

Early Days

'Shane! No-oo! Get off him!' It was too late. Shane was a huge Alsatian and the tiny Jack Russell didn't stand a chance as Shane tore into him. We'd all been playing nicely on the green, when this stray dog had wandered onto our playing field. Before anyone could do anything, the poor unsuspecting animal had been ripped to pieces. I remember running to my house screaming.

The whole thing left me both shocked and distressed. But I also remember thinking that I would never let myself be like that Jack Russell. I would always be on guard and ready for any attack that came my way, regardless of how big my attacker was. And so I made the decision at a young age that I would always be a fighter; I would be one who would fight to the end.

Jackmans Estate

Growing up on the Jackmans Estate in Letchworth, Hertfordshire, was a lot of fun. Despite its terrible reputation, I have many happy memories of playing on the green and getting up to no good. There was a large crowd of us most days after school, and we'd often play football, marbles or 'Ting Tang Tommy' (a type of hide-and-seek game which I used to love), but despite all the fun, you could always guarantee a few fights.

For as long as I can remember, the estate had had a bad name for drink and drugs, and we'd often see some of the older lads having a punch-up. It wasn't very long before I started getting involved, too. Being shorter than most of the other lads only fuelled my anger and made me even more determined not to be pushed around. I'd always give as good as I got. The fights were never anything serious, though. A cut lip here, a black eye there – nothing to get excited about. All in all, though, I loved the Jackmans. I had plenty of good mates, and the older lads looked after us – they used to date my two older sisters, so I always felt protected.

One of the most exciting things for me was playing up the shops. We'd kick balls about or shout abuse at the locals and run off laughing. But what I really loved was watching the older lot going in and out of the local pub. I used to stare through the smudged windows, into the smoky atmosphere, watching them all drinking and playing pool. I used to imagine

myself being there, pint in one hand, pool cue in the other. I couldn't wait to be older. Playing games paled in comparison whenever I thought of the pub scene. To be 'one of the lads' seemed like a dream back then, and whenever one of the locals came out and said hello, I'd feel six feet tall.

The highlight of my week had to be the Monday night disco. The entry fee was only 10p, and my friends and I would turn up dressed as cool as we could for 10-year-olds. With girls there it was inevitable that eventually we'd start showing off. We'd run around doing the stupidest, craziest stuff, just trying to impress them. A smile from a pretty girl was our pay-off.

My Father, My Hero

The Jackmans had a community centre that my dad often took me to. I spent most weekends there, playing pool and causing some sort of trouble. Once I started to get good at pool, my old man taught me how to 'hustle'. Purposefully missing shots, I'd wait for some unlucky punter to notice. Then after my dad convinced them to play me for a quid or so, I'd turn up the heat and end up pocketing the money. It all seemed pretty harmless and I was a quick learner. I'll never forget my dad first teaching me how to 'earn' money.

I loved my dad dearly and I'm sure he loved me too, but our relationship was very up and down. My

two older sisters were from my mum's first marriage, so inevitably I became my dad's pride and joy. In my eyes he was great and, like most kids, I guess, I wanted to be just like him.

Dad was a recovering alcoholic. After many years of alcohol abuse, he finally gave it up after I was born. People have told me the story of how Dad went out to wet the baby's head. Now for most people this would take a few hours at most, but my dad dragged it out for three weeks. After a few more months of this, Mum had no choice but to put her foot down. However, when I was about 9 months old my dad made a firm decision to put me before the booze after turning up completely off his face at his drinking partner's house. At that point he vowed, 'This is it. I have a baby boy and I'll never let him see me drunk.' I never did.

My mum managed to get him into rehab at the local hospital. At first they wouldn't take him, so my mum started getting hysterical, ripping posters off the walls and making a real scene. Thankfully, after a while they took him in, and helped him to get dry.

I'd hear that story and think how great my dad was, doing all that for me. He was my hero. Unfortunately, the years of drinking and heavy smoking had taken their toll on his health, so I missed out on the stuff the other dads were doing with their kids, such as playing football. Dad tried to show his affection in other ways – one being, he bought me things. He'd come home with sweets and toys and was always very generous

with his money. He wasn't the type to show his emotions and, although I'm sure he probably did, I have no memory of him cuddling me or telling me he loved me. Being a young kid, I wasn't going to complain; I just accepted that this was the way he was.

I was frequently left disappointed, though, by his broken promises. I would beg Dad to play football with me or take me somewhere – and he would promise to, often swearing on his life that he would take me 'tomorrow'. But tomorrow never came. I can remember being gutted every time. I'd often cry myself to sleep over this but I made sure Dad never heard me, because he told me that crying was for the weak. The next day my dad would stroll into my room, throw me a new toy or a pack of sweets, apologize for letting me down and then promise me all over again. I'm not looking for sympathy here. That's just the way it was.

