brief time we shared the same space together. The first time in years. She combed mum's hair, fed her water, and managed to do stuff that we were now struggling with. I watched her with admiration as she pick up the slack. Then like the wind, she was gone. And then the trap door opened. We were summoned by the nurse who told us mum was holding on because we were all there. They urged us to leave her by herself. A family discussion brought us to a collective decision. We had to leave her. Malcolm left saying he wanted to be informed when she went. So did Anne. Wendy decided to stay. Melanie had to go back to her children, and there was me. I shook my head and said I'm here till the end. One by one we all went in and told mum why we had to go. Like an Agatha Christie novel, we were reduced in numbers. My brothers and sisters who had endured the experience decided they could no longer stay and watch mum.

It was too painful. It also signified the end of the road for their brave and vigilant actions. We embraced, shed a few tears and bid each other farewell. I promised I would inform them once it was over. I knew I couldn't leave. I'd come too far to turn back. I watched them leave and felt very alone. It was me, Wendy. Wendy's husband Tony, and one of the bravest members of the family, Alex. He's been at mum's side most of his 14 years. It was just us. Didn't sleep well the previous night. Checked on mum, went to the chapel, prayed, and then took root for the next round of waiting. Minutes became hours and time suddenly morphed into the evening. It was particularly quiet this evening. Another patient had died a few hours earlier.

I watched the family leaving, drained and relieved that it was all over. I looked at their faces and knew in a few hours that would be my family and me. I didn't want to know. I found refuge in the chapel, where the tranquillity provided me with some safety, away from the hospital environment. The chapel provided me with solace throughout. Not that I was going to become a Christian, but there was an important need to be satisfied internally. I cried till my chest hurt. Like a spring recoiling, memories came flooding back. The should have done's .. might have said's .. why's and so many other regrets, and then there was a silence that provided comfort when I remembered mum told me two weeks before, not to live in the past. Let go of the past was her exact words. Strange comfort. Even at that moment, she still provided me with the courage to continue. I prayed one more time and made my way back to the ward.

Stepping back onto the ward I became aware of all the patients who had no one and thanked God I had a family to support my mum. A worried nurse approached informing us of mum's medication change and how the breathing was deteriorating. I remember the nurse saying tonight would be the night. I was tense .. nervous and scared at knowing that my mum .. the stalwart, the rock, and the anchor of my life was going to be leaving us. I pace up and down frantically trying to keep my mind on other things, but always drifting back to the reality that time was running out. I wandered backwards and forwards checking mum's room. The rasping noises became longer and less frequent. I watched from the window, fearing the space where mum was going to breathe her final breath. Time passed quickly until the early hours came like a bolt of lightning. Then the thundering silence of the arrival of death kicked in.

My head was hurting, so I needed to get some rest. Somehow I knew tonight would be the night. In between the tossing and turning I felt weird, knowing, but not knowing. I awoke suddenly out of my troubled sleep to find a nurse standing above me. *"She's about to take her final breath"* she beckoned like a soldier on parade. No emotion at all, just a woman doing her job. I was angry as I felt she should be more melancholy, but why should she; she sees this stuff all the time. I got to my feet quickly to make my way to mum's room. I got there a couple of seconds late. She'd gone! I'd missed it. It's not like football when you can get extra time. This was the final curtain call. I entered into the space and stared for what seemed like an eternity. Numb and unable to grasp what I was looking at. She didn't look dead, but I knew she was. The nurses stood next to me not knowing what to say.

It was an awkward silence, punctuated only by my thanking them for all their help. They left, leaving mum and me. I touched her face and congratulated her for passing over. Her skin was so soft. It had always been soft. That word symbolises mum, soft and gentle, mixed with kind and loving. All of that was the essence of our .. my mum. I let her know how brave I thought she was putting up such a gallant fight. I felt tears of pain.. relief .. anger .. everything .. I rushed out, holding it in, until I found my sanctuary ... the chapel. Back to the silence. Not just any silence. The silence that burst out of every part of the dimly lit room, screaming at me loud and clear. I said very little, composed myself and made a hasty exit outside the hospital to get some fresh air. People were coming into work. I hate watching people in to work.

Mum had just died and they were coming to work. I got angry and wanted to stop the whole world and announce that today was a national day of mourning for my mum. Stupid thought really. I knew life had to go. That's what really pissed me off. Life has to go on. What was that all about? No big issue like Princess Diana or John Lennon, just a feeble old lady who was a silent heroine amongst us. Shit! I thought. Headed back to the ward. I wanted to see mum. The sun had come up making her face look beautiful. No more pain, stress, or fear. I read her a letter that I'd written and spent a few minutes telling her how much I loved her. The tears seemed to be on hold, as I somehow felt quite good at that moment. This was compounded by feelings of confusion and guilt. Should I feel okay or relieved now she's gone? But I did. I took some good hard looks, knowing that soon the doctors would come and take her away.

I made my way back into the room and read mum a piece I'd written for her.

*That first cuddle ... the
Way you spoilt us ... giving
Us your wisdom to guide
And protect ... is something to
Cherish ... like the
Reliable support you gave in
Times of strife ... trial ... and tribulation.
Trust given with Motherly conviction
Highlighting your devotion to those of us who
Needed reminding of the importance of
Your understanding which was always
Constant throughout ... never changing.
Always dependable .. reliable ... and demonstrating*

Your unswerving commitment to us
 Your children .. Your honest ways
 Hurt when the truth is bigger than
 The lies we sometimes live and tell.
 Being loyal was your creed ... staunch as the
 Strongest tree ... like the unconditional love
 You gave us time and again made
 Us feel secure .. nurtured ... and needed ..
 Always there to care 'n' share .. the load that was
 Heavier when we sometimes expected too much
 Of you our mother mum
 You are what real education was about.....
 Given with love .. by you to us.
 We now need to teach and guide our own children
 the virtues which you have given freely
 Without strings ...unconditional
 Thanks mum .. rest in peace
 Your loving son ... Martin

By now my brothers and sister had arrived to pay their last respects. I watched them from a distance with their partners. It was touching, but a stark reminder, that like mum I was alone to face her passing. Not that they weren't supportive or giving of their love, but I felt the trap door open and I fell through having been there with mum till the last. It would be another 4 hours before we would all meet up again at the hospital's bereavement centre. We did the business and it was time to go. Time to leave mum and go back to being us. Like a flash it was all over. 5 days ... 24/7 .. around the clock ... there at every moment .. I'll never forget those moments .. colours .. sounds .. smells ... us .. mum .. the hugs .. the tears .. the laughter .. the shame .. the

embarrassment .. the love .. the unconditional love Mum's
bravery ... mum .. that's why we were here ...it's raining .. I
need some petrol ... Choice FM ... no ! it's shit .. I need me some
Miles Davis .. Yes! .. cold ... miserable .. See ya later mum ..

WHERE TO NOW?

When the tree falls, the branches too, fall
(Swahili Proverb)

'T', a tall, powerfully built young Black man, baseball cap peak tipped forward masking his face, looks from side to side like a prowling hyena, marking his territory. We lock eyes and realise I know him. I pull over and invite him into my car. His greeting is warm and friendly. We touch fists. 'T's fists are scarred. In close proximity I notice 'T's face is troubled with an expression that suggests all is not well. 'T' is angry, traumatised, grieving and in a dark place right now. Our conversation centres on catching up with each other; inquiries about work, children, and life in general are the kind of formalities that most people who see 'T' from a distance don't notice. All they see is 'bad man', 'thug', or some other label that makes those who judge feel better. I see 'T' as a bright guy whose pain is carried around like a sack full of heavy stones. I inquire about 'T's well-being.

I can see from his face that he wants to talk but is struggling with how to broach the things on his mind. A change of facial expression, a clenching of fists, combined with tightening of neck muscles gave me a sense that 'T' was emotionally connected to recent tragic events all in the name of 'street warfare'. 'T' reveals that he's lost 4 'tight bredrins' in a space of 18 months. Describing one murder 'T' meticulously recounts the sounds, sights, and smells of that fateful day. The painstaking detail of his description makes you understand that this memory will not only be remembered but is etched on his soul forever. I further learn that 'T's sleep pattern is erratic and interrupted.

I continue to listen to his pain and how the cumulative impact of these events creates a domino effect, with nightmares that are locked in his subconscious memory much the same as a prisoner of war. 'T' is clearly grieving over the first murder, but the stockpiling of the others in his thoughts and memories is torturing his soul. To me 'T' is experiencing *inner city posttraumatic stress disorder* as a consequence of '*Street runnings*'. However 'T's condition is not brought about by war, but one of an internal struggle comprising of a sense of isolation, a lack of social inclusion and belonging. This makes it almost impossible for guys like 'T' to self-actualise. As I journey through 'T's current experiences a constant thread running throughout is the issue of '*Rage*'. This type of rage is dark, disturbing, menacing, and very dangerous.

Not just in terms of the threat it may pose to someone who may become an innocent victim of 'T's projected anger, but more importantly to 'T' himself, who despite his power, strength, and courage, also demonstrated a scared, vulnerable, and fatalistic approach to his life. His inner conflict of pain, loss, helplessness, and a desire for revenge is a perfect illustration of W.E.B. Dubois's analysis of young Black men in America, where he refers to this condition as '*Double consciousness*'. '*Double consciousness*' centres on the inability to reconcile those parts of us that are competing with each other for space and validity. In 'T's case the '*Double consciousness*' is '*Justice*' or '*Revenge*'. An inner conflict that many marginalised young Black men in the UK face on a regular basis. With no means to decode, reconcile, and negotiate this dual dilemma, 'T' feels to act out what he feels will make him feel better and in turn solve his problem of his '*rage*'.

He and I both knew that this was not the case, but as he said several times *"What am I supposed to do?"* I try to explain that violence is not the way, but in my comfortable position I suppose it was easy to could say that. Focussing on ways to prevent 'T' from venting his anger was very testing at times but I knew had a responsibility that I couldn't abdicate. 'T' reveals the desire to make someone pay for crimes committed to his *breddrins*. An all too familiar scenario, which tends to bring out shocked responses from a society that seldom attempts to understand guys like 'T'. I see 'T' less of a bad man, thug, or gangsta but more of a young guy symbolic of a generation who've been forgotten, let down, and left to raise themselves as men. Society on the other hand sees another scapegoat, someone to punish, and exclude from getting the rewards that society tends to reserve for those who seldom question or challenge the status quo.

Blighted by marginalisation, social experiments, and punitive responses to their social reality, we have a generation of young Black men like 'T' who have grown to normalise violence as a way of articulating their masculinity. 'T' is restless; his body language, deep sighs, exhalations, long pauses, and staring into the video of his memories for long periods of time, made me wonder about 'T's relationship with older men. 'T's sense of outrage, shock, and disbelief was running through every ounce of his body and has infected his internal functioning that is poisoning his very essence. To a guy like 'T' losing control was an assault on his manhood. A choice that was non negotiable. 'T' reaffirms his position that someone is going pay for his losses. I ask 'T' about coping strategies. He cites singing and cage fighting as temporary releases for his inner turmoil.

Pushing 'T' further I ask how he feels about community representatives putting his case forward in meetings, grant applications, and to agencies who claim to be making a difference for the youth. 'T's level of anger rises swiftly, when he refers to those people speaking on his behalf as taking '*money under false pretences*'. Despite his outburst 'T' expresses a sense of feeling powerless. Yet another problem becomes attached to an already large list of things pushing him further towards exploding. I am both humbled and saddened when 'T' reveals I am one of the few people he can trust. He goes onto say that most of the time he can't even trust himself and there is a point where he will not hesitate to act aggressively or violent if he loses the capacity to ground himself in rational thinking. I realise when talking to 'T' how many of us speak rhetorically about helping guys like him, but do so from a distance and in the security of an office. Being accountable to 'T' is scary but vital if trust is to be built.

'T' has a valuable insight and perspective into the dangerous world of the streets, and should be seen as someone who can play a role to play in enabling the wider community to increase its understanding of the complexities of 'T's environment. At no stage in our conversation did 'T' cite any agency or group that had asked for his opinion, thoughts, or ideas about solving his problems. It could be argued that 'T' should access what exists. The counter argument is to question how appropriate, relevant, or effective those current services are. Or is the kind of targeted outreach designed to reach guys like 'T' outside the scope and remit of most organisations?

Accessing 'T' is not just about doing a job, its understanding masculinity, fathering, listening, hearing, and connecting to the kind of pain that is so real, that it's frightening. 'T's conversation switches to *'street loyalty'*. He talks passionately about how extreme punishments can be metered out if the *'code of street respect'* is broken. From 'T's point of view, there is a job to be done and those who didn't sign up for it are part of the problem also. He reveals how a lack of trust between bredrins' can send an individual into a state of paranoia, by not knowing *'whose got your back'* at a time when it's needed. Yet another problem for 'T' to internalise. The current inter-cultural/inter faith conflicts on the streets bring an angry response and another key issue to the forefront. The issue of cultural factors in masculinity and its impact upon the various warring factions provides a powerful insight into how young Black men articulate their manhood.

'T' knows that some of his adversaries come from difficult family backgrounds, strong religious bonds, war torn zones, and so on. All competing for space and articulating control and ownership of that space in their own way. He says there is no blueprint or template for a cohesive approach to masculine articulation on the streets, but stresses love, security, and a sense of belonging are in short supply. The more I listen to 'T' the more I see an erosion of processes designed to build and develop vulnerable young men into grown men with a strong sense of purpose. The need to *'Take a scalp'* or an *'eye for an eye'* coming from 'T' highlights that he has no desire to *'turn the other cheek'* something that faith communities need to be aware of when intervening with young men like 'T'.

Having a pathological hatred of an individual for harm done is one thing, to move that onto a whole community gives society a reason to place the forces of social control on red alert with the power not only to stop the outcomes, but to send a clear message to guys like 'T' that any attempt to disrupt the balance in society will be met with force. I push 'T' further and discover something I already know, namely, all of his crew feel the same as he does. I'm welling up inside and feeling sad. I connect to 'T' as I see my younger self but I know that I am not him and have to accept that times are now different. An army of young men like 'T' are poised and ready to take on whatever is thrown at them, not worrying about the personal cost to them or their intended victims. The clarity of his statement suggests this is beyond hatred and into the realm of '*the dark zone*' where there are no rules other than survival.

Insulated by a massive amount of hurt and surrounded by a similar dark energy creates an awesome '*street power*' that can be oblivious to reason unless the outcomes bring a result that will satisfy all '*street soldiers*' involved in a war that cannot be won by anyone side. "T' talks about revenge being a dish best served cold. It's chilling! By now I'm taking in every syllable, breath, gesture, emotional outburst, eye contact, shift in mood, as part of his powerful testimony. Failure to do so will result in creating more distress for a young man who hasn't been listened to or heard in a very long time. Moments like this put many things into a context and makes me realise how ineffective many of us have been and still are at enabling young men like 'T' to live meaningful and productive lives.

