

PROLOGUE

...welcome to my book...it's hard to believe that 25 years have passed since i wrote the original, and of course, a huge amount has changed since that time...

...the first edition was primarily aimed at young male prisoners, and therefore written in a pacey fashion that might best grab their attention...

however, it was a thrill to see it become popular with people from all walks of life...

...in order to distribute as many copies as possible throughout the prison systems of the UK, US and Canada, i took no royalty payments...and a charity was formed to pay for printing and distribution...

...along with the story itself, the message contained within these pages is one of hope... no matter how stuck you may feel, or the mess your life may be in, keys exist that will break the deadlock and open the doors...

...in the midst of my darkest hours i once sat at a kitchen table and said, almost in a daydream, "i'll figure this out one day"...and i did...i also knew that if i could do it, i'd help a great many people to do the same...and that also came true...

...if any of my words and experiences resonate with you, take hold of them, treasure them and make something happen...

...you know, i've noticed something quite amazing about life...if we genuinely search for answers, it's as if a door gets kicked, causing it to stand slightly ajar, not quite open...and if we pass through it, no matter how small or innocuous the opportunity... it leads to another door being kicked ajar...

...but remember...they are your personal doors and nobody can pass through them for you...

...you will notice as you read that i have written short commentaries along the way...they are my current observations on my life as it was back then...

...now, the longest journey has to begin with the first footstep, so let's get started...

CHAPTER 1

Running Wild

I was dragged out of sleep by a big hand ripping at my collar, a hammer raised to strike and two bulging eyes staring into mine. I just hoped in that split-second he'd recognise me.

"James! What are you doing here?" asked Uncle Jack, loosening his grip and lowering the hammer.

"I've run away," came the answer, fright squirting the truth straight out of my mouth.

"Come on lad," he said, lumbering his thick frame across the back yard of his terraced house.

I grabbed my things and followed, wondering what his reaction might be. He'd always been my favorite uncle but running away might be pushing things a bit far.

I'd arrived home late the previous night to find my dad's house locked and in darkness. Dreading a telling off, I'd knocked tentatively, almost hoping not to be heard. After four attempts, I remembered that he'd been taking sleeping tablets following a recent car crash and was unlikely to hear a thing. As I stood on the doorstep, the gathering cold reminded me of the long uncomfortable night ahead, but unbeknown to me, something far worse than that was afoot; the toughest ten years of my life were about to unfold, and I'd be lucky to survive them.

My mind wandered back over the recent years leading up to my parents' divorce. After starting secondary school aged 11, my behaviour, which had always been fairly boisterous, deteriorated. My academic progress was stifled by my rebellious attitude and constant arguing. I was more interested in making a name for myself than doing as I was told. I often felt carried along by a river of bad behaviour and it was only when severely confronted and asked to explain myself that I realised I didn't know why I was conducting myself in such a way.

"Why did you punch that boy/break that window/smash that bottle...?"

"I don't know," I'd say, standing there looking dumb.

It was easy to get hold of strong drink and I loved the wild abandon it gave me. However, the aggression it sparked caused my friends to become increasingly wary of me, especially when I drank at school. Eventually my behaviour reached a point where I was barred from all my classes and forced to learn in isolation.

Before long, my mother took my brother, sister and I to live in an unfamiliar place along the banks of the River Mersey. Moving to a new area was hard for all of us. I hated it. My new school was scruffy and less disciplined than the previous one, but the slack rules provided room for me to flex my restless personality. While my mother struggled with social security problems, along with the emotional upheaval of leaving my dad, I got my kicks out on the streets. With my father out of the way I often skipped school, stayed out late at night and hung out with a rough local gang.

After being involved in a large drunken brawl one evening, I was arrested and locked up by the police. Still aged 14 and classed as a juvenile, a guardian was required to come and collect me. News that my dad was on his way instead of my mum sobered me up in double-quick time. I sat in the cell anxiously awaiting the confrontation, but to my surprise

he reacted calmly and had little to say. In fact, he offered me a cigarette on the way home. It felt weird smoking in front of him but a better atmosphere developed between us. Later that night he asked whether I'd like to move back to live with him, but I agreed more out of politeness than genuine desire. I was very confused and constantly wrestled with uncontrollable urges.

