



BOOK EXTRACT

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Doing the Clapham Common Punks

After my home leave was up I returned to Rochester to serve my remaining weeks. I had left in an ill-fitting Teddy boy suit with a head full of rock 'n' roll, but I returned to borstal seven days later in my gang leather as a rebel Ted. To the casual observer this change may have seemed subtle, but it marked a major shift in my subculture: different clothes and different music. Where Teddy boys had always been a thing of the past, the rebel Teds and rockabillies were of the now. I was part of a fast-growing movement again, but this time it really belonged to me and others like me. In this game we were now the 'originals' and it was up to us to make the rules. We had broken away from the patriarchal influence of the original Teddy boy movement and were now running free. I was impatient to get back to the gang, and my remaining three weeks of porridge seemed like a lifetime but I managed to get through it.

While I was away the north Battersea crew had made their comeback. Led by Psycho Joe they had stormed The George and laid into the Wildkatz with real venom. Harry's head was split open by a lead cosh and the fighting spilled out onto the pavement. Ahmet had his nose broken and Mick took a bit of a kicking. One of the old Sinclair Mob, a guy called Andy, had arrived as the fight spread out across Balham Hill. He jumped out of his car, a second-hand Mini Cooper that he had just bought, to lend a hand and he ended up getting his face kicked in and his car turned over on its roof by six of the north Battersea. A rocker girl got pushed over in the melee and when her boyfriend objected someone threw a lump of paving slab at him, which he dodged, and it hit his girl in the leg, snapping the bone. The Wildkatz were forced to beat a hasty retreat down the side streets towards Poynder, but Mick was cornered by Psycho Joe himself who, according to Mick, pulled out a small revolver and put it up to his head. He told Mick, "Tell your brother I'm looking for him." That was all he needed to say and I got the message.

At this time it was unusual for firearms to be brandished on the rockin' scene, though not unheard of, but it didn't bother me. I had already served a sentence for possession of firearms and armed robbery and I knew where to get my hands on a gun if I needed one, but I was so full of arrogance I didn't think that I did need one. I laughed off Psycho Joe's message and went about building up the gang again. They would get courage from my confidence and I was supremely confident.

The first order of business when I got out was to find Blue and see if he still had a taste for the scene. So Harry and I went down to Balham one afternoon and had a mooch about. I had heard he was working for Belfast Joe and that when he wasn't on a mission he could be found either hanging around the indoor market or in Effy's cafe on Bedford Hill. I had always had a strange affinity for violent lunatics, maybe because I was only half a step from being one myself, and Blue and I had got on well in the old days. I knew that he had really been into the music and I was hoping that there was still enough rock 'n' roll in his soul to tempt him back. The beating that Blue had taken from Bopper Hogan had been pretty severe, but it wasn't this that had made him hang up his blue suede shoes; I think it was more the sense of betrayal and disappointment. Bopper and Blue had been the best of pals before their disagreement, and falling out with a good friend in such a violent way always tends to leave a bad taste in the mouth. I thought that Blue had probably left the scene because of that.

After asking around for a while without success, we were about to give up when I spotted Blue standing in the doorway of the record shop. I had to look twice to be sure, but it was definitely him. He was wearing a checked lumberjack coat with the collar turned up and a flat cap with clumps of wild hair sticking out from under it and he was unshaven. I walked over. "Blue!" I said.

“How’s it hanging, mate?” He looked at me and Harry, sharply at first, and I noticed the furtive movement as his hand slipped into his back pocket. “It’s me,” I said. “Razor!” Blue visibly relaxed and broke into a grin that showed a gap where one of his lower front teeth was missing, knocked out by Bopper Hogan it was said. Blue seemed genuinely glad to see us and after a bit of handshaking and back slapping we took a walk down to Effy’s for a cup of tea and a sausage sandwich.

In the steamy interior of the cafe we sat around a scarred wooden table and filled each other in on what had been happening in our lives. I told Blue a bit about my time inside and how I was now out and forming a gang, just like the old days. He seemed interested but told us that his Teddy boy days were over. We explained to him that we were no longer Teds as such and he asked a lot about the latest music and the fashions we were now into. “What about the old gang?” he asked, and I told him that a lot of them were still around and up for it. “How about the Bopper?” he asked. “He still around?” I shook my head. “Nah,” I replied. “He’s doing 21 months in the Scrubs. Attempted theft and assaulting old bill.” Blue nodded. “Rockabilly, eh?” he said. “Is that the stuff they used to play over at Bobbysox?” It was my turn to nod. Blue drained his tea and looked up at the clock. “I’ve gotta shoot,” he announced. I got a pencil from behind the counter and wrote the address of the flat at Poynders on his fag packet. “Listen,” I said. “If you fancy seeing a few of the old faces and having a good night out, get down to this gaff on Saturday night before about 7.30. It’ll be a great laugh.” We shook hands and he was gone. As we left the cafe I asked Harry if he thought Blue would turn up. Harry shook his head. “And if he does,” he said, “I hope he has a fucking haircut first.”