Cars pass by making my heart skip a beat; a young Asian man walks towards the car makes wonder whether or not 'T' will hand out a punishment beating. He smiles and refrains out of respect for me. I reassure 'T' that if he needs to talk I'm available. In these encounters you never force someone to take up the offer, but by making it available you give a lifeline as a gesture of support. A persistent weakness of policy making in terms of the young Black men like 'T' is its failure to examine the aspirations and goal-striving patterns of black youth and to measure these in relation to the social/political ambitions and the real opportunities available to young people as a whole. If policy addresses only the criminal intent, desire, and behaviour of young men like 'T' without taking responsibility for the socio-historical conditions that created it, then policies will be not be relevant or appropriate in understanding and addressing the right issues. African American criminologist Amos Wilson states, *'that a young Black man with no self concept, will be motivated by self alienation, exhibit an ignorance of his ethnic heritage, engage in unbound hedonism, manifesting in deep insecurities, regarding his masculinities and masculine courage'*

If young black men like 'T' cannot develop a positive self-concept it is questionable whether they can maintain a focus that will enable them to desist from destructive behaviours that will harm both themselves and others. Engaging young Black men in processes that will liberate them from the pain of social neglect and denied access can play a significant role in taking 'T' from a social position of being seen as a social liability into the realms of being acknowledged as an asset to his peers, his family, and in turn the community. 'T' looks at his watch and knows it is time to go and get 'back on road'.

I look in his face and see fear, sadness, and a real uncertainty of his future. As we hug and bid farewell to each other I'm struck how passionate he is about the need to defend his community, honour, and the principle of gaining justice for past wrong doings to his brethren. His final reflection brings out a beaming smile. It's both an optimistic and bright moment. 'T' is about to become a father for the first time. He knows the dangers and threats to him not being able to fulfil that role, but somehow he knows that he must make the best out of a bad situation for sake of his child. As he disappears into the darkness, I breathe deeply, and fight back tears. Maybe I'm crying for myself or could it be that like 'T' I'm upset at what history and society has turned him into. My encounter with 'T' forces me to confront my own inner fears. Can I judge 'T'?

Do I throw him away because of fear of accessing him? Does he become part of my own analysis of the situation? No! It's much simpler than that. For a few brief moments I became a father figure, uncle, brother, a man who needed to listen to another man. At that moment I was neither a researcher, professional, practitioner nor a representative of an agency designed to help guys like 'T'. I was merely a temporary support for someone who needed to be listened to. I took no great pleasure in hearing and feeling 'T's pain, but it does connect to my own. It also reveals an insight into a world that many vulnerable young people will continue to face if the current state of affairs is not checked, addressed, and acted upon. We can all sit in judgement and be rhetorical about what needs to be done.

However, several fundamental questions needs to be asked; how many more 'T's do we need to see going to jail, committing suicide, behaving violently, struggling with fatherhood, not managing their masculinity, and so on before we act to change things? How long will it be before we individually and collectively recognise real action has been transcended by a culture of talk shops, complacency and apathy? I'm sad in seeing 'T' escape into the shadows as I don't know when I'll see him again or if I'll see him again. Talking to 'T' highlights the need to capture these type of 'in the moment' encounters as the basis for educating, informing, and preventing others from going down the same road. In conclusion I would like to offer a poem that encapsulates what 'T' and his crew are saying and feeling. Although the poem is autobiographical it is fitting to end this way, as 'T' himself is a talented singer/songwriter.

ATONEMENT

*Can't carry this load anymore .. can't do it on my own
 Tired of da isolation ... 'n' doin' it all alone
 Sick of deafenin' silences ... anger is da tone
 Hear my cries for love again ... hear my painful moan
 Feel I'm on da move right now ... feel I've hardly grown
 Heart has died 'n' been closed off ... hard jus' like a stone
 Know what loneliness is like ... starin' at da phone
 Tryin ter tend my field ... I'm reapin' what I've sown
 No-one hears my cries inside ... no-one hears me groan
 I really am a library book ... feel I'm out on loan
 A tumbleweed inside my heart .. my inner wind's been blown
 Never had a life route map ... directions? Not been shown
 Like a bird with a broken wing ... that's why I haven't flown
 The dam has burst, soul's been breached ... cut right thru' da bone*

*I'm authentic .. 'n' unique .. 'n' bright .. No! I ain't a clone
I'm headin' for my target ... more chances have been thrown
I lost my true identity ... not much of me is known
It's time to realign myself ... but first I must atone*

LETTERS

Good health does not spread, disease does (Zulu Proverb)

Dear Martin,

I hope you're well. I wanted to share my story with you in the hope you will share it with others in the hope they won't make the same mistakes as I did. I started drinking, and smoking marijuana when I was 13. During that time it was just for fun, and a method used by young boys, to seduce girls of my age. I threw up a lot. At that time, I didn't get involved with hard drugs. By that I mean Bamm (*Which was a name for PRELUDIN, a form of speed*), heroin, cocaine and crack. I first started taking Bamm, when I was 17 going on 18, I was living in DC with my uncle. I was young, naive, and gullible, plus I was swayed by the so-called street life.

My uncle ran a shooting gallery, as well as selling Bamm and heroin. The tenement he lived in was a meeting place for a whole host of different people. Pimps, prostitutes, and pushers, all used to come there. Hell! I was fascinated. I remember 2 guys came to see him, and they kinda noticed me. Well, I began to hang round with one of them, and he turned me onto Bamm. He gave me my first shot, which was a mixture of Heroin and Bamm, called a speedball. I liked the high. As my uncle used to give me money, I used to ask him for it, to enable me to buy Bamm, but one day he found out what I was using it for, and he swore blind he would kill the nigger who turned me onto Bamm. After that, he stopped *giving me* money. It's that, that started me sleeping with guys in order to get high. I did it, coz drugs ain't free. I used to sell my body at times to get high.

Sometime during this period I flipped out, and ended up at St Elizabeth's hospital I was there for about 4 months and about the age of 19 living began to sicken me, mentally and emotionally. I had gotten a disability cheque from the hospital, which I used to catch a bus back to North Carolina, where I became a little settled in a job skill programme in Wilson, North Carolina. This was until I found out I could get Bamm. For a while I lived with my aunt and her sons, but I became lonely, and started tripping out again which lost me my job. My aunt was so frightened she took me back to my family, who also became frightened; as they didn't know I was doing drugs. It was then, my mom phoned the police and I was committed to another mental hospital.

I was just 20. After that episode, I left Bamm completely alone. I then started working again in another work programme, doing landscaping. I ran into some old friends whom I met in prison, and they turned me onto heroin. I went on a shoplifting spree with them a few times and used to do heroin but I didn't acquire the habit. I hated the high. I didn't like nodding off, and not being aware of my surroundings. One night I got caught shoplifting, and they left me in jail. I phoned up my mom, who used my pay cheque to get me out. That was my last experience with heroin. At the age of 22 I then got turned onto cocaine. A guy in the neighbourhood, a couple of houses down, sold both heroin and cocaine, I told him I liked the rush from cocaine, coz it was like Bamm, but the high didn't last as long. I wanted it more and more. So I started tricking men out of their money with lies, promises, or just plain stealing. I also started drinking heavily again. After a time, I got fed up, and moved back to my mom, had a couple of part time jobs.

I also took a little Bamm now and again. It was at that time I met a man, who I thought was straight. I picked him up at a nightclub. I liked him; I learned that he also liked Bamm. I ended up moving in with him, but as quick as it started, it ended. He asked me to leave, coz he said he needed space. A few weeks before I'd met a pimp, who gave me his phone number, I decided to give him a call. Although the thought of working for him didn't excite me, I went to work for him. At that time, he didn't know I used drugs, but someone told him. He warned me that none of his girls take drugs. I said '*No way!*' So he watched me, and caught me going to score. He slapped me around, and before I knew it, we were on our way to New Orleans. He said the reason he was taking me away was to get me off drugs. He left me in a prison ministry for 6 months. At that time I decided to get in touch with the guy I had been living with before. I told him what had happened and he was very understanding. So I left the ministry, and went back to D.C. to join him again. When I got back, things were so different. I was afraid to go out on the streets.

I wasn't feeling good about myself. I was going home one day, when I met another guy. I went to his apartment, and instead of letting him lay me, I robbed him of \$300. I used the money to go back to North Carolina. I decided I didn't want to live with my pimp anymore. When I was about 24, I was working flipping burgers at MacDonald's, and one evening a young brother and me got high on beer and cocaine. I was so high I walked in front of a car, broke my leg, and fractured my back. At 25 I got married to an alcoholic.

We got drunk a lot, and I started back with cocaine .My husband didn't know at the time I had gotten a cash settlement from the car accident. I bought a car, and moved home. One night I got drunk, and had an argument with my husband about who should drive the car. I hit pedestrian, 2-parked cars, and a motorcycle. I was very lucky; I got 24 days, and 2 years probation. During the time I was in prison, my husband sold the car, we lost our trailer, and he moved in with his sister. It had come to a point where I was staying out late doing cocaine where eventually I would get high in front of my husband. He didn't like it, but said he would buy it for me, if I didn't get it myself. I still went looking. I used to thief from friends, by telling them I hadn't cashed cheques they asked me to cash, when I took the money instead, and bought drugs. My husband never knew until the police came round, and I was faced with 2 counts of forgery. My husband then decided it was time to move.

He quit his job, I quit mine, and we went to live in Miami. It was there that my husband turned me onto crack. I'd had freebase before in D.C. but it didn't do anything for me, but my husband said, he'd rather we get high together, than me being strung out on cocaine. I finally learned to like it. Over a period of two years, my husband got hooked on crack, which brought us back to North Carolina. When I did get back I had to face charges of parole violation. Around my 28th birthday, I was sent back to prison for 2 years. When I came out of prison, I knew I had to leave my husband, and North Carolina. I went to live with my father, who drank a lot, as well as not seeing me since I was 13. I drank a lot during this period, and met a lot of people who took cocaine. I used to shoot it in my arm, and I smoked it.

It was at that time it began to get to me. I returned to Greenville, where my sisters lived, only to find that everyone was doing drugs, crack cocaine. Even my sisters were taking crack. I was hurt and disappointed. We talked and said that we were going to give up once and for all, but we lied to ourselves, and sat around getting' high.

In March of 1988 I was picked up on an outstanding charge, whilst scoring a tube of crack. So on MAY 30th 1988 I turned 30 in Raleigh Prison, in North Carolina. I leave you now, hoping that I will see you, on my release. When I don't know.

All my love
Barbara

*DURING HER JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF DRUGS, BARBARA
CONTRACTED HIV AND LATER DIED OF AID*

BROKEN FISH

You lit the fire now the smoke hurts your eyes
 (African Proverb)

I wanna punch him in his big cheesy, spot filled face, but 14 years, 2 months, and 3 weeks inside makes me chill. Heard enough verbal bullshit in my time ter fill da Grand Canyon. Bein' on licence also edits yer behaviour. Do I wanna go back 'n' finish off my stretch? Hell no! So I'm sittin' here listenin' ter this jumped up little arsesole wearin' a cheap suit, tellin' me da *Job centre plus* routine, and so on and so forth. His voice is gratin' on me. I wanna swot him like a fly but I know I can't draw attention to myself. Back in da day I would have kicked off, but I'm pushin' 50 now. Ain't that I can't do somethin', it jus' ain't gonna get me nowhere right now. I can see he's scared of me, but he's coverin' it up, with nervous grins and verbal stumbles.

What an ironic twist. Before this las' sentence I was on a grand a day, had a king's lifestyle, an' people worked for me. I was someone. But now, I'm relegated to this. I kiss my teet and scrutinise a fit sista on a nex' desk wishin' it was me she was talkin' to. Man's killin' me with borin' bullshit! I ain't hearin' him. It's jus' a pair of lips goin' up 'n' down. A call comes thru' an' he takes it. Thank God for a break. I pan 'round an' observe *has beens, might have beens, could have beens*, 'n' people like me, not wantin' to be here in this crap place. Playin' a role in da Government's resettlement plan is supposed ter make man like me be more responsible, useful, an' productive. Bollocks! This ain't no different from bein' inside. I'm still jus' a number. My guy might not be a screw, but he's got power over me 'n' I hate that. Makes me vex. Tired of bein' vex. Sometimes I'm tired of myself bein' vex.

Anyway, I'm here, pissed off, but free. I jus' wanna get this formality out da way an' make my way back to a new life. six sentences is enough for me. Then it happens. I'm lookin' at this big ass clock in front of me eager for time to pass, when it jus' flies off the wall and mashes. Glass flies everywhere soundin' like a gunshot. A few people panic an' scatter. After they realise it's nothin' order returns. My man's a little shaken, does his good samaritan bit, an' picks up da pieces. I feel he jus' wants ter get away from me. I'm relieved. Breaks up da monotony. 2.35pm was when time definitely stood still. I get to my feet, stretch my legs, and look out da window. A car pulls up. Boomin' bassline. Dancehall. A man gets out. He's familiar. Shit! Not good. Don't wanna see him. Too late, he's clocked me. Big mistake. It's Johnny 'B'.

We used ter roll together back in the day. He's bad news. A sneaky, pure bloodclaat trickster. Man's slimy like teflon on a fryin' pan. Imagine, da first man I glimpse out da window is him. He waltzes in blingin' it, combined with an arrogant swagger. I can see he's done well. Designer clothes mixed with ugly jewellery. Chain too big for his neck, watch wider than his wrist, and a pair of shades that makes him look like he's workin' undercover for da feds. No one likes Johnny, but he somehow manages to get thru'. Man's nasty too. He'll teef yer car, yer girl, anything. Yer never trus' a man like Johnny. I'm sure he's an informer. Yer jus' have ter stay one step ahead. Suppose I'm luckier than mos' as I have a rep. People don't play games wid me. Not that I'm bad, but years of crime and rollin' with bad men has hardened me ter certain runnin's. I'm older now. Wasted too much time in my life. Jus' wanna get my head down. Too old to be playin' bad man. Johnny locks eyes on me like a radar on a target. I don't know what ter do.

Chut! style it out, don't get flustered, jus' give him da plastic smile an' stay cool. My man bawls my name out in front of everyone. Ain't too happy. Vex! Feel well vex! I hold it down. He stretches out his dry crusty hand out ter touch fists. I know he's only doin' it ter show off his gold bracelets as a way of sayin' *'look how well I've done'*. Arrogant bastard! We connect. Then his mobile goes off and he disappears into da corner ter take da call. I watch him. Face goes from smilin' ter serious. Somethin' don't look right. He's nervous an' rings off. He paces for a small while an' then comes back, falsely grinnin' thru' nuff gold teet'. *'Yo! Bredrin, we'll link'* he says. *I ain't yer bredrin 'n' I ain't linkin'* I say ter myself. I know he's up to somethin'. Probably wants me ter do some strong arm shit. Ain't interested. He leaves a bad taste in my mout'. I watch him drive off at speed. My spirit's tellin' me somethin' still ain't right. Concerned not worried.