Just two weeks later, there I stood on his doorstep, kicking my heels in the cold. It suited me to believe he'd locked me out deliberately, offering a good excuse to cut loose and run away. My little tale of rejection would deflect the blame nicely onto my dad while drumming up sympathy for me. I liked a bit of sympathy. As I crept around the back of the house to break in and collect some things, my emotions rocked upon a seesaw of excitement and fear. Entering an upstairs window proved extremely difficult, but once inside another dilemma faced me. There before me stood the bed I'd slept in for years; I need only climb in and sleep, putting an end to the quandary.

The light of common sense exposed the fabrication of my self-pitying story, but quickly and aggressively I suppressed those feelings, snatched up a few of my belongings and disappeared. The full impact of what I was doing hit me as I walked along those long empty streets. Many anguished tears rolled down my face as the pain of separation gripped me in a way I hadn't expected.

"What have I done?" I asked myself again and again.

The light of new hope kept my legs moving despite the intrusion of a thousand burning thoughts, and after three hours I stood outside my destination. Uncle Jack had a dis-used car inside the lock-up at the end of his back yard. I could rest there for a few hours and be gone before he woke up in the morning. Breaking in was easy enough, but once inside I found it intolerably cold, smelly and uncomfortable.

Sleep seemed impossible but somehow, shivering and tired, I dropped off while sitting upright.



Smelling fusty like the old car, I now sat feeling exhausted while Uncle Jack talked to me through the open door to the kitchen while peeling spuds. He thought chips would be a great idea for breakfast and set to work cooking them while I, hardly feeling able to refuse, dreaded their arrival.

Following years of illness, Uncle Jack lived alone. Periods locked up in hospitals followed violent incidents that were ‘kept from little ears.’

“Your Uncle Jack’s not well son,” was all I ever heard.

During our conversation, my ears pricked up when I heard him say, ‘I’ll get you a job on the site with me, lad.’

“Thanks Uncle Jack,” I replied, genuinely surprised.

I played it cool but deep down inside my heart leapt at this sudden upturn in fortunes. All being well, I’d have a place to hide and a job – and I wasn’t being packed off to school. It wasn’t the glittering start I’d imagined, but it would serve to make my family realise that I wasn’t about to come crying home.

The warmth of the heater drew out my tiredness into a string of yawns, filling my eyes with tears as the chips arrived with a bottle of brown sauce. I struggled through enough of them to satisfy Uncle Jack then, and with my immediate worries over, fell fast asleep.

The following morning Jack had me up early, running bleary eyed through the dark streets to catch a bus. Despite appearing much older than my fourteen years and clearly dressed for work, Uncle Jack insisted on paying half fare. The conductor reluctantly surrendered to Jack’s menacing appearance without a word while I stared out of the window,

embarrassed. Arriving on site, I was given the job of ‘can lad,’ (tea-maker) by the grumpy boss whose attitude flattened all possibility of enthusiasm. Setting about my duties, I reflected upon the rude awakening my romantic idea of running away had received. However, it was the freedom to hang out late at night with my friends that made it all worthwhile. Tearing around the streets with them was the main attraction for leaving home in the first place.

There were many kids who hung around each day instead of going to school, while others showed up at night to see what was going on. The nearby shopping precinct was the hub of activity; all the shops had their windows boarded up and covered in graffiti. A seedy nightclub was situated in the middle of it all, owned by an American guy, and it was a miracle how he kept his licence; there were fights inside and out almost every night. The prostitutes who brought sailors from the docks gave us cigarettes and money on the way in. We were always hanging around, sometimes picking up valuables dropped in scuffles or trying to part a drunk from his money.

