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THE LONELINESS OF
THE LONG-DISTANCE

RUNNER

Alan Sillitoe

Published in 1960

AS soon as I got to Borstal they made me a long-distance cross-country runner. I suppose

they thought I was just the build for it because I was long and skinny for my age (and still

am) and in any case I didn't mind it much, to tell you the truth, because running had always

been made much of in our family, especially running away from the police. I've always

been a good runner, quick and with a big stride as well, the only trouble being that

no matter how fast I run, and I did a very fair lick even though I do say so myself, it didn't

stop me getting caught by the cops after that bakery job.

You might think it a bit rare, having long-distance crosscountry runners in Borstal, think-

ing that the first thing a long-distance cross-country runner would do when they set him

loose at them fields and woods would be to run as far away from the place as he could get

on a bellyful of Borstal slumgullion— but you're wrong, and I'll tell you why. The first thing
is that them bastards over us aren't as daft as they most of the time look, and for another
thing I'm not so daft as I would look if I tried to make a break for it on my longdistance
running, because to abscond and then get caught is nothing but a mug's game, and I'm not
falling for it. Cunning is what counts in this life, and even that you've got to use
in the sly-
est way you can; I'm telling you straight: they're cunning, and I'm cunning. If only
'them'
and 'us' had the same ideas we'd get on like a house on fire, but they don't see eye
to eye
with us and we don't see eye to eye with them, so that's how it stands and how it will
always stand. The one fact is that all of us are cunning, and because of this there's no
love
lost between us. So the thing is that they know I won't try to get away from them: they
sit
there like spiders in that crumbly manor house, perched like jumped-up jackdaws on the
roof, watching out over the drives and fields like German generals from the tops of tanks.
And even when I jog-trot on behind a wood and they can't see me anymore they know my
sweeping-brush head will bob along that hedge-top in an hour's time and that I'll report to
the bloke on the gate. Because when on a raw and frosty morning I get up at five o'clock
and stand shivering my belly off on the stone floor and all the rest still have another
hour
to snooze before the bells go, I slink downstairs through all the corridors to the big
outside
door with a permit running-card in my fist, I feel like the first and last man on the
world,
both at once, if you can believe what I'm trying to say. I feel like the first man because I've
hardly got a stitch on and am sent against the frozen fields in a shimmy and shorts—even
the first poor bastard dropped on to the earth in midwinter knew how to make a suit of
f

leaves, or how to skin a pterodactyl for a topcoat. But there I am, frozen stiff, with nothing

to get me warm except a couple of hours' long-distance running before breakfast, not even

a slice of bread-and-sheepdip. They're training me up fine for the big sports day when all

the pig-faced snotty-nosed dukes and ladies—who can't add two and two together and would mess themselves like loonies if they didn't have slaves to beck-and-call—come and

make speeches to us about sports being just the thing to get us leading an honest life and

keep our itching finger-ends off them shop locks and safe handles and hairgrips to open

gas meters. They give us a bit of blue ribbon and a cup for a prize after we've shagged

ourselves out running or jumping, like race horses, only we don't get so well looked-after

as race horses, that's the only thing.

So there I am, standing in the doorway in shimmy and shorts, not even a dry crust in my

guts, looking out at frosty flowers on the ground. I suppose you think this is enough to

make me cry? Not likely. Just because I feel like the first bloke in the world wouldn't make

me bawl. It makes me feel fifty times better than when I'm cooped up in that dormitory

with three hundred others. No, it's sometimes when I stand there feeling like the last man

in the world that I don't feel so good. I feel like the last man in the world because I think

that all those three hundred sleepers behind me are dead. They sleep so well I think that

every scruffy head's kicked the bucket in the night and I'm the only one left, and when I

look out into the bushes and frozen ponds I have the feeling that it's going to get colder

and colder until everything I can see, meaning my red arms as well, is going to be covered

with a thousand miles of ice, all the earth, right up to the sky and over every bit of land

and sea. So I try to kick this feeling out and act like I'm the first man on earth. And that

makes me feel good, so as soon as I'm steamed up enough to get this feeling in me, I take a

flying leap out of the doorway, and off I trot.

I'm in Essex. It's supposed to be a good Borstal, at least that's what the governor said to me

when I got here from Nottingham. "We want to trust you while you are in this establishment,"

he said, smoothing out his newspaper with lily-white workless hands, while I read

the big words upside down: Daily Telegraph. "If you play ball with us, we'll play ball with

you." (Honest to God, you'd have thought it was going to be one long tennis match.) "We

want hard honest work and we want good athletics," he said as well. "And if you give us

both these things you can be sure we'll do right by you and send you back into the world

an honest man." Well, I could have died laughing, especially when straight after this I bear

the barking serjeant-major's voice calling me and two others to attention and marching us

off like we was Grenadier Guards. And when the governor kept saying how 'we' wanted you to do this, and 'we' wanted you to do that, I kept looking round for the other blokes,

wondering how many of them there was. Of course, I knew there were thousands of them, but as far as I knew only one was in the room. And there are thousands of them, all over

the pox-eaten country, in shops, offices, railway stations, cars, houses, pubs— In-law blokes

like you and them, all on the watch for Outlaw blokes like me and us—and waiting to 'phone for the coppers as soon as we make a false move. And it'll always be there, I'll tell

you that now, because I haven't finished making all my false moves yet, and I dare say I won't until I kick the bucket. If the In-laws are hoping to stop me making false moves they're wasting their time. They might as well stand me up against a wall and let fly with a dozen rifles. That's the only way they'll stop me, and a few million others. Because I've been doing a lot of thinking since coming here. They can spy on us all day to see if we're pulling our puddings and if we're working good or doing our 'athletics' but they can't make an X-ray of our guts to find out what we're telling ourselves. I've been asking myself all sorts of questions, and thinking about my life up to now. And I like doing all this. It's a treat. It passes the time away and don't make Borstal seem half so bad as the boys in our street used to say it was. And this long-distance running lark is the best of all, because it makes me think so good that I learn things even better than when I'm on my bed at night. And apart from that, what with thinking so much while I'm running I'm getting to be one of the best runners in the Borstal. I can go my five miles round better than anybody else I know.

So as soon as I tell myself I'm the first man ever to be dropped into the world, and as soon as I take that first flying leap out into the frosty grass of an early morning when even birds haven't the heart to whistle, I get to thinking, and that's what I like. I go my rounds in a dream, turning at lane or footpath corners without knowing I'm turning, leaping brooks without knowing they're there, and shouting good morning to the early cow-milker without seeing him. It's a treat, being a long-distance runner, out in the world by yourself with

not a soul to make you bad-tempered or tell you what to do or that there's a shop to break

and enter a bit back from the next street. Sometimes I think that I've never been so free as

during that couple of hours when I'm trotting up the path out of the gates and turning by

that bare-faced, big-bellied oak tree at the lane end. Everything's dead, but good, because

it's dead before coming alive, not dead after being alive. That's how I look at it. Mind you,

I often feel frozen stiff at first. I can't feel my hands or feet or flesh at all, like I'm a ghost

who wouldn't know the earth was under him if he didn't see it now and again through the

mist. But even though some people would call this frost-pain suffering if they wrote about

it to their mams in a letter, I don't, because I know that in half an hour I'm going to be

warm, that by the time I get to the main road and am turning on to the wheatfield footpath

by the bus stop I'm going to feel as hot as a potbellied stove and as happy as a dog with a

tin tail.

It's a good life, I'm saying to myself, if you don't give in to coppers and Borstal-bosses and

the rest of them bastard-faced In-laws. Trot-trot-trot. Puff -puff -puff . Slap-slap-slap go my

feet on the hard soil. Swish-swish-swish as my arms and side catch the bare branches of a

bush. For I'm seventeen now, and when they let me out of this—if I don't make a break and

see that things turn out otherwise— they'll try to get me in the army, and what's the difference

between the army and this place I'm in now? They can't kid me, the bastards. I've

seen the barracks near where I live, and if there weren't swaddies on guard outside with

rifles you wouldn't know the difference between their high walls and the place I'm in now.

Even though the swaddies come out at odd times a week for a pint of ale, so what? Don't I

come out three mornings a week on my long-distance running, which is fifty times better

than boozing. When they first said that I was to do my longdistance running without a guard pedalling beside me on a bike I couldn't believe it; but they called it a progressive

and modern place, though they can't kid me because I know it's just like any other Borstal,

going by the stories I've heard, except that they let me trot about like this. Borstal's Borstal

no matter what they do; but anyway I moaned about it being a bit thick sending me out so

early to run five miles on an empty stomach, until they talked me round to thinking it

wasn't so bad—which I knew all the time—until they called me a good sport and patted me

on the back when I said I'd do it and that I'd try to win them the Borstal Blue Ribbon Prize

Cup For Long Distance Cross Country Running (All England). And now the governor

talks to me when he comes on his rounds, almost as he'd talk to his prize race horse, if he

had one.

"All right, Smith?" he asks.

"Yes, sir," I answer. He flicks his grey moustache: "How's the running coming along?"

