Walking with Karl

An ex-gang member revisits his past
EDWARD DOCX

I am at the House of Commons. Karl lives less than three miles down the road. So I leave it late and I’m crossing the river on a bus when I get the message: “A very close friend of mine was stabbed severely in the chest yesterday and past away an hour ago. I’m in the hospital now and won’t be able to meet with you today.”

The sun has fallen behind Westminster Abbey and the water below is the colour of charcoal. For half a minute, I think maybe Karl’s making it up because he’s changed his mind. Last time we met, he was shy and wary. I go through all the usual media organisations on my phone trying to find news of a stabbing and what is now a murder. It takes me almost 20 minutes to locate even a paragraph. Eventually, I have a name and a place: Dwayne Simpson, Brixton.

I find some words to text back to Karl, but even on my own screen, the exchange is unreal to me. Three days later, I receive the following: “The young man was more a brother than a friend and though the effect its had on me is unwordable, this pain must fuel a purpose.”

My purpose—my plan—had been to spend some time walking and talking with Karl through the streets, the scruffy asphalt parks and the estates of his childhood. I wanted to see our capital through the eyes of a man who for more than five years lived in the midst of intense physical violence.

Karl is 24 years old. He grew up in and around the Myatt’s Field estate in Brixton. His mother, Elizabeth, whom I later meet, is Ghanaian, like his father. She’s smiling, doting, warm, indulgent and cheerfully Christian. They moved to Britain about 30 years ago. In Ghana she was a teacher, but her qualifications were not recognised here, so she did various “hand to mouth” jobs and worked as a nurse. Karl’s father, whom he doesn’t want to name, “does a few jobs now, delivery work and security stuff.” He has one older brother who was in “some sort of menial job” the last time Karl heard about him.

At the age of 13, Karl created his own gang, MAD. This stood for Max, Addict and Drowsy. He was “Addict.” The gang became “Mayhem and Disaster” and grew to number around 40. They posted a picture of themselves online in 2004, which the national newspapers later splashed all over their pages. Karl can be seen crouching on a brick wall at the top centre. He is 14 years old and clearly the leader. He is carrying an imitation automatic rifle which he points at the camera. Two of the others in the picture are now in jail for different murders. One of them is dead. On average, over the past 10 years, teenage murders in London
At 13, Karl joined the more notorious OC (Organised Crime) gang, which, for a few years had the reputation of being the most feared and ruthless in London. He “got out” aged 19; he was saved; he changed his life. But not before he had counted a toll of 19 deaths—four of which he categorises as “us”; and 15 of which he categorises as “them.”

“And some of these happened in front of your own eyes?”

“One of them. My friend Alex.”

“How did that affect you?”

“Seeing death distorts. There are the things that make you quite unremorseful. ‘Us’ and ‘them’—that’s such a wicked thing; but someone that has eyes to really see it will see it as a defence mechanism. If you’ve got less people to grieve for, you know.”

“Did Alex’s death register though? Your friend? Do you feel the reality of it? Or were you numb?”

“If we were going to go through the psychological effects of inner-city estate warfare, then I was a severe casualty.”

Alex Malumba’s body was kept for a long time as part of the murder investigation. He was stabbed in his heart on the night before Karl took his GCSEs.

“You hear he’s dead,” Karl says. “You haven’t seen the body as yet; you’re going to have to wait for a funeral that’s suspended and can be at any moment. But it will usually be after a few weeks. By then the body is usually rotted to a far extent. They use perfume but they can’t mask the smell.”

“You’re saying that you could smell your friend’s body?”

“Yeah, even with the perfume. I was one of the six that carried him down the aisle.”

“How did that feel?”

“I put on the mask of violence.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re talking to the should-be-dead. I’ve been shot at several times, point blank, close range, automatic, one pop. I have been stabbed back and front.”

“But the mask?”

“It manifests in different ways. I did resign to cry after the first one.”

“You decided not to cry anymore?”

“And then the friends that followed, I never cried. And then it got to a point where I wanted to cry and couldn’t cry. And then I was very grateful that when Dwayne died I could cry. Very grateful, very grateful.”