Barry Louvane was the top gang tattooist in south London and had a little shop at the bottom end of Garratt Lane near Wandsworth Arndale Centre. Barry kept his own hours, sometimes not opening the shop until 2.00 in the afternoon, but he was never short of customers and there was usually a queue outside his shop. Most days Barry could be found in the bar of the snooker club across the road and one of his customers would have to go over and ask him to come and open up the shop. He had tattooed every south London gang in existence since the early 1970s and, despite his prodigious alcoholic intake, he was fast and good with the tattoo gun.

I had quite a few homemade and jailhouse tattoos, including S.T.U.D. on my left wrist, which had been my first, but now I wanted my first professional gang tattoo so I came to Barry Louvane’s. Barry’s tattoo parlour was another one of those places that was classed as neutral territory and it wasn’t unusual to see Teds, skinheads, punks and rockabillies hanging around outside the shop and giving each other no more than dirty looks. I decided to get the words ‘Balham Katz’ on my neck and hardly felt a thing as Barry inked me up. Harry got ‘Made In Balham’ on one arm and a skull with a quiff and the words ‘Forever Rockin’ on the other. Mick got ‘Made In Balham’ around his navel, and Alan and Perry both got confederate flags and the words ‘Balham Katz’ on their arms. We met up with young Tommy Hogan and Tin-Tin as well. Tin-Tin was having ‘Gene Vincent & The Bluecaps’ around his neck and Tommy was having a confederate flag and ‘Battersea Rebels’ on his chest.

Getting inked was like a strange kind of bonding ritual among gang members. Nowadays it seems as if everyone, even the most middle-class and respectable of people, have at least one tattoo, and they have become a fashion statement among young girls. But back in the day it was only Maoris, sailors and the criminal classes who sported tattoos. A teenage boy with a tattoo was considered thuggish by ‘nice’ people, and that was the whole point of it for us. We wanted to be outsiders, to be thought of as different and somehow dangerous, and tattoos, along with our hairstyles and clothing, achieved that effect. We were like walking advertising hoardings for our chosen lifestyle. And tattooing was popular among all the teenage subcultures of the time.

After getting our ink done we all plotted up in a cafe a few doors away from Barry Louvane’s and compared results. It was the first time I had really got to talk to Tommy and Tin-Tin, though I had been on nodding acquaintance with them around the clubs. I knew Tommy’s brother, Bopper, very well and in the Teddy boy days we had always got on well with the south Battersea Teds. Tommy told us that there had been a lot of speculation about whether we would be making a comeback against Psycho Joe’s crew. I assured him that the trouble was far from over, though, as yet, we had no firm plans for our revenge. The south Battersea cats had never really got on with Psycho Joe’s crew and Tommy intimated that his mob might be interested in lending us a hand in any future trouble. I knew this offer would depend entirely on how we shaped up as a gang in the near future. If we took another defeat from anyone we would lose all credibility and no one would be interested in helping us out. We parted on good terms with Tommy and Tin-Tin.

While I had been away for my final three weeks, Peter and Johnny Virgo had appeared in court again and been jailed for 18 months apiece. Without any parole they would have to serve a minimum of 12 months before release, so I could count Peter out of any action for a while. We still had a pretty formidable bunch of fighters though and I decided that we needed a victory of some kind in order to boost our confidence. And I knew just where that victory would come from.

Nobody had elected me leader of our gang, or had even spoken about it out loud, I just seemed to fall into the role because I was the most violent and aggressive amongst us. Some of the gang looked up to me because of my criminal past and time spent in jail and others remembered the reputation I had been building as a Teddy boy before I was jailed. I would like to think that I had a certain charisma and leadership qualities that made others follow me, but I think my real talent lay in enticing other immature young men into my fantasy world and making them believe it. I could inspire people to take it all seriously because I believed it myself and we were all looking for something, anything, that was better than real life. Our petty violence and macho posturing were our rite of passage into manhood. We didn’t have the option of going out into the bush to kill a lion, or even of striding a foreign battlefield with a gun in our hands; our generation had no war in which we could prove ourselves or die trying. So we divided ourselves into armies and beat the shit out of each other on the streets - until we grew up.