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Coin Quest
– The Story of my Father –

EN7104 – The Writing Project
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Supervisor: Dr. Peter Blair

- Prologue -

Fathers, Sons, and Coins

I was about nine years old when I asked my dad what that massive book was. It used to turn up every now and then, in different rooms. Sometimes it lay open, sometimes face-down, spine-up, or sometimes it would hide unused for months on the pine shelf behind the Miller's price guides. He said he might give it to me one day. The *Krause Standard Catalog of World Coins, 1973*. An American book with big American writing on the front. Thumbed and tatty. The cover showed a map of the world in three egg-shaped sections, meshed like a maths exercise book. It had over two thousand pages (I think that was more than the Bible).

The day I got my hands on it I stayed up late into the night, flicking through the black and white pictures of circles and faces. He wanted me to take an interest in it. He showed me where the best ones were and even gave me a few to start up my collection. The world of ancient currency had suddenly opened up. Secret worlds and their mysterious monetary interactions. I found myself marvelling at the austere images of royalty, domination, authority; noticing coinage similarities in close-bordered countries, distinguishing the rare ones from the commoners, the grails from the mugs. I learned that Roman coins weren't actually worth much at all. I learned about things like 'minting' and 'grading'. I had become a 'Numismatist'. Then I got bored and started buying stickers instead.

The first ever coin in human civilisation is believed to have been the 'Lydian Lion', minted in 600BC by King Alyattes II of Lydia (present-day Turkey). The Lion was the emblem of the royal Mermnadae family, a symbol of absolute authority and dominance. Numismatists (real

ones) seem to differ when charting the coin's ancient societal value. Depending on who you believe, it was worth either of the following: Three jars of wine, one sheep, eleven sheep, ten goats, or one-hundred-and-sixty-eight grains of wheat. Evidently, nobody really knows for sure. An open-jawed lion's head – ferociously mid-roar – imprints one side, and a large paw stamps the back. The Lydian Lion has left its mark as 'the Adam of modern currency', systematically replicated by the Greeks, the Romans, and the Persians, subsequently birthing the initial structures of the very same monetary system we use today.

Lydia was one of the wealthiest empires of the ancient world. Its capital Sardis sat proudly next to the fruitful gold deposits in the Pactolus River and the streams of electrum ore coursing the veins of the surrounding mountains. According to Herodotus, the Lydians were 'the first retail tradesmen', establishing innovative currency and trading systems much envied by their neighbours. But the power of coins will always attract the powerful. King Cyrus of Persia coveted the Lydians' wealth so much that in 550BC he attacked Sardis, easily defeating Alyattes' son, Croesus, who seemed more a lion cub than a lion. Instead of considering military tactics as his father might have done, he wasted precious days journeying to the Oracle of Delphi to seek her counsel. She told him that 'a great Empire would fall'. And so it did. His father's Empire.

It all started with coins. He was working at a hotel in St. Aubyns, Jersey. The Highlands Hotel. Lots of Chaplain parties and fishing retreaters. He'd often have to go into the capital, St. Helier (not that Jersey really needs a 'capital') to buy Cracker Barrel cheese, which you couldn't get in St. Aubyns. One trip, he noticed the window of an old shop on the high street which sold antiquated coins and medals. He wondered why anybody would ever want to open a shop that sold outdated versions of the things you swap for food or entertainment. A

prominent sign in the window said 'For Sale: Silver Thri'penny bits: Two shillings.' He had a vague interest in old coins, and he remembered that one in particular; once a year a silver thri'penny bit would be hiding at the centre of the family Christmas pudding. But he decided it wasn't for him. He had bigger (more literal) fish to fry, and the solitary, bunker-laden Jersey rocks provided plenty of opportunity. That week, to his amazement, he noticed another coin shop on the other side of the island, back in St. Aubyns. Two on one island. It seemed unnecessary. But the sign in the window was even more startling: 'We buy Silver Thri'penny bits for four shillings.' The man behind the dilapidated desk looked like he hadn't been outside in decades. He was thin and wiry, perhaps due to a life spent favouring stale currency over fresh sustenance. He was asked if he knew of another coin dealer on the island. 'I haven't spoken to that bastard in twenty-three years.' And a mediator was born.