The area was always filled with colorful characters at night, and you had the feeling anything could happen. I envied those whose poor upbringing allowed a type of behaviour I’d never been permitted. With little concept of the true misery of their lives, I wanted to be associated with their rough identity and enjoy the fruit of indiscipline. Despite equipping myself with a good excuse for running away and being willing to play my part in the late-night escapades, it was a rough district where acceptance wasn’t guaranteed.

One particular night at a local disco, I had a few dances with a girl I liked, but unfortunately, she had a boyfriend called Jonah, a guy I didn’t know. Donna liked me and confessed she wanted to get rid of Jonah:

“He’s always with his stupid mates,” she said. “He never bothers with me.”

Later when everybody spilled out into the precinct, others drifted in to mix with us from nearby streets. The atmosphere bounced with shouts, whistles, singing, shouting, smoking and laughter, but then suddenly one of Donna's friends tugged my sleeve.

"Jonah's here with his mates," she said. "You'd better clear off in case he starts."

I didn't like the idea of being frightened-off, but the warmth I'd previously enjoyed as part of the crowd had now become punctuated with steely looks. Feeling unsure, I drew heavily on my cigarette before stepping aside to leave, but suddenly my head exploded and the world spun around as I felt myself being dragged across the pavement by the hair. The crowd jostled noisily for position amid screaming girls as I grappled furiously to get a grip on my attacker.

We wrestled, kicked, banged heads and punched furiously until finally I broke myself free, knocked Jonah to the ground and started beating him. A figure darted from the crowd and kicked me, followed by a few others until I fell unconscious to the floor. Meanwhile, scuffles broke out among the crowd and girls fought with those who'd been kicking me, but by then I was in a complete daze.

I regained consciousness leaning against the wall of a nearby alleyway; an echoing voice became that of a girl trying to hold me up. She'd apparently helped me stagger away as the police arrived with their truncheons in hand, ready to split a few heads. Lighting a cigarette for me she related what had happened. It was clear that I'd beaten Jonah before the attack by his mates, but instead of seeking revenge, I looked forward to the increased credibility the fight was sure to bring.



After two weeks, I was laid off from the job, which suited me just fine – I'd rather be out on the streets with my mates. We wandered around causing trouble, stealing, smashing things up, fighting, tattooing one-another and generally causing a rumpus everywhere we went.

Arriving home late one night, I found Uncle Jack sitting waiting for me in a state of agitation.

“That feller around the back is giving me fuckin’ trouble,” he said, his eyes ablaze.

“Which feller?” I asked.

“That bald-headed twat with the van,” he answered. “We’re going to sort him out, big style.”

I couldn’t understand what the problem was, and suspected that it may have been all in his head; the turmoil in his eyes was there for anyone to see. Luckily, I managed to talk him out of a violent attack; instead we crept out in the middle of the night and hammered six-inch nails into all four tyres of his van.

Over the weeks that followed I drifted away from Uncle Jack’s, preferring instead to stay with the crowd I was meeting in the pubs. The older guys were different from my mates and had given up hanging around street corners looking for the next fight. Instead they liked to drink in comfort, buy decent drugs, waltz in and out of nightclubs and breeze through life in the easiest way possible. Occasionally, they ended up without money, but information would soon arrive about a lucrative job to pull off. It was common to pay shop staff to take a walk for five minutes while expensive equipment got carried away.

During that period, I met up with Denny, an old school friend who was fascinated by all the things I’d been getting up to since running away. The gang made him welcome, sharing ciggies, money and drink before he’d catch his bus home each night. Despite the lax pub rules, Denny didn’t look old

enough to get served, so we had to sneak him in through a back window and keep him hidden.

I was pretty selfish in those days and soon grew tired of having to accommodate his younger looks and lack of 'street cred'. He was getting in the way of my big plans. Therefore, I began avoiding him, letting him wander around the streets alone until he eventually gave up and stopped visiting. I felt bad about this, but I reckoned I'd soon forget him, just like I had my family. I didn't want to be tied down by the needs of others.

Following a few close shaves with the police, I was arrested and locked up again. When my mother arrived to collect me, my head dropped in dismay, knowing the further grief I was bringing to her.

