

(6c) Joe's story

I can't believe this is happening to me, Me, Joe Woods who, up until six months ago, would hardly say a word to anyone, always the quiet one often picked on by the harder kids, now sitting in a police cell. How did it go so wrong? Why didn't I spot the warning signs?

It started not long after Mum died. Dad never seemed to have much time for me, spending hours either in bed or lying on the sofa watching telly with a can of Stella. Some days I'd find him in the pub. I got used to my own company.

School holidays were always so boring - until last July. I can clearly remember the day I met Sully. He was hanging around the Spar waiting for someone. He was a bit older than me, about fifteen, but he was really friendly - offered me a fag and said he was meeting up with the rest of them later. I pretended I was meeting someone too, but deep down I knew he didn't believe me.

As time went on I started to have fun. They - Sully, Mickey and Tim were a real laugh and, although we didn't do much, I felt part of the group. I belonged. Sometimes we'd have a kick of a ball we'd nicked from a younger kid, or hang around the shops waiting for people to pass so we could shout at them. Mickey was brilliant at getting us 'eats' when we were hungry. He never managed to get caught - bold as brass he was. My house was a great place to go when it was raining 'cos there was no one to bother us. If we were lucky we could pinch some of Dad's vodka. Girls always hung around - especially if Tim was there. He just had it all - the looks, the clothes and the confidence.

His older brother Taz sometimes met up with us. He was totally different to Tim. His face was scarred and his nose sat at an angle just off centre and looked as if it had been broken a few times. Most of his muscle bound arms and legs were covered in tattoos. He was about twenty, never seemed to do any regular work but always had plenty of cash. Occasionally he'd buy us some smokes or booze for us if we cleaned his car or ran errands for him. Once he sent Tim, Sully and me to pick up a parcel from someone he knew.

As we arrived at the flat I had an odd feeling. The lounge was full of older blokes all with the same 'look' as Taz. They ignored us initially, busy planning something it seemed. One shouted, "Get the kids out!" but when Taz was mentioned he stopped shouting. I was glad we only stayed for a few minutes.

Over the next two weeks I didn't see my mates as Dad and I went to stay with his sister in Manchester. I was so bored. My cousins, who I always got on well with, seemed so boring. I missed all the fun of the gang and couldn't wait to get back home to see them all - even Taz!



When I got back things had changed a bit. Taz seemed to spend more time with us and he was sound. That's more than I can say for Mickey who had just upped and left the group with no contact at all. No one would talk about him and he didn't answer any of my messages. As time went on Taz became a real friend. He'd listen to me and gave me advice when I had a problem and taught me to play a mean game of pool. I felt great when he invited me to join his friends for a pool marathon in the next town. It meant having a lift with one of his mates in his Land Cruiser. What a machine, all black, including the windows.

On the way to the pool game I found out they were mad Spurs supporters. I'd always been a Chelsea supporter but I was outnumbered so I kept quiet. Driving along the roads there would be occasional comments like, 'there's another one'....'we need to step up the action'.....'When's the next meeting?'.....

I thought nothing of it but was very wary of the guy sitting in the front by the driver. He joined in very little of the chat but seemed to make most of the comments. He also was heavily tattooed with a strange Nazi one on the back of his neck.

During the pool match there was a lot of talk I didn't understand. Taz made sure I was OK and assured the group that I was sound and that I could be trusted. I felt even more grown up than with Sully's gang and was over the moon when they invited me to play pool again. Over the course of a few weeks I saw them most days. Even when school started in September I'd slip out for an hour or so or catch up with them after school.

The first 'meeting' I attended was held in the back room of a local pub. There, with another group of blokes, I had my first real introduction to racism. I suppose I had my suspicions weeks before, but I chose to ignore them. During the meeting there were leaflets handed out with names and addresses of shops and other businesses that were owned by the 'non-whites'. The idea was to divide the town up into three areas and each of the group members could be responsible for an area. This would involve graffiti and other elements of vandalism in the first instance. I was put with Taz and another bloke, Stew. We had five restaurants, four shops and a laundry to 'take care of'. I knew I was getting in to something serious but the adrenaline rush during the planning was addictive. It was crazy.

Fast forward several months of targeting these businesses. I would draw or write on their windows and walls in the darkness of night. Taz was the 'expert' on intimidating the owners and Stew was the main organiser, planning the next move.

It all went badly wrong when, during one visit to a corner shop, Taz decided to get a bit heavy with the owner and a fight started. Stew and I couldn't leave him on his own and we went in to help. From the corner of my eye I saw a flash of metal and then there was blood. The next minute we were sprinting up the alleyway next to the shop. There was a lot of screaming, shouting and sirens and the rest, as they say, is history.