Only Fools and Horse Manure

The alluring world of currency first introduced itself at the Dublin docks in 1955. Returning sailors would hurl these strange metal discs to fellow four-year olds scrambling like blue-eyed marbles on the decks below. Usually foreign coins; worthless, but he'd pocket them anyway, just in case. Dublin was a deprived place, but even for a six year old there was money to be made in the right places, the right nooks and crannies. Money was nowhere and yet everywhere; you just needed the sharpness of mind to find its hiding places.

And there was never a more proficient mind-sharpener than poverty; *miserable Irish Catholic* poverty at that. 'Unrealistic? Angela's Ashes wasn't realistic *enough!* I could *add to* it.' He says that a lot. Pickle-crammed into a single, tiny stone room with his 'Mam', his father, older brother Tony, and baby brother Terry. The shack stood in a decrepit hundred-yard terrace block: Riley's cottages. I don't know who Riley was, but he would have done well to disassociate his name from his cottages. Corrugated iron roof, inevitably dripping. After all, what miserable Irish Catholic upbringing would be complete without that memorable icon of impoverishment? No gas, no electricity, just an open fire at the wall, where their father would sit in the evenings, wondering if the Catholic girl he'd been disowned back in Liverpool for had been worth the effort. Outside the front door, across the narrow street, stood an animal slaughterhouse, fully-functioning. Lying on the floor-blanket at night, a miniature version of my father would peer underneath the gap in the front door, at the fresh blood slowly trickling to the gutters at the end of the lane. It became normality, synonymous with bedtime. For the rest of his life that natural instinct to detect the smell of

animal blood from a distance would remain with him; a kind of useless half-sense, locking his mind back into the presence of Riley whenever the familiar scent resurfaced.

There exists a couple of pages of unfinished Dublin memoir (barely-started, in reality) written by big brother Tony. He wrote it from prison, where he still is to this day ('and probably always will be,' Dad might add, if he had written a barely-started memoir, too). Of this era, Tony writes: 'Riley's Cottages sounds idyllic to the imagination but, in reality, it was a complete festering shithole.' It is written on that special printer paper you'd get at primary school, hole-punched down the left and right margins, and alternating sets of green horizontal lines running faintly in the background. I presume that kind of paper must have been cheaper, but it seems like they'd gone to much more effort putting it together. His recollections seem a hackneyed yet fascinating insight, offering a dissonantly contrasting perspective to Dad's story. 'Take everything Tony says with a pinch of salt,' Dad often used to say. The story of the brothers' relationship could be a memoir all on its own.

Back in Dublin, one thing they did agree on was the traumatic experience of Bath night; that weekly looming cloud, dreaded by all. Mam had acquired an old tin tub as the chief prop for this regimented melodrama. The other prop – a kind of younger sibling to the old tin tub – was the old tin pail. Shades of Jack & Jill resonated as one of the boys – whoever happened to make eye contact with Mam first – would make the dozen or so trips to the pump at the end of the lane, fetching pails of painfully cold water. The one pump was shared by all other residents of the cottages, as was the one toilet (nice one, Riley). To get to this solitary tap meant contact with the mysterious old woman who lived at the end of the lane. In keeping with many old women who tend to live at the ends of lanes, she appeared to utterly detest children of all varieties. She lived in a shack which was separate from the rest of the terrace; a mythical creature guarding a sacred lair, despising all who disturbed her slumber, or tried to steal from the magic cistern's stream. The fact that 'intruders' were, more

often than not, enacting necessary bodily functions seemed to be irrelevant; if she caught a single glimpse of one of them they would invariably be chased straight back down the lane, like dusty cats. Many a pail was spilled en route, over-prompted by the absurdly vigorous power of the frail old lady's broom. And that was just the beginning to Bath Night. Whoever wasn't risking the wrath of end-of-lane-lady was helping Mam out with the fire. If there was no peat to hand, firewood would be expended. This required the gathering of spindly twigs and wood shavings from the surrounding building sites. Once it was lit, broken pebbles and extracted cobblestones would be bunched together, heated up and eventually placed into the tin bath, which – broom-chasings permitting – would be full of cold water. There was no way of telling the right temperature, no thermostat, no thermometer, so the bathing experience was perpetually unpredictable. Freezing cold one week, seething hot the next: the polarities of discomfort.