"I've set myself to trot round the grounds after dinner just to keep my hand in, sir," I tell

him.

The pot-bellied pop-eyed bastard gets pleased at this: "Good show. I know you'll get us

that cup," he says.

And I swear under my breath: "Like boggery, I will." No, I won't get them that cup, even though the stupid tash-twitching bastard has all his hopes in me. Because what does his barmy hope mean? I ask myself. Trot-trot-trot, slap-slap-slap, over the stream and into the wood where it's almost dark and frosty-dew twigs sting my legs. It don't mean a bloody thing to me, only to him, and it means as much to him as it would mean to me if I picked up the racing paper and put my bet on a hoss I didn't know, had never seen, and didn't care a sod if I ever did see. That's what it means to him. And I'll lose that race, because I'm not a race horse at all, and I'll let him know it when I'm about to get out— if I don't sling my hook even before the race. By Christ I will. I'm a human being and I've got thoughts and secrets and bloody life inside me that he doesn't know is there, and he'll never know what's there because he's stupid. I suppose you'll laugh at this, me saying the governor's a stupid bastard when I know hardly how to write and he can read and write and add-up like a professor. But what I say is true right enough. He's stupid, and I'm not, because I can see further into the likes of him than he can see into the likes of me. Admitted, we're both cunning, but I'm more cunning and I'll win in the end even if I die in gaol at eighty-two, because I'll have more fun and fire out of my life than he'll ever get out of his. He's read a thousand books I suppose, and for all I know he might even have written a few, but I know for a dead cert, as sure as I'm sitting here, that what I'm scribbling down is worth a million to what he could ever scribble down. I don't care what anybody says, but that's the truth and can't be denied. I know when he talks to me and I look into his army mug that I'm alive and he's dead. He's as dead as a doornail. If he ran ten yards he'd drop dead. If

he got ten yards into what goes on in my guts he'd drop dead as well—with surprise. At the moment it's dead blokes like him as have the whip-hand over blokes like me, and I'm almost dead sure it'll always be like that, but even so, by Christ, I'd rather be like I am— always on the run and breaking into shops for a packet of fags and a jar of jam— than have the whip-hand over somebody else and be dead from the toe nails up. Maybe as soon as you get the whip-hand over somebody you do go dead. By God, to say that last sentence has needed a few hundred miles of long-distance running. I could no more have said that at first than I could have took a million-pound note from my back pocket. But it's true, you know, now I think of it again, and has always been true, and always will be true, and I'm surer of it every time I see the governor open that door and say Goodmorning lads.

As I run and see my smoky breath going out into the air as if I had ten cigars stuck in different parts of my body I think more on the little speech the governor made when I first came. Honesty. Be honest. I laughed so much one morning I went ten minutes down in my timing because I had to stop and get rid of the stitch in my side. The governor was so worried when I got back late that he sent me to the doctor's for an X-ray and heart check. Be honest. It's like saying: Be dead, like me, and then you'll have no more pain of leaving your nice slummy house for Borstal or prison. Be honest and settle down in a cosy six pounds a week job. Well, even with all this long-distance running I haven't yet been able to decide what he means by this, although I'm just about beginning to— and I don't like what it means. Because after all my thinking I found that it adds up to something that can't

be true about me, being born and brought up as I was. Because another thing people like
ke
the governor will never understand is that I am honest, that I've never been anything
else
but honest, and that I'll always be honest. Sounds funny. But it's true because I know
what
honest means according to me and he only knows what it means according to him: I think
k
my honesty is the only sort in the world, and he thinks his is the only sort in the world
as
well. That's why this dirty great walled-up and fenced-up manor house in the middle of
f
nowhere has been used to coop-up blokes like me. And if I had the whip-hand I wouldn't
t
even bother to build a place like this to put all the cops, governors, posh whores, p
enpush-
ers, army officers, Members of Parliament in; no, I'd stick them up against a wall and let
d let
them have it, like they'd have done with blokes like us years ago, that is, if they'd
ever
known what it means to be honest, which they don't and never will so help me God Al-
mighty.

I was nearly eighteen months in Borstal before I thought about getting out. I can't tell
you
much about what it was like there because I haven't got the hang of describing buildings
ngs
or saying how many crumby chairs and slatted windows make a room. Neither can I do
much complaining, because to tell you the truth I didn't suffer in Borstal at all. I
gave the
same answer a pal of mine gave when someone asked him how much he hated it in the
army. "I didn't hate it," he said. "They fed me, gave me a suit, and pocket-money, which
ich
was a bloody sight more than I ever got before, unless I worked myself to death for it, and
t, and
most of the time they wouldn't let me work but sent me to the dole office twice a week."
k."
Well, that's more or less what I say. Borstal didn't hurt me in that respect, so since
e I've got

no complaints I don't have to describe what they gave us to eat, what the dorms were like,
or how they treated us. But in another way Borstal does something to me. No, it doesn't
get my back up, because it's always been up, right from when I was born. What it does do

is show me what they've been trying to frighten me with. They've got other things as well,
like prison and, in the end, the rope. It's like me rushing up to thump a man and snatch
the coat off his back when, suddenly, I pull up because he whips out a knife and lifts it to
stick me like a pig if I come too close. That knife is Borstal, clink, the rope. But once you've
seen the knife you learn a bit of unarmed combat. You have to, because you'll never get
that sort of knife in your own hands, and this unarmed combat doesn't amount to much.
Still, there it is, and you keep on rushing up to this man, knife or not, hoping to get one of
your hands on his wrist and the other on his elbow both at the same time, and press back
until he drops the knife.

You see, by sending me to Borstal they've shown me the knife, and from now on I know something I didn't know before: that it's war between me and them. I always knew this,
naturally, because I was in Remand Homes as well and the boys there told me a lot about
their brothers in Borstal, but it was only touch and go then, like kittens, like boxing gloves,
like dobbie. But now that they've shown me the knife, whether I ever pinch another thing
in my life again or not, I know who my enemies are and what war is. They can drop all the
atom bombs they like for all I care: I'll never call it war and wear a soldier's uniform, be-

cause I'm in a different sort of war, that they think is child's play. The war they think is war is suicide, and those that go and get skilled in war should be put in clink for a ttempt- ed suicide because that's the feeling in blokes' minds when they rush to join up or let themselves be called up. I know, because I've thought how good it would be sometimes to do myself in and the easiest way to do it, it occurred to me, was to hope for a big war so's I could join up and get killed. But I got past that when I knew I already was in a war of my own, that I was born into one, that I grew up hearing the sound of 'old soldiers' who 'd been over the top at Dartmoor, half -killed at Lincoln, trapped in no-man's-land at Borstal, that sounded louder than any Jerry bombs. Government wars aren't my wars; they've got nowt to do with me, because my own war's all that I'll ever be bothered about. I remember when I was fourteen and I went out into the country with three of my cousins, all about the same age, who later went to different Borstals, and then to different regiments, from which they soon deserted, and then to different gaols where they still are as far as I know. But anyway, we were all kids then, and wanted to go out to the woods for a change, to get away from the roads of stinking hot tar one summer. We climbed over fences and went through fields, scrumping a few sour apples on our way, until we saw the wood about a mile off. Up Colliers' Pad we heard another lot of kids talking in high-school voices behind a hedge. We crept up on them and peeped through the brambles, and saw they were eating a picnic, a real posh spread out of baskets and flasks and towels. There must have been about seven of them, lads and girls sent out by their mams and dads for the afternoon . So we went on our bellies through the hedge like crocodiles and surrounded them, and then dashed into the middle, scattering the fire and batting their tabs and snatching up all there

was to eat, then running off over Cherry Orchard fields into the wood, with a man chasing

us who'd come up while we were ransacking their picnic. We got away all right, and had a

good feed into the bargain, because we'd been clambered to death and couldn't wait long enough to get our chops ripping into them thin lettuce and ham sandwiches and creamy cakes.

Well, I'll always feel during every bit of my life like those daft kids should have felt before

we broke them up. But they never dreamed that what happened was going to happen, just like the governor of this Borstal who spouts, to us about honesty and all that wappy stuff

don't know a bloody thing, while I know every minute of my life that a big boot is always

likely to smash any nice picnic I might be barmy and dishonest enough to make for myself. I admit that there've been times when I've thought of telling the governor all this so as

to put him on his guard, but when I've got as close as seeing him I've changed my mind,

thinking to let him either find out for himself or go through the same mill as I've gone

through. I'm not hard-hearted (in fact I've helped a few blokes in my time with the odd

quid, lie, fag, or shelter from the rain when they've been on the run) but I'm boggered if

I'm going to risk being put in the cells just for trying to give the governor a bit of advice he

don't deserve. If my heart's soft I know the sort of people I'm going to save it for. And any

advice I'd give the governor wouldn't do him the least bit of good; it'd only trip him up

sooner than if he wasn't told at all, which I suppose is what I want to happen. But for the

time being I'll let things go on as they are, which is something else I've learned in the last

year or two. (It's a good job I can only think of these things as fast as I can write with this

stub of pencil that's clutched in my paw, otherwise I'd have dropped the whole thing weeks ago.)

