

Jack the Lad, by Al Watt.

I've got a record as long as your arm.

My first bust was for stealing tarts. Thought I'd make a couple of bob selling them for play pieces to my school pals. My old man gave me a right leathering and I swore I'd never do it again – well at least not out of my mum's shop. I got a thrill out of shoplifting but the buzz didn't last long and all too soon I needed more to get that adrenaline rush.

It's an old story; Teachers couldn't cope with me, so I didn't get any qualifications. So even if I did go *jobseeking* it'd be less than I could make from hustling on the streets.

I saw how the gangstas were kings of the hood. I wanted all the stuff that they had; the fancy cars, the designer gear, the babes, to feel ten foot tall and know that no one will mess with me.

I killed a guy cos he was fool enough to fight back when I was mugging him. The beak sent me down for ten and I said EASY so he gave me fifteen for my cheek.

Then one of these new schemes came along with shrinks and a lot of psychobabble. I thought I'd just tell them what they wanted to hear and it'd maybe be a ticket out of the jail.

Anyhow, after a bit, the shrink asks me if I've got the guts for a face-to-face with the victim's wife.

Well I never was one to back down and I thought maybe if I says sorry it'd stand me in good for my parole, but that's not how it went down.

Her face was pure dead white so it was. When she stared me right in the eyes; it was like looking down the barrels of a shotgun. She never said nothing at first – just glared at me for like ages. Then she did the weirdest thing, she shook her head and laughed and said she thought I'd have had horns, or look scary, or something. How she'd this big speech ready to see if she could get through to me what it meant for her kids to lose their father, but how it'd just be a waste of time as I wouldn't know a decent feeling if it leapt up and bit me. She says she almost felt sorry for me as nothing good was ever going to happen to me. How my whole life was just about fighting and I'd most likely die in a fight over nothing. Then she said she wasn't going to waste another second's thought on me and marched out of there without me saying a single word.

Those few minutes changed my life.

See, I used to look in the mirror and see a hard man, but after that all I saw was a loser going downhill fast.

So I got help with learning to read and write and do sums and I stopped giving the screws a hard time.

It was brutal at first. The other cons seen me as soft – noising me up – trying to push me into fights – so I got into segregation. I hated being in with all the nonces, but I just had to suck it up – I got my head down and got there in the end.

When I got out I took up martial arts for the discipline and I got a job with a scheme that gets ex-cons to refurbish old furniture. My P.O. was well pleased with me. He asked if I could give talks on my experiences and I was well up for it. The shrink had done me a favour and I hoped I could make a difference. That's how I've ended up here talking to you.

So this is it – a reality check. Jails are not what you think. Best you can hope for is some hairy arsed con will make you his bitch – otherwise you'll spend every day waiting on the rape gangs.

It's worse at night.

And DON'T give me any whiney excuses about *mean city streets* and *doing whatcha gotta do to survive*, cos I've been there – done that and wiped my arse with the T-shirt.

Right now, you're nothing but a pack of scabby rats clawing and biting each other to get to the top of a pile of shit.

If you survive long enough – what're you going look back on in your life?

At your age I wanted to get a gun and shoot someone – any one – just to get a killer

rep. I thought I'd achieved something going to jail for murder, like other folk would get a degree or promotion at work. I thought people respected me but it was just fear. You can say it's a dog eat dog world out there and that everyone's out for themselves but it needn't be that way – this project is a chance – YOU and YOU ALONE CAN DECIDE what you're gonna be – A ZERO – or A HERO.

I've got a slogan I got framed at the workshop,

“It's easier to let the darkness swallow you up – than to struggle for the light.”

So my question to you all here is – have you got the cojones – the courage – to do what I did?