But Bath Night did have its latent advantages, gradual though they were. The process of collecting the materials inculcated a habit within them of *gathering* itself. It was drummed in by sheer necessity. This instinct would ultimately shape the person Dad would become. An ever-expanding scope for profit. When he was six, his father, Harold Edwards, who made rustic garden furniture as a living (along with any other jobs that were going), knocked up a box cart for the boys. This consisted of two wooden wheels nailed to the sides of a square box, and a long wooden handle; a cross between a primitive wheel barrow and a pram. It would become a pivotal business tool in the coming months as the infant entrepreneurs sought to scrape together extra pocket money from wherever they could. Dad had always had something of the Del Boy spirit about him (even years before the TV show existed). His memoir would probably have been quick to say so too, many times. I remember growing up, in those rare moments when allowed up past bedtime (scrunched small at the outside wall of the living room couch, thinking I was avoiding detection), it was only because *Only Fools*

and Horses was on. His favourite. In the audacious escapades of Peckham's most renowned market tradesman, he undoubtedly saw flashes of his younger self. He and Del Boy shared something. Not just the aspiration to be 'miwyonaaaires' by *this time next year*, but the thirst for scrimping, scraping, and innovating beyond their means. It was that uncanny ability to seize opportunity from apparent nothingness. He could squeeze pennies from cobbles. Almost literally.

In Dublin, the box cart would be his and Tony's own Reliant Regan. Edwards Independent Traders. The first commodity was stock. They began by harvesting the fruit of the cobbled streets themselves. Horse faeces. It was the inevitable starting point. Mini stockpiles of the stuff on every street. A box cart full of horse manure would make sixpence at the nearby allotments. The Middle English meaning of the word 'manure' (*manuren*) aptly means 'to cultivate land.' And cultivate they did. As the Nematodes fed on bacteria in the soil they helped to nourish, so the junior Del Boys fed on the inanimate streets themselves. And each sixpence would, in turn, find its way back to the cashiers of the sweet shops that ruled their pockets. The great food chain. They couldn't believe other kids weren't doing it already, it seemed so obvious. Weekends were the most effective, when they were off school, and the wealthier Dubliners would take trips around the city in carriages leaving plenty of fresh deposits. Often they'd pick it up whilst it was still steaming, like freshly baked bread.

But horse manure was never going to be a long-term venture. Though it was in plentiful supply, it took quite a while to fill up the cart, and required lugging a heavy shovel around with them. The real money was in another prominent crop of the street: used vessels. At that time most commodities were sold in glass containers of varying sizes; each one would yield a tidy deposit from the local retailers. Another obvious move. 'It's like picking up money,' they used to say to one another, continually baffled as to why they had no competition. Lemonade bottles, coke bottles, jam jars (*lots* of jam jars), pickle jars, even the

occasional aluminium pot with a hole in it; all of it sitting in the streets – especially down the alleyways – waiting to be monetised. Most glass bottles fetched around a farthing each, though if you were really lucky you might bag the prized asset of the ‘trade’: the coveted amber bleach bottle. One whole penny. When they found one it felt like they’d struck gold; an insignificant item suddenly metamorphosised into gold. To the scavenger’s eye, the amber bleach bottle became an article of genuine beauty; not in the modern-art sense, but due to the meaning attached to it – a meaning which usually found its roots in coins. Amber bleach bottles would always win hands-down over galleries and sunsets. After all, galleries and sunsets didn’t get you pennies. Beauty was pennies, pennies beauty.