By the time I'm half-way through my morning course, when after a frost-bitten dawn I can

see a phlegmy bit of sunlight hanging from the bare twigs of beech and sycamore, and when I've measured my half-way mark by the short-cut scrimmage down the steep bush-covered bank and into the sunken lane, when still there's not a soul in sight and not a

sound except the neighing of a piebald foal in a cottage stable that I can't see, I get to

thinking the deepest and daftest of all. The governor would have a fit if he could see me

sliding down the bank because I could break my neck or ankle, but I can't not do it because

it's the only risk I take and the only excitement I ever get, flying flat-out like one of

them pterodactyls from the 'Lost World' I once heard on the wireless, crazy like a cut-

balled cockerel, scratching myself to bits and almost letting myself go but not quite. It's the

most wonderful minute because there's not one thought or word or picture of anything in

my head while I'm going down. I'm empty, as empty as I was before I was born, and I

don't let myself go, I suppose, because whatever it is that's farthest down inside me don't

want me to die or hurt myself bad. And it's daft to think deep, you know, because it gets

you nowhere, though deep is what I am when I've passed this half-way mark because the long-distance run of an early morning makes me think that every run like this is a little life-

as you know-but a life as full of misery and happiness and things happening as you

can ever get really around yourself- and I remember that after a lot of these runs I thought

that it didn't need much know-how to tell how a life was going to end once it had got well

started. But as usual I was wrong, caught first by the cops and then by my own bad brain,

I could never trust myself to fly scot-free over these traps, was always tripped up sooner

or later no matter how many I got over to the good without even knowing it. Looking back

I suppose them big trees put their branches to their snouts and gave each other the wink,

and there I was whizzing down the bank and not seeing a bloody thing. II I don't say to

myself: "You shouldn't have done the job and then you'd have stayed away from Borstal";

no, what I ram into my runner-brain is that my luck had no right to scam just when I was

on my way to making the coppers think I hadn't done the job after all. The time was a u-

turn and the night foggy enough to set me and my mate Mike roaming the streets when we should have been rooted in front of the telly or stuck into a plush posh seat at the picture-

tures, but I was restless after six weeks away from any sort of work, and well you might

ask me why I'd been bone-idle for so long because normally I sweated my thin guts out on

a milling-machine with the rest of them, but you see, my dad died from cancer of the throat, and mam collected a cool five hundred in insurance and benefits from the factory

where he'd worked, "for your bereavement," they said, or words like that.

Now I believe, and my mam must have thought the same, that a wad of crisp blue-back rivers ain't a sight of good to a living soul unless they're flying out of your hand into some

shopkeeper's till, and the shopkeeper is passing you tip-top things in exchange over the

counter, so as soon as she got the money, mam took me and my five brothers and sisters

out to town and got us dolled-up in new clothes. Then she ordered a twenty-one-inch t
el-

ly, a new carpet because the old one was covered with blood from dad's dying and
wouldn't wash out, and took a taxi home with bags of grub and a new fur coat. And do
you know—you wain't believe me when I tell you-she'd still near three hundred left in
her

bulging handbag the next day, so how could any of us go to work after that? Poor old
dad,

he didn't get a look in, and he was the one who'd done the suffering and dying for su
ch a

lot of lolly.

Night after night we sat in front of the telly with a ham sandwich in one hand, a bar
of

chocolate in the other, and a bottle of lemonade between our boots, while main was wi
th

some fancy-man upstairs on the new bed she'd ordered, and I'd never known a family as
happy as ours was in that couple of months when we'd got all the money we needed. And
when the dough ran out I didn't think about anything much, but just roamed the street
s-

looking for another job, I told mam— hoping I suppose to get my hands on another five
hundred nicker so's the nice life we'd got used to could go on and on for ever. Becau
se it's

surprising how quick you can get used to a different life. To begin with, the adverts
on the

telly had shown us how much more there was in the world to buy than we'd ever
dreamed of when we'd looked into shop windows but hadn't seen all there was to see be
-

cause we didn't have the money to buy it with anyway. And the telly made all these th
ings

seem twenty times better than we'd ever thought they were. Even adverts at the cinema
were cool and tame, because now we were seeing them in private at home. We used to
cock our noses up at things in shops that didn't move, but suddenly we saw their real
val-

ue because they jumped and glittered around the screen and had some pasty faced tart g
o-

ing head over heels to get her nail-polished grabbers on to them or her lipstick lips
over

them, not like the crumby adverts you saw on posters or in newspapers as dead as door -

nails; these were flickering around loose, half-open packets and tins, making you think

that all you had to do was finish opening them before they were yours, like seeing an un-

locked safe through a shop window with the man gone away for a cup of tea without thinking to guard his lolly. The films they showed were good as well, in that way, because

we couldn't get our eyes unglued from the cops chasing the robbers who had satchel-bags

crammed with cash and looked like getting away to spend it— until the last moment. I always

hoped they would end up free to blow the lot, and could never stop wanting to put

my hand out, smash into the screen (it only looked a bit of rag-screen like at the pictures)

and get the copper in a half-nelson so's he'd stop following the bloke with the money-bags.

Even when he'd knocked off a couple of bank clerks I hoped he wouldn't get nabbed. In fact then I wished more than ever he wouldn't because it meant the hot-chair if he did, and

I wouldn't wish that on anybody no matter what they'd done, because I'd read in a book

where the hot-chair worn't a quick death at all, but that you just sat there scorching to

death until you were dead. And it was when these cops were chasing the crooks that we played some good tricks with the telly, because when one of them opened his big gob to

spout about getting their man I'd turn the sound down and see his mouth move like a goldfish or mackerel or a minnow mimicking what they were supposed to be acting—it was so funny the whole family nearly went into fits on the brandnew carpet that hadn't

yet found its way to the bedroom. It was the best of all though when we did it to some To-

ry telling us about how good his government was going to be if we kept on voting for

them—their slack chops rolling, opening and bumbling, hands lifting to twitch moustaches

and touching their buttonholes to make sure the flower hadn't wilted, so that you could

see they didn't mean a word they said, especially with not a murmur coming out because

we'd cut off the sound. When the governor of the Borstal first talked to me I was reminded

of those times so much that I nearly killed myself trying not to laugh. Yes, we played so

many good stunts on the box of tricks that mam used to call us the Telly Boys, we got so

clever at it.

My pal Mike got let off with probation because it was his first job— anyway the first they

ever knew about— and because they said he would never have done it if it hadn't been for

me talking him into it. They said I was a menace to honest lads like Mike— hands in his

pockets so that they looked stoneempty, head bent forward as if looking for half-crowns to

fill 'em with, a ripped jersey on and his hair falling into his eyes so that he could go up to

women and ask them for a shilling because he was hungry— and that I was the brains behind

the job, the guiding light when it came to making up anybody's mind, but I swear to

God I worn't owt like that because really I ain't got no more brains than a gnat after hiding

the money in the place I did. And I— being cranky like I am— got sent to Borstal because to

tell you the honest truth I'd been to Remand Homes before— though that's another story

and I suppose if ever I tell it it'll be just as boring as this one is. I was glad though that

Mike got away with it, and I only hope he always will, not like silly bastard me.

So on this foggy night we tore ourselves away from the telly and slammed the front door

behind us, setting off up our wide street like slow tugs on a river that'd broken the
ir hoot-

ers, for we didn't know where the housefronts began what with the perishing cold mist
all

around. I was snatched to death without an overcoat: mam had forgotten to buy me one
in

the scrummage of shopping, and by the time I thought to remind her of it the dough wa
s

all gone. So we whistled 'The Teddy Boys Picnic' to keep us warm, and I told myself t
hat

I'd get a coat soon if it was the last thing I did. Mike said he thought the same abo
ut him-

self, adding that he'd also get some brand-new glasses with gold rims, to wear instea
d of

the wire frames they'd given him at the school clinic years ago. He didn't twig it wa
s foggy

at first and cleaned his glasses every time I pulled him back from a lamp-post or car
, but

when he saw the lights on Alfreton Road looking like octopus eyes he put them in his
pocket and didn't wear them again until we did the job. We hadn't got two ha-pennies
be-

tween us, and though we weren't hungry we wished we'd got a bob or two when we

passed the fish and chip shops because the delicious sniffs of salt and vinegar and f
rying

fat made our mouths water. I don't mind telling you we walked the town from one end t
o

the other and if our eyes worn't glued to the ground looking for lost wallets and wat
ches

they was swivelling around house windows and shop doors in case we saw something
easy and worth nipping into.

Neither of us said as much as this to each other, but I know for a fact that that was
what

we was thinking. What I don't know—and as sure as I sit here I know I'll never know—i
s

which of us was the first bastard to latch his peepers on to that baker's backyard. Oh yes,

it's all right me telling myself it was me, but the truth is that I've never known whether it

was Mike or not, because I do know that I didn't see the open window until he stabbed me

in the ribs and pointed it out. "See it?" he said.

"Yes," I told him, "so let's get cracking."