Two weeks later, Karl is waiting at Brixton tube station. We’re at the end of the first truly beautiful day of the year and the air is warm and the streets have a sepia-timeless quality in the early evening light.

Karl is around six foot five. He’s broad and densely-built, yet somehow gangly. His habitual expression hovers between the slight reticence of his smile and the vigilance of his eyes. He has a deep knife scar that runs from his forehead diagonally across his eye to the top of his nose. His demeanour is hard to capture: part wounded, boyish and vulnerable; part warrior, unflinching and primed; part righteous preacher, part humble student. He is articulate, engaging, generous; though his intelligence is exacting. And he is among the most psychologically astute people I have met.

We set off down the Brixton Road, heading north. I can feel an emotion—grief, sorrow—hanging in the air like cordite. We’re going to do the walk we had originally planned but now with a more acute purpose. We’re going to see the place where Dwayne lay dying in an alley after he, too, had been stabbed in the heart.

In 10 paces, everything has changed. I feel as if I’ve been given special glasses, or had some cataract removed. Suddenly the street no longer swarms with the usual blurred anonymity of London; instead, it becomes a parade of individuals who come towards us in sharp focus. Two younger men in the oncoming crowd slow, almost imperceptibly, and their fists go diagonally to their hearts as they draw level. (This gesture will happen frequently—it is the sign of “brotherhood”; they are “saying hello, like colleagues.”) Someone hails us from across the road. On our left, drive-by windows go down and hands come out of cars in the sign of guns or salutes. Horns. Two girls stop—“Are you Karl?”—and then ask us about Gospel music. Boys on bikes. Three men in a car. Girls in the park. Men and women waving or nodding from balconies and doorways that I would never have noticed. Right and left, people greet, acknowledge, make the effort to connect. Walking with Karl, I am seeing not just another city but another world. A parallel reality with different rules and protocols and requirements that may or may not coincide with my own. Without Karl we would be invisible to one another.

We peel away, right, into the Angell Town estate. Soon, we’re surrounded by social housing. Some concrete, some brick, some white, some grey—block after block, stretching away in all directions. High-rise windows glint in the low sun.

“How does it start? How did it start for you?”

“Powerlessness,” Karl says, quickly. “Everyone’s story is different; but that was the biggest factor for me. I was scared.”

“Scared of other boys?”

“Yeah. Scared of people that I once called friends or peers at school that had now kind of gone that way. They would intimidate me. That’s the feeling that will then lead you to be in a gang; But then when you’re in the gang what motivates you may well be... more power. But it’s not power to be more dominant; it’s more power to feel more safe indirectly. So fear is a great motivation.”

It is hard to overestimate the amount of unreported youth-on-youth crime that happens every day, right here where we are walking. Karl tells me about how many times he was robbed—phones, money, bike. How they broke into his mother’s car. How he beat him up. How it got so he couldn’t set foot out of the door. I have to remind myself that he was a child when this was happening. Nine, 10, 11. That the boys doing all this were older than him, carried knives, were in gangs.

From about the age of 12, the prospect of joining a gang filled Karl’s mind: “It was partly pragmatic for me,” he says. “I couldn’t foresee living in these circumstances for the next maybe 10 or so years. I heard about getting a great job later on; but I’ve got so many years to live before that.”

“So you want to arm yourself up?”

“No, it’s not like that in the beginning. There were other young men that felt as vulnerable and as intimidated as myself and were tired with that and couldn’t see how long that could go on. So, they just became my band of merry men. We were friends already and we kind of had each other’s back. The truth is that it was very gradual and organic.”

We leave Angell Town for Myatt’s Fields, the neighbouring estate, Karl’s old home. I ask about the feeling of “brotherhood.”

“People don’t realise. You get in a gang and that’s how it feels—the majority of the boys think they’re helping; everyone is helping each other. It’s like giving you a life, like someone
giving you an internship. It’s not like ‘I'm going to destroy your life’; it’s more ‘I’m going to help you.’”

“I’m going to look after you?”