When the streets were empty, they even resorted to knocking on doors asking for spare jars. This happened every Saturday, regardless of the season (the trusty box-cart seemed to be an all-weather model). Bar the occasional ‘Piss off you little buggers!’ the local residents were often more than willing to supply the young tradesmen with their empty receptacles. These would then need cleaning out before the grocers would accept them back. Twenty jars was the weekly target (they actually discussed this), which – though not always met – would sometimes be obliterated when an aloof resident might open up a garage door to reveal a stash of more than fifty in one room. Ineffable excitement (‘Thought all my birthdays had come together,’ says the barely started memoir). They soon learned to visit the garage houses first. Jam jars were the future.

They tried their fair share of tricks too, usually at Tony’s prompting (‘Tony corrupted me,’ claims Dad). When they started using the box-cart to sell firewood (occasionally ‘gathered’ from ‘abandoned’ building sites in the evenings), their first scam was born; the first of many. The wood was chopped into mini planks back at the cottage and tied together in small bundles, then sold by the cart-load. When stacking the cart they detected a gap at the base where no other bundles would fit, leaving a large empty space. They would cover it

over, wedging a bundle over the space to make it look as if the cart was full. They'd have it checked (not very thoroughly, evidently) then get asked to dump it on the pile around the back; the customer would see a full cart arriving and an empty cart leaving. They never had any complaints. 'We could've taught the Real Hustle a thing or two,' says the unwritten memoir.

Small scams were the norm in the Dublin years, though they would occasionally branch into outright theft. One day, whilst bunking off school, he and Tony noticed a van pull up to a confectionary shop on a corner. These were the days when a friendly driver, whilst collecting the mandatory signature, might stay for a quick chat about the drizzly sermon on Sunday or the last result from Croke Park. A fully-stocked van might stay unattended for two or three minutes. Ample time for a 'corrupting' older brother to coax an aspiring younger brother to make a dash for the back door step. 'Just grab something!' 'What shall I grab?' 'Anything!' He sprinted across the cobbles as if it were flatland, ankles oblivious to sprain, and leapt up, dutifully grabbing the first *anything* that came to eye. Jackpot. Better than horse manure; better than aluminium pots; better, even, than amber bleach bottles: a box of sixty Cadbury's chocolate bars. The thin ones, foil-wrapped, usually sold at a penny *each*. A discovery like this was almost too much to handle; like holding a bomb; so much potential power and yet so much imminent incrimination in your hands all at once. In fear of any repercussions should the theft become local news or the driver come looking for them, they stashed the box in a dry ditch at some nearby woodland. When they got home, asked why they were off school, their streetwise wits seemed to fail them: 'The teacher gave us the rest of the day off because we were so good.' Needless to say, they were beaten, 'black-and-blue.'

The next day at school they were forced to bring in a note from Mam explaining why they'd been off the day before. The incensed teacher re-enacted the same punishment they'd received the night before (with the same colour scheme). But this time, the multiple cane-

whips, fists and bruises were made a touch more bearable at the thought of the bounty that awaited them at the end of the day. The mere sight of foil alone was enough to trigger their excitement. ‘Sixty! SIXTY of them!’ The number would repeat itself on a loop in their heads, nullifying all other interactions, which became nothing but nerve-wracking preambles to the main event. At the end of the day they ran, panting and clambering back to their loyal ditch by the woodland. But the box was gone, without a trace. Someone had outsmarted them. Or, the box had ascended to Irish catholic heaven. Whichever would best satisfy their frustrations at the time. They were sick. Sicker than all the blacks and blues could ever make them.

Scallies, Slots, and Blind Inanimate Dogs

‘We speak with an accent exceedingly rare, meet under a statue exceedingly bare, if you want a cathedral, we’ve got one to spare, in my Liverpool home’ (*In My Liverpool Home*, Pete McGovern). He used to sing that song to me. I remember every word, as though it were scripture from the mouth of a Rabbi. Dad was a Liverpudlian at heart, and enchanted us with his stories of growing up in that famous city. It felt like my second home before I’d ever been there.