"But what about the wall though?" he whispered, looking a bit closer.

"On your shoulders," I chipped in.

His eyes were already up there: "Will you be able to reach?" It was the only time he ever

showed any life. "Leave it to me," I said, ever-ready. "I can reach anywhere from your

ham-hock shoulders."

Mike was a nipper compared to me, but underneath the scruffy draught-board jersey he wore were muscles as hard as iron, and you wouldn't think to see him walking down the street with glasses on and hands in pockets that he'd harm a fly, but I never liked to get on

the wrong side of him in a fight because he's the sort that don't say a word for weeks on

end— sits plugged in front of the telly, or reads a cowboy book, or just sleeps— when sud-

denly BIFF— half kills somebody for almost nothing at all, such as beating him in a race for

the last Football Post on a Saturday night, pushing in before him at a bus stop, or bumping

into him when he was day-dreaming about Dolly-on-the-Tub next door. I saw him set on a

bloke once for no more than fixing him in a funny way with his eyes, and it turned out

that the bloke was cockeyed but nobody knew it because he'd just that day come to live in

our street. At other times none of these things would matter a bit, and I suppose the only reason why I was pals with him was because I didn't say much from one month's end to another either.

He puts his hands up in the air like he was being covered with a Gatling-Gun, and moved

to the wall like he was going to be mowed down, and I climbed up him like he was a stile

or step-ladder, and there he stood, the palms of his upshot maulers flat and turned out so's

I could step on 'em like they was the adjustable jack-spanner under a car, not a sound of a

breath nor the shiver of a flinch coming from him. I lost no time in any case, took my coat

from between my teeth, chucked it up to the glass-topped wall (where the glass worn't too

sharp because the jags had been worn down by years of accidental stones) and was sitting

astraddle before I knew where I was. Then down the other side, with my legs rammed up into my throat when I hit the ground, the crack coming about as hard as when you fall after

a high parachute drop, that one of my mates told me was like jumping off a twelve-foot

wall, which this must have been. Then I picked up my bits and pieces and opened the gate

for Mike, who was still grinning and full of life because the hardest part of the job was already

done. "I came, I broke, I entered," like that cleverdick Borstal song.

I didn't think about anything at all, as usual, because I never do when I'm busy, when I'm

draining pipes, looting sacks, yaling locks, lifting latches, forcing my bony hands and

lanky legs into making something move, hardly feeling my lungs going in-whiff and out-

whaff, not realizing whether my mouth is clamped tight or gaping, whether I'm hungry,

itching from scabies, or whether my flies are open and flashing dirty words like muck and

spit into the late-night final fog. And when I don't know anything about all this the n how

can I honest-to-God say I think of anything at such times? When I'm wondering what's the

best way to get a window open or how to force a door, how can I be thinking or have a ny-

thing on my mind? That's what the four-eyed white-smocked bloke with the note-book couldn't understand when he asked me questions for days and days after I got to Borstal;

and I couldn't explain it to him then like I'm writing it down now; and even if I'd been able

to maybe he still wouldn't have caught on because I don't know whether I can understand

it myself even at this moment, though I'm doing my best you can bet.

So before I knew where I was I was inside the baker's office watching Mike picking up that

cash box after he'd struck a match to see where it was, wearing a tailor-made fifty-s hilling

grin on his square crew-cut nut as his paws closed over the box like he'd squash it t o noth-

ing. "Out," he suddenly said, shaking it so's it rattled. "Let's scam."

"Maybe there's some more," I said, pulling half a dozen drawers out of a rollertop desk.

"No," he said, like he'd already been twenty years in the game, "this is the lot," patting his

tin box, "this is it."

I pulled out another few drawers, full of bills, books and letters. "How do you know, you

loony sod?"

He barged past me like a bull at a gate. "Because I do."

Right or wrong, we'd both got to stick together and do the same thing. I looked at an ever-

loving babe of a brand-new typewriter, but knew it was too traceable, so blew it a kiss,

and went out after him. "Hang on," I said, pulling the door to, "we're in no hurry."

"Not much we aren't," he says over his shoulder.

"We've got months to splash the lolly," I whispered as we crossed the yard, "only don't let

that gate creak too much or you'll have the narks tuning-in."

"You think I'm barmy?" he said, creaking the gate so that the whole street heard.

I don't know about Mike, but now I started to think, of how we'd get back safe through the

streets with that moneybox up my jumper. Because he'd clapped it into my hand as soon as we'd got to the main road, which might have meant that he'd started thinking as well,

which only goes to show how you don't know what's in anybody else's mind unless you think about things yourself. But as far as my thinking went at that moment it wasn't up to

much, only a bit of fright that wouldn't budge not even with a hot blow-lamp, about what

we'd say if a copper asked us where we were off to with that hump in my guts. "What is

it?" he'd ask, and I'd say: "A growth."

"What do you mean, a growth, my lad?" he'd say back, narky like. I'd cough and clutch myself like I was in the most tripetwisting pain in the world, and screw my eyes up like I

was on my way to the hospital, and Mike would take my arm like he was the best pal I'd

got. "Cancer," I'd manage to say to Narker, which would make his slow punch-drunk

brain suspect a thing or two. "A lad of your age?" So I'd groan again, and hope to make
him feel a real bully of a bastard, which would be impossible, but anyway: "It's in the
family. Dad died of it last month, and I'll die of it next month by the feel of it."

"What, did he have it in the guts?"

"No, in the throat. But it's got me in the stomach." Groan and cough. "Well, you shouldn't

be out like this if you've got cancer, you should be in the hospital." I'd get ratty now:

"That's where I'm trying to go if only you'd let me and stop asking so many questions .

Aren't I, Mike?" Grunt from Mike as he unslung his cosh. Then just in time the copper would tell us to get on our way, kind and considerate all of a sudden, saying that the out-

patient department of the hospital closes at twelve, so hadn't he better call us a taxi? He

would if we liked, he says, and he'd pay for it as well. But we tell him not to bother, that

he's a good bloke even if he is a copper, that we know a short cut anyway. Then just as

we're turning a corner he gets it into his big batchy head that we're going the opposite way

to the hospital, and calls us back. So we'd start to run... if you can call all that thinking.

Up in my room Mike rips open that money-box with a hammer and chisel, and before we know where we are we've got seventy-eight pounds fifteen and fourpence ha'penny each lying all over my bed like tea spread out on Christmas Day: cake and trifle, salad and

sandwiches, jam tarts and bars of chocolate: all shared and shared alike between Mike and

me because we believed in equal work and equal pay, just like the comrades my dad was in until he couldn't do a stroke anymore and had no breath left to argue with. I thought

how good it was that blokes like that poor baker didn't stash all his cash in one of the big

marble-fronted banks that take up every corner of the town, how lucky for us that he did-

n't trust them no matter how many millions of tons of concrete or how many iron bars and

boxes they were made of, or how many coppers kept their blue pop-eyed peepers glued on to them, how smashing it was that he believed in money-boxes when so many shop-keepers thought it old-fashioned and tried to be modern by using a bank, which wouldn't

give a couple of sincere, honest, hardworking, conscientious blokes like Mike and me a

chance.

Now you'd think, and I'd think, and anybody with a bit of imagination would think, that at

we'd done as clean a job as could ever be done, that, with the baker's shop being at least a

mile from where we lived, and with not a soul having seen us, and what with the fog and

the fact that we weren't more than five minutes in the place, that the coppers should never

have been able to trace us. But then, you'd be wrong, I'd be wrong, and everybody else

would be wrong, no matter how much imagination was diced out between us.

Even so, Mike and I didn't splash the money about, because that would have made people

think straightaway that we'd latched on to something that didn't belong to us. Which wouldn't do at all, because even in a street like ours there are people who love to do a

good turn for the coppers, though I never know why they do. Some people are so mean-gutted that even if they've only got tuppence more than you and they think you're the sort

that would take it if you have half the chance, they'd get you put inside if they saw you

ripping lead out of a lavatory, even if it weren't their lavatory –just to keep their tuppence

out of your reach. And so we didn't do anything to let on about how rich we were, nothing

like going down town and coming back dressed in brand-new Teddy boy suits and carry-

ing a set of skiffle-drums like another pal of ours who'd done a factory office about six months before. No, we took the odd bobs and pennies out and folded the notes into bundles and stuffed them up the drainpipe outside the door in the backyard. "Nobody'll ever think of looking for it there," I said to Mike. "We'll keep it doggo for a week or two, then take a few quid a week out till it's all gone. We might be thieving bastards, but we're not green."

Some days later a plain-clothes dick knocked at the door. And asked for me. I was still in bed, at eleven o'clock, and had to unroll myself from the comfortable black sheets when I heard mam calling me. "A man to see you," she said. "Hurry up, or he'll be gone."

