

3. Extra gear

'Black people don't bruise'

The sky was lit up by flames on the evening of the 1985 Brixton riot. It had all died down the next morning and I walked with Rob through a ghost town of burned out, overturned cars and smashed-in shopfronts. It was like being on a huge film set.

I was at Pimlico comprehensive in Westminster at the time, then the most multi-cultural school in the country. You might think it was posh because of its location but actually the pupils were almost exclusively drawn from the sprawling council block estate next door and rough areas south of the river. The first day back after the riot, everyone was talking about it. How the police had shot a black woman — Cherry Groce — in her home because she was suspected of harbouring her son who was wanted over firearms offences. He wasn't there.

The whole year of boys went to have PE at one point during the day and our teacher, 'Mr Hunk', looked agitated. I'd always liked him. He was a tall, white, muscular, blonde, handsome, charismatic guy. Sort of like He-Man.

But what happened next was a bit weird. Instead of letting us get changed, he marched us into the gym and ordered us to sit down on the benches and listen. It seemed like he was angry with *us*. He then proceeded to give a lecture on how the police were just doing their jobs and that the woman who got shot — and paralysed from the waist down — was harbouring a bank robber. He seethed: "Do you know what a sawn-off shotgun can do? It can take out a whole car."

There was a deathly silence.

There was no time left for our lesson so we never did get changed and no one talked about 'the speech' afterwards.

I thought it was a demonstration of breathtaking arrogance by Mr Hunk. I knew through personal experiences that the police often behaved like a gang of racists in my area. And I'm quite sure that many of my fellow pupils would have been aware of that themselves, often through their personal experiences or those of people close to them. What Mr Hunk did was inappropriate and unprofessional. I knew it then as a 13 year old and I know it now. Surely, there would or should have been guidelines about that sort of thing.

Many years later, mother of six Mrs Groce received £500,000 in compensation from the Metropolitan Police, with no admission of liability. The officer who shot her — Detective Inspector Douglas Lovelock — was prosecuted for malicious wounding but acquitted.

Let's talk again about firearms offences.

Mrs Groce died in 2011 aged 63 and a 2014 inquest ruled there was a causal link between the shooting and her death. In the same year, an inquest jury concluded that eight separate police failures had contributed to it. The Met eventually apologised for the wrongful shooting of Mrs Groce.

Her son, Michael, got a three-year suspended sentence for illegal possession of a sawn-off shotgun but was never charged with any offence related to armed robbery or the riots. He insisted he had taken possession of the weapon because he feared for his life.

What do you say now, Mr Hunk?

One thing I *would* say for him is that he did save an old woman's life. She was about to jump to her death from a third floor window which looked down on one of the submerged playgrounds at Pimlico. A few of the pupils playing football at lunchtime looked up, spotted her and started shrieking: "Don't do it!"

She did jump but miraculously, survived. What actually happened is that one of her calves got impaled on an iron railing on the way down. A million to one shot. Mr Hunk was the first one on the scene and rushed to hold her in place until the fire brigade arrived. The whole school turned out to watch. But I decided, after hearing what had happened, that I would avert my eyes from the gruesome display.

My other abiding memory of Mr Hunk, apart from chatting up admiring female teachers, is taking us for sprinting during PE. Pimlico School is on a sort of island surrounded by roads and our running track was the narrow pavement around the grounds. We were doing the 100 metres sprints in pairs with two teachers, one at each end. Mr Hunk was at the start. I hated running because I was always slow. Before my turn, this tall, blonde, nice guy put his head down and ran his socks off. Unfortunately for him, towards the end of the 100 metres, he ran into a lamppost face first, with such impact that he bounced five foot from where he'd just come from and landed flat out on his back. He was motionless.

The boys at my end were in fits of laughter. Some were on the floor. I could see the funny side but didn't want to laugh until I knew the boy was okay. Mr Hunk went ballistic at the laughers. What did he expect? We were a bunch of ghetto-hardened kids. Some would have laughed even if the boy had died. Some *especially* if he'd died. That's the reality.