The Irish, in particular, have always had a bit of a *thing* for Liverpool. Ever since the Great Famine in the mid-nineteenth century, flocks of bright blue eyes have been crossing the Irish Sea in search of income, at one time forming over twenty-five percent of the city’s population. Harold Edwards wasn’t migrating, he was returning home, Catholic wife and three kids in-hand. Handel Street was the first house they found, a neat little terraced place, with its own toilet and with the added bonus of not being opposite a slaughterhouse. Riley’s Complete Festering Shitholes were now a distant memory. The distinct sense of *being Irish* is one of Dad’s earliest Liverpool memories. Though there was no shortage of Irish folk, there was a time when he felt like an alien to the other children; the thick Dublinness of his accent setting him apart from the common tongue. This would be especially felt when locked out-of-doors in the early evenings waiting for Mam to come from the shops. Children would stare, confused as to why he and his family sounded so strange, and inwardly mock (so he thought).

In a sense, the outcastness worked in his favour, leaving him and Tony free to scavenge for a more dependable neighbour: Profit. Edwards Independent Traders now had a new branch. Like in Dublin, school seemed pointless (or rather, *profitless*). Learning was

merely a hindrance to coins. Why go to school and learn *about* life when you could get started on the ladder early? English Literature lessons at St. Bernadette's Catholic School highlighted the reasons behind this preference for profit over art. A brutal poetry teacher, Miss Fiddler, would set the homework. The objective: learn poem off-by-heart by following lesson, or have skin ripped off knuckles by thin end of ruler. The way in which poetry was taught seemed no different to Mathematics. The endless repetition of wordy formulas with no grounding in reality. Epics about North American Indian princesses had little relevance to the exhilarating world of coin-scrounging. Avoiding a beating was the only real motivation to succeed. Poetry was about doing what you're told; a stifling of the open mind, and a wet rag over the creative spark. Imagination, it seemed, was best saved for the streets.

At first he brought over his Dublin expertise, with the same system applied to all things glass and bottley. Rooting through old bins down alleyways proved most lucrative, especially in unearthing the more exotic gems (particularly those of the amber-coloured variety). A corner shop at the end of Handel Street was a regular 'buyer-backer'. Often, Dad and Tony would sit inside the shop on one of the tables drinking bottles of Sasperella. It was a regular hang-out for kids of the area, and a good place to meet future allies. Nine and ten year-olds could buy 'looseys' (single cigarettes) at tuppence each, to which the shopkeeper would usually turn a blind eye. But though one eye was voluntarily blind, the other was no better. This man was infected with that unique condition that seemed to plague most shopkeepers in nineteen-sixties Liverpool: chronic naiveté. And a sharp young Dubliner knew it. Around the back of the shop was a small yard, where the docile man kept his returned bottles in ordered piles. The glass den was guarded by a cement wall, the top of which was lined with shards of broken bottles (somewhat ironically). Nothing a small roll of old carpet couldn't overcome. An incredible opportunity, as if the good Lord himself had shown them. For an entire year they managed to successfully steal lemonade bottles from the

back yard of the very man buying them back at the front, generally with a gap of only two minutes from theft to resale. Forget princesses, this was *real* poetry.

By this point, Tony had gone his own way, busy involving himself in the more ‘advanced’ variety of scam (the more overtly illegal kind); too busy for bottles now. But this didn’t affect Dad much, who now had his own gang of fellow Faganites to run riot in their unquenchable hunt for earnings. They were doing well, here and there, gathering and reselling, still operating on a coin-only level. Not that this bothered them much. Coins – as opposed to notes – were infinitely more *real*; the feel of them in your hands as you rubbed your thumb across them, the sound in your pocket as they clinked together, distinctly reminding you of what you had, what you owned, and most importantly, what you had *earned*. Bank notes, on the other hand, were a kind of sacred parchment, almost legendary. They had no place in the scurrying world of bottle collecting. Notes were a foreign species (for now, at least).