Riding home in the taxi, she tried to cheer me up, but I remained impassive and wouldn't let her near me. I no longer believed I had any right to her love and couldn't be bothered with all the complications of family life.

"Why can't you just forget me?" I'd say. "Just leave me alone, I'm no good for you anymore."

My harsh words and actions were intended to push her to the brink and force her to reject me so that we could both be free.

"You'll have your own kids one day. Then you'll see," she said, repeating a phrase I was getting sick of hearing.

While waiting to attend court, I was ordered to live at her house and go back to school. Despite enjoying some aspects of home life, I found conflicts increasingly hard to deal with and soon ran away again.

Thus began a pattern of behaviour that repeated itself many times over subsequent years.

I went to a number of schools while living with a succession of relatives following various arrests. Despite my outward toughness, my over-sensitivity at home began shaping my behaviour out on the streets. Moving from one gang

to another, drifting from girl to girl, never wanting to commit myself to anybody or anything.

Things came to a head one night when, having taken a cocktail of drugs and alcohol, I arrived home and started shouting at my new step-father. Fearing what may happen, my mother was forced to call the police. I hated my mum's feller – he seemed like a big phony to me and I was itching to prove it. Nevertheless, I left calmly with the police and stood chatting with them further along the street.

“Come on, sunshine,” one of them said. “We don't want to arrest you. You've just had an argument, that's all. Now, why don't you go back, say you're sorry and everything will calm down.”

“Okay, I will,” I said. “Thanks.”

As they climbed back into their police car, I picked up a large rock and smashed it into one of their doors. We wrestled all the way to the police cells and I came off second-best. They locked me up for the night and made sure I'd be up before the Magistrates the following day.

My dad met me at the court where we sat waiting in a long corridor with shiny floors. People stood around murmuring in small groups, wearing ill-fitting suits and worried expressions. Suddenly, through the haze of cigarette smoke and clicking footsteps on the marble tiles I could hear my name being called by the Usher.

“Rice – do we have a James Rice?”

We stood up.

“This must be it then,” gulped my dad.

A ruddy-faced man in a black gown approached carrying a bundle of papers. “Are you James Rice?” he barked, for all to hear.

“Yes, I am.”

“Then you'd better take these,” he said, leafing charge sheets into my hands, one after the other: “Rice, Rice, Rice, Rice...”

I quickly glanced through them, recognising each wild incident with a shudder. “Oh shit,” I thought.

With hardly a moment to prepare, we were called in and once the opening formalities were over, the Prosecutor began reading out the offences. Hearing them presented in such stark terms was like being undressed in public. I became painfully aware of my father standing just yards away, listening to it all.

What would the Magistrates think of this wild, drunken, abusive and violent creature standing before them? I dreaded to think. My plea of, ‘Guilty as charged’ was the signal for much flapping in outrage among the Magistrates. Things looked bad. After my dad spoke a few words in my defence, they calmed down a little bit, but no sooner had he sat down, than the Clerk was on his feet pecking at the Magistrates with stern advice in hushed tones.

The fat man in the middle raised his hand, called for order and spoke. “Young man, there has to be some recompense for your behaviour...”

I held my breath as he paused, doing my best to look as innocent as possible.

“We have no alternative but to sentence you to three months in a Detention Center. Take him away.”

My legs almost turned to jelly as I was led down the steps. Three months didn’t sound like much if you said it quickly, but the weight of it was suddenly killing me.

“What a wimp I really am,” I thought.

My pockets were emptied, forms signed and handcuffs placed on my wrists for the four-hour trip into the unknown. Looking out through the windows as we sped along in the police van, I wished with all my heart I could be somebody else; I hated my life.



The safe haven of the journey ended all too soon as the van pulled up outside two large brown gates. The whole place seemed unnaturally quiet as we passed through a series of locked doors that led to the reception area. An officer appeared with a friendly smile and asked my name.

“Jimmy,” I replied.

Smack! My head spun. He’d hit me hard across the face. A rage boiled inside me.