To illustrate the kind of thing that went down at Pimlico, a friend of mine was nearly murdered playing at lunchtime. Growing up, there was this playground game called "Stingball". The idea was to throw a tennis ball at someone so hard that it would hurt. Being slow, I never

played it. One summer, a more vicious version of the game — “Beats” — became all the rage. And when I say rage...

The idea was that when someone was hit, the victim had to escape from the playground as everyone tried to punch and kick him. One day after lunch, I was in a design and technology class and, before the lesson began, all the boys were talking about how Beats had got out of hand. The boys were kinda excited that a boy had been beaten to a pulp.

Then the Deputy Head, a handsome and charismatic (more so than Mr Hunk on both counts) Asian man called Mr Singh, came in and spelled out the gravity of the situation — with considerable drama. The victim was not a close friend but a friend nonetheless, a decent guy. He, incidentally, had the same racial make-up as me. Mr Singh said the paramedics had to use special lifting equipment to scrape him off the floor, so as not to damage his spine. He added that the boy was fighting for his life and talked about “murder charges”. Suddenly, the excitement was gone. Now it was about fear.

What actually happened is that the victim *had* managed to escape the playground but the pack continued chasing after him anyway. He was knocked unconscious as he fell when his head hit a steel bar which was part of the school’s electronic, outer blind system. The story is that the last assailant jumped on the boy’s head. Fortunately, for all involved, the victim escaped with some broken ribs and made a full recovery. But I found him to be a slightly different person after that.

I was never the type to get involved with a game like Beats, even had I been fast. But I was quite badly behaved in my own way, especially from the age of about

13. I barely did a jot of homework during my whole time at Pimlico. I was the class clown and would frequently be sent out for being disruptive.

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Back in my early days at Pimlico, aged 11, I was on my way home and these two older, black boys cornered me after I got off the Tube at Brixton. They told me to come with them and we ended up on this secluded, open staircase just off the high street. It was horrible. I didn't know what they wanted from me but I was scared.

Eventually, after coming to the conclusion I had little to take other than a few coins, they let me go. I ran a mile or so home in tears and my mum called the police. This white detective turned up at our home, asked me what had happened and for descriptions. I told him that the older, taller, darker one had "a lot of facial bruising". The detective said: "Black people don't bruise."

I was totally speechless. Shocked. I was thinking: "Hang on a minute here."

HE HAD BRUISES.

It was a chilling moment. My best friend at that time — 'Ralph' — was black and he was a gentle giant. A real softie, much more so than me. We were inseparable. The point being that the boys being black was not my issue. The detective drove me to the scene and I was sitting in the back of the car feeling almost as nervous and bewildered as when I had been with the two boys.

Part of me had always wanted to believe that my fears and the stories about cops weren't *really* true, despite the incident outside Henry Fawcett School with Rob years previously and the 1981 riot. It woke me up a bit. That cop

knew black people bruise. Apart from anything, I simply couldn't believe it at the level of an adult openly talking shit, especially to a child.

In that first year at Pimlico, a black boy in the fifth year tried to "drapse" my watch, which had the then new feature of being both digital and analogue, a bit James Bond. "Drapsing" is kind of like a mild form of mugging. It usually equated to older kids taking stuff off younger kids, knowing they would never report it. Drapsing could involve a physical element but not necessarily. My scene happened on a platform bench inside Pimlico Tube station. He was a big guy, a six-footer. He was all over me. We were both gripping the watch and I just held onto it for as long as I could, as tightly as I could. I might have let go if he'd hit me. But he didn't and, eventually, he gave up, saying something like: "This kid's got spirit."

You're damned right.

My Sony headphones once got drapsed. They were taken by a black kid outside my form classroom before afternoon register. The annoying thing is that this big, white guy, 'Martin', assured me he'd get them back for me. But possession is nine tenths of the law and he knew it. He should have stopped them from being taken there and then or stayed out of it.

Martin saw himself as a hardman but the truth was that he was afraid of certain black boys. I did, miraculously, manage to get the headphones back a few weeks later but no thanks to Martin. I was in a playground with him once and he told me he was going to hit me round the head with the cricket bat he was holding. I said: "No, you're not."