“It’s more I’m going to show you the ropes and be your friend. It’s all pretty sad in the sense where everyone is trying to be something. But what can they be? They want to feel significant. They want to feel that they have a role to play. As if they are not just a void. They want to feel as if they have some self-worth. That is what is never highlighted—that is the other big motivation: self-worth.”

“Fear and self-worth?”

“That’s how it starts. But it’s interlinked with the hopelessness. Gangsterism in a sense is like a slow suicide.”

We turn down a dusty and derelict alley. I can smell urine. The housing here seems to be abandoned. It’s hard to know. Now Karl is talking about love.

“What the world sees as a bunch of kids trying to hurt each other is actually a bunch of kids trying to help each other. These may look like crimes of hate. But they’re not. I can’t stand the lie. The young men are showing their love and loyalty for one another. Look what they have done to you. Look what I will do to them for you in return.”

“The loyalty between you is fierce—literally fierce?”

“You have it. There was a time in my life when boys would attack my friends or try to rob them and love would fuel me. I would cry and be shouting, ‘No, don’t touch my friend!’ and start fighting like that. We saw it as a token of our affection.”

“That you would be strong for each other?”

“And the bond was even stronger afterwards. The truth, absolute truth, is that was my family, that was my family.”

“But how did you feel walking around with knives and guns?”

Karl pauses. It got to the point, he says, where some of them “carried firearms to go to the shop.”

“Just in case anything happened?”

“Let’s say I go on the main road with so many cars going past. It just takes one person to see you, make a phone call to say you’re there. If you were in a location for, say, 15 minutes then someone could alert someone.”

He talks about being hunted; hunting.

“If a man has enlisted, he has to go and fight. They go and they do what they need to do to get back. And by the things they do together in that setting... they bond. This is very similar to the bond between gang members. This is the bond that you can’t quite reach. This is the most devastating, this is the most effective, part of the glue that is keeping gang members together is the fact that they’ve gone through so much together. It is bro-mance to the highest degree. To the highest degree.” His eyes glass a little.

“Because we need love,” I say, “we find it where we can.”

“We all crave it.”

We’ve stopped on a stairwell. These places are often lazily called rabbit warrens. But you could shoot a prison movie in and around these walkways and nobody would fire the location manager. There were dark moments here, Karl says. I can sense by his introspection that we’re standing in a place of physical significance—but whether he was victim or otherwise, I can’t tell. Gulls bark in the last of the sunset above us. I wait until he speaks—almost wistful now: “It didn’t help that I was very ambitious,” he says. “To a young boy here, gangsterism was an admirable pursuit. Even those that grew up around you and didn’t get involved in gangsterism to the extent that I did, they esteemed it. They respected it. Being a gangster has very attractive branding. The PR in the world is spectacular, especially where I’m coming from.”

“You’re saying you have to be ambitious to be in a gang?”

He raises one foot on the step. “In my case, to go after it took a lot of ambition. It took diligence. It took every single day going to it. You have to transform yourself. Because remember this is an overall transformation. I’m coming from the household where my mother believed I could do all things. And I’m turning to gangsterism.”
**Left, in 2004, this photo of Karl (top right) with his gang, holding an imitation gun, was splashed across national newspapers**

He uses this term a lot. He means not just being a gangster but what he refers to as the “ideology” of being a gangster. By this I think he is referring to the cluster of emotional coordinates that best describe the brutish bravado and ersatz masculinity that boys might construct in their imagined vision of men: fragile pride, fraught bravery, foolhardy loyalty. But not in a playground; in a warzone.

“How did you transform?”

“I used to actually go home, look in the mirror and say: ‘I ain’t ever scared, I ain’t ever scared, I ain’t ever scared.’ I’d be singing, ‘I ain’t ever scared.’ I didn’t want to be evil, so I had to be brave. I wouldn’t go round stabbing all the time. But you wouldn’t dare come and stab me because you know if you come to try and stab me…”

“You got away with things because of your reputation. How did you do that? You just called their bluff?”

“I called their bluff, and some of them are in prison at the moment for murder. Some have come for me and I’ve called their bluff, too. I’ve done things that I shouldn’t have got away with. That’s also helped my popularity. That I should be dead.”

“But sometimes you have to act?”

