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opening extract from

The Boyhood of Burglar Bill

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published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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I

One-armed Man, Three-legged Dog

The best and worst times of my life occurred, I truly believe, before I was twelve years old. It was another world in those days: terraced houses, wash houses, communal yards. Our lavatory was a brick-built gloomy box at the end of the garden. I got a good part of my education – world affairs, showbiz gossip – from torn squares of newspaper stuck out there on a nail behind the door. The streets were full of kids and empty of cars; the park, an orderly and enormous wilderness. Everything was urgent – vivid – outlined in fire at times. The world did not merely spin in those days, it went up and down like a roller-coaster.

Mr Cork was a madman. He had a wide flat face like a garden spade, and one arm. He often carried a cricket stump. If you didn't know the answer to some question or other, he would hammer your

desk – bang! – and jump you out of your skin. He had this gravelly voice. 'Ahlberg,' he'd say. 'C'mere.' He was a teacher you see, supposed to be. Emergency-trained, for lion-taming, Joey Skidmore reckoned. There was a shortage of teachers after the war and more than a few of them had bits missing.

He was cunning too. You might think you knew it was coming, that cricket-stump trick, and grit your teeth determined *not* to jump. But he'd move on along the aisle, allowing some kid just time enough to breathe his sigh of relief, then quick dart back and – wallop! A heavy man he was, but light on his feet.

Mr Cork taught craft to the boys when the girls were having needlework with Miss Palmer. Also once a week on a Wednesday he'd march the boys, about sixty-six of us, out of the school gates, along Rood End Road, down Oldbury Road, across the Birmingham Road and into Guest, Keen & Nettlefold's sports ground for football in the football season, cricket in the cricket. And that was how it started.

Sixty-six boys, more or less, two footballs, two sets of shirts, one madman and a whistle. This was how things were organized. Mr Cork took the first and second teams on the top pitch. It had goalposts, nets, even corner flags sometimes. They played a

proper match. Mr Cork, with his trousers tucked in his socks and his empty sleeve flapping, ran up and down kicking wildly at the ball from time to time, yelling at the kids. Coaching, he called it. This went on for a whole afternoon.

Meanwhile, down on the bottom pitch forty-four boys organized themselves into two warring factions and played their own game. No referee, no kit and pitch markings you could hardly see. It was like one of those historical events you get on TV where one half of a village tries to move a pumpkin or something up the hill and the other half tries to stop them. The groundsman stored his rollers along one side of this supposed pitch. There was a brook and a seasonal swamp behind one goal, scrap metal, huge coils of wire, containers full of toxic waste, I wouldn't be surprised. But maybe I'm exaggerating.

The weather had little influence on Mr Cork. In wind and rain, snow and ice, if it was Wednesday we went. Mud never bothered him at all. (I wonder now though what *his* mother, or wife maybe, made of it.) Afterwards we'd troop back up the hill to school, kids peeling off when we passed their streets, like an army of zombies or *Flash Gordon and the Claymen*.

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One Wednesday, a dry and sunny day as it happened, the three of us – Spencer, Ronnie and me – left Mr Cork's retreating column outside Milward's. Ronnie picked up his gran's copy of the local paper, Spencer bought a liquorice pipe. We stood around admiring the contents of Milward's window.

'Bags I that *Rupert* annual,' Spencer said. 'Bags I . . .'

Ronnie read the paper. There was a picture of a pools winner on the front page; the Mayor and Mayoress having tea in an old people's home. And on the back an account of Oldbury Town's latest fixture and an entrance form for the Coronation Cup.

'Says here, the Cubs've gotta team up . . .'

Spencer peered over Ronnie's shoulder.

'. . . and the Boys' Brigade.'

Spencer made no comment. He broke off a bit of his pipe and pushed it into Ronnie's mouth. I stared at my reflection in the window, hair on end as usual like a cockatoo. Mrs Milward glared back at us and shooed us away. She judged we were up to something. Milward's had more stuff pinched than they sold, according to her. I took a kick at a cigarette packet on the pavement; we moved off. On the allotments, old man Cutler in his off-white

painter's overalls and his pork-pie hat was tending his bonfire, smoke billowing across the road.

'We could get a team up,' Spencer said.

The next morning in assembly Mr Reynolds talked to the whole school about boys peeing up the wall in the outside toilets, kids frothing up their milk with straws, kids kicking balls deliberately from the boys' playground into the girls' and infants' playground, Jesus and the Coronation Cup. Rood End Primary would enter two teams, he said. The rest of us, he was sure, would want to come along and support the teams and, by implication, the entire royal family. Preliminary rounds would be played . . . the final was on . . . dates, times, places. Then, as Mrs Belcher struck up her 'walking nicely music' and we were leaving, Mr Reynolds saw fit to speak again.

'Toomey – stop that. See me afterwards.'

'Which one, Sir?' said a voice.

'Er . . . Brian.'

'See all of 'em, Sir!'

'Who said that?'

There were three Toomeys in the hall on that occasion; could have been four. Maurice Toomey was away working for his dad, or up at the juvenile court, more like.