“You call me ‘sir’. Don’t ever forget.”

I wouldn’t, but deep in my heart I wanted to kill him. The police officers looked embarrassed handing me over into care of the Detention Centre and once the paperwork was completed they left without a word.

I was gripped with fear, feeling threatened in the hands of my captors. ‘Anything could happen to me here,’ I thought. By keeping my mouth shut I made it through the reception procedure without any further fuss. I was locked in a tiny cell to wait while other prisoners were brought through the gate. Meanwhile, my mind wandered back to my old school where even at that very moment they might be doing English or perhaps sports on the playing field. The thought of it was almost unbearable, but I held the emotion back. ‘Why couldn’t I have stuck with school?’ I wondered. ‘Why am I so bad?’ My old life seemed like a million miles away, lost forever.

Later, I was led to an enormous dining room filled with prisoners who stared while I was shown to my seat. I took an instant dislike to the one sat opposite me, who probed me with stupid questions.

“Where are you from? What are you in for?”

I was too deep within myself to be bothered answering him and ended up telling him to, “Shut your fucking face.”

Long before dark, four of us were led to small cells and locked up for our first night. As newcomers, we would have to sleep alone in small cells for a few nights before

being allocated to dormitories. As the door locked shut, the walls seemed to close in and suffocate me. With my freedom gone, I suffered a terrible emptiness that was almost unbearable – and that was just the first night. I wanted to cry out but held everything inside. Instead, I began to think of happier days, of times with my brother and sister, both of whose innocence ensured their comfort and security within family life.

“Why have I gone this way?” I wondered. “Why can’t I accept a simple life?”

It was an endless night with little sleep, unhappy thoughts, and an absolute dread of the morning.

The following day proved equally eventful, beginning with a visit to the Governor who told me I’d only have to serve six weeks of the sentence if I behaved myself, otherwise I’d be kept in for the entire three months. It sounded like good news, but even six weeks seemed interminable for me. I hated every moment of it with a passion.

After that, we were set to work scrubbing floors on our hands and knees for the entire day. No talking or smoking was allowed, which made it drag all the more. Before supper we were taken to a canteen (prison shop) to be given advance pay. Nobody was allowed to have cash, but we were given goods to the value of our earnings. While we were waiting lined up in the corridor, another work party arrived and stood nearby while our officer disappeared for a chat with somebody. One of the lads from the other party turned to me and asked, “What are you in for, dickhead?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “You what?” I answered, angrily.

“Oh, he’s getting upset now,” he said, laughing to his friends.

Somehow, he seemed to think there was no danger in what he was saying. With little sense of the rules or the

consequences that may fall upon me, I punched him hard in the face and he fell to the ground. At that moment, the prison doctor turned into the corridor and saw me standing over the lad, a big commotion stirring all around.

“Who did that? What’s going on?” he asked in a panic.

“I did it,” I said. “He...” I wanted to explain that he had started it, but the doctor pressed an alarm bell on the wall and wouldn’t listen. The stupid lad lay on the floor as a group of officers charged at me, grabbed both of my arms and dragged me away into the punishment block for a spell of solitary confinement.

An hour later I was ordered out of the cell and marched into a room where I was to face the Governor for the second time that day. They stood me on a slippery mat to prevent me gaining any purchase in the event I attacked anybody. Two officers stood in front of me protecting the Governor, who sat behind a large desk.

The Chief Officer, a rotund man, barked at me, “Rice, you are charged with assaulting prisoner Baker. How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?”

I couldn’t believe this. It was like being back in court. “Well, the thing is...” I began, but he cut me off.

“Guilty or not guilty?” he snapped loudly.

“Well, it’s just that...”

This time his face turned purple as he shouted, “Did you do it or not?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, resigned to the outcome.

The Governor scribbled notes while the fat Chief Officer whispered and the two officers in front of me stared. It all seemed slightly unreal. Then the Governor spoke.

“Rice, you’ve come here with a bad record, but we won’t accept your violent behaviour. You’ll spend seven days in solitary confinement; lose three weeks’ pay and three days remission. Do you understand?”