I could hear her keeping him at the back door, nattering about how fine it had been but how it looked like rain since early this morning— and he didn't answer her except to snap out a snotty yes or no. I scrambled into my trousers and wondered why he'd come— knowing it was a copper because 'a man to see you' always meant just that in our house— and if I'd had any idea that one had gone to Mike's house as well at the same time I'd have twigged it to be because of that hundred and fifty quid's worth of paper stuffed up the drainpipe outside the back door about ten inches away from that plain-clothed copper's boot, where mam still talked to him thinking she was doing me a favour, and I wishing to God she'd ask him in, though on second thoughts realizing that that would seem more suspicious than keeping him outside, because they know we hate their guts and smell a rat

if they think we're trying to be nice to them. Mam wasn't born yesterday, I thought, thumping my way down the creaking stairs.

I'd seen him before: Borstal Bernard in nicky-hat, Remand Home Ronald in rowing-boat boots, Probation Pete in a pitprop mackintosh, three-months clink in collar and tie (all this

out of a Borstal skiffle-ballad that my new mate made up, and I'd tell you it in full but it

doesn't belong in this story), a 'tec who'd never had as much in his pockets as that drain-

pipe had up its jackses. He was like Hitler in the face, right down to the paint-brush h tash,

except that being six-foot tall made him seem worse. But I straightened my shoulders to

look into his illiterate blue eyes— like I always do with any copper.

Then he started asking me questions, and my mother from behind said: "He's never left that television set for the last three months, so you've got nowt on him, mate. You might as

well look for somebody else, because you're wasting the rates you get out of my rent and

the income-tax that comes out of my pay-packet standing there like that"— which was a laugh because she'd never paid either to my knowledge, and never would, I hoped.

"Well, you know where Papplewick Street is, don't you?" the copper asked me, taking no

notice of mam.

"Ain't it off Alfreton Road?" I asked him back, helpful and bright.

"You know there's a baker's half-way down on the lefthand side, don't you?"

"Ain't it next door to a pub, then?" I wanted to know. He answered me sharp: "No, it bloody well ain't." Coppers always lose their tempers as quick as this, and more often than

not they gain nothing by it. "Then I don't know it," I told him, saved by the bell. He slid his

big boot round and round on the doorstep. "Where were you last Friday night?" Back in the ring, but this was worse than a boxing match.

I didn't like him trying to accuse me of something he wasn't sure I'd done. "Was I at that

baker's you mentioned? Or in the pub next door?"

"You'll get five years in Borstal if you don't give me a straight answer," he said, unbutton-

ing his mac even though it was cold where he was standing.

"I was glued to the telly, like mam says," I swore blind. But he went on and on with his

looney questions: "Have you got a television?"

The things he asked wouldn't have taken in a kid of two, and what else could I say to the

last one except: "Has the aerial fell down? Or would you like to come in and see it?"

He was liking me even less for saying that. "We know you weren't listening to the television

set last Friday, and so do you, don't you?"

"P'raps not, but I was looking at it, because sometimes we turn the sound down for a bit of

fun." I could hear mam laughing from the kitchen, and I hoped Mike's mam was doing the

same if the cops had gone to him as well.

"We know you weren't in the house," he said, starting up again, cranking himself with the

handle. They always say 'We'

'We', never T

T— as if they feel braver and righter knowing there's a lot of them against only one.

"I've got witnesses," I said to him. "Mam for one. Her fancy-man, for two. Ain't that enough? I can get you a dozen more, or thirteen altogether, if it was a baker's that got robbed."

"I don't want no lies," he said, not catching on about the baker's dozen. Where do they scrape cops up from anyway? "All I want is to get from you where you put that money."

Don't get mad, I kept saying to myself, don't get mad-hearing mam setting out cups and saucers and putting the pan on the stove for bacon. I stood back and waved him inside like I was a butler. "Come and search the house. If you've got a warrant."

"Listen, my lad," he said, like the dirty bullying jumpedup bastard he was, "I don't want too much of your lip, because if we get you down to the Guildhall you'll get a few bruises and black-eyes for your trouble." And I knew he wasn't kidding either, because I'd heard about all them sort of tricks. I hoped one day though that him and all his pals would be the ones to get the black-eyes and kicks; you never knew. It might come sooner than anybody thinks, like in Hungary.

"Tell me where the money is, and I'll get you off with probation."

"What money?" I asked him, because I'd heard that one before as well.

"You know what money."

"Do I look as though I'd know owt about money?" I said, pushing my fist through a hole in my shirt.

"The money that was pinched, that you know all about," he said. "You can't trick me, so it's no use trying."

"Was it three-and-eightpence ha'penny?" I asked.

"You thieving young bastard. We'll teach you to steal money that doesn't belong to you."

I turned my head around: "Mam," I called out, "get my lawyer on the blower, will you?"

"Clever, aren't you?" he said in a very unfriendly way, "but we won't rest until we clear all this up."

"Look," I pleaded, as if about to sob my socks off because he'd got me wrong, "it's all very well us talking like this, it's like a game almost, but I wish you'd tell me what it's all about, because honest-to-God I've just got out of bed and here you are at the door talking about me having pinched a lot of money, money that I don't know anything about."

He swung around now as if he'd trapped me, though I couldn't see why he might think so.

"Who said anything about money? I didn't. What made you bring money into this little talk we're having?"

"It's you," I answered, thinking he was going barmy, and about to start foaming at the

chops, "you've got money on the brain, like all policemen. Baker's shops as well."

He screwed his face up. "I want an answer from you: where's that money?"

But I was getting fed-up with all this. "I'll do a deal."

Judging by his flash-bulb face he thought he was suddenly on to a good thing. "What sort of a deal?"

So I told him: "I'll give you all the money I've got, one and fourpence ha'penny, if you stop this third-degree and let me go in and get my breakfast. Honest, I'm clambled to death. I ain't had a bite since yesterday. Can't you hear my guts rollin'?"

His jaw dropped, but on he went, pumping me for another half hour. A routine check-up, as they say on the pictures. But I knew I was winning on points.

Then he left, but came back in the afternoon to search the house. He didn't find a thing, not a French farthing. He asked me questions again and I didn't tell him anything except lies, lies, lies, because I can go on doing that forever without batting an eyelid. He'd got nothing on me and we both of us knew it, otherwise I'd have been down at the Guildhall in no time, but he kept on keeping on because I'd been in a Remand Home for a high-wall job before; and Mike was put through the same mill because all the local cops knew he was my best pal.

When it got dark me and Mike were in our parlour with a low light on and the telly off, Mike taking it easy in the rocking chair and me slouched out on the settee, both of us puffing a packet of Woods. With the door bolted and curtains drawn we talked about the

dough we'd crammed up the drainpipe. Mike thought we should take it out and both of us do a bunk to Skegness or Cleethorpes for a good time in the arcades, living like lords in a boarding house near the pier, then at least we'd both have had a big beano before getting sent down.

"Listen, you daft bleeder," I said, "we aren't going to get caught at all, and we'll have a good time, later." We were so clever we didn't even go out to the pictures, though we wanted to.

In the morning old Hitler-face questioned me again, with one of his pals this time, and the next day they came, trying as hard as they could to get something out of me, but I didn't budge an inch. I know I'm showing off when I say this, but in me he'd met his match, and

I'd never give in to questions no matter how long it was kept up. They searched the house a couple of times as well, which made me think they thought they really had something to go by, but I know now that they hadn't, and that it was all buckshee speculation. They turned the house upside down and inside out like an old sock, went from top to bottom and front to back but naturally didn't find a thing. The copper even poked his face up the front-room chimney (that hadn't been used or swept for years) and came down looking like Al Jolson so that he had to swill himself clean at the scullery sink. They kept tapping and pottering around the big aspidistra plant that grandma had left to mam, lifting it up from the table to look under the cloth, putting it aside so's they could move the table and

get at the boards under the rug—but the big headed stupid ignorant bastards never once thought of emptying the soil out of the plant pot, where they'd have found the crumpled-up money-box that we'd buried the night we did the job. I suppose it's still there, now I think about it, and I suppose mam wonders now and again why the plant don't prosper like it used to— as if it could with a fistful of thick black tin lapped around its guts.

The last time he knocked at our door was one wet morning at five minutes to nine and I was sleep-logged in my crumby bed as usual. Mam had gone to work that day so I shouted for him to hold on a bit, and then went down to see who it was. There he stood, six-feet tall and sopping wet, and for the first time in my life I did a spiteful thing I'll never forgive myself for: I didn't ask him to come in out of the rain, because I wanted him to get double pneumonia and die. I suppose he could have pushed by me and come in if he'd wanted, but maybe he'd got used to asking questions on the doorstep and didn't want to be put off by changing his ground even though it was raining. Not that I don't like being spiteful because of any barmy principle I've got, but this bit of spite, as it turned out, did me no good at all. I should have treated him as a brother I hadn't seen for twenty years and dragged him in for a cup of tea and a fag, told him about the picture I hadn't seen the night before, asked him how his wife was after her operation and whether they'd shaved her moustache off to make it, and then sent him happy and satisfied out by the front door. But no, I thought, let's see what he's got to say for himself now.

He stood a little to the side of the door, either because it was less wet there, or because he wanted to see me from a different angle, perhaps having found it monotonous to watch a

bloke's face always telling lies from the same side. "You've been identified," he said, twitching raindrops from his tash. "A woman saw you and your mate yesterday and she swears blind you are the same chaps she saw going into that bakery."