Need ter move beyond that feelin'. Job centre plus bwoy calls me an I sat back down for a few more borin' minutes, and then leave. I'm on a mission ter find my favourite dumplin' shop ... *Yabby's*. I jus' wanna taste that food. *Yabby's* is one of da oldest dumplin' shops I know. It's an institution. Nuff times when I used ter come from blues, chillin' afta a robbery, or when I needed some tall stories .. *Yabby's* was da place ter be. To me *Yabby's* is 'a ghetto community centre'. Any information yer want, jus' check a dumplin' shop. Yer get da same vibe in Ruffcutz da barber shop, but *Yabby's* sells food, and food is at da heart of any community. When yer servin' a long sentence yer forget mos' tings, but not *Yabby's*. It'll always be a part of my life. So I'm troddin' thru' da community tryin' ter blend in. Walkin' free for the first time in a long time. I see people who I know, but I avoid them. Not that I'm tryin' ter be ignorant but I need to be in stealth mode.

Don't know whose got beef with who. Can't get dragged into nothin' right now. Critical time .. critical moment .. jus' critical. Don't have any family, both parents' dead, an one sister in Jamaica. Old friends have come 'n' gone. So it's jus' me one. 49 years of age, no home of my own, no money, jus' a bag of qualifications since doin' time. What a waste! I made thousands when I was on road but squandered it on rubbish. I'm feelin' kinda lonely right now. Change that thought. That las' robbery made us four hundred and fifty thousand. *Me, Jacko, Breadback, 'n' Chicken Wing*. *Jacko* got stabbed to death after a fight in Long Lartin, *breadback*' still Cat 'A' at Full Sutton, and *chicken wing* has a few months left at Featherstone. We were tight, but we also got caught. Miss da man dem. Crime is all I've known. Probably time for a divorce. Strange not havin' a car. I walk pas' the frontline an' watch da you't dem; hustlin', doin' a ting, tryin' ter get by. Same old shit! Don't change. Don't like what I see. I was a robber, old style. It wasn't about hurtin' people, it was simply 'bout gettin' in, gettin' da money an' livin' large.

Now it's violence for the sake of violence. Saw nuff little raas shotters comin' into jail like they're bad. I used ter tell them '*when you ain't got a gun, you ain't shit*'. I'm a big man, 19 and half stone; I've worked out, looked after myself. Even though I know how ter protect myself someone always wants ter come an tes' yer. So many times I had to crack a few heads for bein' facety. I look at them an' shake my head. They look back scopin' me out. They nod an' I pass thru'. I wish I could do somethin' to change their situation, but I'm just a grey haired, ex-con, with stories and no real future. I watch these young street soldiers wonderin' if any of them could be my own kids; Reuben, and Joshua.

I ain't seen them since they were born. What kind of father or role model am I? They could be over there sellin' crack 'n' I wouldn't know. Have ter put that thought out my head, otherwise it hurts, and pain is somethin' I don't need right now. Here it goes ... an argument breaks out, gun gets pulled, an' people scatter. I run off. Police arrive. I ain't down with this. Ain't losin' liberty or life on account of someone else's foolishness. There's no need. Flashback. Spent nuff time inside readin'. It helped kill da boredom of bein' locked up. Gave me a different focus on life. Made me think differently. It's hard to think differently in prison, so I discovered the prison library. That was my escape. Nuff times when my head was buggin', I went down the library and jus' read. Still had to face shit on the wing, but in my quiet moments, I found a strange kinda peace.

Became more intelligent and learned stuff school denied me? What good is it to me now? Who knows? At last! I'm here. Yabby's dumplin' shop. Same front, same décor, same evryting. I hold back for a while. I'm nervous. I smile an observe people goin' in. Hope no-one spots me up. Dumplin' shops are dread places for gossip. If you ever want everyone to know you're back in da community, go to a dumplin' shop. Ghetto grapevine is alive an' kickin'. Food takes forever to come in a dumplin' shop an' it's pure jokes inside an' out. I laugh as I try to imagine Yabby's as a fast food restaurant. I don't think so. I cross da threshold and am hit by wicked smells. I close my eyes and inhale ... chicken ... fish ... rice 'n' peas ... dumplin' .. ackee 'n' saltfish. It's nectar ter a dry throat. As usual there's a few irate people waitin' for their food. No matter how much yer moan 'bout yer food, it ain't comin' any quicker. It's a serious test of patience in a dumplin' shop.

Dancehall music fills da whole place. Don't like dancehall. My closest friends inside were *Bob, studio one, Gregory, d brown, burnin' spear, not forgettin' the great mighty diamonds*. Yout's on my wing used ter drive me nuts with hip-hop and garage. Couldn't relate ter it. It's jus' noise ter me. Suppose it's a generational thing. Feels good ter be free. Feels good ter be at Yabby's. I've missed it. Sadly it hasn't missed me. I'm at da front of da queue. I then come ter face ter face with an elderly man with grey locks way down his back. He peers thru' his dutty glasses an' stares hard at me with a semi-toothless grin. He peeks over da top of agein' lenses, takes them off, an' gives me a visual inspection from head ter foot. '*Bloodclaat, iz yu dat Clinton?*' he screams. Yabby's been here 45 years an' still Jamaican speech is embedded in his soul. I smile, nod, an' become self-conscious. I'm da prodigal son returning home.

Yabby, tells his young assistant ter take over whilst he leaps from behind da counter an' lands gracefully on both feet. His stocky frame gives me a fatherly hug, that reminds me of poppa when he was alive. It feels good. Yabby acts with no judgement, jus' positive vibes. Yabby's a strong man. A good man. An hones' man. A strong hug from Yabby meant you *were* one of *his* children. Yabby has nine kids. I notice Hyacinth, his faithful machete in the corner. He named it after his grandmother, who he said was sharper than anyone he knew. Still there after all these years. He'll use it if he has to. Looks like it hasn't moved for a long time though. We need more Yabby's in the world. Strong, dependable, an' a wicked cook. I wonder if I'll ever be like him. I'm starin' at three fried dumplin's, ackee an' saltfish, two pieces of chicken, an' a big piece of yam, with Guinness punch, for free.

Trus' me, I didn't have no money so I was grateful to Yabby. I enjoy listenin' ter my old friend reminisce, fillin' me in, an' givin' me all the ghetto gossip. When yer do a big sentence yer lose nuff people in yer life. But Yabby, will be always close to my heart. Yabby is one of those old time Jamaican's who is da real Anancy. Story after story. Yabby's happy face disappears. He whispers '*Nuh bodder wrap up wid Johnny 'B'*'. He gets ter his feet and walks slowly back ter da kitchen, lookin' back as he goes. Him an' Johnny lock eyes. They say nothin'. One false move an' Yabby would chop him. Yabby ain't scared of no-one. In the middle of this sweet meal, Johnny 'B' plonks himself right down in front of my face. I carry on eatin' and try to behave like he ain't there. He clicks his fingers gesturin' for his food.

Obviously a regular. I'm eager ter know where Johnny's comin' from, but mindful of what Yabby has jus' said. I wanna leave but da food's too sweet. So here I am with Johnny 'B' again. Hard food an' fried fish appear. Feel uneasy not knowin' if he has some on-going beef, or if some man's gonna roll up an' take him out. I can see people in da shop lookin' visibly uncomfortable and makin' a hasty exit. Da man's rep has obviously grown since back in da day. Johnny kills his food with hot pepper sauce. It's disgustin' ter watch. He may look slick, but eats like a cannibal. Slappin' his lips is a deafenin' sound. It's killin' me. I hate hoggish eaters. Johnny talks, answers his mobile and chews his food all at da same time. Then a silk handkerchief comes out. He wipes his crusty lips like a man scraping paint off a wall. This was followed by a belch that measurin' six point five on the Richter scale. Says he wants me ter do a job for him. Pays well, but risky.

Says I'm da man, and he can help me get back on my feet. I thought *'whose he talkin' to?* This harebrained scheme sounds like pure bullshit, but I know he's serious. I need money, but not this bad. I carry on listenin' but don't know where the hell he's comin' from. It may be a set up. I feel my fists tightenin' again. He takes out a wad of money an' tries ter press it into my hand. I push it back. He's vex but tries ter style it out. Luck is on my side! Johnny starts chokin' on a fish bone, which gives me my exit point. I wait till the ambulance comes. Internally I'm laughin'. Nuff people inside da place howl at da sight of Johnny grippin' his throat, strugglin' fer breath. Out da corner of my eye I see a couple of devious you'ts eyeballin' Johnny's jewellery. Not into opportunist robbery. Never works. I clock them and they back off. I say bye to Yabby and leave. Mus' be careful. Steppin' out onto da street I watch a couple rowin' over foolishness.

It gets ugly. My man slaps her hard, and I intervene. He pulls a knife. I think shit! What's da world comin' to? Back in the day you could break up a fight 'n' it would be cool. Now it's pure drama. I manage ter calm it down for a while. I figure da guy don't wanna tangle wid me. But as I walk away, she's lickin' down da man. What the leave it. Need to clear my head. I decide ter cut through the park. I find an old bench and sit down. It's good seein' elderly couples holdin' hands. Reminds me of mamma and poppa. The way they stayed in love, for over 60 years. There's a sadness. I was inside when they both passed. I'd let them down, but it's too late now. I close my eyes for a brief moment 'n' I'm back inside, I hear' evry soun' .. smell evry smell hear evry rule .. evry regulation ... remember evry app I made. Tears reach my eyes, but are forced back as a small child wanders from its pram.

He stands lookin' at me like I'm an alien. His mother rushes over, looks me up and down, scowls, and rushes off kissin' her teet'. I haven't done a thing, yet I've been found guilty again. I wonder why, but then realise that there's nuff crazy people walkin' about sittin' in parks. I think about Johnny 'B' chokin' on that fishbone and I laugh out loud, till my belly nearly bursts. Then bird shit splashes my shoes. I'm vex. I could kill that bird. I smile. Oh! to be a bird. I watch them fly amongst the trees. What do they do? Fly, eat, 'n' have sex. Perfect. Now there's a thing. Sex! Thank God for my right hand. 'Clinton', a soft voice calls out. I search for the source. A gentle touch grabs my shoulder. I'm startled and turn quickly poised to go on the attack. A huge grin erupts all over my face. I know that voice. Silence. Stare. Silence. Stare. Smile. Laughter.

It's Jasmine. My childhood sweetheart, close friend, and someone who's never given up on me. Da hug feels good. It's passionate, firm, and quenches my thirst. I need it more than ever right now. Jasmine is like a cool drink after a hot sweaty session down the gym. We sit for ages, talkin, laughin', and reaffirmin' who we are ter each other. Suddenly freedom means somethin'. It's a bit of light at the end of a dark tunnel. Jasmine is one of those women who becomes yer best friend, but makes yer wonder if we could have more. She's the person I'd talk ter when it got tough. Never judged me. Never put me down. All she does is give me firm advice ... with love. Real love. Not soap opera love. If only I was as good to her as she is to me. Don't know why she's stuck with me all these years? Scared to ask. She wrote me every week. Asks me why I haven't called. Too shamed to lie, I tell her da truth. Another hug. I'm fightin' an erection by now... If only.... Stop da nostalgia an jus' enjoy bein' with her.

She's yer bredrin' whose always had yer back. I tell myself. Jasmine is a rare individual who's never married, never settled down, never had kids, jus' a sister whose gone thru' life doin' good for others. I've always wondered why she's been alone. Secretly I wanted her ter be waitin' for me, but know that was a stupid thought. Meetin' Jasmine reminded how much I've missed havin' a women in my life. I ain't good at relationships. Too involved in criminal behaviour to have a real women. There *were* moments though, but I just couldn't keep it down. Women like Jasmine were jus' too good ter go out with, so I left them alone. So we're more like a brother an' sister. I look into those deep hazel eyes an' observe this stunnin' 50-year-old Black woman, with skin and a figure of someone half her age. She still carries herself well. Like me, her hair is greyin'.

Her shoulder length plaits is a real turn on. I'll never tell her, but inside I feel horny. Change that thought. Jasmine scribbles an address on a scrap of paper and asks me ter talk ter da you'ts. She's a youth worker who works with da '*hardcore*'. They love her. I suppose she's everyone's mum. Part of me doesn't want ter do it as I'm tired of wannabe gangsters, but I remember how Jasmine's letter's kept me goin' when I was inside. I feel obligated. I connect ter her on a soul level. She's my soul mate. As she drives off Jasmine leaves me with a dull ache and memories of a broken past that's startin' ter catch up with me. A big ass Lexus pulls into the park, and out steps Johnny 'B' with a nex' man. I know they're lookin' for me, so I jus' flop back on the bench and wait. I should have gone with Jasmine. Johnny looks troubled. A look I've seen so many times before. 'Bout 5 years into my sentence a man wanted me ter hurt someone and I turned him down.

Now this same man had already promised someone else that he'd get me ter do it, so he was up shit street when I refused. I figure Johnny has done da same thing, so I need ter be sensible and smart. Once again he garbles his way through a half-baked explanation of a job he wants me ter do and urges me ter think about his offer. Once again another roll of money appears. This time much bigger. I tell him I ain't interested and he laughs nervously. I so much want ter knock him out, but his accomplice sporting a flak jacket and a mean look, forces me ter reconsider. Not that I can't handle da bizniss, but this place is too public. I find myself in da front of Johnny's Lexus bein' driven round the community, given a guided tour thru' shit street, bruk down avenue, 'n' crack alley. I hate it. Everything I hate is outside the car and in it. Johnny's taste in thing's is as loud as his music. Da smell of weed makes me feel sick. Don't like weed. Meanwhile his bredrin keeps his eyes firmly glued on me. At da back of my mind is bein' on licence. What would happen if anything goes down right now? I'd be back to square one.

Tryin' ter tell Johnny I'm not interested in doin' any more robberies is like tryin' ter tell a young child not ter stroke a dangerous dog. I can hear da frustration in his voice. He gets ruffled, an' then becomes aggressive. I'm tryin ter be cool right now, as I wanna peaceful outcome, but he's pushin' it. I can take mos' things, but don't take da piss! It's goin' nowhere so he pulls over ter da side of da road, issues me an ultimatum an' then kicks me out da car at gun point. He's now tellin' me I've got a few hours ter mull it over. Says he's gonna come lookin' for me. *Bollocks! You ain't tellin' me to do shit*, I say to myself. *Mek dem cum!* I'm vex now. Don't want no beef. But if it comes my way I'll handle it. Jus' wanna go straight. No hassle. My man's threatenin' my liberty.

I'm clear that no way was I goin' back ter my old life. As he pulled away at speed I knew in my heart this wasn't be da last of it. Why me I think? I know why. I'm an ex-armed robber, that's why. Need ter take control of da situation I remember Jasmine's offer an' take da paper out my pocket, look at da address and head off. I need ter change my focus. I need ter do somethin' useful ter occupy my time. Not havin' money bites deep, but I know Johnny's offer ain't no solution. I kinda felt he'll come back. Jus' don't know where or when. Darkheart youth centre is small, claustrophobic, an' bruk down. I don't like it. Not because of da centre, but seein' da yout's crammed into a space that has no resources. Nothin'! That's why nuff man rob. When yer can't get tings you need, you rob. I sit in da corner observin' 'n' listenin to da yout' dem, actin' out, behavin' like they know what's goin' down.