My dad was great at other stuff – like stopping my mum from whacking me. She was the one who disciplined me – when my dad let her. If she tried to hit me, he'd pick me up and shield me from her wild swings. I'd soon forget about the broken promises after he had defended me from my raging mum. Yeah, he was great, my dad!

When I was about 9, I was told we were moving house. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to move. I loved the Jackmans and the green and the shops and all my mates, and we were moving what seemed like miles away – it was actually just a five-minute walk away, but I didn't see it that way.

However, I soon changed my mind when I saw the house. It was a lot bigger, and the back garden was massive. I started to plan a tree house and different things before we'd even moved in. I was very excited. I made friends with the kids over the road, a really nice black family; some of the kids even went to my school. It was all getting better and better for me.

My new house had a big garage as well, which I turned into a bit of a den. We'd get up to all sorts of things in there, mostly kick boxing training. I'd charge the other kids a pound to join my classes. To tell you the truth, I'd never even been to a kick boxing class, or anything like that – I used to watch a lot of Jackie Chan and Jean-Claude Van Damme films, so I felt I was a bit of an expert.

School Days

When I was 11, I joined Highfield Secondary School and started to develop a real attitude, influenced by the *Karate Kid* films and *Hong Kong Phooey* cartoons. I tried out my moves on the other kids and got into loads of trouble. Me and some friends were walking through the town once after school and I wanted to show off a new move I'd learnt, so I bet the others I could walk up to the tall kid in front of us and take him out in one move. This got them all going and I was egged on in my mission. I approached this poor lad, who had done absolutely nothing wrong, and

tapped him on the shoulder. As he turned around I knocked him to the ground with a flying kick to his face. We all ran off laughing. My reputation had kicked off.

Not long after that, the head teacher at Highfield and my mum agreed that it would be best for everyone if I moved to another school. I soon found myself walking through the gates of Knights Templar School in nearby Baldock. I joined them in the second year and, as I already knew a few kids who went there, I settled in nicely. I was given a very strict warning by my new headmaster that if anything of my reputation followed me, I'd be straight out. What a challenge I had been set! I absolutely terrorized that poor school. I broke records for the most suspensions in the school's history, I gave one teacher a nervous breakdown, and I caused many others to go grey well before their time. I found it all hilarious.

By about the third year I was becoming a real 'Del Boy' (a wheeler-dealer, like the fictional character in *Only Fools and Horses*). My dad often had boxes of fake designer clothes, aftershaves, watches and kids' videos. He would buy everything and anything that he could make a profit on, and I was no different. I was always in the playground with a crowd around me, doing my sales pitch (Dad was a great teacher). I once even conned a fifth-former into buying a French cigarette for £2 – I told him it was a joint. The same lad came looking for me later on, and I thought he wanted to beat me up. How I laughed when instead he

asked me if I could get any more. 'It was the best joint I've ever had,' he said.

Things started to get really bad at home, though, and I hated the constant rows between my mum and dad. Mum, by this time, had become a devout Christian. She had turned her back on the pub scene and had given up her shoplifting habit. She continually went on about how great Jesus was and how amazing God was. Dad found this all too much and would really 'kick off' about her new religion. I regularly cried myself to sleep, hearing them screaming at each other. The rows got worse and worse and I started to punch walls and cut my arms as a way of relieving some of the stress I was feeling.

For a while I had enjoyed going to church with Mum, but Dad put a stop to all that. He would call Christians 'nutters' and say they were brainwashed. Anyway, I wanted to be like my dad, so I eventually started copying whatever he said. I'd call my mum all sorts of names and became very abusive towards her. My parents separated on a few occasions, and I was over the moon when Mum moved out and it was just me and Dad. But they always got back together again. My dad just could not cope without Mum and he put on the charm, promised her the world, and she soon returned home.

This went on for years and it took its toll on me. I began to hate religion with a passion. It had caused such division in my family. I became a clone of my dad. Although he was a great man in many ways, he

could be nasty in others and was emotionally scarred from his own upbringing. He was racially prejudiced towards my sisters' black boyfriends – the abuse that came out of his mouth at times was horrible. I had black friends myself, and often got very upset with him, but after a while I gave in and started copying my dad. I had become a fake racist.

As I look back at my home life I have mixed feelings. It could be like a battlefield a lot of the time, but despite this there was no denying the fact that my parents really did love each other. We had some good times as a family, and I was very lucky to get a holiday abroad every year. If you looked through some of our family albums, they would probably tell a story of a close family and belied the reality of the constant rows and tension which stained those memories for me.