I didn't, but said, "Yes, sir," and was then quickly marched back to that bare cell.

The punishment block was much tougher than the rest of the place, a mixture of painful isolation, grueling work and punishing workouts in the gym. My physical strength and skill with a ball helped me get along with the gym staff, but didn't excuse me from some of their nasty games. I was often placed in the basketball circle in the middle of the gym, then one lad from each end was sent in to try and fight me out of it. Many made only feeble attempts while others really had a go, but I bounced them all out of my circle every time; the punishment block officer loved it when I hurt somebody.

The first good feelings I enjoyed in that place came on the day I was allowed to go back to the normal regime. The rest of the place seemed easy compared to where I'd been for a week. It was about then that I started to notice how young many of the other prisoners seemed, despite us all being a similar age. There were some obviously 'bad' ones, but I couldn't imagine how many of the others had ever reached a Detention Centre – they looked permanently bewildered and a few of them cried at night.

A lad called Ginger, who spoke like a little posh school-boy, was probably the most out of place. He reacted wrongly to everything on account of his nerves and giggled when bullies snapped at him, which infuriated them even more. When an officer bawled at him one day for not scrubbing a floor properly, he laughed and told him not to be so silly. I couldn't believe my ears. The officer went berserk, kicked his bucket all over the floor and made him scrub it all over again.

Eventually, I was moved to a dormitory that I had to share with twenty other lads; it was like a hospital ward without the frills. Ginger approached as I unrolled my kit onto the bed,

"You'll have to do a dorm run tonight, Ricey," he said. "Everybody has to."

“What’s a dorm run?” I asked without looking up.

“You have to climb over one bed and then under the next, all the way around the dorm while everybody hits you with pillowcases filled with boots and things.”

“And who’s gonna make me do that?” I asked, feeling myself stiffen in aggression.

“Dawson,” he said. “He’s the boss of the dorm.” As the room started to fill with prisoners, Ginger pointed him out.

“He can do mine for me,” I said.

Ginger disappeared looking excited while I sat quietly on my bed, and sure enough, Dawson made his approach.

“You new then?”

“No, I’ve been in the block,” I answered without looking at him.

“You’ll have to do a dorm run you know, everybody does.” He didn’t order me like he might some of the others, more a request.

“You can do mine, pal,” I said.

“Wh, what!” he said, trying to smile and keep things light.

“You can do mine,” I repeated, this time standing up and staring into his face. “I’m not doing any fucking dorm run, so go on, fuck off.”

He backed-off quickly, crushed by the situation and tried to do his best to look cool, but he was finished. His personal dominion over the dorm had ended right there and then. The other lads quickly found out that I wasn’t exactly a newcomer, but had been kept in the punishment block for fighting.

I paid no interest in bullying anybody and wouldn’t allow it in the dormitory; I just wanted to get through my sentence the easiest way possible. Over the weeks that followed, Dawson started to pay the price for the bullying he’d done. Knowing that I’d protect them, the other lads exacted their revenge upon him in all sorts of ways until eventually, the screws had to move him out.

Following the harsh regime of each day, the period between supper and sleep was often filled with the excited chatter of relief. Some read books or wrote letters home, while others curled up on their beds, riddled with the pain of homesickness. We all missed the families we had so easily taken for granted. However, there were plenty of others who had become institutionalised after placements in strings of children's homes, usually as a result of neglectful parenting. It was hard to imagine how they would ever break out of their downhill spiral; they seemed to be steeped in a mentality of incarceration.

Release day was always tantalisingly elusive, so near but so painfully far away, but despite the endless grind, my last night soon arrived. I felt like a rich man, in possession of the one thing everybody craved: imminent freedom. As dawn broke, I was up and packed before anybody had even stirred. The walk back down to reception was particularly triumphant, and it was hard to keep from smiling all the way. Wearing my own clothes again felt strange; they smelt a little fusty having been stored in a cardboard box.