It struck me how many of these yout's think they're men but have no guidance because of guys like me. You know. Father's who ain't around. I feel bad for them. I love their sense of style, energy, and most of all the attitude. It's how they have to survive. Da sad truth is that for some of them crime is gonna be a way out. I see myself in them. Crime doesn't pay long term, but it has it's moments. Hell what do I know? What do I have to show it. Squat! As Jasmine enters da space it's obvious that she has their respect. Da yout's become da children their parents would love to see; mild and attentive. I'm nervous, as she bigs me up in her introduction. I can see from their faces they're sussin' me out an' ask me all sorts of questions about prison life and street survival. I don't like the word criminal, but with them I can't escape my actions and the labels I've acquired throughout my journey in and out of crime.

Since the age of 13 until now I've spent the vast majority of time locked away. I'm an expert at being incarcerated. It feels weird, tellin' yout's about stayin' positive when I have no real reference point. There's a small part of me that feels proud of what I'm doin', but I can't show it. Like mos' things in my life I have ter keep my feelin's on lockdown. Still doesn't feel comfortable bein' here, but I remember I'm doin' this for Jasmine. Like evaporatin' steam da session comes and goes. Several yout's linger wantin' a one on one. We laugh, share stories, but deep down, I know they're startin' life and I'm well into mine. It's late an' I'm anxious. Thinkin' about Johnny's threats. I notice a yout' makin' a call an' lookin' at me at da same time. I'm suspicious, but too taken up with everyone else. So I leave it. Don't feel right. I make my out with a small group of stragglers and Jasmine. Shit! Johnny's Lexus is parked across da road. He get's out. This time with two more men, who are packin'.

Johnny bounds over an' behaves like he's my best bredrin. A look of fear erupts onto Jasmine's face. Da yout' wid da mobile walks over ter Johnny, touches fists, an' receives what looks like a chunk of money. He's obviously workin' for Johnny an' told him my whereabouts. I'm real vex now, but know I can't let off. I'm thinkin' gun, but I don't have one. I think 'bout Jasmine, da yout's and for once me. I don't want no beef, but I feel dragged into somethin' where I may have ter act. I can see my licence bein' slapped all over my face. Don't wanna go back, but my backs against da wall. All eyes are on me. Johnny's crew step forward and attempt to pull me away from Jasmine, meanwhile Johnny looks on, actin' like a poor imitation of a Mafia boss. My heart's beatin' fas', I'm sweatin', and feel my rage risin'. Somethin' snaps, I grab one man, take da gun out of his hand and aim at Johnny's head.

I look at da you't's, Jasmine, Johnny, and his bredrin's. Prison images flash thru' my mind at speed; the noises, sounds, colours, I'm panicking. Gotta stay calm. I jerk Johnny ter one side an' push him up against da wall an' tell him that if he ever troubles me again I'd wouldn't have a problem going back to jail, if it meant I'd done the right thing for once. I give him a choice. Johnny tries ter plead his case and tells me he's in trouble if I don't help him. I look at da you't's and know I can't do this. I hand Johnny da gun and tell him to shoot me. I need this ter stop. My heart's racin'. I'm not scared, jus' da adrelin of da situation. Johnny's hand is shakin'. He can't pull da trigger. I call him a 'pussyhole' and urge him again. Johnny curses out loud.

He knows he's beaten. He swears vengeance, but da shame of it makes him lose face. He grunts a few words an' then cuts his eye after me. We lock eyes. I ain't given him an inch on this one. He pushes past me, and exits as quickly as he came. For da firs' time people who think I'm heroic and brave surround me. I suppose I was, but I lock that feelin' away. No time to big myself up. I needed ter proved ter myself that freedom is a better choice than being a slave ter badness. I've got a PHD in badness. I need a new qualification. It was a tough lesson for me. Once upon a time it was me that was puttin' a gun ter people's head. I don't want it anymore an' I certainly ain't this kinda street warfare. Stuff that! I asked Jasmine if she'd drop me at Yabby's. I was hungry. I'm happy sittin' next to Jasmine. Still wonderin' if we'll ever connect physically? She's so damn fit an' sexy. But she's my only real friend. Have to change that thought. Beres Hammond bustin' thru' the speakers provides a welcome distraction. We talk trivia. There's love but it's hidden. Probably my mind playin' tricks. Maybe I need her more than she needs me. Stomach's achin' with hunger.

I can see Yabby's in the distance. Heart beat's fast. Blue and White tape, nuff police, and a whole heap of community people there to greet us. Somethin' bad's happened. Jasmine pulls over. First thought is to get out and find out *wha gwaan?* Jasmine urges me to chill and suggests its better that *she* goes to investigate. I reluctantly agree. I know I need to be in stealth mode. Don't wanna get into no beef, especially with Johnny and his crew. Nuff things go thru' my mind. I become impatient. Watchin' the scene is like lookin' at a screen saver of inner city life. I thought I'd left this shit behind long ago, but here I am at the scene of a possible murder. Hope nothin's happened to Yabby. Jasmine hurries back, distressed, and bursts into tears. She tells me Yabby's been shot dead. I feel the trap door open and me fallin'. Can't take it in. Silence, then rage. I'm upset, pissed, real vex and wanna explode, but I know I have to chill. Thoughts in my head right now ain't nice.

Negative thoughts push the good one's out. The silence between me and Jasmine seems to last forever. So many questions but no answers. Someone has to pay for this. Wanna get out the car, but Jasmine urges me to stay put. I know she's right, but the gangsta side of me wants to act. My bredrin, my father figure, dead! Head's poundin'. Outwardly I'm in control, internally I'm bustin' up inside. Jasmine's calm is like a cold shower on a hot back. I punch the dashboard several times. Tryin' to hold back the tears. I'm hurt. So hurt. The moment is broken. Johnny's Lexus pulls up. He gets out, makes his ways towards the blue and white tape. A couple of shady lookin' yout's reason with him. Johnny seems satisfied about somethin' and makes a call. He gets back into his car an' reverses at speed. He doesn't see me. I know he knows somethin'. I wanna kill him. I snap at Jasmine.

Know I was wrong, but it jus' came out. It's not personal. She understands. She always understands. I tell Jasmine I need a change of energy. She drives off. We sit together outside my place. I'm feelin' shit! Don't wanna go in. Jasmine tries to talk me. I ain't hearin'. I want revenge. Not thinkin' straight. Don't wanna be rational at this moment in time. I know Johnny's got somethin' to do with this an' I wanna find out what it is. I should have capped him when I had the chance. I see concern all over Jasmine's face. I feel it for her. She looks uncomfortable. I open up, express guilt, an' feel the pain of loss. Not jus' my loss, but the whole community. This is Yabby! The man, who taught me how to ride a bike, catch fish, kill a chicken, become a man. Yabby was more than a man to me. Indirectly I feel the man dem got to Yabby, as a way of gettin' to me.

I feel it in my gut. Jasmine tries to reassure me that I'm not to blame. She urges me to lie low for a few days until she can find out what's goin' on. I half promise. Yabby's murder has opened up somethin' inside of me that is dark and menacin'. The last time I felt like this was when a pad mate of mine called *Rigger* hung himself. I used to look out for him, but when I was removed from the pad for spittin' at a screw. *Rigger* couldn't deal with the bullyin' an' shit, so he took his life. He was good yout'. He jus' gave in at the last minute. The demon is back. An all too familiar feelin'. Jasmine grabs my hand and squeezes it gently. I remember good times. Within the flicker of an eye I find myself standin' on the pavement watchin' her car drive away. Sad to see her go. The cold starts to bite. I blow into my hands and rub them for warmth. I push my key into the crumblin' door an' see Yabby's face. I have to do somethin'. Someone has to pay for Yabby's murder. I'm still hungry.

The streets don't change. Still bleak, still smellin', still depressin'. An urban nightmare with all the appeal of a dog pissin' on my head. In sayin' that these streets give me the right cover to escape from the feds. They're out in force tonight. I stumble onto a crack head givin' some White guy a blow job. It makes me wanna puke. Saw nuff of that shit inside. Man and man sellin' themselves. I hate it. The last time someone tried to push themself up on me like that I broke both their legs and jaw. I was an animal back then. Maybe I still am. Jekyll an' Hyde. That's me. Sometimes I'm scared of who I am. The welcome sound of studio one gets closer. Like an old friend that mellow bassline combined with wicked harmonies soothes me.

Today's shit does my head in. Pure raas noise and some dickhead chattin' pure rubbish. There's a crowd a people standin' outside. I edge closer. To my surprise Johnny pulls up an' gets out. He's askin' questions. I dress back not wantin' to get noticed. Johnny gets back into his car and drives towards me. An imminent call on his mobile diverts his attention. The car passes. My mobile goes off. I see Jasmines name come up. I let it ring before it stops. I decide to go home. From a distance I see Johnny's car outside my place. I step into a shop doorway and watch them. Johnny's pacin' an' talkin' on his phone. I know he's lookin' for me. If only I had a gun, I'd take him out right now. I feel my blood boilin'. Gotta think fast. I watch Johnny and his crew drive off. I call Jasmine and tell her I need a place to stay. She's cool an' tells me she'll come and pick me up. Her place is small, compact, and neat. The waft of incense and soft Jazz is truly relaxin'. Still feelin' tense. I haven't been in the same room as a woman for a long time. She enters an' I feel my penis start to rise. I grab a cushion and position it conveniently on my front. Jasmine sits opposite me on the settee.

I see her naked and me between her legs. I look at the pictures on the wall, the African carvings, anything that will get me away from wantin' to screw her. We talk, laugh, and share a vibe well into the early hours. I notice she's flaggin', but she's too polite to tell me. I take the initiative. She brings me a towel and a quilt and tells me to make myself at home. She kisses me on the cheek again and bids me goodnight. I meet her on the way out of the bathroom. She's glistenin' and smells good. Through the open door I watch her beautiful sleek body disappears under the duvet and wish I were next to her. Watchin' Jasmine within a few feet away knowin' I can't do anything about it is hard. I think of all the one night stands, crap relationships, hangers on, and the occasional prostitute I've had. None of them can compare to what lies in front of me. Right now I'm throbbing.

I decide to relieve myself. It's no substitute for the real thing, but it's better than havin' blue ball syndrome. I wake up nursin' a headache. Gut's achin' too. Still haven't eaten. There's a note on the table from Jasmine. I read it out loud to myself and smile. She informs me that she's had to go out and will check me later. For a brief moment it feels like I'm in a relationship. Wishful thinkin'. I enter the kitchen and to my surprise I see a plate full of fried dumplin', ackee, an' saltish. I'm in heaven. Then it hits me. Yabby's lyin' in the mortuary an' I'm here livin' large. I say a silent prayer for him. I reflect on the good bits of my life. Although they are few and far between I try to keep a positive focus. Confusion again. Fuck! All sorts of crazy thoughts are goin' through my head. What if one of the yout's that did it was my own son? Shit! Don't know what he looks like. Took the pain killers, plonked myself in front of the TV an' ate like I've never seen food before.

A soft hand pushes my shoulder and jerks me out of my sleep. I look up and see Jasmine. I've been asleep for hours. I apologise and get to my feet. It doesn't feel good. I'm so tired an' have been taken off guard. Anyone could have rolled up and taken me out. What was worse I was in Jasmine's house. As usual she is ice cool about everyting. She gives me an update. Sound's like the shotter was the same you't that Johnny talked to at Darkheart Youth centre. If only. Forget that. Maybe's .. could have been's ... might have been's ... should of's ... waste of energy. She goes on to describe what went down. I get vex again. I feel my anger risin' quickly. Can't shake it off. Her lips jus' move. Can't hear anything she's sayin'. She asks me what I'm goin' to do. I snap again and lose it. I can see she's scared. I quickly apologise an explain how frustrated

I am not being able to act. Jasmine get's angry an' shouts at me. We're both tense. She demands a hug. We embrace. Thank God my penis stays down. Jasmine expresses her concern for me as she knows what I'm capable of. She tells me she doesn't want me to go after the person who did it. I didn't feel good knowin' that I was still the hardened criminal. I explain that this is not a job; it's about gettin' justice for Yabby. Jasmine goes quiet. I ask her what's wrong. Her silence says everythin'. I feel possessed. She pleads with me not to get a gun as she doesn't want me to go back to prison. I come to a decision. I have to think sensibly and strategically. A bit like pullin' off a robbery. Criminal thoughts won't leave me alone. She leaves the room. I hear water runnin'. She sets the bath for me. I close my eyes, sigh, and knew the next 24 hours will change my life forever. Jasmine pulls up a small distance away from a bruk down pool club called '8' Ball, which was a front for a Don man, called 'Redeye'.

He is an ex armed robber like me back in the day. More of a getaway driver than a shotter. He still blames me for the death of one of his bredrin, durin' a robbery that went wrong. He swore he'd get me back when I came back out. He tried to fuck me up in prison, but it didn't work. I realise that he's the man behind Johnny. *Redeye* is too smart to do his own dirty work. It makes sense now. I figure if I'm goin' to take out Johnny and that bastard who killed Yabby I have to get to *Redeye* first. I hate this waitin' game. I try to keep it light, but fail miserably. She tells me I'm safer with her around. She's right. If I'm left to my own devices I don't know what I'll do. How I'm gonna get into the club? A stroke of luck. *Redeye* appears from nowhere with a couple of his crew in tow. He pulls off at speed. I tell Jasmine to trail them at a safe distance. Don't feel good involvin' her this way, but needs must. We follow *Redeye* to a large house in a leafy suburb.

I tell Jasmine to stay back whilst I sort tings out. I can see she's scared. If only my man's dem was as loyal as she is. *Redeye's* crew stands guard outside the house. Reminds me of the old days when I used to do security. First rule is don't get caught off guard. Unlucky for them a baseball bat comes in handy in situations like this. I'm in the house treadin' carefully, headin' towards where I can see light. Through a small crack in the door I see a Marylyn Monroe look-alike with a drink in her hand. They chat and laugh. She exits. I remember that *Redeye* got his name on account of every girl anyone had, he wanted them. This place tells me she's shacked up with some old rich guy, but needs the rush of a badman. I bound in, jump him, and pin him up against the wall with a blade. I tell him I ain't got time to waste and explain my situation. I offer him a deal; Johnny and the you't in exchange for doin' the job he's been stressin' me over.

I was lyin' of course, but I had to get him to agree. Fear and hate was all over his face. Jus' give me reason an' I'll rip yer throat out. He's too weak to deal with shit on his own. Give him a knife though and he'll cut ya balls off. However, I have the upper hand this time. I threaten to cut off his ear if he doesn't tell me who shot Yabby. I discover the yout' is Johnny's nephew Calvin. *Redeye* agrees to give me Johnny an' Calvin. His woman comes back. She's perplexed. She wants to know what's going on. *Redeye* styles it out. I exit. Wonder if he'll double cross me? Inside the car Jasmine's probes me again. I remain quiet. She's not happy. I tell her from here on it, it's my fight not hers'. She's angry. We reason it through. I needed her acceptance.