“Many times, I wasn’t bluffing; I believed it. Have you watched on YouTube the clip of those Nairobi men? They approach a pride of lions in a formation while the lions are eating a carcass. And then the lions flee, and the men cut the carcass that they’ve killed and take it. I get that totally. That doesn’t just work with lions. I’ve done that plenty of times. I summon something.”

“It’s theatre—a kind of theatre?”

“Yes. But I’m not scared.” He repeats this last phrase often.

“You’re making them think this guy doesn’t mind dying?”

“This is it. Initially I was doing it, I was faking it. But they say fake it to make it; I got there; I was not scared. Ever. I’ve been in so many close encounters that for me they didn’t spell death. So many times I’ve been seen by cars full of people that want to do me harm and they’ve spun it round and tried to chase me.”

“Would you say you had a form of messiah complex: I’m different: I’m special: you can’t touch me?”

“Yeah, I had that complex fully. I had the complex fully in a negative way.”

Dusk. Lights of the cars. Lights in the fried chicken joints. Light in the Somali grocers. Dim where we’re walking across threadbare grass. Shadows in the alleys. We’re back on the Brixton Road. I press him. I want to know what is at stake. What are the dark moments? How do they start?

“There’s a young man from Peckham: he had basically just as much gravitas as I did, carried himself with the same bravado. He was esteemed in his patch and I was esteemed in mine. We had interactions. We had fights. But now he’s also part of the church—a different church, not my church. And me and him are very close… We spoke about writing a piece of text where we explore a different church, not my church. And me and him are very close… We spoke about a different church, not my church. And me and him are very close… We spoke about writing a piece of text where we explore a different church, not my church. And me and him are very close… We spoke about writing a piece of text where we explore a different church, not my church. And me and him are very close… We spoke about writing a piece of text where we explore a different church, not my church. And me and him are very close… We spoke about writing a piece of text where we explore a different church, not my church. And me and him are very close…”

“We know each other.” Giving each other high fives. But we had a problem. This is the dilemma with the cluster of emotional coordinates. If a gangster is a fiction, a fiction created to enable his survival, then what is the point of being a fiction? What is the point of fiction?

“The bigger his reputation, the smaller his world.”

“Told you so. I wasn’t bluffing; I believed it. Have you watched on YouTube the clip of those Nairobi men? They approach a pride of lions in a formation while the lions are eating a carcass. And then the lions flee, and the men cut the carcass that they’ve killed and take it. I get that totally. That doesn’t just work with lions. I’ve done that plenty of times. I summon something.”

“It’s theatre—a kind of theatre?”

“Yes. But I’m not scared.” He repeats this last phrase often.

“You’re making them think this guy doesn’t mind dying?”

“This is it. Initially I was doing it, I was faking it. But they say fake it to make it; I got there; I was not scared. Ever. I’ve been in so many close encounters that for me they didn’t spell death. So many times I’ve been seen by cars full of people that want to do me harm and they’ve spun it round and tried to chase me.”

“Would you say you had a form of messiah complex: I’m different: I’m special: you can’t touch me?”

“Yeah, I had that complex fully. I had the complex fully in a negative way.”

miles. It’s not just that he seldom left London, he seldom left Brixton. When he went by the street name of “General Lokks,” it was possible he’d be attacked if he went two miles in any direction. The bigger his reputation, the smaller his world.

“I bumped into him in Streatham,” says Karl. “We were walking through Streatham like we own Streatham. I’m not really supposed to be there; I’m from Brixton. But, technically, we owned it. So, I’m walking with three of us, and I see a young man, him and another—on the bus. And they are just kind of looking at us in a certain way.”

“So that you know he’s part of this thing?”

“Yes. He put his hand up—a certain sign that shows that he’s from Peckham. So then I’ve gone for him, ‘Come on, don’t be a coward!’ The bus is moving. ‘Don’t be a coward! You’re a coward!’ And it’s driving away. For me that was so terrible. For me, I can’t respect that. Then in the distance, like a Texas film, they were just walking right back. They had actually got off at the next stop. I kind of went of, ‘touché.’”

