THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER

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 cross-country runners in Borstal, thinking 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 long-distance 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 it in the slighest 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 crummy 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 boke 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 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-dip. 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 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 hear the barking sergeant-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 poxen country, in shops, offices, railway stations, cars, houses, pubs—In-law blokes like
you and them, all on the watch for Out-law 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 foot-
path 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
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 booz-
ing. When they first said that I was to do my long-distance
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-twitch-
ing 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 bim, and it means as much to bim 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
don’t know is there, and he’ll never know what there be-
cause 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 beginninS 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 the governor will never understand is that I am honest,
that I've never been anything else but honest, and that I'll al-
ways 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 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 nowhere has been used to coop-
up blokes like me. And if I had the whip-hand I wouldn't
even bother to build a place like this to put all the cops, gover-
nors, posh whores, penpushers, army officers, Members of
Parliament in; no, I'd stick them up against a wall and 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 Almighty.

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 describíng buildings
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 aU. I gave the same
answer a pal of mine gave when someone asked hím how
much he hated it in the anny. 'I didn't hate it,' he said. 'They
fed me, gave me a suit, and pocket-money, which was a bloody
sight more than 1 ever got before, unless 1 worked myself to
death for it, and most of the time they wouldn't let me work
but sent me to the dole office twice a week.' Well, that's more
or less what I say. Borstal didn't hurt me in that respect, so
since 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 un-
armed 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'll like for all I care: I'll never call it war and
wear a soldier's uniform, because 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 killed in war shouId be put
in clink for attempted 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 nought 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 goals 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 eorodiles 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 clamped 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 boggared 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 no 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 life—a little life, I 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 coppers 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.

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 ran into my runner-brain is that my luck had no right to scram just when I was on my way to making the coppers think I hadn't done the job after all. The time was autumn 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 pictures, 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 fivers 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 dished-up in new clothes. Then she ordered a twenty-one-inch telly, 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 won'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 such 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 mam was with 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 streets—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. Because 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 because we didn't have the money to buy it with anyway. And the telly made all these things 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 value because they jumped and glittered around the screen and had some pesty-faced tart going head over heels to get her nail-polished grabbers onto them or her lipstick lips over them, not like the crumby adverts you saw on posters or in newspapers as dead as doornails; these were
flickering around loose, half-open packets and tins, making
you think that all you had to do was finish opening them be-
fore they were yours, like seeing an unlocked 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 wasn'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 brand-new carpet that hadn't found its way
to the bedroom. It was the best of all though when we did it
to some Tory 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 mous-
taches 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 stone-
empty, 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 wasn't in it 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 Re-
mand Homes before—though that's another story and I sup-
pose if I ever 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 their hooters, for
we didn't know where the housefronts began what with the
perishing cold mist all around. I was snatched to death with-
out an overcoat: mam had forgotten to buy me one in the
scrammage of shopping, and by the time I thought to remind
her of it the dough was all gone. So we whistled 'The Teddy
Boys Picnic' to keep us warm, and I told myself that I'd get a
coat soon if it was the last thing I did. Mike said he thought
the same about himself, adding that he'd also get some brand-
new glasses with gold rims, to wear instead of the wire frames
they'd given him at the school clinic years ago. He didn't twig
it was 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 between 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 frying fat made our mouths water. I don't mind telling you we walked the town from one end to the other and if our eyes weren't glued to the ground looking for lost wallets and watches 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—is which of us was the first bastard to latch his peepers onto 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 chimed 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 suddenly 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 cock-eyed 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 then 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 anything on my mind? That’s what the four-eyed white-smocked bloke with the notebook 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-shilling grin on his square crew-cut nut as his paws closed over the box: like he’d squash it to nothing. ‘Out,’ he suddenly said, shaking it so’s it rattled. ‘Let’s scram.’

‘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 chin 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, cracking 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 money-box 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 tripe-twisting 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. Arent 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 outpatient 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.