

From *The Cul de Sac*

Out in the Sticks

Joe was out in the garden getting some air after his maths exam. He hated to admit it, but he and the garden had a special relationship. Not quite exclusive but they was getting there. He watched a couple of little flitty birds in the tree in the field next door and wished he could fly up and join them. He'd aced the exam, he was sure. Mum had insisted on the tutor and Deena had, to be fair, helped him properly get Mechanics but he still had his Planning, Analysis and Evaluation for Physics and his second Economics exam to come.

Today was his first day at the Chalk Hills Academy, local school in the back of beyond. He had walked there, surprised not to see horsedrawn carts going past. The school was not so different to his old one in Thornton Heath. It was all sleek lines and computers. But had these big glass windows at the front, and a mezzanine, architect designed, the patronizing head had told them at the tour his parents insisted coming to before he started. He was shown the Sixth Form common room where he could take a break between exams and 'drink coffee and hang out'. Like he was gonna sit around drinking coffee with this bunch of floppy-haired toss pots talking Kasabian and Arctic Monkeys.

At the end of the exam, he was walking back to the glazed entrance, chucking his bag over his shoulder when someone called behind him. ‘I’m going into town. Wanna come?’

The boy caught up with him and walked alongside as Joe eyed him, looking at his scuffed Hi-Tec trainers and his ankle grazer trousers. But the kid looked sort of all right, non-threatening, sort of friendly. No designer stuff like his friends back home but Joe thought of his boring house and the toytown cul de sac and decided he had nothing else to gain at this juncture. So, bruh, why not?

The two of them walked into the olde worlde town centre which had a Peacocks, an Iceland and of course a Costa. What else would anyone need? He was missing the Chicken Cottage on Streatham High Road, the record shops in Camden, his clothes from Oxford Street and the Brixton clubs. There were no nightclubs, man, not for miles and even then, well, like, no decent ones except in Bristol which was like thirty miles away. Joe had no clue where he was going but walked like he was in control, his shoulders back, affecting the limp and he had his leather jacket on even though the sun was searing his back through each break in the clouds and his top lip was wet with sweat.

He followed the boy who walked fast across the old, dirty stone town centre, running between cars and saying ‘all right’ in a squeaky voice to like one in five people. The boy was only little for his age, and his hair was overgrown and curled and he smelled bad, like he had not even seen a bottle of Lynx or Paco Rabanne or whatever shit these kids out here used. But Joe was bored with his new home, and curious.

They walked along the High Street past, like, a gazillion charity shops and old ladies' clothes shops and down an alley. Joe looked round him, his movements split-second from city life. The boy took him into a small café. It was all melamine and sticky sauce bottles and smelled of chip fat. A big man with a roll of pale flap hanging outside his jogging bottoms eyed Joe suspiciously. The woman in the tabard behind the counter with long plastic nails with thick eyeliner looked at the boy, 'Yes love. What can I get you?'

'I'll have an All-Day Breakfast with an extra round on the side.'

'And you, love?' she smiled at Joe.

He looked at the menu above the counter. 'Burger, please.' He took two cans, sheepishly following the boy to a table near the toilet but thankfully away from the fat man.

'So you's new to these parts?' The boy laid on a thick West Country accent and grinned. He held out a hand, ingrained with all kinds of shit by the looks of it. 'I'm Sol, Sol Holloway. Wiltshire born and bred. Pleased to meet you, my man.'

'Joe.' He limply shook the dirty hand, wiped his on his T-shirt and shifted in the plastic chair.

'*Hey Joe*,' weirdly the boy sang. '*Where you going with that gun in your hand?*' He sat back and laughed.

'What you saying?' Joe fronted the boy. 'I'm gangsta cos I'm brown?'

'No, just some old Hendrix. Never mind. Where you from?'

Joe curled his lip. 'Pakistan.'

'No, where are you from? In England?'

‘We come over from London, and I wish to God we were back there now.’

‘Chill, Joe. It’s not so bad round here. What you looking for? Girls? Drugs? Drink?’

‘Nah, none of that shit. Got a girl back in Streatham and don’t touch all that. Music. That’s what I’m after.’

‘Yeah, that might be tricky. Sorry, mate. Innt much doing here, unless you go a Bath or Bristol.’ He had half-finished his breakfast and was wiping the toast in the bean juice, coating his fingers and drooling orange pus from his mouth.

‘Whatever. I’m out of here in a few months. Going to Leeds Uni in September. The folks can go for their little country lives here but I’m back to the city. Leeds for me, brother.’

‘I’ll still be here in September. Got no plans.’ The boy sighed and turned it into a yawn.

Joe ate up the greasy burger but left the pallid chips. Mum said she was marinating chicken and doing sweet potatoes tonight, so he saved his appetite. Sol finished his food and sat back, his feet up on the chair the other side if the table next to Joe. ‘That was good,’ he said, hands on his skinny belly.