As with all successful enterprises, the picking-up of bottles – like the horse manure before it – eventually peaked, and slowly began to take more of a backseat role. This was less due to the wising-up of the shopkeepers, more to the eagerness for variety. New schemes, new opportunities, new challenges. Had this small group of Irish-Liverpudlian scallies been a corporate company, that would have been their flagship slogan; their mission statement. But as it happened, they were really just a bunch of kids having a laugh. No organisation, no head honcho, just whoever happened to be around and was nifty enough to get the job done. Getting around the city was never much of an issue; an open-backed truck or lorry often provided a useful ‘hop-on’ opportunity, with the possible added bonus of relieving a box or two from the cargo, which brings another line from McGovern’s famous song to mind: ‘At stealing from lorries, I was adept, and underneath overcoats each night I slept.’ Lorry drivers hated kids. And often had no idea they were there, creeping around in the back before lobbing

a couple of cardboard rewards out onto the pavement. The best part was rooting through the polystyrene fragments and getting to the good stuff; it was like a lucky bag; inside it could be anything, from catalogues to toasters.

But despite the lorry drivers' loathing, Dad still managed to utilise his eleven-year-oldness to induce sympathy from the general public. The scam was called 'The Way To Bootle'. It went like this: he would wander around Upper Parliament Street near the centre of town looking lost, then approach a passer-by with the phrase: 'Excuse me Sir, could you tell us the way to Bootle?' (Bootle being four or five miles away in the outskirts). This was usually followed by directions to a nearby bus stop, at which point he would solemnly interrupt them, saying 'Oh no, I'm walking.' This would inevitably summon something to the effect of 'Oh you're too young to walk that far, here's the bus fare.' Job done. He'd stuff the coins down his sock and move on to the next victim. Some days the sock got too full to carry on, bulging conspicuously above his ankle. At those times there would be an inner contemplation of that universal human trait: *hubris*. He had to ask himself this question: leave the table and count up your winnings, or go for that little bit extra and risk being found out?

One particular time, he came so close that he learned this lesson for life. The sock was the fullest it had ever been, to the extent that he was walking with a limp. But strangely, this had actually been working in his favour: the fuller the sock, the greater the limp; and the greater the limp the greater the coin. Then one old lady (usually the perfect type of punter), rather than supplying him with the bogus fare, innocently directed him to a nearby policeman: 'Hello Constable, this poor lad has to walk all the way back to Bootle, can you help him?' A giant navy blue man, complete with giant hat, towered above, inducing what every young boy feels at that pivotal moment before detection. These were the days when the minimum necessary height of a policeman was six foot. They roamed the streets like knights, silver-tipped at every joint of their armour. The truncheon alone was the length of Dad's arm.

As his eyes were interrogated, his nerves pinged around his small intestine like a pinball. But these are the moments that make you, when the more determined scammers fight their small intestines and save face. With the jingling sock bulge threatening to betray him at every step, scrunching his toes to hold the loose coins in place, he made up a story as to why he was so far from home, why he had a limp, and even how he was doing at school. To his amazement, the policeman not only believed him, but gave him three times his bus fare, too.

The joy of the tangible coins in one's pocket was a great feeling, but unlike in Dublin, it wasn't the primary motivation. This had evolved. The greatest thing that drove him was the *challenge*, the concept of *winning*. Fooling the corner shop man, fooling policemen, fooling his parents, fooling his teachers; this was the greatest wage. It was something *beyond* the world of currency, crediting some abstract bank of self-worth. Beating the system, overcoming the blocked barrier, finding the loophole, these were things that made him who he was. He used to read the Kipling poem 'If' to me whilst I was growing up (and later made me recite it, somewhat against my will). The lines that stuck were 'If you can make one heap of all your winnings /And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss, /And lose, and start again at your beginnings /And never breathe a word about your loss.' These were the kinds of poems he could get on with; the pithy, didactic kind. And if anything, he is the embodiment of the *if* principle. *If*s look beyond banality, they drive the human psyche beyond the immediate, beyond the way things are. Essentially, they are the reason for the creative spirit itself, out of which all art, and all literature is made. In that sense, he and I are not that different. Where my creativity led to the written word, his led to the written coin.