I was dropped off at a railway station where I joined the morning commuters heading for work. The first cigarette made me feel sick, but nothing could dampen my spirits. While never wanting to be put back inside, I looked forward to having fun with some of my old friends.

The emotional joy of release soon ran into a brick wall as I arrived at my new home, a big old YMCA. It was like a prison with its long corridors, strangers, little rooms, locked doors, smelly dining hall and plain food. My allocated social worker wasted no time in reminding me that any misbehaviour within six weeks of release would spell an immediate return to detention. Fear of this kept me in line, but an underlying resentment of it started to build.

My mother visited and was happy to accommodate what she thought was my long-held desire to be away from home and free.

“How are you doing son? Everything alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I lied.

The truth was that I longed to go home, but couldn’t express it. I feared showing any real emotion in case my carefully constructed image fell apart, leaving my identity in tatters. Instead, I waited for the expiry of my six-week release condition to expire, like a cat ready to pounce, then packed-up and left without paying the rent.

Arriving back on familiar territory felt great, and the gang at the precinct listened avidly as I told them about the Detention Centre. Others who’d also been sent to institutions laughed at the memory of their time inside and boasted how easy it had been. I wondered whether they were liars or I was too soft.

Many of the lads stole regularly, making plenty of money week after week, but that wasn’t my style. Instead, I returned to drifting around, joining the occasional raid to top up my finances, then disappearing again. My existence was aimless, but it suited me fine. At night I walked the streets, slept on the stairs of tower blocks, or in a shed down by the railway tracks, and sometimes at friends’ houses.

I spent many summer evenings alone or with a girl, down by the docks drinking whiskey, smoking and idling around. In winter, I moved into a house where a lot of wild young people hung out. Spray paint covered the inside walls and we steadily snapped up all the internal furniture and burned it in the fireplace to keep warm. The curtains were permanently closed and people arrived all through the night after the clubs were closed to drink, take drugs or boast of robberies and fights.

It was great fun floating around in a bubble of drink and drugs, untouched by the concerns of the world. We lived life pretty fast with everything done for kicks, clubbing, fighting and partying almost every night of the week. Scrapes with the law were customary and twice I escaped a further

custodial sentence by the skin of my teeth. However, my air of invincibility came under severe threat in court one day by the police, who tried very hard to have me sent to Risley Remand Centre; a place with a notorious reputation for violence, suicides, misery and filth.

My grandfather, who'd come to offer support, suddenly found the proceedings pivoting around his decision of whether or not to stand bail. As he stood looking uncertain, the Magistrate glanced at her watch and my heart pounded in my chest.

"Come on!" I thought.

"All right, I will," he finally said.

Phew! I smiled with relief while my granddad looked on unhappily. The bail conditions were that I live at his address, sign on at the police station every day and obey a twelve-hour nightly curfew.

Upon leaving the courtroom, I headed straight to the house where I'd been staying to collect a few things and see what was going on. The gang were amazed to see me, feeling certain I'd be remanded in custody. Somebody produced a bottle of Bacardi rum, which I started drinking by the glassful, and as I did, a guy showed up who had grassed on some of my friends to the police.

By including him in the conversation, I gave no clue that I was about to attack, but just as the bottle was nearly drunk, I quickly pounced. He screamed aloud as I beat him with a poker, blood pouring from his head as the others looked on in terror. But suddenly, overcome by so much alcohol on an empty stomach, I collapsed on the floor. Bleeding profusely, the others helped my victim escape through a window and called an ambulance for me.

I woke up the following morning in a hospital bed with alcoholic poisoning, feeling more dead than alive. It's a terrible feeling having a pipe shoved deep down your throat, then

watching the contents of your guts pumped out into a glass vacuum cleaner.

The police arrived to escort me back to court, and having advised my granddad to withdraw his bail and save himself a £500 bill, I was sure to be remanded. I stumbled through the court proceedings in a daze before being transported to the place I dreaded – Risley Remand Centre.

...looking back at my young self, it was clear that i was very different on the inside than the outside...my true 'self' was becoming horribly lost inside the false character i was creating on the outside...