Joe pushed his plate.

‘Right. Let’s go,’ said Sol.

He walked out of the café and Joe walked behind him. ‘That’s nine pound eighty, love.’ The woman behind the counter called out to him. The boy was already strutting off outside, so Joe pulled a tenner from his pocket and paid her. He got outside and looked around. The squirt had gone. Joe felt like

an idiot. He didn't want to make friends here. He had no intention of settling down but he'd been fleeced by a small-town street urchin. Wicked.

Joe walked back down the High Street in the direction of the school to head home. He pushed his hand into his pockets and walked with his head down. His face burnt and his eyes were sore, like a hundred tiny needles pricking each cornea. No way, he hadn't cried since he was a kid and he wasn't starting now. Not even with all the shit in London with Mum and Dad when she sat crying in the armchair, balls of tissues around her, Dad putting out a comforting arm, and Ela would sit on her lap and give her a hug. Joe had held it together, been strong like his dad.

‘Watcha guv’nor,’ said Sol in faux Cockney as he sprang out from a charity shop doorway.

‘What the...?’

‘Sorry, mate.’ Sol rubbed his nose and he walked alongside him, avoiding eye contact. ‘I’m skint. I was starving.’

‘Whatever, I’m out, man. You can go to kingdom fuck.’

‘Calm down, son. Look, come with me.’

Joe really didn't want to follow this Sol, but he thought of the sterile new home and his mother's smiles through tear-stained cheeks and heavy eyes. Ela had already gone off with another girl from the cul de sac, Casey or Courtenay, so she wasn't home for him to play *Minecraft* with or to sneak in a game of *Assassin's Creed* when the folks were at work. And the internet was shit, the connection flipped in and out. Absolute bumpkin territory where nothing worked and it was all very, very slow. If this boy was gonna lock him

in an empty freezer chained up in the middle of nowhere what did that even matter? He'd take his chances.

They walked past the school to the other end of the car park. It was quiet now at the end of the day, a futuristic city awaiting attack, wind whirling round the tall buildings like the offices in central London. Sol took Joe into the town campus, an ugly new building that housed the leisure centre, a library and meeting rooms. It just got better.

‘Come on.’ Sol walked past the reception desk where he waved at the two women in blouses with cravats who smiled like cabin crew as they sold swim sessions and gym membership, and then Sol put a hand up to an elderly woman in the library. They went through a fire exit to a staircase and Joe followed his new acquaintance as he ran up the steps two at a time.

There was a corridor at the top with some offices, everything painted white like a hospital, then a row of unmarked doors lined up close together. Sol took out a key and opened a door. He reached inside, pulled a light cord, grabbed Joe and shut the door behind them. There was a metal shelf unit with loads of boxes with pamphlets and stationery, then just behind that a sleeping bag was spread on some boxes on the floor with Sol’s things, a creased copy of 1984, a screwed-up sweatshirt and a toothbrush. Shit, it was sad.

‘Make yourself at home.’ Sol sat cross-legged on the sleeping bag, but Joe hovered tall above him.

He looked around, a camping lamp on the shelf, a tin of stew and some moulding bread. This kid lived here, man. ‘So, where’s your parents?’ asked Joe.

‘Don’t know and don’t bloody well care. Had enough of their shit. Thieving alcoholics.’ The boy tapped his foot, clenching his teeth. ‘Social worker thinks I’m at my gran’s but she’s losing it. Can’t cope. She don’t know what day it is. I’m eighteen in two weeks so I’m on me Jack Jones then anyway.’

‘That’s rough.’ Joe shrugged and thought of his old room then of his new one with his iMac and sound system then looked at Sol’s minimal possessions.

‘Yeah.’ Sol sighed and sat back against the shelf.
‘I’d better go,’ said Joe. ‘Get back for dinner.’
Sol looked sad. ‘OK, mate.’ He reached over for his book. He opened it. Then he looked up like he had a brainwave. ‘Course, I could take you to the clubs. My brother knows the best ones. He’s got a flat in Barton Hill, you know, in Bristol. Put us up probably. I can’t afford the train fare, mind so you’d ...’

‘Yeah?’ Joe was hopeful. He wanted to get out, just for one night to get back his sanity. He pulled his phone out, sat down next to Sol and showed him what he had on iTunes. The boy, he had good taste.

After an hour Joe noticed the temperature in the cupboard lowering and got up to go home. He walked back through the safe little town, no-one there in their hatchbacks and estates short on food like that boy, without a home to go back to. In this town, well, well, well. Turned out there was shit everywhere.

Joe got up from the garden bench. His arms were getting darker from the time he was spending outside. He would go and check out the club nights in Bristol like Sol suggested. They were meeting tomorrow to sort it.

He wondered if Mum would notice if he took his old baby blanket from the airing cupboard.