I was wrong. Martin became a lawyer.

Despite Pimlico's shortcomings, there were some good teachers, especially my form tutor, Mr Nicholls. He genuinely cared about us during my time there and he was extremely patient. He once invited an Auschwitz survivor to talk to us. Everybody was incredibly respectful. I can't speak for the others but that experience had a huge impact on me. I simply could not comprehend the evil of the Holocaust, that people would do that to their fellow human beings on such a massive scale.

My tutor group was a mixture of white (including Jewish), black and Asian. We mainly got along, although there was a lot of piss-taking about our racial backgrounds which, occasionally, boiled over. But I noticed, when I was around 13, some of the boys were organising themselves into racially-defined gangs.

One morning break time, I was playing football and this boy from the year below, who happened to be black, kept fouling me. Bearing in mind there was no referee and it could get a bit rough, I finally snapped, grabbed him by the arms, pinned him up against a wall and delivered a few, ineffective, punches. I was wearing woollen gloves.

I'd forgotten the incident by lunchtime until the boy I'd hit came into the playground with an older, mixed race boy who used to wander round the school grounds carrying a rounders bat, without ever being challenged by the teachers. I recall that he had actually left the school but still hung around. He was aged around 16.

They took me to another playground area and there was a multi-racial, multi-age gang waiting for me. I was encircled and they were starting to give me little digs.

I was resigned to taking the beating of my life. I feared for my life. But then the black gang from my year, led by Colin, a boy I'd been friends with before he

got all militant, emerged from the distance to retrieve me, followed by most of the rest of the boys from my year. It was like something out of a movie. Robert, who was white and one of my best friends, had alerted Colin.

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I have faced racism from Asian people, though not nearly as much as from white people. But I've had virtually no racism from black people. One of the few times I did was from a girl in my form early on at Pimlico. 'Denice' was of Jamaican extraction and lived in the infamous Stockwell Park Estate in Brixton. I feared that place and I'd had run-ins in the past with boys from there. Some of them, black boys, played in my Brockwell Park Saturday morning football league and they didn't give a fuck. I don't remember anything specific, I just knew that was somewhere I didn't want to go for fear of being mugged or attacked. I lived on The Frontline but I was a familiar face there.

Me and Denice, who was in my tutor group, had an on-off friendship over the years. We once had an altercation after she accidentally ripped my new jacket. I pushed her away, unfortunately with more force than I'd intended. She went flying against a desk, then came for me and scratched my face to ribbons.

I digress.

One day, my dad — universally known as "Peso" — picked me up from Pimlico when I was about 13. It was one of the happiest moments of my life. I can still see him walking up to the school gates with a big smile on his face. I hadn't been picked up by anyone pretty much since I was seven, so to be picked up by *my dad*, who lived in India,

was a special occasion. And I wanted to say to all my school friends: “You see, my *Indian* dad does actually exist.”

The next day, Denice being Denice saw this as an opportunity to tease me and took great delight in comparing my dad to “a monkey”. Looking back, it probably just tickled her that I’d be so hurt by an insult usually aimed at black people. I got quite tearful about it and somehow ended up in an office with the Deputy Head of Year. She was Greek and told me she used to get teased about being a “bubble and squeak” (which is not quite the same) and I should just shrug it off, which I did. It’s quite amusing in a way.

Not that it was specifically directed at me but I do also recall a black kid — who went on to become a professional footballer — repeatedly using the word “Paki”. We were getting changed after PE and he was talking to someone about why there were no Asian professional footballers in Britain. I can still remember how angry I was when he asked everyone: “Why are there no professional Pakis?”

I just wish he hadn’t used that word. Things would have kicked off if I had talked about “niggers”. My other abiding memory of him wasn’t good either. I got into some stupid row with an on-off white friend, ‘Graham’, as we were leaving school at the end of the day. I was holding a football and I told him to “shut the fuck up or I’ll blast you in the face”. He challenged me to try. I wasn’t a great footballer and had no genuine belief I’d hit the target but — Sod’s Law — I nearly took his head off. I felt a bit of pride. But Graham was essentially a nice guy going through a devastatingly difficult period of his life. He challenged me to a fight a few days later.