I was dead sure he was still bluffing, because Mike and I hadn't even seen each other the day before, but I looked worried. "She's a menace then to innocent people, whoever she is, because the only bakery I've been in lately is the one up our street to get some cut-bread on tick for mam."

He didn't bite on this. "So now I want to know where the money is"— as if I hadn't answered him at all.

"I think mam took it to work this morning to get herself some tea in the canteen." Rain was splashing down so hard I thought he'd get washed away if he didn't come inside. But I wasn't much bothered, and went on: "I remember I put it in the telly-vase last night— it was my only one-and-three and I was saving it for a packet of tips this morning— and I nearly

had a jibbering black fit just now when I saw it had gone. I was reckoning on it for getting me through today because I don't think life's worth living without a fag, do you?"

I was getting into my stride and began to feel good, twigging that this would be my last pack of lies, and that if I kept it up for long enough this time I'd have the bastard's beat: Mike and me would be off to the coast in a few weeks time having the fun of our lives,

playing at penny football and latching on to a couple of tarts that would give us all they

were good for. "And this weather's no good for picking-up fag-ends in the street," I said,

"because they'd be sopping wet. Course, I know you could dry 'em out near the fire, but it

don't taste the same you know, all said and done. Rainwater does summat to 'em that don't bear thinkin' about: it turns 'em back into hoss-tods without the taste though."

I began to wonder, at the back of my brainless eyes, why old copper-lugs didn't pull me

up sharp and say he hadn't got time to listen to all this, but he wasn't looking at me any-

more, and all my thoughts about Skegness went bursting to smithereens in my sludgy loaf. I could have dropped into the earth when I saw' what he'd fixed his eyes on.

He was looking at it, an ever-loving fiver, and I could only jabber: "The one thing is to

have some real fags because new hoss-tods is always better than stuff that's been rained on

and dried, and I know how you feel about not being able to find money because one-and-

three's one-and-three in anybody's pocket, and naturally if I see it knocking around I'll get

you on the blower tomorrow straightaway and tell you where you can find it."

I thought I'd go down in a fit: three green-backs as well had been washed down by the wa-

ter, and more were following, lying flat at first after their fall, then getting tilted at the cor-

ners by wind and rainspots as if they were alive and wanted to get back into the dry snug

drainpipe out of the terrible weather, and you can't imagine how I wished they'd be a ble

to. Old Hitler-face didn't know what to make of it but just kept staring down and down,

and I thought I'd better keep on talking, though I knew it wasn't much good now.

"It's a fact, I know, that money's hard to come by and half-crowns don't get found on bus

seats or in dustbins, and I didn't see any in bed last night because I'd 'ave known a bout it,

wouldn't I? You can't sleep with things like that in the bed because they're too hard , and

anyway at first they're.. .."It took Hitler-boy a long time to catch on; they were be ginning to

spread over the yard a bit, reinforced by the third colour of a ten-bob note, before his hand

clamped itself on to my shoulder. Ill The pop-eyed potbellied governor said to a pop-eyed

potbellied Member of Parliament who sat next to his pop-eyed potbellied whore of a wife

that I was his only hope for getting the Borstal. Blue Ribbon Prize Cup For Long Distance

Cross Country Running (All England), which I was, and it set me laughing to myself in -

side, and I didn't say a word to any potbellied pop-eyed bastard that might give them real

hope, though I knew the governor anyway took my quietness to mean he'd got that cup already stuck on the bookshelf in his office among the few other mildewed trophies.

"He might take up running in a sort of professional way when he gets out," and it was n't

until he'd said this and I'd heard it with my own flap-tabs that I realized it might be possi-

ble to do such a thing, run for money, trot for wages on piece work at a bob a puff r ising

bit by bit to a guinea a gasp and retiring through old age at thirty -two because of lacecur-

tain lungs, a football heart, and legs like varicose beanstalks. But I'd have a wife and car

and get my grinning longdistance clock in the papers and have a smashing secretary to

answer piles of letters sent by tarts who'd mob me when they saw who I was as I pushe d

my way into Woolworth's for a packet of razor blades and a cup of tea. It was something

to think about all right, and sure enough the governor knew he'd got me when he said, turning to me as if I would at any rate have to be consulted about it all: "How does this

matter strike you, then, Smith, my lad?"

A line of potbellied pop-eyes gleamed at me and a row of goldfish mouths opened and wiggled gold teeth at me, so I gave them the answer they wanted because I'd hold my trump card until later. "It'd suit me fine, sir," I said.

"Good lad. Good show. Right spirit. Splendid."

"Well," the governor said, "get that cup for us today and I'll do all I can for you. I'll get you

trained so that you whack every man in the Free World." And I had a picture in my brain

of me running and beating everybody in the world, leaving them all behind until only I

was trot-trotting across a big wide moor alone, doing a marvellous speed as I ripped between

boulders and reed-clumps, when suddenly: CRACK! CRACK! –bullets that can go faster than any man running, coming from a copper's rifle planted in a tree, winged me

and split my gizzard in spite of my perfect running, and down I fell.

The potbellies expected me to say something else. "Thank you, sir," I said.

Told to go, I trotted down the pavilion steps, out on to the field because the big cross-

country was about to begin and the two entries from Gunthorpe had fixed themselves early-

ly at the starting line and were ready to move off like white kangaroos. The sports ground

looked a treat: with big tea-tents all round and flags flying and seats for families—empty

because no mam or dad had known what opening day meant— and boys still running heats

for the hundred yards, and lords and ladies walking from stall to stall, and the Bors
tal

Boys Brass Band in blue uniforms; and up on the stands the brown jackets of Hucknall
as

well as our own grey blazers, and then the Gunthorpe lot with shirt sleeves rolled. T
he

blue sky was full of sunshine and it couldn't have been a better day, and all of the
big

show was like something out of Ivanhoe that we'd seen on the pictures a few days befo
re.

"Come on, Smith," Roach the sports master called to me, "we don't want you to be late
for

the big race, eh? Although I dare say you'd catch them up if you were." The others ca
t-

called and grunted at this, but I took no notice and placed myself between Gunthorpe
and

one of the Aylesham trusties, dropped on my knees and plucked a few grass blades to
suck on the way round. So the big race it was, for them, watching from the grandstand
under a fluttering Union Jack, a race for the governor, that he had been waiting for,
and I

hoped he and all the rest of his pop-eyed gang were busy placing big bets on me, hund
red

to one to win, all the money they had in their pockets, all the wages they were going
to get

for the next five years, and the more they placed the happier I'd be. Because here wa
s a

dead cert going to die on the big name they'd built for him, going to go down dying w
ith

laughter whether it choked him or not. My knees felt the cool soil pressing into them
, and

out of my eye's corner I saw Roach lift his hand. The Gunthorpe boy twitched before t
he

signal was given; somebody cheered too soon; Medway bent forward; then the gun went,
and I was away.

We went once around the field and then along a half-mile drive of elms, being cheered
all

the way, and I seemed to feel I was in the lead as we went out by the gate and into t
he

lane, though I wasn't interested enough to find out. The five-mile course was marked by splashes of whitewash gleaming on gateposts and trunks and stiles and stones, and a boy with a waterbottle and bandage-box stood every half-mile waiting for those that dropped out or fainted. Over the first stile, without trying, I was still nearly in the lead but one; and if any of you want tips about running, never be in a hurry, and never let any of the other runners know you are in a hurry even if you are. You can always overtake on long-distance running without letting the others smell the hurry in you; and when you've used your craft like this to reach the two or three up front then you can do a big dash later that puts everybody else's hurry in the shade because you've not had to make haste up till then. I ran to a steady jog-trot rhythm, and soon it was so smooth that I forgot I was running, and I was hardly able to know that my legs were lifting and falling and my arms going in and out, and my lungs didn't seem to be working at all, and my heart stopped that wicked thumping I always get at the beginning of a run. Because you see I never race at all; I just run, and somehow I know that if I forget I'm racing and only jog-trot along until I don't know I'm running I always win the race. For when my eyes recognize that I'm getting near the end of the course—by seeing a stile or cottage corner— I put on a spurt, and such a fast big spurt it is because I feel that up till then I haven't been running and that I've used up no energy at all. And I've been able to do this because I've been thinking; and I wonder if I'm the only one in the running business with this system of forgetting that I'm

running because I'm too busy thinking; and I wonder if any of the other lads are on t
o the

same lark, though I know for a fact that they aren't. Off like the wind along the cob
bled

footpath and rutted lane, smoother than the flat grass track on the field and better
for

thinking because it's not too smooth, and I was in my element that afternoon knowing
that

nobody could beat me at running but intending to beat myself before the day was over.