“So they come towards us, there are three of us and two of them. I’m sussing they must have had something. And we have nothing on us. But we never knew that initially. So we have the altercation, that’s next. They end up swinging the first punch and then we go; two of my friends on this one guy—me on him. And then he brought out this pointy thing and we have this face-off. I’m like, ‘Go on, stab me. There! There! There!’ I was in a bullet-proof level two, so I was hoping that he stabs me at the place I’m saying. At that moment the adrenaline is pumping. So I was going to hit him that hard and he was going to drop. I was quite confident with my fists as well. But he ends up doing this to-and-fro motion. And so I just turned my back to him. And do you know what he did? He ran round me and stabbed my friend in the neck.”

“To get you back for disrespecting him?”

“Yeah. It’s like a weird kind of dynamic.”

I have to remind myself that this is all happening in broad daylight on a main London street on a very average day. I have to remind myself that it was entirely normal for Karl to be wearing a bullet-proof vest.

“The police came quick,” says Karl. “They were asking us what was going on? My friend hadn’t got hit properly, because the hood got most of it. Very lucky. Because the guy went full throttle. They had thrown their knives by the bus stop. So we all put our hands round each other and we are like: ‘No, we ain’t got no problem. We know each other.’ Giving each other high fives. But we had been in full out combat. We kind of stated our names and then walked back.”

“You stated your names to the police?”

“No no no… The police left. We stated our names to each other. It’s like a duel.”

It occurs to me that “respect” is the 21st-century word for “honor” and that as a word it likewise whispers of frailty even as it puffs up its chest in pride. Duelling, slight, affront, rebuff… these are the words. This is about feuding and vendettas. This is about parading and preening and pecking orders, paying court and power relationships. This is about “territory” and “esteem.”

This is about boredom and hopelessness relieved by the churn of adrenaline. This is about the perverse prestige of crime and the desire for self-dramatisation. This is about codes of behaviour that create belonging. A fantasy world that isn’t a fantasy.

But, says Karl, this is not about the money and it’s not about drugs. Or not primarily. The drugs and the theft are mostly...
small time—the currency rather than the creed. (When I put it to Karl that gangs are all about drugs, he says “that’s total rubbish.”) Yes, these children may go into gangs that deal hard drugs “professionally” but the last thing London’s major crack, heroin and cocaine suppliers want is violence. They don’t want the police attention. They want the money with minimum fuss. Every gang is different and every story has its nuances but, yes, in the main this is about “respect.”

“I think,” Karl says, “that the most trivial of taking offence that I have encountered was a young man that was walking through my estate.”

“That was it, he’s just walking through?”

“Just walking through. Me, personally, I never really came out of war mode. I could flip from a normal conversation into full action. There were times in my life when I’d just think about murder.”

Karl loves words. He wants to write. He says he composes poems. I tell him I write poems for my friends’ birthdays sometimes. I ask him what he has written.

I say that he should send me something. He goes one better. He flicks through his phone to find a poem that he has written. Then he reads it to me as we walk.

I live in a urine village.  
This is worse than hell  
Because even in hell there’s equality—all gnash teeth or smell flesh.  
But in these fields of existence  
I am without a garden, without a pardon.  
Why do you paint my soul with the black of night?  
Darker than the black of light?  
Those shadows cast as darkness  
Where the most alienated become Marxist  
And wear hoods.  
I am Karl. I am Karl Marx.  
The flick of sparks and revolution burns.  
So, we fire at each other  
And hope that our blood will bleach your power;  
For our bullets cannot reach your ivory tower.

Night. And we’re standing beneath a street lamp at the entrance to an alleyway just off the Brixton Road, which is maybe 50 paces away. There’s a low brick wall topped by black railing. Intertwined with the railings are ribbons from which are suspended bouquets of pink roses, white lilies and a flower I do not know that blooms in pale gold.

“Dwayne was stabbed here?”

“Yes. He was.”

Karl says this in a voice that he strains to be without emotion. The cars on the main road pass by ceaselessly. One hundred metres away, at the other end of the alley, is Brixton police station. There’s a park behind us where people are sitting, idly smoking and talking. This delicate memorial, fixed to these railings seems so inadequate to me, so insufficient.