Dozens of boys gathered round us but neither of us would throw the first punch. My rationale was that he had

challenged me, so why should I throw the first punch? The footballer held me by one of my wrists and tried to get me to punch Graham. Fighting ‘duels’ were great entertainment back then but I’d managed to dodge being one of the leading men over the years, and did so with Graham, who I was not afraid of. It was just him trying to boost his street cred, which was a bit pathetic.

Misbehaviour was such a big issue that, halfway through my time at Pimlico, they created a tutor group full of the most disruptive boys in the year. Graham was put in there. I thought it was pretty harsh and, having met him years later, I think it sent him down a horrific path...to jail. But he was his own worst enemy in a way, he was so desperate to be in with the ‘cool’ kids. I heard that one of them once poured the contents of an ashtray over his head and he burst into tears. He was an arse-kisser, all for the sake of being ‘cool’, which was never going to happen.

But there were certainly worse-behaved boys in my class, especially ‘Kelvin’, my day-to-day nemesis at Pimlico. He was a black kid with a Jamaican background. I got a bad first impression of him. He was also from Stockwell Park Estate and mates with Denice. I would not submit to his will, not even parting with my coppers so he could play a game called “penny up”. Kelvin was actually not that big or strong but he was a force of nature, charismatic in his own way but essentially, a bully. He had two, white sidekicks who hung around him because they thought it made them ‘cool’. I nearly came to blows with him a few times but I was scared of his two, older sisters. They were fearsome, like I’d imagine they would *literally* scratch your eyes out.

One of the few times my mum drove me to Pimlico was because I was going on a school journey and had

luggage. As we were driving through Stockwell, I saw Kelvin on the street struggling to the bus stop with his suitcase. He was running late and I think it was the first time that I ever recognised he was vulnerable. There was something in his body language that made me realise he wanted just to be a normal kid. When I look back, it seems obvious he'd been brutalised.

You have to bear in mind that we were sworn enemies but without hesitation, I told my mum to pull over. I put his suitcase in the boot and got him in the car. Kelvin turned to me and gave me a huge smile. He never gave me a problem again after that. That was when we were around 13 and a few years later he was living on his own in a hotel room near the school. He used a crowbar to prise open parking meters for pocket money. And I realised more and more that, whatever was going on in my life, his must have been tougher than I could possibly comprehend.

I mean, this guy went to a parents' evening on his own. I rated him for turning up under those circumstances. And he did make a go of things in the later years, especially in maths, which was taught by Mr Nicholls. But he should, in all fairness, have been in the naughty boys' class, not Graham. And let's not be sentimental about Kelvin: At times, he displayed an almost murderous streak.

The epilogue to that story is that I ran into him in the street during my early 20s when I was doing a journalism course in Vauxhall, south London. We had a little chat as we walked along and he seemed happy. I will always remember him telling me: "I never forget my friends."

My actual best friend for most of my time at Pimlico also had a Jamaican background but he was a different kettle of fish all together. Ralph was very straight in many ways, he didn't get into dope like me and a few others

at 15, for starters. He had a great sense of humour, though. He was warm and sensitive. A lot of his character can be explained by knowing his domineering mother, who brought him up single-handedly. I reckon she thought I was a bad influence on Ralph. Maybe I was.

I used to call him “Timothy” in reference to Ronnie Corbett sit-com, Sorry. In it, Corbett played a middle-aged man who is still living with his mum because she won’t extract her claws from him. She sabotages all his potential escape routes, romantically and otherwise. It was cringemaking. It’s funny because ‘my’ “Timothy” was a tall black guy (6ft 5ins, eventually), while Sorry Timothy was 5ft 1ins and white. The only physical thing they had in common (presumably) was that they both wore glasses. I once sent him a postcard from Greece — Ralph not Ronnie — and in it I called him a “bloodclaat”. I phoned him up when I got back and his mum came on and gave me an ear-bashing about using that swearword.