It meant a lot to me. I ask her what it is about me she likes. She smiles, kisses my cheek, and drives off. I sit and watch her. She's as much a mystery to me now as she was the first day we met. Old warehouses are great for hidin'. Hearts beatin' fast. The darkness becomes illuminated with light. A car rolls in. Two people get out. Calvin and Johnny. They call out for *Redeye*. Silence. They call out again. A movement of a rat under a sheet of newspaper informs me that they're both armed. The rat escapes. Shame they won't. Within seconds I'm on Calvin and snap his neck like a straw. He drops to the ground. I run off like a Ninja. I'm too fast for Johnny who panics and starts shootin'. He calls out *Redeye's* name and curses him, whilst heading towards his car at speed. Johnny fumbles his keys in the ignition and rolls his head back to get a clearer sight of them. Without fuss I place my makeshift garrote, made from speaker wire and two piece of wood around his neck and pull. He gurgles and twitches. I wanna take him out but something inside stops me. Conscience! Guilt! Didn't have time to analyse it. Kill or be killed! Johnny's eyes bulge. Mouth dribbling. Gaspin' for air. He looks scared.

He pleads with me. He's bawlin' like a child. I punch him several times in a frenzied rage. I'm sweatin'. Can't got thru' with it. Johnny falls onto the steering wheel. The horn kicks off. I push his head away and he flops onto the passenger seat. Don't know if he's dead. It's over! Complete! I don't feel good, but I did what I had to do. For Yabby. I kick my door open and run. I'm outside, strugglin' for breath. Reality kicks in. Not feelin' good. A car passes by. I puke all over the grass. I phone Jasmine. We sit there like strangers and hardly say a word to each other. We know it's over. The look of disappointment on Jasmine's face say's it all. I feel bad. I know I've let her down. No matter how much I try to justify myself I can't. This woman could finally set me free. I was driven by rage and acted upon it. Too late now. This silence is awkward. I know it's time to go. We look at each other for the last time an' hug. She gives me another kiss on the cheek. Her tears wet my cheek. No erection this time. Jasmine presses her car keys into my hand an' bids me farewell. I shake my head and know that life for me is over. It is now a matter of survival. I know *Redeye* will come after me. Jasmine's door shuts. Feel alone and very isolated. No more Jasmine. What a fuckin' mess! I hear bawlin' from behind the door. I push the keys through her letter box an' head off. It starts to rain.

EPIPHANY

*It is the silent lion that is stalking you
(Zambian Proverb)*

I'm sitting in a dreary, sparsely decorated flat, twelve floors up, in a tower block in New Town. Home is a sprawling mass of concrete, a pissed-up lift that seldom works; we call it Muggers Paradise. Single parent mothers with attitude and no man, parade their trophy every day, like a police line-up trying to guess who the father is. We're all living on top of each other, submerged in a thick soup of inner city noises: couples fighting, hip-hop competing with garage, a dog howling to be let out.

Helicopters sweep over, looking for some drugged up joy rider that bent his last nicked car round a tree before running into my block. Smells! Stinkin' smells: shit, piss, bacon, overpowering perfume, weed, plus the worst stench of all - poverty. I hate it. Every stinking moment of it. All in the name of urban regeneration. I used to think experiments were things that happened during chemistry lessons. School. Seems like years ago. Twelve, to be exact. It's just a blur now.

Breakdowns kill off the memory like that - not that I want to remember anything - but nice thoughts are good when you can get them. I used to have nice thoughts. Weather, clothes, my favourite meal. I have no sense of time now. I'm attached to the ceiling, looking at myself. I don't belong down there with me. The place is a tip. Last night's Chinese meal, a half-smoked spliff, and cans of lager congregating on the floor.

A small shaft of daylight pokes through permanently drawn curtains, while I, Linton Jefferson Stephens, a disheveled, mashed up black man wearing a ripped vest, and boxer shorts, lie face down in my own vomit.

Thank God it didn't land on my vinyl. I always try and project sick downwards. I'm not always that lucky though. A treasured Coltrane box set got it the other day. The whole set, ruined! I knew I should have brought CD's. Deafening, disjointed sounds reverberate inside my head; they make me dive into the corner of the room, shaking backwards and forwards, whimpering like a scared child. My breathing is erratic as another palpitation sets in. Sometimes I wish my tired heart would stop. I'm not brave enough to do anything about it though. So I wait to see when death will come and meet me face to face. I've always wondered if it's male or female.

Does Death wear clothes? Does it have a face? Be dread if death were black. Who cares? I just wish it would hurry up. I pan around my room and focus attention on *that* photograph. I pick it up, and stare, not wanting to look, but knowing I have to. The police told me she'd been raped. Was that before or after the eight stab wounds? I had to identify the body. I knew it wasn't her. This photograph is her. We were gonna get married, have kids, settle down. We had an argument that day, and I stormed out. She was so beautiful. I can still smell her skin. Sandalwood. She always used sandalwood, mixed with almond oil. I'd smear it all over her body and rub it in before we made love.

We never had sex. We always made love. It's something that she insisted on. I protested at first, but in the end it worked out better. And now, what do I get? Advice. People trying to second-guess. "Move on," they tell me. "It gets easier," they say. Where's God now? Where are my friends? I go to the window, look out, and then turn away, unable to deal with the glare from the light. I shut the curtains, blocking out every beam, then plunge back to the safety of my corner.

Here comes the manic, crazy laughter, then tears. Sometimes waterfalls, other times a small shower.

I throw myself onto my back and stare at the ceiling, light a big spliff. I take the biggest pull I can. I'm watching myself again. Surrounded by acrid smoke; it smells sweeter than sandalwood right now. I draw the smoke deep into my mouth, letting it penetrate my lungs. It hits the spot. I moan and sigh, then inhale again. Four days without sleep can be punishing, especially on the eyes. So I sit and wait for it to come. Nighttime that is ...

Most people fear the night, but it fascinates me. I'm consumed with its form, its total being, and its majesty. I'm addicted to its mystery. Darkness lets me escape, hide among the shadows. Unseen and deadly. Out of the blanket of darkness comes a powerful silence, broken only by the beautiful sound of a whispering breeze that stalks the lonely streets. I like the touch, the taste, and the smell of the cool black night. It engulfs me from head to foot. The darkness is my friend, night is the messenger. They never let me down. Always there, regular as clockwork...

I manage to get to my feet and retrieve her photograph. I stare at it again, wishing for it to come alive, to provide me with some peace of mind, some love, some hope. I place it back on the windowsill, gently, and peek through the curtain. The inner city skyline looks great from a high-rise block vantage point, until you see the sights close up. There are tiny dots moving beneath me. Shit always looks good from a distance. That's the way I like it. Distance, mileage, space. I watched them shoot a guy the other day. A young drug dealer who tried to go a little too far. That's what it's like, you want to occupy a little space, but someone either wants to take it away, or set up stall on your patch. It was over so quick. The murderers scattered like running ants.

That's when I shut the curtains. Up here you don't feel anything. It's like those guys in Vietnam who dropped the bombs. If you ain't on the ground it don't affect you. Or is it that I just don't feel anymore? Who knows? Who cares? My grimy bathroom. The place I come to freshen up. Never decorated it, never intend to. What's the point? You can't see new paint in the dark. This place has no feeling or character. Very Dickensian. Scrooge would love it here. A lone candle stands guard over the soap and toothpaste. I stare hard into the wall mirror, pulling stupid faces, then splash water onto my aging skin. Wonder how and why it all went wrong. I've lost count of how many toilet rolls have patched up my battered hand – I keep having wall punch-ups. It's the hand I used to masturbate with. Even that has no meaning now. Time for some relaxation.

If you take my saxophone away, I'm dead. I blow, fondle, try to escape, remembering Coltrane. I even begin to relax, and then shit enters the right hemisphere of my brain again. I retreat to the corner and start the whole God damn ritual all over again. Got some friends this time. Tom and Jerry. I watch them try to catch each other out. Occasionally I join in, but usually end up smacking myself into a wall or falling over the furniture. They always disappear. I'll find where they are one day, I'm sure ... I wake up hours later, not knowing how or when I passed out. Yes, yes! Night's here. I can tell: no more light, no more torturous light. Time to go. What time is it? I don't know. Confusion sets in sometimes. Night removes a sense of time and space. All I know is that I'm going out. It's what I call my night ritual. It's not harmful. It's my ritual, my time, my way of being free, to be the way I want, no interruptions.

Chimes...one...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight...nine...ten...eleven...twelve...just right, just right. Checklist: Risla, cap, knife, ready. I'm off. I'm headed out into *my* world. It feels different today. Can't describe it. Dark, empty street. Dimly lit streetlights provide the only illumination. I stand outside a terraced house looking up at the window, then bring out the photograph, sigh, whimper, cry, howl like a werewolf, then move off to the sounds of abusive neighbors who hate having their tranquility disturbed by my pain. I walk towards Handsworth. A police patrol car tracks past, second-guessing, trying to suss me out. I carry on walking, face straight ahead peering out the corner of my eye, just in case they stop and I have to leg it. They disappear into the gloom.

Alone, I scream at the top of my voice. "I'm free!" I stride down the street as if I own it. It's a confident, assertive stride, gladiatorial in stature and size. No one's gonna mess with me tonight. Screaming, again. "Did-you-hear-me?" I stop to roll a spliff. My tongue massages the Risla, I fondle the soft paper, caress the weed. I remember better days. The days of Studio One and Motown, of James Brown and Earth Wind and Fire, of sound systems and Rasta. Remnants of my past, but they evaporate like steam. The first pull on the spliff calms me down. I let myself enjoy it, like the sex I used to have...Tonight it's mild, quite warm I'd say. It feels different somehow, but I can't put my finger on it. You know when you get that gut reaction *de ja vu*? It feels weird, but at the same time I don't notice it. I smile. Darkness always makes me smile. This darkness makes me smile even more than usual. I move through the frontline on Lozells Road: urban chaos, car led drug deals, hustlers, congregating black youths.

Devious looking black men emerging from the shadows while white students look for cheap weed or walk by scared and unnoticed. This is real theatre. No pretentious actors here. Everyone is playing a starring role. There's no beginning, middle, or end. It just starts somewhere and goes nowhere. The performance is always the same, same outcome. No seats, standing room only. The headache's back. Where's Tom and Jerry? They always desert you when you most need them. Alleyways are great to walk down. Oh, to be a cat. The danger's past. I can move again. I'm on Holly Road. Big houses.

The kind of house I like. It's my mother's house. Too late to go and see her. Ten years too late. Like a snake, I'm shedding my skin. There are no stars, no moon, just fading streetlights, pushing out small insignificant beams, the perfect light for a mugger crack head or gunman, poised, ready to take you out. Another sharp pain to my head forces me to the ground. I clasp my head tightly, but the pain drives into me. What are you looking at? Yeah you, tree. What cat got your tongue? Don't just stand there grinning; help me, you tall piece of shit. Piss off, then! I don't need you.

You just stand there trying to look cute. At least I can walk, and I ain't as ugly as you. No amount of cream can make your skin smooth. Sounds of a distant bass line punctuate the air. It sucks me in. Like oral sex, it feels good. I compose myself and head off towards the sounds. Douglas Road ... kicking blues. Nuff black youths congregate. I walk through them. Suspicious eyes glare as I pass. A drug deal goes down. Night people do their business. A woman is being slapped up by her angry man. The Shadow people. Those who deal, those who sell, those who kill if they have to, bound together by the fear of daylight.

Designer clothes wrapped around wasted lives. Surviving, existing, creating fear and misery, preying on the innocent. I am them, they are me; trapped prisoners of our own environment. Black on black, on white, on police, on crack, on bail, on the edge, on the verge of collapse but who gives a shit? They don't. It's not about next week, next year. It's about now...

General organized chaos. I move through, hand clasping my knife. A youth steps up to me.

Grinning as if he's gonna take liberties with me. I hate gold teeth. He has gold teeth. It was a guy with gold teeth who raped her. He looks just like him. I see rage, there's the sound of blade in chest. He screams. I run off towards Handsworth Park. Panic and screaming, behind me. I don't belong in *their* darkness. Like a sprinter I meander in and out of places only I know. I shake them off, knowing that tomorrow they'll be out seeking revenge. They can't touch me. Tom and Jerry have passed on their knowledge to me. So I've got lots of surprises up my sleeve...

Handsworth Park provides me with the right camouflage. I'm standing in the center of the disused bandstand soaking in the past memories of a by-gone area. Brass band music pours out of the silence. The moment is broken as an eerie stony silence that sweeps over this space. It becomes darker and colder. I sit at the edge kicking my feet imagining water, clear and blue. Caribbean water. Oh, how I remember it. Perched. I hear voices in the wind. A short distance away a couple have sex. The absence of tenderness, no foreplay, just a good fuck, is that what it's all about? Time to go. I hear approaching anger. No sign of Tom or Jerry. Rubbish tips! I love rubbish tips. Raw and unspoiled. By day they're ugly, but at night they glisten and shine.

Dark seas of rubbish and filth, danger lurking behind every plastic bag. People leave you alone here; frightened the smell will disrupt their new perfume or aftershave. I trip over an outstretched hand and disturb the dying moments of gangland hit. Gurgles twitch and shake. Then it's all over, a small exhalation and a last fight. I close the lids of those scared eyes. I sit there and stare at him, wondering if he had children, a mother, anyone who loved him. A soothing blast of Miles Davis wafts through my tired brain. I close my eyes and escape. I'm face to face with myself on a beach in the sun. I'm talking to myself. I look good. Heavy breathing brings me back. Angry black youths search for me. Where to next? Graveyard! They won't find me there. Graveyards never scare me. They used to, but I can be alone here and no one troubles me. The dead don't worry me; it's the living that is the problem. A new layer of darkness appears and a rat gnaws my ankle.

Like Jerry. There's Jerry. Hey Jerry! I snake around the headstones and pause to catch my breath. Where is that little mouse? I get it, we're playing hide and seek. Headstones seem so final. So bleak to the touch. I run. I run faster than my legs can. I'm running away from them. They're getting closer. I'm tripping and tumbling. I slam into a tree and fall to the ground. I fend off my attackers. I cut one, two, maybe three, until I'm tired. Feet tired. Legs heavy. Where am I? Something's wrong. This canopy of trees provides me with no bearing. A force moves me. I'm moving. Not in control. A curtain of darkness has descended, blocking my darkness out. Fragments of previous moments pass me by, as if I'm on a speeding train. Ear shattering bass, the wound in my chest, the waste ground, mortuary slab, school days, first girlfriend. Feet surround me, but they're walking away.

Why are they walking away? I shout. No-one answers...no one's there...I'm alone...lights flicker on and off. Something touches my shoulder. There's *nothing*. I stand at the water's edge. Sounds. Then silence. I'm cold. I scream but nothing comes out. I gasp and fight for air. Mud ...sand ... then water... I frantically search for her photograph, but it floats past with all my other memories. There is light. I hate light...but this light smells of sandalwood. Tom and Jerry smile at me.