The thirst for coinage would occasionally lead him and his sporadic gang to the amusement arcades at New Brighton, a place often dubbed 'The El Dorado of Merseyside'. Just a Ferry-'Cross-the-Mersey away (bunked, of course). A bustling society of coins. The whole place ran on them. Its robotic inhabitants ate them one at a time through slitted

mouths; and every now and then they spewed them back up. The great coin cycle. To young boys in search of adventurous income, New Brighton was a haven. Most kids had some kind of scam, it was the only reason they were there. Dad had two; one was legal, the other, ‘not-so-legal’. The first port of call was obvious; the things that contain the most coins: fruit machines. First invented in 1895 by San Franciscan, Charles August Fey, ‘one-armed bandits’ have since birthed a pseudo-mythological canon of hypothetical tactics and philosophical musings on the nature of probability. These range from the legendary existence of a ‘progressive jackpot’, in which the likelihood of winning is determined by amount-spent-in-one-sitting, to whether or not the machine ‘favours’ a hot or a cold coin. Countless money-spinning books have been written, each claiming to possess ‘*the* definitive slot machine strategy’, even some which seek to subvert the subgenre itself: *How to Win Millions Playing Slot Machines!... or Lose Trying*.

Clearly, they were all wasting their time; all you needed to do was jimmy open the glass pane at the front of the machine and you’d win every time. Tool of choice: an old can opener. The logic was that ‘jimmies’ themselves were far too suspicious an object for a youth to be carrying around with them (after all, can-openers could be fully accounted for, couldn’t they?) Once the trusty penny was dispensed and the lever pulled, an adept hand could affix the reels to the desired symbols as they slowed down. Bar, Bar, Bar. Ten thousand possible combinations reduced to one in an instant. The jackpot was a shilling: twelve pocket-moneys for the price of one. He’d run the machine dry, and sometimes – if he was feeling particularly cheeky – would come back a few hours later and do it again once it had been replenished.

Though working the fruit machines was essentially breaking and entering, the second scam was entirely legal, and undoubtedly the more inventive of the two. The greyhound race game. Six to a track, different colours, place your bets. The reds and blues won most frequently (low odds). They were the safe bets, small tit-for-tat profit, but the track always

won in the end. The white greyhound was the one to watch; in its rare moments of victory it would promise to shell out a few shillings at a time. But, of course, it never seemed to happen. The white greyhound was his nemesis, smugly luring coin after coin into its slot, promising dreams of a lavish payout, only to produce yet another dud performance before its hapless punter gave up just in time to see it win. He had to beat it. *There must be a system.*

This was his thought process, as it always has been (with virtually everything). And his logic usually followed that with every system, there *must* be a loophole, an anarchist, a dissenting spanner-in-the-works (or can-opener). It took a while at first, but after some astute observation he managed it. Unlike fruit machines, within the mechanism of the greyhound game there was no Random Number Generator (RNG) to determine each winner. This meant there was a cycle. By mentally bookmarking the related occurrence of the more infrequent winners (yellows and blues), he memorized that, after a certain cycle had begun, the white greyhound would win on, say, the twenty-sixth race. It was just a case of picking it up at the right point and following the sequence to its penultimate destination: one before the elusive white. Then, a simple tap on the shoulder of the nearest punter, a swift “Gis’ a go!” and he was on for victory. In went one coin, out came twenty, like the touch of a magician.

Alongside the coin bounty there was a bonus that always added extra relish to the triumph: the face of the dumbfounded punter, stewing in a confused mixture of jealousy and mystified respect.

Trips to New Brighton were great harvests of profit, but they were rare. They knew they couldn’t return too often without the risk of being recognised; so most of the time they had to make do with bread-and-butter stuff. Some of their enterprises were seasonal, even generic, such as ‘Penny-for-the-Guy’ before November the fifth. Nothing fancy, just a straightforward latching-on to the public calendar. Strange to think of this young Roman Catholic mass-goer now selling propagandist dolls that represent the execution of the most

famous Catholic anarchist in Britain's history. Had the nuns back at St. Philomena's found out, they would have taught him the only way they knew how. 'Spare the rod, spoil the child' was a proverb one hunchbacked corridor-guarding nun seemed to remember with particular relish. He used to describe it as 'a Catholic concentration camp'. Now, in a sense, he was actively quashing the anti-Protestant revolt, complying with King James I's official instruction to remember, remember.