“Language, Timothy!”

I wanted to tell her that I had sent the postcard to Ralph not her and that it was none of her business. But she scared the shit out of me. I lived quite close to Ralph so we would travel home together most days. He did listen to me but I think, in the end, he hated me. He was seriously into this blonde girl in his area and struck up a friendship with her. I don’t know whether he was in love with her but he certainly talked about her a lot. Eventually, he wanted to show her off to me and we met. Okay, so you’ve guessed what happened next...

Yes, horny me got together with her for a while. My rationale was that if anything was going to happen between them it would have already occurred. I was a 15 year old virgin. It’s a shame, though. Ralph and I were

close. I suppose it would have been tremendously hurtful if the tables had been turned. But frankly, I wouldn't have showed her off before she was in the bag. Okay, I'm trying to justify my actions. I can't. It was a betrayal and it cost me a great friendship. Would I do it again as a randy, 15 year old boy? Probably.

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I lived and breathed football for much of the early part of my life. I would have loved to have been a pro and, specifically, played for Arsenal. I had this recurring dream about coming on as a substitute at their old Highbury ground. But the only thing I had in my favour was a good footballing brain.

Most of the Saturday morning league boys in Brockwell Park weren't quite good enough for their school teams, although it probably helped to give a few of them a nudge in that direction (including Ralph). Anyway, one time, I was playing right back in a match and was getting murdered by the opposition left winger. He was a fast, tall, strong, black guy. Definitely school team potential. Lightning quick.

We all had full kits, shirts, shorts and stockings but this kid was wearing grey tracksuit bottoms. As an aside, I sort of felt that it diminished the standing of the league that he wasn't wearing the proper kit. Anyway, as he was about to fly past me for the umpteenth time, I conducted an *experiment*: I deliberately tripped him up. He went flying, landing in a heap on the floor. After a few moments, he turned in my direction while still down and looked at me daggers. Then he got to his feet before pulling a spanner out of one of his tracksuit bottom pockets! I turned around

and ran as fast I could in the general direction of my home. As I said, I was slow but boy, I found an extra gear that day. When I finally looked behind me, I couldn't see him and I stopped running. I'm sure he felt like he'd made his point...and I then understood why he was wearing tracksuit bottoms.

Nothing was said about it the following week. I still occasionally see "Spanner Lad" around my area and it always sends a chill down my spine.

As well as playing regularly, from the age of 13, I used to go to most Arsenal home games with my mates, unaccompanied by an adult. And we'd go to other games in London, such as at Chelsea or even QPR, if Arsenal were playing in a different part of the country. It was a great outlet for me. The atmosphere back in the Eighties was pretty electric (there was actually an electric fence at Chelsea but it was never turned on).

I was quite resourceful when I think about it. I used to spend a week painting Arsenal's old ground during my summer holidays in return for a season ticket. I'm sure I won't get sued for this because they're probably all dead by now but the painters on the payroll were basically a small bunch of elderly, somewhat kindly, drunks. Can you imagine anything like all of that happening now? These days, painting Arsenal's Emirates Stadium *probably* involves a contract that gets put out to tender and various multi-national corporations vie for it. That's *probably* an exaggeration.

Arsenal playing legend George Graham took over as manager in 1986 and we won the League Cup in his first season. When we were painting the stadium during our summer holiday, me and my mate, 'Gary', were once taking a break in the iconic East Stand where fans were

having their pictures taken with the Cup. The funny thing is that they just left it behind on its own for an hour when the photographer went to lunch. Anyone could have just walked in off the street and taken it. *We* could have taken it.

My other abiding memory of growing up with Arsenal was me and Gary eventually having the balls to stand in the epicentre of the North Bank terrace, where all the singing emanated from. There used to be this young lady who would often position herself behind one of the bars in the most tightly-packed section. Women hardly went to football in those days, let alone placed themselves in that area of the ground. AND she was gorgeous. This is a bit pervy but we (I mean all the males in that particular section) used to take turns lining up behind her, hoping Arsenal would score so we'd get squeezed against her gorgeous behind in the melee. She definitely got off on it, as did we! Talk about up the Arsenal! I suppose she must have been some sort of exhibitionist.