For when the governor talked to me of being honest when I first came in he didn't kno
w

what the word meant or he wouldn't have had me here in this race, trotting along in
shimmy and shorts and sunshine. He'd have had me where I'd have had him if I'd been i
n

his place: in a quarry breaking rocks until he broke his back. At least old Hitlerfac
e the

plain-clothes dick was honestier than the governor, because he at any rate had had it
in for

me and I for him, and when my case was coming up in court a copper knocked at our
front door at four o'clock in the morning and got my mother out of bed when she was p
ar-

alytic tired, reminding her she had to be in court at dead on half past nine. It was
the finest

bit of spite I've ever heard of, but I would call it honest, the same as my mam's wor
ds were

honest when she really told that copper what she thought of him and called him all th
e

dirty names she'd ever heard of, which took her half an hour and woke the terrace up.

I trotted on along the edge of a field bordered by the sunken lane, smelling green gr
ass

and honeysuckle, and I felt as though I came from a long line of whippets trained to
run

on two legs, only I couldn't see a toy rabbit in front and there wasn't a collier's c
osh behind

to make me keep up the pace. I passed the Gunthorpe runner whose shimmy was already
black with sweat and I could just see the corner of the fencedup copse in front where
the

only man I had to pass to win the race was going all out to gain the half-way mark. T
hen

he turned into a tongue of trees and bushes where I couldn't see him anymore, and I couldn't see anybody, and I knew what the loneliness of the long-distance runner running

across country felt like, realizing that as far as I was concerned this feeling was the only

honesty and realness there was in the world and I knowing it would be no different ever,

no matter what I felt at odd times, and no matter what anybody else tried to tell me. The

runner behind me must have been a long way off because it was so quiet, and there was even less noise and movement than there had been at five o'clock of a frosty winter morning.

It was hard to understand, and all I knew was that you had to run, run, run, without

knowing why you were running, but on you went through fields you didn't understand and into woods that made you afraid, over hills without knowing you'd been up and down, and shooting across streams that would have cut the heart out of you had you fall-

en into them. And the winning post was no end to it, even though crowds might be cheering-

ing you in, because on you had to go before you got your breath back, and the only time

you stopped really was when you tripped over a tree trunk and broke your neck or fell in-

to a disused well and stayed dead in the darkness forever. So I thought: they aren't going

to get me on this racing lark, this running and trying to win, this jog-trotting for a bit of

blue ribbon, because it's not the way to go on at all, though they swear blind that it is. You

should think about nobody and go your own way, not on a course marked out for you by people holding mugs of water and bottles of iodine in case you fall and cut yourself so that

they can pick you up—even if you want to stay where you are—and get you moving again.

On I went, out of the wood, passing the man leading without knowing I was going to do

so. Flip-flap, flip-flap, jog-trot, jog-trot, crunchslap-crunchslap, across the middle of a broad field again, rhythmically running in my greyhound effortless fashion, knowing I had won the race though it wasn't half over, won it if I wanted it, could go on for ten or fifteen or twenty miles if I had to and drop dead at the finish of it, which would be the same, in the end, as living an honest life like the governor wanted me to. It amounted to: win the race and be honest, and on trot-trotting I went, having the time of my life, loving my progress because it did me good and set me thinking which by now I liked to do, but not caring at all when I remembered that I had to win this race as well as run it. One of the two, I had to win the race or run it, and I knew I could do both because my legs had carried me well in front— now coming to the short cut down the bramble bank and over the sunken road— and would carry me further because they seemed made of electric cable and easily alive to keep on slapping at those ruts and roots, but I'm not going to win because the only way I'd see I came in first would be if winning meant that I was going to escape the coppers after doing the biggest bank job of my life, but winning means the exact opposite, no matter how they try to kill or kid me, means running right into their white-gloved wall-barred hands and grinning mugs and staying there for the rest of my natural long life of stone-breaking anyway, but stone-breaking in the way I want to do it and not in the way they tell me. Another honest thought that comes is that I could swing left at the next hedge of the field, and under its cover beat my slow retreat away from the sports ground winning post. I could do three or six or a dozen miles across the turf like this and cut a few main roads behind me so's they'd never know which one I'd taken; and maybe on the last

one when it got dark I could thumb a lorry -lift and get a free ride north with somebody

who might not give me away. But no, I said I wasn't daft didn't I? I won't pull out with on-

ly six months left, and besides there's nothing I want to dodge and run away from; I only

want a bit of my own back on the In-laws and Potbellies by letting them sit up there on

their big posh seats and watch me lose this race, though as sure as God made me I know

that when I do lose I'll get the dirtiest crap and kitchen jobs in the months to go before my

time is up. I won't be worth a threpp'ny-bit to anybody here, which will be all the thanks I

get for being honest in the only way I know. For when the governor told me to be honest it

was meant to be in his way not mine, and if I kept on being honest in the way he wanted

and won my race for him he'd see I got the cushiest six months still left to run; but in my

own way, well, it's not allowed, and if I find a way of doing it such as I've got now then I'll

get what-for in every mean trick he can set his mind to. And if you look at it in my way,

who can blame him? For this is war—and ain't I said so?— and when I hit him in the only

place he knows he'll be sure to get his own back on me for not collaring that cup when his

heart's been set for ages on seeing himself standing up at the end of the afternoon to clap

me on the back as I take the cup from Lord Earwig or some such chinless wonder with a name like that. And so I'll hit him where it hurts a lot, and he'll do all he can to get his own

back, tit for tat, though I'll enjoy it most because I'm hitting first, and because I planned it

longer. I don't know why I think these thoughts are better than any I've ever had, but I do,

and I don't care why. I suppose it took me a long time to get going on all this because I've

had no time and peace in all my bandit life, and now my thoughts are coming pat and the

only trouble is I often can't stop, even when my brain feels as if it's got cramp, frostbite

and creeping paralysis all rolled into one and I have to give it a rest by slap-dashing down

through the brambles of the sunken lane. And all this is another uppercut I'm getting in

first at people like the governor, to show how— if I can— his races are never won even

though some bloke always comes unknowingly in first, how in the end the governor is going to be

doomed while blokes like me will take the pickings of his roasted bones and dance like maniacs around his Borstal's ruins. And so this story's like the race and once

again I won't bring off a winner to suit the governor; no, I'm being honest like he told me

to, without him knowing what he means, though I don't suppose he'll ever come in with a

story of his own, even if he reads this one of mine and knows who I'm talking about. I've

just come up out of the sunken lane, kneed and elbowed, thumped and bramble-scratched,

and the race is twothirds over, and a voice is going like a wireless in my mind saying that

when you've had enough of feeling good like the first man on earth of a frosty morning,

and you've known how it is to be taken bad like the last man on earth on a summer's afternoon,

then you get at last to being like the only man on earth and don't give a bogger

about either good or bad, but just trot on with your slippers slapping the good dry soil

that at least would never do you a bad turn. Now the words are like coming from a crystal-

set that's broken down, and something's happening inside the shell-case of my gut

that bothers me and I don't know why or what to blame it on, a grinding near my ticker as

though a bag of rusty screws is loose inside me and I shake them up every time I trot for-

ward. Now and again I break my rhythm to feel my left shoulderblade by swinging a right

hand across my chest as if to rub the knife away that has somehow got stuck there. But I

know it's nothing to bother about, that more likely it's caused by too much thinking that

now and again I take for worry. For sometimes I'm the greatest worrier in the world I think (as you twigged I'll bet from me having got this story out) which is funny anyway

because my main don't know the meaning of the word so I don't take after her; though dad Had a Hard time of worry all his life up to when he filled his bedroom with hot blood

and kicked the bucket that morning when nobody was in the house. I'll never forget it ,

straight I won't, because I was the one that found him and I often wished I hadn't. Back

from a session on the fruit-machines at the fish-and-chip shop, jingling my three-lemmon loot

to a nail-dead house, as soon as I got in I knew something was wrong, stood leaning my

head against the cold mirror above the mantel piece trying not to open my eyes and see

my stone-cold dock—because I knew I'd gone as white as a piece of chalk since coming in

as if I'd been got at by a Dracula-vampire and even my penny-pocket winnings kept quiet

on purpose.