“How did this happen?”

“He literally tried to help somebody that he’s seen in some form of distress. I believe he then tried to flee this way and then collapsed here.”

“He goes to help, and that person turns on him?”

“Not the person that he’s helping but the other person that he’s trying to stop from inflicting whatever.”

Dwayne Simpson was stabbed several times. He dragged himself—20 years old—down an alley until he could crawl no further. There he lay down, squirming with the agony of his wounds, crying out for help, glimpsing the sky, the blur of the street, as his blood drained into the tarmac. Five o’clock in the afternoon. Three miles from the Houses of Parliament.

“When did you cry?”

“After I left the hospital when Dwayne died. I got into the car and cried.”

Statistically, there will be another similar death in London this month. And the next. And the one after that.

We walk up Acre Lane in silence, past the dishevelled night parade of fast food joints and people working in “not the most legitimate of ways.” One after another, from the gloom of the doorways, they murmur, sign and nod. I’m used to this now. Quietly though, Karl tells me to put away my dictaphone. He says that he is unusual—unique—in that he can get away with what we’re doing. They call him “Freedom Pass,” referring to the card that allows older Londoners to travel for free on public transport. But even so. Tomorrow would be different for Karl if people felt that he had been “dry snitching”—indirectly revealing what the street does not want revealed.

We’re coming to the end of our walk. I mention Vladimir Putin. We talk about how much you let the other side get away with before you fight back? What is weakness? What is strength? He says when he was 13 a knife was impressive. When he was 16, you had to have a gun to be significant. Then it was all about whether you’d fired it. And then whether you’d hit anybody. London to him was like a city in the midst of an occupation or a war: Sarajevo, Damascus, Jerusalem.

He okays me to turn on the dictaphone again when we get to the covered market, the epicentre of Brixton’s partial gentrification. There must be a dozen restaurants here. They sell London craft beers, hand-roasted coffees, artisanal breads. There’s a table of 20-something guys with absurd faux-Edwardian beards. There’s a table of mothers-and-babies and one of them is saying that she is “militant” about breast milk. Everyone is eating and drinking. I see blackboards announcing “locally sourced” and “dinner” and “Table of 20-something guys with absurd faux-Edwardian beards.”

I ask him how he feels about the middle class moving in. He’s measured: “The only thing is... that if prices go up slightly in Brixton because they know that there’s people that have more disposable income, then that will affect those that don’t have more disposable income.”

“Did you consider yourself British when you were younger?”

“Brixton not Britain.”

“Do you feel British now?”

“Yeah. I like Britain now.”

“Would you say you’re European at all?”

“I’m British.”

“You talked before about how two of the people in the photograph from when you were in a gang—your friends—are now in prison for murder. Is prison a deterrent?”

“You don’t want to go there. Mind you, when I was 15, I did want to go. It’s like a pit stop; like a place that was almost
inevitable.”

“When you got there you’d be fine because you’d know people?”

“Yeah, yeah. I live in London. One time I must go on the London Eye—it’s more like that. It can be safer than the streets, too.”

“Do you believe prison does any good at all?”

“My whole thing is rehabilitation. As a country we’ve got that attitude like ‘you do the crime you do the time.’ Which is not wrong. I believe in punishment. To not believe in punishment... there would be no order. But I would say that if we’re aiming for a better society, then it has to be more than punishment. This is why Justice Secretary Chris Grayling should reconsider his new policy that stops inmates being able to receive books from friends and family.”

We’re sitting down. Karl says he’s not so hungry because he’s been fasting. His life now is abstemious: no drink, no drugs, no promiscuity. We order the same picante pancake. I ask him about David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Ed Miliband, whether they mattered to him when he was in the middle of it all.

“Oh wow, no, no, no. As far as I was concerned I saw them everyday through the police officers. I saw them everyday; I spoke to them everyday through civil servants that would kind of distastefully deal with situations with family members. That was my only experience of government whatsoever. And now as it stands I see that the whole leadership—not just Cameron, Labour also—I see them all as careerists, if I’m going to be absolutely honest. I believe that some may have started out with good intentions, but it slowly becomes a career game: it becomes more about position than purpose.”