SMILE

*What lies in the heart, can only be known if it passes the throat
(Yombe proverb)*

I was eight, when it first started. I came in from school one day, and looked into their bedroom, and saw our next-door neighbour Ken, a big guy, with big hands. I always remember Ken's big hands because he would occasionally pick me up off the ground and give me a hug. Ken hated his wife, well what other reason would he have for doing it with Mum ... he loved my mum literally. The first time I saw him on top of her, I watched my Dad watching from his armchair. Dad always watched from the armchair, unless he was looking at me. I spent most of my childhood being watched. Especially by Dad. He would come in and watch me get undressed for bed, and sometimes in the morning, and lots of time in the bathroom. He always did it when mum wasn't around. He said he liked us to keep it secret. He never touched me though, unless I was in the bath .. then he did put his hands between my legs. I thought he was playing about.

Although he did hit me one time, when I told mum what he was doing. She just looked at him, with a strange smile, and said nothing. She never said anything. She just smiled. It reminds me of the same smile she had when Ken would come over. When I look back on it, we never talked about most things. When Dad watched Ken fuck my mother he had a nice tight smile on his face. I learnt the art of smiling from Dad. Nice tight smiles that say nothing. People at college always wanted to know why I always had a nice tight smile on my face. I never told them .. they wouldn't have understood.

As Dad said, it was our little secret. I kept that secret for years .. and years. I never really knew what happened to Ken. As soon as my other sister came along, he was never around, and she really looked like Ken. Dad used to stomp around the house like a madman, whenever I'd ask about him. Mum used to tell me, Dad got what he deserved. I'd hear them fighting in the bedroom, never in front of me. They were too civilised. I mean screw someone else in front of your daughter, but fighting was out the question. Dad never played with my sister. He was too drunk. I'd never seen him drunk till she came along. She only lived with us for about a year, and mum told me that Adoption meant living with other people because it meant she would get more Christmas presents. I told mum, I wanted to be adopted. During my last year at school, I met this handsome young man called Steve. We were all over each other. He kept telling me how I turned him on, and he wanted to be the one who took my virginity away.

I didn't have the heart to tell him about my Dad, and Uncle Robbie. Well you couldn't could you .. I mean it was out little secret. The first time we had sex Steve felt he was an expert. He came almost as he put it inside. I'll never forget how funny he looked panting and pushing, with me looking at a spider in the ceiling. Steve went round school telling everyone how I was a virgin and he'd break me in. Little did everyone know, I thought. I stopped having sex after that .. I'm lying really ... I couldn't find a man. Steve and me broke up and I .. well had a fling with a woman. Didn't like it much, but it was different. I wasn't a lesbian, but I wanted something different.

Didn't last long. I thought I'm giving up sex .. until I met Michael at college .. he was in my Sociology class ... He was Black, Political, and never had time to smile, not like Dad did. He was always busy being busy and looking good, which I didn't mind, but he attracted too much attention from all the other girls. Michael always wore suits when everyone else was in Jeans and Jackets .. God he was sexy ... The big joke was, he was always mistaken for a lecturer, and sometimes he played up to it. It boosted his ego. I didn't mind though, because with me, he was always himself. That's what made him so attractive.

Always the gentlemen, courteous, kind, and a really good fuck. He could go on all night. He used to complain though, because I never really had an orgasm. It dented his male pride that I wasn't screaming the place to bits. I wanted to tell him about Dad, but like my orgasm, I just suppressed it anyway Michael always worked out at the gym; I always thought it was because he wanted to be seen by all those women in Lycra suits. He did have a great body and boy did he know that ... his male friends used to tell him all the time which made his head swell.

Sometimes I fantasised about Michael getting screwed by his mates, and me watching .. just like Dad. It never happened. Although Michael used to tell me that he used to watch shows like Jerry Springer and wondered how people could watch each other having sex. I just smiled ... We lived together Michael and me. It was just a matter of time before I became pregnant, as we were always at it, anywhere, anytime, it was great, never a dull moment, although

I used to hear that he was screwing a big breasted woman called Joan, who was a Humanities lecturer, but I said nothing, as I couldn't prove, and anyway if I was having such great sex, why spoil it. I was tempted occasionally when his friends would hit on me, but I suppose I never really found them exciting .. being pregnant was a shock ! Michael wanted me to keep it, but Dad was vex. He told me he didn't like losing his little girl ... Well .. I suddenly became obsessed with Michael ... and then depressed because he started to touch me, the way my Dad did .. I don't know what hit me, but when I saw Michael .. I saw my Dad ... I used to freeze and Michael told me I was like a block of ice ... I always felt he would go an fuck someone else just for spite .. I never knew if he did, but I was depressed ... they called it Clinical depression ...

I didn't really care what it was called; I just knew it hurt my head. I started to live in my own world and shut everyone out. Mum thought I was nuts and Dad .. well he just smiled as he always did .. probably because he thought his secret was safe I thought shit ! ... My body is being taken over ... I have no control over it. I looked at Michael started to blame him ..

It's his fault why I'm pregnant ... I've become a loner .. then clingy .. then needy ... then ... fuck ! what's going on .. Michael starts smiling again .. you know the kind of smile that tells you he's up to no good ... He loves me .. he loves me not .. he loves me .. he loves me not .. he loves me ... bullshit ! He'd never told me he loved me for ages, and I heard a rumour that his bitch lecturer was carrying another baby for him, but as she was married, I decided to leave it, not for her sake, but her husband's.

Poor sod .. probably never even knew the guy she used to train with was screwing her things started to get out of hand ... Michael got pissed off with my mood swings .. I never knew from one day to the next whether Michael actually loved me ... as the pills got more and more he started to call me more and more names ... I nearly stabbed him one night, but luckily I hit the headboard instead .. Dad came round the other day .. he didn't say much .. he just looked at me .. and looked and looked .. and then ... smiled ... and asked me how I was feeling ... I complained about Michael, And then my Dad walked over, grabbed my arse and said there there ! I wanted to punch him, but he just laughed and went home. I thought about mum and wanted to phone her, but my head started aching and I needed to chill out .. I was frustrated when I couldn't find the pills. I did eventually they calmed me down .. took me somewhere else .

I get a phone call from another bitch telling me she was carrying a child for Michael ... I didn't take much notice .. I just slammed the phone down, or so I thought .. the telephone engineer told me it took a lot of force ripping it out the wall like that . I confronted Michael ... who admitted it and said it was a mistake and how he'd met her before he met me, and the usual bullshit .. I laughed .. I laughed so loud it hurt he was upset because I didn't wanna have sex with him that night .. he tried .. oh how he tried .. the amount of time he had achy testicles .. he would complain that he needed a release .. I told him use your hand .. which always made him vex and as usual he would storm out ... I didn't see him for a couple of days .. I was happy so I thought ... all that space to myself ... until I walked into my bedroom and hallucinated .. I saw Ken our next door neighbour humping my mum ... again and again and again .. and I saw my Dad smiling ... and then I woke up out of my nightmare ..

I was sweating ... scared .. not knowing who to turn to .. I hated Michael .. I got in touch with his new baby mother, and heard Michael in the background .. I put the phone down and cried all night ... I held my stomach and talked to my baby and told it not to worry .. I'd be there no matter what . Hospital, now that was an ordeal .. I was there alone I didn't tell Michael ... the fucking pain was a killer, but they dragged it out of me ... 3.40 am ... I'll never forget the time ...It's a boy .. he looks like my Dad .. not Michael ... everyone comes to see me at hospital Not me, but my son .. I was just there .. an ornament .. an excuse for other parents to relive what they never had .. I called my son Kenneth, to spite my Dad .. he was livid, especially when I asked him about my sister.

Mum cursed me off and took the flowers she'd brought with her ... the dreadest thing was when one of Michael's women turns up and told me how sorry she was .. we talked, and I told her to go before Michael gets here .. she told me she didn't want Michael anymore and I could have him .. I just laughed ... Michael turned up late, said he was busy down the gym, and didn't hear the message on his mobile ... you bastard I thought .. but I was in too much pain from the 'C' section to let him get to me ...

Michael told me how couldn't wait to get me home coz home is where the heart is ... who ever said that wants stringing up ... it's bullshit ! I get home and Michael decides it's time to get violent .. as my body took the daily battering I talked to myself in my head and when I saw his manic face I wet myself, and he beat me again.

His secret was out hold up your trophy Michael ... needs more slaps .. more punches .. go on Michael hit me .. hit me ... fucking hit me !!!! and then it came .. one more kick .. one more hit and he's nearly through .. that's it .. feel better do .. you sad bastard .. you've won .. you've won ..

How does it feel .. step over your trophy .. wash away the guilt .. can't have you staining your hands now can we ... I found it easy to submit after that ... I thought it must be love .. sing me that madness song all over again .. just another moment of madness ...Michael starts using me as a doormat .. he likes it ... he's in control .. I tell him as he fucks me .. he can I wipe my feet on me ... he thinks I'm talking dirty and comes quick ... I'm pregnant again .. Michael takes me for an abortion ...

The doctor's worried because he says I keep smiling, and I hear Michael saying how much he cares for me, and loves me, and how an abortion is the only way forward .. when the doctor asked me, I just nodded ... couldn't take the stress of another beating. The doctor smiles as he tells me to undress, and examines me. I scream as I see my Dad all over again. Michael is embarrassed and tells me to shut up, the Doctor just continues, and secretly tells Michael I need therapy. Michael starts worrying when the doctor notices the bruises on my arms.

I smiled and blamed the fall I stay in hospital for a while .. five days all told it was quite messy .. and those pains .. I had nuff pains ... compared to Michaels beating though, they were quite tame. I asked the Doctor if my labour pains had started. You've had an abortion he stated ... I cried .. inside ... and out .. Michael felt relieved .. I could see it all over his fucking face .. you bastard I thought .. you're a killer ... you've fucking killed something inside me .. in fact you've killed part of me and he still wanted sex ...

I gave it to him, until his balls ached .. anytime he was tired I'd give him an erection and start again ... I'll teach you .. you bastard ... I became depressed again .. really depressed ... The drugs made me slow .. happy .. angry .. stupid. was floppy and smiling all week like a mad woman ... I've lost my anger ... I wanted it back

Michael said he needed to some space .. but stays for a fuck first .. not a very good one cause he couldn't get it to stand up I had to help him a little .. sad bastard . he started panting and gasping and panting and gasping and then flopped ... as I heard the door shut .. I just stared out the window .. I remember that day because it coincided with Social Services taking my son away .. I'm sure his foster parents will be in touch .. they seemed like nice people ... I've got my freedom back ... I can do what I want .. when I want .. I'm free ...I met this guy the other day ... he was good looking .. attractive ... intelligent , but I didn't want that .. I wanted sex ... nothing but raw unadulterated passionate .. hot and steamy sex as a way of cleansing myself from Michael .. why shouldn't I ? I thought .. men do it all the time .. Michael came in and caught us .. he was vex, but the guy was bigger than he was .. so he stormed out ... I never saw the guy again, but it was good ... Michael came back that night and we argued and had a fight and then screwed the way it used to be .. then he told me he'd found someone else .. and how it was over ... it was then I decided .. before the drugs .. before him .. before everything .. there was me .. I prayed for a solution ... I heard nothing .. what was I supposed to do ..just stand there and let it happen ... I felt the knife enter his chest .. and then he let out a scream .. not a loud one .. he started vibrating and twitching, but all I could do was laugh ... there's a weird sound when someone's

dying .. a sort of gurgling I'll never forget the expression on his face ... he just stared at me .. seemed like forever ...

I just stood over him I was unaware of the mess .. I noticed it when I went to put on a 'R' Kelly CD afterwards ... my hands were red .. the floor was red .. everywhere was red strange really I never felt angry or anything ... I looked at myself in the mirror and smiled ... I saw my mum and Dad in the mirror

Dad was smiling as usual ...It was nice policemen who came to the house .. I apologised for the mess and asked them if I could have a wash before they take me down to the station ... they were really polite.

Mum and Dad don't come and see me as much as they used to ...

TO BE OR NOT TO BE ... ME

*The wise aim at boundaries beyond the present; by their
Struggle they transcend the circle of their beginning
(African Proverb)*

I wake up, a rope around my neck. I'm looking at an angry mob looking at me. I'm choking. I'm dying. Time stands still. I hear my thoughts Sounds ... big sounds ... small sounds .. sounds ... sounds of hate .. sounds of whispering .. sounds ... sounds of loneliness .. sounds of desire .. sounds of need .. cries for freedom .. sounds of thoughts .. sounds of hope .. sounds of hate .. sounds of dreaming .. sounds of pain ... sounds of weeping .. sounds of hurting ... sounds of wanting ... sounds of screaming ... sounds of memories ... sounds of the future ... sounds of endless moments .. sounds without meaning .. without purpose .. without hope ... how's .. if's .. but's ... maybes ... yesterday ... gone .. today ... now .. changes .. time ... this time ... my time ... wrong time ... time is waning ... time has left ... time ... frustrated. .. berated... stated ... clearly ... the terms .. like worms .. things turn .. they crash ... they burn ... with scorn... weren't born... day dawns .. then it happens ... like lightenin' .. it's frightenin ... how it comes ... then goes .. 'n' flows.. then shows ... it's self like a demon ... rips yer heart out.. try to shout ... stout ... like wood... I'm not... hit the .. spot .. where ... here .. they're here ... hear the fear .. taste the fear ... on the cusp... on the verge ... the breakdown ... taken down... surrounded .. bodie's pounded .. deaths sounded the call ... the rise .. the fall ... see me ... do they see.. me .. no they don't ... or won't .. here.. then there... here... not there ... where do they want ... want who... me ... don't they see or believe... that stream.... lost dream

...loud scream ...my consciousness ... need to redress ... the ache
 .. as they takes ... my soul... this dark black hole .. on the roll .. er
 ... coaster... flyin'back 'n' forth.... forth 'n' backcrack...
 slap... clap... rise.. fall ... bawl. .. like a child mild bulging eyes.
 .. always tried .. to please... the disease Infects.. connects ...
 their soul's they need .. to feed .. 'n' kill my spirit... 'n' spill it
 with blood ...trippin' 'n' fallin' 'n' rantin' 'n' stallin' what the ...
 what the ... what the confusion... delusion ... a conclusion
 with the ... head pounds.. dead sounds.... rebounds ... feelin'
 down... can't raise ...dark blue haze ... crazed ... laughter
 inside... tried.... As I slip 'n' slide .. what the.. what the.. what
 the .. k ...k ...k .. white knights in flight. .. the plight of the slave ..
 have to .. face it .. place it .. re-frame .. re-name .. re-claim ... all
 that is mine ... no choice.. my voice... is silent... they're violent ..
 memories flashing...feel I'm crashing ...hear them laughing
 tongues and whips lashing...pain .. their pain on me ... my pain
 is silent ... falls on deaf ears ... deafening cheers .. in the face of
 love.. like a glove ... it don't fit right.. must hold tight ...blind ..
 no sight wings clipped ... no flight.. can't give in .. must refuse
 ...diffuse.. they accuse.. me .. what the ... what the ... what the ..
 is going on inside my head .. livin' on top of... livin' inside of...
 livin' outside of... self ...need space ...to hear myself ...be near
 myself ...to know myself ...to be myself claus tro ...pho
 ...bic .. tt mosphere ...always present always there ...
 depressed obsessed ... brain suppressed ... need to rest
 feel so weak ...the landscape's bleak ... reached the peak
 ...can't think ...or breathe, ...or med itate ...no more time
 ...to con tem plate ... cannot stop ...cannot wait ...what is
 my role? ...what is my fate?they ain't stoppin' ...to hes I
 ... tate? ... this place? dark so blue ...I knew ...this time
 ...would come, carrying this weight ...A heavy load