Gunthorpe nearly caught me up. Birds were singing from the briar hedge, and a couple of

thrushes flew like lightning into some thorny bushes. Corn had grown high in the next

field and would be cut down soon with scythes and mowers; but I never wanted to notice

much while running in case it put me off my stroke, so by the haystack I decided to leave

it all behind and put on such a spurt, in spite of nails in my guts, that before long I'd left

both Gunthorpe and the birds a good way off; I wasn't far now from going into that last

mile and a half like a knife through margarine, but the quietness I suddenly trotted into

between two pickets was like opening my eyes underwater and looking at the pebbles on a stream bottom, reminding me again of going back that morning to the house in which my old man had croaked, which is funny because I hadn't thought about it at all since it

happened and even then I didn't brood much on it. I wonder why? I suppose that since I

started to think on these long-distance runs I'm liable to have anything crop up and pester

at my tripe and innards, and now that I see my bloody dad behind each grass-blade in my barmy runner-brain I'm not so sure I like to think and that it's such a good thing after

all. I choke my phlegm and keep on running anyway and curse the Borstalbuilders and their athletics— flappity-flap, slop-slop, crunchslap-crunchslap-crunchslap— who've maybe

got their own back on me from the bright beginning by sliding magic-lantern slides in to

my head that never stood a chance before. Only if I take whatever comes like this in my

runner's stride can I keep on keeping on like my old self and beat them back; and now I've

thought on this far I know I'll win, in the crunchslap end. So anyway after a bit I went up—

stairs one step at a time not thinking anything about how I should find dad and what I'd

do when I did. But now I'm making up for it by going over the rotten life roam led him

ever since I can remember, knocking-on with different men even when he was alive and fit

and she not caring whether he knew it or not, and most of the time he wasn't so blind as

she thought and cursed and roared and threatened to punch her tab, and I had to stand up

to stop him even though I knew she deserved it. What a life for all of us. Well, I'm not grumbling, because if I did I might just as well win this bleeding race, which I'm not going to do, though if I don't lose speed I'll win it before I know where I am, and then where would I be? Now I can hear the sportsground noise and music as I head back for the flags and the lead-in drive, the fresh new feel of underfoot gravel going against the iron muscles of my legs. I'm nowhere near puffed despite that bag of nails that rattles as much as ever, and I can still give a big last leap like galeforce wind if I want to, but everything is under control and I know now that there ain't another long-distance cross-country runner in England to touch my speed and style. Our doddering bastard of a governor, our half-dead gangrened gaffer is hollow like an empty petrol drum, and he wants me and my running life to give him glory, to put in him blood and throbbing veins he never had, wants his potbellied pals to be his witnesses as I gasp and stagger up to his winning post

so's he can say: "My Borstal gets that cup, you see. I win my bet, because it pays to be honest and try to gain the prizes I offer to my lads, and they know it, have known it all along. They'll always be honest now, because I made them so." And his pals will think: "He tells his lads to live right, after all; he deserves a medal but we'll get him made a Sir"—and at this very moment as the birds come back to whistling I can tell myself I'll never care a sod what any of the chinless spineless In-laws think or say. They've seen me and they're cheering now and loudspeakers set around the field like elephant's ears are spreading out the

big news that I'm well in the lead, and can't do anything else but stay there. But I'm still

thinking of the Out-law death my dad died, telling the doctors to scat from the house when they wanted him to finish up in hospital (like a bleeding guinea-pig, he raved at

them). He got up in bed to throw them out and even followed them down the stairs in his

shirt though he was no more than skin and stick. They tried to tell him he'd want some

drugs but he didn't fall for it, and only took the pain-killer that mam and I got from a

herbseller in the next street. It's not till now that I know what guts he had, and when I

went into the room that morning he was lying on his stomach with the clothes thrown back, looking like a skinned rabbit, his grey head resting just on the edge of the bed, and

on the floor must have been all the blood he'd had in his body, right from his toenails up,

for nearly all of the lino and carpet was covered in it, thin and pink. And down the drive I

went, carrying a heart blocked up like Boulder Dam across my arteries, the nail-bag clamped down tighter and tighter as though in a woodwork vice, yet with my feet like birdwings and arms like talons ready to fly across the field except that I didn't want to

give anybody that much of a show, or win the race by accident. I smell the hot dry day

now as I run towards the end, passing a mountain-heap of grass emptied from cans

hooked on to the fronts of lawnmowers pushed by my pals; I rip a piece of tree-bark with

my fingers and stuff it in my mouth, chewing wood and dust and maybe maggots as I run until I'm nearly sick, yet swallowing what I can of it just the same because a little birdie

whistled to me that I've got to go on living for at least a bloody sight longer yet but that for

six months I'm not going to smell that grass or taste that dusty bark or trot this lovely

path. I hate to have to say this but something bloody-well made me cry, and crying is a

thing I haven't bloody-well done since I was a kid of two or three. Because I'm slowing

down now for Gunthorpe to catch me up, and I'm doing it in a place just where the drive

turns in to the sportsfield— where they can see what I'm doing, especially the governor and

his gang from the grandstand, and I'm going so slow I'm almost marking time. Those on the nearest seats haven't caught on yet to what's happening and are still cheering like mad

ready for when I make that mark, and I keep on wondering when the bleeding hell Gunthorpe behind me is going to nip by on to the field because I can't hold this up all day, and

I think Oh Christ it's just my rotten luck that Gunthorpe's dropped out and that I'll be here

for half an hour before the next bloke comes up, but even so, I say, I won't budge, I won't

go for that last hundred yards if I have to sit down cross-legged on the grass and have the

governor and his chinless wonders pick me up and carry me there, which is against the rules

so you can bet they'd never do it because they're not clever enough to break the

rules—like I would be in their place—even though they are their own. No, I'll show him

what honesty means if it's the last thing I do, though I'm sure he'll never understand be-

cause if he and all them like him did it'd mean they'd be on my side which is impossible.

By God I'll stick this out like my dad stuck out his pain and kicked them doctors down the

stairs: if he had guts for that then I've got guts for this and here I stay waiting for Gun-

thorpe or Aylesham to bash that turf and go right slap-up against that bit of clothes-line

stretched across the winning post. As for me, the only time I'll hit that clothes-line will be

when I'm dead and a comfortable coffin's been got ready on the other side. Until then I'm a

long-distance runner, crossing country all on my own no matter how bad it feels.

The Essex boys were shouting themselves blue in the face telling me to get a move on, waving their arms, standing up and making as if to run at that rope themselves because they were only a few yards to the side of it. You cranky lot, I thought, stuck at that winning post, and yet I knew they didn't mean what they were shouting, were really on my side and always would be, not able to keep their maulers to themselves, in and out of shops and clink. And there they were now having the time of their lives letting themselves go in cheering me which made the governor think they were heart and soul on his side when he wouldn't have thought any such thing if he'd had a grain of sense. And I could hear the lords and ladies now from the grandstand, and could see them standing up to wave me in: "Run!" they were shouting in their posh voices. "Run!" But I was deaf, dumb and blind, and stood where I was, still tasting the bark in my mouth and still blubbing like a baby, blubbing now out of gladness that I'd got them beat at last.

Because I heard a roar and saw the Gunthorpe gang throwing their coats up in the air and I felt the pat-pat of feet on the drive behind me getting closer and closer and suddenly a smell of sweat and a pair of lungs on their last gasp passed me by and went swinging on towards that rope, all shagged out and rocking from side to side, grunting like a Zulu that didn't know any better, like the ghost of me at ninety when I'm heading for that fat upholstered coffin. I could have cheered him myself: "Go on, go on, get cracking. Knot yourself up on that piece of tape." But he was already there, and so I went on, trot-trotting after him until I got to the rope, and collapsed, with a murderous sounding roar going up through my ears while I was still on the wrong side of it.

It's about time to stop; though don't think I'm not still running, because I am, one way or another. The governor at Borstal, proved me right; he didn't respect my honesty at all; not that I expected him to, or tried to explain it to him, but if he's supposed to be educated then he should have more or less twigged it. He got his own back right enough, or thought he did, because he had me carting dustbins about every morning from the big full-working kitchen to the garden-bottoms where I had to empty them; and in the afternoon I spread out slops over spuds and carrots growing in the allotments. In the evenings I scrubbed floors, miles and miles of them. But it wasn't a bad life for six months, which was another thing he could never understand and would have made it grimmer if he could, and it was worth it when I look back on it, considering all the thinking I did, and the fact that the boys caught on to me losing the race on purpose and never had enough good words to say about me, or curses to throw out (to themselves) at the governor.

The work didn't break me; if anything it made me stronger in many ways, and the governor nor knew, when I left, that his spite had got him nowhere. For since leaving Borstal they tried to get me in the army, but I didn't pass the medical and I'll tell you why. No sooner was I out, after that final run and six-months hard, that I went down with pleurisy, which means as far as I'm concerned that I lost the governor's race all right, and won my own

twice over, because I know for certain that if I hadn't raced my race I wouldn't have got this pleurisy, which keeps me out of khaki but doesn't stop me doing the sort of work my itchy fingers want to do. I'm out now and the heat's switched on again, but the rats haven't

got me for the last big thing I pulled. I counted six hundred and twenty -eight pounds and

am still living off it because I did the job all on my own, and after it I had the peace to

write all this, and it'll be money enough to keep me going until I finish my plans for doing

an even bigger snatch, something up my sleeve I wouldn't tell to a living soul. I worked

out my systems and hiding-places while pushing scrubbing-brushes around them Borstal floors, planned my outward life of innocence and honest work, yet at the same time grew

perfect in the razoredges of my craft for what I knew I had to do once free; and what I'll do

again if netted by the poaching coppers.

In the meantime (as they say in one or two books I've read since, useless though because

all of them ended on a winning post and didn't teach me a thing) I'm going to give this

story to a pal of mine and tell him that if I do get captured again by the coppers he can try

and get it put into a book or something, because I'd like to see the governor's face when he

reads it, if he does, which I don't suppose he will; even if he did read it though I don't

think he'd know what it was all about. And if I don't get caught the bloke I give this story

to will never give me away; he's lived in our terrace for as long as I can remember, and

he's my pal. That I do know.