My career as a journalist had its roots in my obsession with football. I used to buy weekly football magazines, such as *Match* and *Shoot*, from the age of 11. Then I started buying *The Daily Mirror* for its football coverage. I was not a good student at Pimlico but I must have absorbed a lot by reading red-top tabloids. I was learning unconsciously.

For the entirety of my six years at Pimlico, I caught the Tube from Brixton. There was a newsstand outside the station where I would buy my magazines and papers. The funny thing is that the (white) woman who usually served me always gave me the wrong change. Too much! Sometimes she would give me more than I gave her in the first place. Like maybe 50p more.

This 'arrangement' was unspoken. Looking back, I find myself speculating whether she thought that my

preoccupation with words would lead me into some sort of worthwhile career. I guess I'll never know but I'm sure she wasn't giving the wrong change to everyone. That little bit of money that I saved or accrued did make a difference. I wasn't a squatter at that point but things were still pretty tight. I may not have made it as a journalist if it hadn't been for the newsstand woman.

The Mirror was an assertion of my “lefty” background and identity. A black classmate used to buy The Sun and we were like two Jedi with our lightsabers. He laughed and laughed many years later when he heard that I was working for The Sun. Leroy wasn't a tall guy but he was big and strong. It was bizarre that he was so right-wing. I couldn't understand it but we had fun. Everyone referred to him in a deep, booming voice as “Leeroooy”, even the black boys, especially the black boys. It was related to his stereotypical image as the big, strong black guy. He was infamous for his “nipple twists”. If you'd done something to piss him off then he'd grab hold of your nipples, twist them and lift you off the ground by them. Agony. But he was protective of his friends, especially us in his tutor group. He'd walk the walk rather than just talk the talk when it came to standing up to anyone in the school. He had a particularly strong personal identity, especially as he had St Lucian heritage rather than Jamaican. Leeroooy was a one-man band and did not affiliate himself to any gang.

We weren't close friends but we used to have “cussing matches”, which would often draw a crowd. “Cussing” is West Indian for “cursing”, essentially taking the piss out of each other. I used to pick on parts of his body, clothes and shoes. He was more old school, mainly cussing my mum. A crowd of up to a dozen kids from all races used to witness these clashes as we'd walk the couple of miles

from Pimlico, over Vauxhall Bridge and to Stockwell, where he lived. If you landed a decent verbal blow then everyone would laugh and shout: “Cuss! Cuss!”

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As I came towards the end of my time at Pimlico, dope started to become an important part of my life. I had my first joint when I was 15 and smoked it on and off until I was first sectioned in 2008. I haven't touched it since. I miss it. I regularly dream about it. It's still part of who I am. But it's not really compatible with bipolar disorder. I have a great long-term memory but my short-term memory is poor. I don't know if there is a link.

Me and my friend Robert (who tragically died in his early 30s of a rare disease not long after we'd reconnected many years later) used to get stoned at lunchtime when we were in the sixth form at Pimlico. It was fun. We got into some really hilarious debates during government and politics, and sociology lessons.

I don't know if the teachers knew we were stoned but they didn't give us any obvious indication that they were pissed off about it. I do believe dope can open up the doors of perception. But I have also learned to my cost that it can close them pretty abruptly as well. I used to think it should be legalised. I don't anymore, although I think it should be decriminalised, along with other recreational drugs.

One of my worst stoned memories was in a park in west London with Robert and a Jewish friend. We were sitting in a playground getting blasted during school hours and this little white kid — around five years old — came up and started talking to us. He heard me being called “Siddy” and started calling me a “Paki”. It was such a

frustrating situation because I couldn't do anything about it. So many levels of frustration. This obnoxious child was so cocky and eventually told us: "My dad's a policeman."

I thought: "That figures."