....walking down this ...endless roadwinding... spiralling
 ,.... bottomless well ...descending to hell ...high 'n' low ...fast 'n'
 slow ...won't let gothe ebb 'n' flow ... this choking collar
 hear me holler ...as I let it out ... i need space ... no where to
 go ...the win..... dow of my life can't recall, the rise
 ... the fall ...this brick wall ...is this all? ... that there is ... not
 cool .. they rulethis whirlpool ...drags me down ...will I
 drown lonely figure silhouette ...wailing soul ...silent fret
 too much paintoo much regret ... cannot forget that I
 need space ...need to share ...need to care need a better at
 mos ...phere .. need to breathe ... fresh air ...need to feed .. the
 soul ...everywhere ... Open the door feelin' raw ...the corr
 idor .. of my ... mind ...I look hard ...'N' do not find .. the
 space.... I require ...'n' desire ... t o find my peace ...my
 release ...my space just bleakness what is this ...their
 weakness .. makes me know .. what ...I feel is real ...so I
 protest .. then I shout ... let me out .. let me go ... set me free ... let
 compassion show But here's the news they refuse ... they
 abuse I push 'n' kick kick 'n' pushthey rush ... 'n' then
 crush my spirit .. still trying to kill it .. still trying to win it ... I
 scream then shout I try to let it out what the ... what
 the ... what the .. is going on inside my head there's no
 light losing the fight ... wings clipped there's no flight ... I'm
 not right ... it not a new day ...I'm not a new me .. still not free ..
 cannot flea ... as watch 'n' hear 'n' feel ... those who have fed on
 my soul ... those who planted trees for us to swing from ... those
 who forced us off the land ... I had a sense of purpose ...sense of
 place ... sense of who am i ...what am i ...why am i ... became
 miseducated ... mis .. guidedmis .. directed ... mis ..
 understood ... mis ... quoted ... mis ... diagnosed ... mis ...
 represented ... mis ... sed the point .. time's stood still .. time's

standing still .. times' running out .. time's run out .. not enough
 time ... not the right time ... need more time ... ran out of time ...
 didn't have time ... don't know time time to go time .. to be
 or not to be ...what should be .. could be ... must be ... will be
 might be ... never will be .. should be ... can never be .. or is it
 being ... being us ... being me ... being you being together
 being a partnership ... being a collective being aware ... just
 being ... what the ... what the ... what the .. is going on inside
 my head .. it is about story ... our story .. your story ... my story
 .. their story .. her story .. his story .. their story .. they define .. re-
 define ... invent .. deconstruct ... converge ... emerge .. on the
 verge of ... a moment this moment .. doubts broken heart ...
 thinks suicide.. can't hide .. broken pride .. crossed the divide .. I
 was born as a child ... in mid life .. never smiled ...got tamed ..
 made wild... lost all sense of style ...they put me trial ...was well
 read .. knew the right words ... conscious ... became political
 read more .. knew more ...sussed the conspiracy ... believed in
 liberation .. they were *wannabe*'s who's become a *might be* .. who
 were *has been's* .. whose thinking became irrelevant ... they made
 me father less..... community less ... emotion ... less
mind less value ... less care ... less
 thought ... less..... conscious less..... couldn't care ... less....
 Identity ... less ...what the ... what the ... what the .. is going on
 inside my head ... pain emotional arrearsdespairing mood
a rut ...screaming mode ... this pain in my brain ... has
 remained ... just the same ... thoughtstwisted strain ...this
 pain ... has no name ... like the wind ... always blows ... without
 trace ... to a place ... where I fall without grace ... like glass ..
 that has broken can't see clear ... nothing spoken ... not much
 at all ... my withdrawal insides turned out ... cannot shout
 riddled with doubt ... as this pain in my brain ..will not cease ..

want release possessed with their quest .. my soul doesn't rest ... like a knife ... razor sharp ... understood ... never am .. never was ... just because ... of my ... mind ... they said I'm my ideas ... were all there's ... like a tormented moan ... I'm standing here alone .. must atone no love has been shown no peace ... will cease ... or release ... the pain in my brain. ... my thoughts ... are the ... sort ... that cannot be boughtlike a drum skin that's taut ... like a soldier I fought to regain this pain in my brain. ... at times just not clear ... but aware ... of the fear that was there .. Revelation like Hades inferno ...Like Dante's ...mirage ...it is large ... it is raw... as I step thru' the doorof my life ...filled with ...strife ... like a knife ... cuts me down ... N' still every grain of my brain ... remains just the same ... twisted thoughts ... puts a strain ... again 'n' again ... comes 'n' goes ... fast 'n' slows highs then lows ... they have worn the mask .. played the game .. avoided the issue side ... stepped the truth .. didn't turn the other cheek ... spouted the rhetoric ... colluded with deceit .. whilst others died .. others suffered ... others did not make it ... others were swallowed up ... others were spat out ... others were taken off course ...others were devoured ... others were castrated ... because others protected their ass the master trickster ... shape shifter ... clown ... a snake that shed its skin .. grew a new one ... see the devil .. in peril ... soon gone ... dead .. blood red ... like a book that's been read feel the fear ... no more tears ... as I stare ... death in the face ... early grave ... not alive ... can't revive .. myself .. this chaos is killing me ... I'm quiet 'n' all alone ... Ghost's of time are haunting me .. I know its time to go ... every journey has its end .. in death I find a friend ... my legacy remains ... locked 'n' bound in rusting chains .. reflection in my mind ...we're all just Ghosts in Time ... silence is all around me ... no longer feel afraid death

embraces all my needs .. now my final journey's made ... no longer held down captive ... removed the shackles 'n' these chains ... now my journey is completed ... I will hopefully remain ... just a *Ghost in Time* ... the stillness just surrounds me ... there's a calming of my soul ... broken pieces start to mend ... to make my spirit whole ... know that I am on the journey ... once a blind man I can now see .. where I was held captive in the darkness ... I know now that I'm well and truly free ... I'm just a Ghost in Time ... then sounds ... big sounds ... small sounds .. sounds ... sounds of hate .. sounds of whispering .. sounds ... sounds of loneliness .. sounds of desire .. sounds of need .. cries for freedom .. sounds of thoughts .. sounds of hope .. sounds of hate .. sounds of dreaming .. sounds of pain ... sounds of weeping .. sounds of hurting ... sounds of wanting ... sounds of screaming ... sounds of memories ... sounds of the future ... sounds of endless moments .. sounds without meaning .. without purpose .. without hope ... how's .. if's .. but's ... maybes yesterday ... gone ... now I feel .. the steel that severed my foot ... from ...the leg which ... shook whilst ...rope burns ... tightened ... around the larynx .. until ...my breath disappeared ...as eyes my bulged ... out of my skullthat was crushed ...as the gun butt ...severed my cranium ...from the brain ...they said I didn't have ... house or field .. a slave is a slavepeace is what I need peace is coming ... my release is coming I am now free ... death smiles and says .. hello and welcome .. enter the space .. become today I left the plantation .. free ...I wake. Sweating, struggling for breath, heart pumping. I'm alive. Scared. Frightened. Shocked. I calm down, compose myself, and take a good look at myself. To be or not to be ... me.

IT MUST BE LOVE

*A stone may break your hoe, a word will break your heart
(Angolan proverb)*

I sit nervously in a small grey room anticipating the arrival of 'J', a young black man in the care of a Youth Offending team. My previous encounter with 'J' reveals a young man on the cusp of serious offending, who is reacting and responding to the trauma of both personal and social neglect. My lasting image of 'J' was an insular, angry, and potentially volatile young man who was crying out for support, but emotionally struggling to ask for it. A car pulls up and out step's Rob, 'J's key worker, who informs me that 'J' hasn't been seen for the last couple of days. Rob asks if I want to go and find 'J'. A small negotiation with the YOT manager, and we're out of there. Although it was going to be a risky pursuit, the idea of not having a dialogue with 'J' was just not feasible. The main reason being was 'J' like a legion of young men before him holds the key to many answers researchers, policy makers, and analysts, make up without engaging in a real conversation. I knew that the probability of finding him was slim, but it felt a worthwhile challenge, that may bring in a significant result. As Rob and I set off we swap stories and make a real connection. Work like this is about a team effort and not reliant on status, profile, or academic ability. Rob was a guy who knew the streets, had a strong awareness of young people like 'J', but more importantly he wants to make a difference in the lives of young guys like 'J'.

After a few random stops in the community we eventually find 'J' at a house where he'd found refuge to 'chill out'. With things at home piling up, stress of dealing with his mum, and generally in need of a space to reflect, forces 'J' to be elsewhere. I discover an ironic twist in 'J' disappearing act, namely he wants his independence, but the thought of being on his own is a scary prospect. 'J' climbs into Rob's car, scowls, glares, and then touches my fist. In a way I'd got his approval, but the look of cynicism is very evident. To 'J' it appears I was yet another vested interest wanting to pick his brain and make some recommendations in a report that no one was going to read or act on. Hard as it is I can't argue with his logic. In saying that I continue to press 'J' about his well being, which he acknowledges with a few nods of the head and the occasional answer. I become very aware of the difficulty 'J' finds in talking to me in front of his key worker. It was at that point I decide to pull back and give 'J' the space to engage on his own terms. Pushing 'J' into a corner could result in conflict that I want to avoid.

Rob soon picks up the vibe and suggests we go for something to eat at a fast food restaurant. 'J' smiles and agrees. Not only did I feel good that we'd touched base, but I was also anxious about how our meeting would be. Sitting with 'J' gave Rob his exit point. We all touched fist and 'J's loyal worker left. Too many professionals use guys like 'J' for CV information, without doing the job or establishing the credibility with their key workers. I had my work cut out. For the next few minutes 'J' eats his food and drank, like a condemned man having a last meal. He is clearly hungry. Another aspect of our encounter is 'J's nervousness. Every person coming in is surveyed with piercing looks.

At one point I ask 'J' if he had an on-going beef with anyone as I sensed that this space is unsafe. I ask 'J' is he wants to leave. There was no answer. 'J' gets to his feet, heads out the door, and continues to look from side to side, front to back. I was becoming nervous, as 'J' doesn't indicate why he was so edgy. So there we were sitting in my car, outside a house in silence. I was playing the internal DVD of this meeting and begin to wonder if I would get a break though. I was still reminded that 'J' is a young man who is struggling to find time and space to communicate anything to anyone, and my intrusion into his life may leave him a little irritated as I had pulled him away from *'Street runnins'*. A few minutes pass and 'J' sits in silence as if he wanted to tell me stuff, but was still fearful of talking to a stranger who claimed he was here to help. And then it happens. 'J' opens up. For over an hour we engage in deep discussion about the things that are troubling him. 'J' reveals his distress about his absent father, the pain of not experiencing love in his life, the on-going battle with his mum, all underpinned by a deep sense of loss and despair in relation to losing friends to gun crime.

'J's tough exterior drops off him like snow on a melting glacier. I was now talking to someone who was less of a *'bad boy'* or *'young offender'*, but a young man in need of understanding and love. Amazingly 'J' smiles in a shy type of way and asks me a profound question; *'what is love?'* 'J' takes me completely by surprise and off guard. I go blank for the first time and ask him to give me a few moments to think of a response. For the first time in our conversation the tables have been turned. The good thing was 'J' is in control and is growing in confidence.

As I bumble my way through an answer that was anything but right, it provides 'J' with an opportunity to see me as someone who was not there to punish or hurt him, but just another individual who was wrestling with similar issues as him.

Not that I want to put myself in the same situation as 'J', but the need for love, connection, support, and understanding, is common to both of us. 'J' is now smiling, laughing, letting his vulnerability show in a way that was natural and unpretentious. In 'J' I see myself. Here is a young man with so much to give, but someone who has had so much taken away. The clarity about his life is very apparent at that moment in time. Suffering from *Father hunger syndrome*, living the fear of acceptance or rejection by society..

As quick as the conversation had started it ends and 'J' links his cousin on the mobile. Within moments 'J's cousin arrives and they're off. Like two prowling hyena's poised to strike at any moment. 'J' touches my fist, makes a last glance back, put his mask on, and vanishes into the chaotic world of *'Street Runnin's'*. To 'J' the streets are a place he can exercise control through menace and fear, as well as finding solace in a world of lost souls. Hopefully 'J' will discover a better way to negotiate the social maze before it's too late.

Sadly though if love passes 'J' by and he vents his anger on an innocent bystander or turns it in on himself, then he will become a mere number, an output target, a statistic, languishing in the abyss and banished to the margins of a society that has little or no interest in him as a person. *'Mirror mirror on the wall, will 'J's talents, gifts, and abilities be seen or heard?'* The reflection is hazy. I wish it were clearer for guys like 'J'. 20 minutes after 'J' left I start the engine and head home.

SPIRAL

*The past cannot be changed, nor the future known
(Swahili proverb)*

5 years 4 months an' three days. Nottingham Prison. Good riddance. It's rainin'. Don't care. Got my prison bag 'N' I'm free. That's all that matters. Feels good. Rain on my face. Taxi's waitin'. Feel nervous. The driver ain't payin' me no mind.

'Where yer goin?' he barks

'The Endz' I reply.

He looks at me like I'm crazy.

'The Endz? I don't know no endz! So where yer goin?' he growls. I wanna punch him but I don't wanna go back inside so soon. I take a piece of paper out my pocket and give it to him. He scans it.

'Get in?' he grunts.

The cab smells of smoke. Radio Trent sounds shit! But I'm free.

'What ya lookin' at?' I shout as I see my man lookin' at me in the mirror evry second. He looks away quickly. I'm takin' in the sights. It all seems so strange. It's like I'm seein' things but I ain't. Yer get me? It seems familiar but I can't get the sounds of prison out my head. My hearts beatin' fast. Strugglin' with my breathin'. I'm chokin'. Cab pulls over.

'Look I don't know what you're on, but I ain't takin' you no further' he says fearfully. I can't speak. Things are spinning. I hit the ground. Heads hurtin' an' I'm wet. The cab drives off. If I see my man again I'm gonna bus' his arse. People jus' walkin' pas'

'Raatid! Sensi' a familiar voice calls out.

I look up it sounds like Skippa. I can't speak. He helps get me to my feet. Skippa's my tight bredrin from back in the day. A good you'. Always tried to keep me out of trouble. Skippa's always been there for me. Still is.