At playtime Spencer and I played marbles with Joey Skidmore and lost. The Purnells' three-legged dog, Archie, got under the gates and raced around the playground for a while, creating havoc. Archie was a wonder dog in all our eyes. Nearly a year ago he had got run over. They found his foot in the street but the rest of him ran off. Mr Purnell mourned for a while; Mrs Purnell offered to beat the motorcyclist up or at least wreck his bike. Then, lo and behold, a fortnight later back came Archie. Subsequently, he treated the Purnells with disdain, steered clear of traffic and was generally adopted by the neighbourhood. He could get a bone anywhere.

Lining up after playtime, Spencer and I compared our losses. Ronnie claimed to have been peeing up the outside-toilet walls in a competition organized by Amos. A ball came flying over the wall *from* the girls' and infants' playground, which raised a cheer. And Ronnie said, 'We could y'know.'

'What?'

'What?'

'Get a team up.'

2

The Coronation Cup

Mrs Glue peered suspiciously at us, the door open just enough to accommodate her head.

'Graham's out.'

'But we've just seen him come in, Mrs Glue,' said Spencer in his politest voice.

'Oh, well he's in then.'

Whereupon another voice from inside. 'And in he's stoppin'.'

Mr Glue, that was.

'Couldn't Graham come out and . . .' I didn't give up that easily.

'He's havin' his tea.'

'After his tea?'

'He's helpin' his dad.'

Voice from inside. ''E's no help.'

At which point Graham's face, with its shock of almost-white hair, squeezed into view under his mother's arm. Somehow, without actually speaking,

he indicated that he would see us later up the park with his boots. He'd spotted me with mine and Spencer with the ball.

After Graham we tried Joey Skidmore and he was out, Malcolm Prosser and he was out, and Trevor Darby and he was out. Gone for a haircut, his sister said. So off we trooped to Cotterill's.

Trevor was kneeling up in the chair when we got there. We could see him through the window. Mr Cotterill, with a cigarette in his mouth and a cup of tea at his elbow, was running the clippers up and over the top of Trevor's head. The radio was blaring out. Trevor's mother was in there, clutching her handbag and looking anxious. She instructed Mr Cotterill in the finer points of hairstyling she required for her beloved son. Mr Cotterill adjusted his hearing aid and nodded. His eyes behind the thick lenses of his glasses looked like little blue fish swimming around. Yes, and one thing more to complete the picture: his hand – with scissors, clippers, sometimes even an open razor in it – ever so slightly shook.

Trevor got down from the chair and, though more or less bald, seemed cheerful enough. He was unable to join us, however. Off to the hospital with his mum to see his gran. (And show her where his hair had been!) All this was happening on the

Friday after we had read and heard about the Coronation Cup on the Wednesday and Thursday. We were getting a team up.

It was the end of March now, 1953. The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II would take place in June, with half the street crowded into the Skidmores' watching it all on a nine-inch black-and-white TV. The cup itself (the main event, in our eyes) was for under-twelves; there was an under-sixteens one as well, as I recall. It was assumed that mostly schools would enter, plus boys' clubs, scout groups and so on. Matches would be played throughout April on a knockout basis. The final to be held at Accles & Pollock's sports ground, with its superior facilities and proper stand, presentation of medals by Ray Barlow himself, on the 22nd of April. The entrance fee was five bob, 25p in today's money.

Later that evening we sat in the park sheds watching a shower of rain go bouncing across the pond: Graham Glue, Joey Skidmore, Spencer, Ronnie and me.

'So who else have we got?' said Joey.

'Trev'll play,' I said.

'My cousin's a good 'un,' Graham said.

'How about Prosser?' said Ronnie.

'He'll only play if his brother plays,' said I. 'His brother's useless.'

The Prosser brothers were twins and, aside from their footballing skills, hard to tell apart.

'I know who we should get,' said Joey.

'Who?'

'Tommy Pye.'

'Tommy Pye, he's only seven!'

'Have you seen him play?'

'He's a midget.'

'Have you *seen* him?'

On the way home, we went round to Tommy's, the whole lot of us. But his mother said he was in bed. Back in the street, we could see his little face up at the bedroom window. He gave us a wave.

We split up then. Eventually, Spencer and I made our way to Cemetery Road. He and I were near neighbours. At the top of the road we passed a couple of the older Toomeys, Albert and Rufus, lounging around outside the Malt Shovel. They took offence at Spencer as we went by. They judged him to be a snob on account of his collar and tie. Albert accused us of looking at them. We kept going. At a safe distance I yelled defiance, partly because Monica Copper, a girl I secretly admired, was out in her garden. The Toomeys came running,

but soon gave up. We had too good a lead.

Spencer was worried, even before the Toomeys. He had missed his accordion lesson. What could he tell his mother?

'Tell her you asked a man in the park and he told you the wrong time,' I offered. 'Tell her you ran from a horsefly.'

My mum was in the yard beating the daylights out of a rug. A shaft of light from the open doorway illuminated the scene. Half the kitchen furniture was out there. She was laying lino. I made myself a sugar sandwich and, when the coast was clear of Toomeys, took Dinah for a walk.