“Boris?”

He makes a face that I might charitably describe as amuse-ment. He doesn’t want to leave it as a joke though: “No listen,” he says, “I believe that being a careerist has a part to play. I’m not going to demonise them for that. Because I believe that they do love their country. They love their country; but what’s their definition of their country? I don’t believe they have the capacity to love a young man coming from my walk of life. I don’t believe they think they should love a man like me.”

“We’re talking about love again?”

“I’m not talking about the gooey feeling. Love is kindness and curiosity. To always believe the best and to seek the best in a person. And I don’t believe that they do love all the country.”

“What do you feel they know of you?”

“They know the figures. But the figures is never going to fit. A lot of politicians see the stats, and they can tell you the amount of people in x; they can tell you about the people that are supposedly suffering from y; they can tell you the amount of people that have been affected by z—but they don’t know these people; they can’t connect with these people; they don’t understand their experiences. So, if you don’t know a people, you can’t really govern them.”

“Do you have an example?”

“I was hearing about a scheme some time ago where they wanted to give the housing benefit directly to the person receiving housing benefit... that they [the recipient] may pay it to the landlord. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

“Why?”

“Because how things turn is that there are always pressing needs. Everyone is always living hand to mouth, whether it be due to an addiction, whether it be due to financial illiteracy, whether it be due to hardships people are facing. So, if we then put a lump sum of money that has a purpose, it doesn’t mean a need ain’t going to arise before that purpose is met. But they’re not going to take that into consideration—those that are pushing forwards these sorts of disengaged policies.”

“So it’s their disengagement which gets to you? A politician should be deeply engaged with the people?”

“What I find distasteful is the assumptions. I find assumptions quite disrespectful. Not just with Boris—politicians are quite prone to do it.”

Our food arrives. The first time I talked to Karl, he told me he might want to join the Conservatives. I ask him what it is about the party that appeals to him.

“There was generic Labour, and then there’s New Labour; I kind of feel there should be a New Conservative. That would be more the bracket. I’m attracted to some of the values; not the party. I do like the emphasis on family. I like the overall desire to cause people to be self-sufficient.”

“But the right is traditionally about being a bit heavier on prisoners, a bit heavier on police, a bit heavier on drugs.”

“That don’t ever change whether Labour’s in power. So, that’s not really the components of the party.”

“It doesn’t make any difference in Brixton?”

“Not at all.”

“Let me put it this way... if I said to you tomorrow you can be an MP for Brixton, then...”

“I wouldn’t. Because I haven’t yet got... I don’t want the politics to become my daily bread, because then it would become disingenuous. I see my future place in some form of office, some form of work. If I was to tell you you’d probably think I’m a mad man. I’d like to stay doing what I am doing at the grassroots level—where soul is still an aspect of politics. I want to be able to do this effectively here and go up with it without being compromised.”

I tell him that I don’t think he’s mad. Karl is studying politics now at Queen Mary University of London. He is supported financially by the charity Kids Company, for whom he has become a hardworking ambassador, helping pull others out of gangs. He has also worked with the Centre for Social Justice think tank, and written for national newspapers about what he calls “the addiction” of gang culture.

We walk back to Brixton station, where we began. The only thing we haven’t discussed is religion and that’s maybe because of me, not him. I feel I should leave it alone. I am an atheist. And yet it’s absolutely clear to me that Christianity has saved Karl’s life. In particular, the grace and generosity of a woman called Pastor Mimi. She invited gang members to her flat on the estate for dinner every night. She talked to Karl without judgement and used the Bible to “divorce” Karl from the family of the gang so that he could marry into the family of the church.

“I learnt through her teachings,” Karl says. “And seeing her own life, through the Bible. Then I went out there and I literally put it to the test. Where there was a potential they would punch me, I would kiss them. And I just kept on kissing fists. I kissed enough fists to the point where they just received me.”

The tube station is like a night hive. We stand in the midst of all the people coming and going. I thank him for being so open with me. He thanks me for listening to “his truth.”

“We’ve got more in common than we’re different,” he says. Edward Docx is an Associate Editor of Prospect