'You goin' to ya mums?' he asks gently.

I nod. My blurry eyes and headache can't quite make his image out. I'm in Skippa's car. The systems pumpin', Don't really like 'the spitter', but the bass is sweet.

'Yo bredrin, howya doin?' Skippa asks.

I shake my head and say nothin'.

'Yo blood what happened in there?' Skippa says with concern

'Nothin' I reply.

'You ain't lookin good blood' Skippa continues

'I'll drop ya to ya mums and link ya later' he finishes.

Time drags. Mind's blank. Skippa is talkin' to me but all I see is lips movin'.

'Here we are' Skippa shouts.

I stay quiet. Feel unfamiliar. That's the way it is.

'Yo bredrin, we're gonna link yeah?'

I blank again.

'Take this'. Skippa presses a key into my hand.

'What's this for?' I ask

'It's the key to my yard. If you need a space to put your head down, use it' Skippa replies,

Skippa drives off. Feelin' nervous. I'm standin' outside mum's door for the first time in over 5 years. I go to knock an' pull my hand back. A few people pass and are lookin' at me. Don't like it. I take a deep breath and knock. Heart's beatin' real fast. I hear footsteps on the other side of the door.

I'm sittin' in the livin' room cold an' wet.

'Where's mum?' I ask Patrick. He's my stepfather. We ain't close.

'Hospital?' Patrick says through gritted teeth.

Ain't a good feelin'. Never got on with him then an' I ain't gonna get on with him now.

'Let's jus' get this straight. You're only here till yer get a place' Patrick says tryin' to intimidate me.

'When's mum gettin' back?' I ask knowin' he don't wanna give me an answer.

'Don't change the subject! Do you understand what I'm sayin?' Patrick continues

'I'm hungry' I tell him plainly.

He walks up to me and pushes his face into mine.

'You put one foot wrong this time and it's me an' you. If I had my way, you would never set foot in here again. Get out my sight' Patrick leaves. I hear the door shut with a loud bang. Don't care what he wants to say right now. I'm hungry. The front door opens.

'Patrick?' the voice calls out. Then footsteps.

The door opens. It's mum.

'Mikey. I didn't know you were out today?' mum says as tears start to drop.

'Come here son, let me hug you?' Mum screams with joy The hug feels good. It feels safe. The door flies open. Patrick bursts in. He's vex.

'I'm goin' out!' Patrick says glarin' at me, like a laser cuttin' metal.

'Why you goin' out now? My son's back' Mum inquires. Patrick says nothin' and storms off. The door sounds loud. Don't like door slammin. Reminds me of prison.

'Have you eaten yet?' Mum asks kindly.

'What happened at hospital?' I ask

Mum says nothin' and starts cookin'.

'Listen son, you can stay here as long as you like. I'm jus' glad you're home safe' Mum continues.

I can see she's ill but I jus' go with the flow. The smells lick me. Fried plaintain ... dumplin' ... egg 'n' beans. First real breakfast. Tastes sweet. Freedom tastes sweeter. My older brother Robbie and my younger sister Valerie burst in.

'What's he doin here?' Robbie shouts

'Hush' Mum replies *'Don't start'*

'You're too soft mum. You know he's gonna get you in trouble again' Valerie kicks off. I wanna argue with them but my head hurts. I pick up my food and go to leave.

'Yeah go on. Run off like you always do.' Robbie says gloatin'.

I turn an' face him.

'When I get a place I'll be gone. Don't worry 'bout that'

I respond, dyin' to punch him in his face.

'I ain't worried. Coz if you don't I'll put you out myself. You ain't wanted around here' Robbie goes on. Feel like crap.

'Stop it! I don't want to see no arguments in my house. Mikey you're rooms ready' Mum finishes.

I hit the stairs an' feel dizzy. Can't remember much after that.

I wake up an' I'm in my old room. Feel safe. Feel secure.

Seems like hours have passed. My heads spinnin'. The voices are back. I can't take the voices. Feel sleepy.

I'm out. Feels weird. Strange. Nervous. Tryin' hard to go unnoticed. Back in the Endz. It's been a long time. Community centre's still there. Still grubby. Still mashed up. Could do with paintin'. Used to sell weed on those steps. Can't believe it. The old library. Still standin'. G' Boy got shot there. In front of my face. Never forget that day. Don't wanna remember that. This place wasn't here before. Community bookshop. Never had that when I was here. Probably if I did I wouldn't have got into trouble. Used to go to the prison library though. Need to get my bearin's. Nuff yout's. Jugglin'. Tings ain't changed. That yout' can't be no older than 13. What's gwaanin'? Feel' dizzy again. Have to stand still for a while. Breathin' hard. People are lookin' at me.

'Yo bredrin' A voice calls out.

I'm blank.

'It's me. Skippa'

We touch fists.

'The manz dem know that you're back in da endz' Skippa goes on.

'I jus' wanna keep my head down' I reply, not wanting to chat much.

'I know. You need to be careful' Skippa says

'Tings are different now. That las' sentence was heavy' I explain

'Yer gonna need some money' Skippa says an' presses some notes in my hand.

I hand it back.

'I ain't down with it. Trus' me I ain't goin' back. Thanx , but I need to chill for while' I reply

'We a bredrin hold on to this Skippa pushes the notes back into my hand, Things have changed in the Endz. It ain't like when you ran tingz. I jus' want you to have a good start. Take care bredrin. Yu know where I am, 'yu still got me key'

I stare at the money. Tears start fallin'. Can't believe I've got such a good bredrin. I'm standin' on my own.

'Mad bwoy!' I hear a young voice call out.

I search for the voice. I hit the ground. Some yout' on a bike drops me with a piece of wood to the temple. He leans into my face.

'Jus to let you know, you ain't no Don in the Endz anymore. So don't even go there. Yer get me blood'

The yout' hits me again an' kicks me couple of times in the ribs. His bike disappears. Feet into my ribs. I can't scream out. My voice goes silent. Blood trickles from my head, into my eyes an' into my mouth. Can't make out who he is. Skippa helps me to my feet.

'Yo bredrin' I told you. These yout' ain't rompin'.

Voices. I'm hearin' voices again. Everythin's a blur. Jus wanna go home. I'm sittin' in Skippa's place. He brings me some drinkin' chocolate and some food.

'Why don't you stay here?' Skippa asks

Head hurts. Can't say anything. Feel dizzy. Drop asleep. Feel safe at Skippa's.

I wake up. Skippa's cousin General arrives. General is the man who runs the Endz, now.

'What you doin' here?' Skippa asks

'Heard Sensi's back' General replies

General touches fists with me. Can't touch his skin as I can't get past the bling on his fingers. General smells of weed. It's overpowering.

'Yo bredrin you look mashed' General says

'Jus' leave him. He don't need no drama in his life right now?'

Skippa says.

General makes a call and steps to the window. I used to be like him. General finishes the call and walks over to me.

'You need anything, jus' holla ... scen' General says smilin' thru' gold teet'

I watch General and Skippa argue. General kisses his teeth and exits vex.

'I'm Tired bredrin. Real tired' I respond

'Listen Mikey, you know the runnins'. People like my cousin ain't good. Jus' leave well alone' Skippa points out sternly.

'Trus' me I don't wanna be in the game' I finish

'Been talkin' to couple of people. I know a man who may be able to hook you up with a Job. Nothin' big, but it's a start' Skippa says smilin'

I hear voices I hear prison sounds. I hear the sound of my bredrin bein' shot. Piss pours into my shoes. I've wet myself.

I blank out. Find myself in Skippa's bath. Don't know how I got in. Feels good. Calmin'.

'Clean yourself up' an' I'll see ya later.' Skippa tells me.

'There's some new clothes in the livin' room' Skippa finishes.

Skippa leaves. He a good bredrin. Solid. Need to get out. I get

ready quick and leave. It starts to rain. I stand there for what seems like ages People stare at me. The voices come back, again. They sound all right this time. I talk back to them. The police arrive. I'm arrested. I blank out.

Back inside. Mental health ward this time. I'm in this therapy run by people from The Community. Not the bad ones. These people are good. Not bad. Not tryin' to hurt me. Steve and Marjorie. I like them. I'm in a group of people like me. 'Mikey, do you want to tell us your story?' Steve asks politely. I look at everyone lookin' at me. I'm nervous an' start to breath heavy like I'm havin' a panic attack.

'It's all right' Marjorie says *'In your own time'* she continues.

I take a deep breath. This place ain't like prison. This is my first experience of hospitalisation. It ain't nice. I don't hear voices as much but there's a lot of screamers in here. That is jus' like prison. People start laughin'.

'What yer laughin' at?' I shout

'They're not laughing at you, they're laughing at what you said. Carry on' Steve says in a reassurin' voice.

I'm not a mad person but now I feel I'm classed as one of them. If someone says you're mad enough times you think you are. I did not know what I'm in this hospital for? What I do remember is a number of policemen jumped me and took me away I feel alone in here. I don't feel human.

The doctors and everyone keep sayin' I have mental health problems; As far as I am concerned I am ok. They put me on some anti-psychotic drugs They did work for a few days an'

completely knocked me out. I know the medication is changing me. I think I am a bit slower now. I just want to sleep all the time. Last night I was in the bathroom at about 11pm running water for a bath I was told not to do it, but I disobeyed. Why should they take away my right to have a bath? Five members of staff came bursting into my room without knocking at the door.

I really felt as though they were provoking me, like they wanted me to kick off. I didn't react but they hurt me when they restrained me. Couldn't fight back. I'm off my medication now. I was given a choice, which made me feel much better. That's why I opted to come here an' do therapy. I feel better now

'Thanx for that' Marjorie said.

Everyone starts clappin'. I feel good. Never had praise like that before. Get back to my room. Skippa comes to visit me.

It's good to see him. Feel I've let him down.

We talk for ages. He gives me bad news. Mum is dead. I cry hard.

I start shakin', bangin' the walls with my fists till they bleed.

Skippa grabs me an' holds me till I calm down.

'Yo bredrin. I've got ya back. If ya need me to do anything, let me know' Skippa goes on.

Me an' Skippa sit in silence. He leaves.

I pray hard an' sleep with my bible by my side.

In hospital I start readin' a lot. Since mum died I feel closer to God The staff say I'm not right in the head. They try to put me on medication again. I pretend to take it. This place is more depressin' by the day. People walkin' around like Zombies. Nothin' positive. I've been goin' to therapy for a while now.

I like Steve and Marjorie. They make me feel safe.
 I don't hear voices anymore. I am told that too much weed
 smokin' is partly responsible. Found out I might be sufferin' from
 Post Traumatic Disorder.
 Never really dealt with my past Jugglin ... shootin's ... pure crap
 Can't get out of it . Start writing poetry. I write my first poem. Its
 called *The Endz*

Whilst we mourn
'N' cry
'N' get angry
'N' feel helpless
'N' become powerless
'N' have another community meeting
'N' kill each other without reason
'N' turn a blind eye to the reality
'N' try to blame someone else
'N' see religion as the way out
Sociologists add a new chapter to a book
Politicians make a new law and order policy
Economists count the cost
Comedians tell a new joke
Educationalists blame the system
The middle classes blame the poor
The poor blame unemployment
The press smile and rub their hands
The church pray to God
'N' our you't's are destroyin' each other
Turn mentally ill
Take crack
Stop seein' the future
'N' The community remains the same

In da Endz

Good news. I'm told I'm gonna get released. I'm happy but scared at the same time. Saw General yesterday on the ward yesterday. He's gone. Turned crazy. He ain't comin' back. Heard he flipped when he caught his bredrin' in bed with his girl. General looks real bad Don't even recognise me. Lookin' out my window. I see birds. Wanna be free like them. Skippa comes to visit General and then links me. I feel it for Skippa this time. We talk for ages.

'I'll pick you up' Skippa tells me.

'Yo bredrin, how can I repay you?' I ask

Skippa smiles.

'You're my bredrin. That's all the payback I need' Skippa replies

A week later I'm released. No taxi this time. Skippa's waitin'. Feels good. Feels very good. *For the first time in my life I feel useful.* My heads clear. I'm going to mum's house today. It will be tough. I'm nervous quite calm. Still on a bit of medication but only for anxiety. I arrive at mum's and knock the door.

Patrick answers.

'What?' Patrick says in an angry tone.

'I wanted to come and see you' I reply

'Why? There's nothin' here for you anymore' Patrick scowls

'Can I come in?' I ask

Patrick moves out the way and I walk past. In the livin' room is my brother and sister. They blank me.

'Robbie'

Robbie says nothin'

'Valerie'

Valerie says nothin'

Patrick stands at the door with his arms folded

'I'm jus' passin' by to apologise for all I've put you though and to let you know I've changed my ways' I say with tears runnin' down my face.

Robbie gets up and punches me hard. I hit the wall and bang my head.

'If it wasn't because of you mum would still be here. Now get out!' Robbie screams.

I feel bad. I understand how they feel. I spend the rest of the day in a park. I notice trees more now. Like the water. Feed the ducks. Skippa turns up.

'Yo bredrin. The rooms done. When ye ready jus' move in.'

Skippa says

'I also spoke to my other bredrin and I may have a car for ya soon' Skippa finishes.

Skippa takes a call on his mobile. We touch fists. He's gone.

I people watch. Wish I had a son of my own. Who knows. One day. I'm at the cemetery. It feels good to lay flowers on mum's grave. I pray for forgiveness and go home to Skippa's.

I'd like to welcome you all here tonight for the opening of Stoneway Black Mental Health Coalition.

My name is Mikey Thomas, formally know as 'Sensi'.

I was a notorious 'bad bwoy' back in the day.

Father left when he was about 5 years old.

Kicked off at primary school.

I didn't know it at the time, but my father's absence made me struggle all the way through school.

Fightin' and general disruption brought me to the attention of the community 'Dons' so

I became a 'street runner', that prepared me for a life of petty and then serious crime. I fought my way to the top, I became the don of 'the Endz'. Had nuff street respect and was feared amongst my peers, I was proper bad, some say 'psychotic'.

Always struggled with my feelings, it became worst when my step father came along whilst I was in my teens. Unable to feel I fitted into my families' life I found comfort in my crew.

I had to survive through hustlin', fightin', and dealin' with the competition by any means necessary.

I was gifted and talented. Did well at school, but felt street life offered me more scope to live 'for now' I lived up to the MTV 'bad bwoy dream, I wanted the bling the girls and the fame.

Saw my bredrin 'Pepper' get shot dead.

Started to smoke more weed, couldn't cope with the impact of his death, through guilt. Experienced a breakdown, a basic psychosis where I became delusional, withdrawn, and heard voices. Eventually, I got arrested and beaten by police, which pushed my mental state to a new position.

Ended up in a mental hospital.

Had little support

Family rejected me

Community rejected me.

Whilst I was inside I found a couple of people who helped me out.

I believe in God and am back from the darkness.

That was my story.

I don't want you to end up like me.

That's why I set up this project

Wanna introduce my bredrin ... Skippa ..

Me an' Skippa touch fists and embrace

..... so who wants to introduce themselves first?

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