But in truth, the significance of what they were actually selling never entered their heads. It had nothing to do with religion or politics, it was all about the pennies. *How quick can we get them? And what do we need to do?* Base materials: old rags and scrunched-up newspaper. The most important aspect was the sign: clear and big; the second was the location: a primary spot at the top of Lodge Lane, a commercial district where seven roads met at once. Good for passing trade. Even as eleven year olds, they knew the first rule of retail: decent advertising. The young Dubliner didn't need a degree in business studies to understand this. Rather, business was about 'common sense'. That transcendental understanding of human nature; knowing what they like, don't like, how they are likely to react, what their next move is going to be; these are things education simply could not teach. In fact, it was around the same year that he had failed his 'Eleven Plus'; an incident he bemoans as being due to the inclusion of algebra in his exam, something they had (supposedly) never been taught. Not knowing the system, whether his answer should be a word, a number, a letter, a symbol, was something he simply couldn't handle. No amount of guesswork, no clever loophole, no creative angle, or 'common sense' could get him through it; you either knew the answer or you didn't. Black or white. This seemed to be in opposition to everything he knew about the world. His real identity – where he truly felt himself – came from the more ambiguous field of one-on-one moneymaking; dealing with the active, living psyches of unique human beings, thinking about how to make them tick, how to make them

stop, how to make them wind and unwind, and most importantly, part with their pennies. These market principles seemed to be imprinted in his genes. 'Please Sir, penny for the Guy? Just a ha'penny will do.'

But on Bonfire night itself, a strange thing seemed to happen. For one night, they became children again. For one night, it was no longer about profit, but the sheer ecstatic thrill of fire. The orangey wisps, the crackles, the bright shifts, licks, dances of each flash of burning energy, each making up the corpus of the whole. This wasn't specific to Dad's gang of menaces, it seemed universal. Fires to young boys are a fascination, the greatest of disciplinarians (far more effective than nuns). It didn't even need to tell them what to do, they knew instinctively what their job was: to feed it, with whatever they could find, as if it had commanded them with a dinner bell. A bizarre, citywide frenzy of wood-gathering for a unified purpose. Anything remotely flammable was hunted out, amassed and sacrificed at the feet of the flames. Unsold Guys, newspapers, exercise books, dining room chairs, picket fences. Abandoned houses were ransacked, furniture, skirting boards, whatever was there got taken. There were even a few cases of whole back doors being relieved of their hinges and marched down to wherever the closest fire happened to be. Total anarchy. But a kind of cathartic anarchy. Objects and opportunities these young boys would normally be masterminding for profit were temporarily seen in a completely different light. The firelight had seduced them, proven itself worthy of their praise and offerings. Sod Mary. Sod the nuns. Bring on the fire.

Dad's early teen years saw a dramatic gear shift in his currency pursuits, from the cheekily inventive to the overtly criminal. By this time, the parents had moved to a new house on the other side of the city, not that he or any of his comrades spent much time in their homes. It was that pre-girlfriends era of adolescence where young boys harness that inner desire to live chiefly for the glorious end of mischief itself. Like a slave-driving boss,

Mischief commanded them to pester and break barriers wherever they could, with the promise of money as a golden (though, more likely copper) bonus. One man constantly on the receiving end of their attacks was the owner of a certain pet shop on Alexander Lane. He used to place a plastic dog-shaped moneybox outside during the day, collecting charity for the blind. Rather than risk detection, they'd snap its chain and do a runner with the whole dog; then break into it somewhere down the road and abandon it. In a way it was like primitive joy riding, leaving a burnt-out T-Bird in a field somewhere. At some point the pitiable inanimate dog would usually be picked up by some compassionate Samaritan and returned to the pet shop. But this proved to be more of a curse than a blessing. It wouldn't stay there beyond a week without the coin-hungry bees returning for their pollen. A ridiculous cycle. It became a standard activity. 'What do you wanna do today?' 'Rob the dog?' 'Why not, eh!'

This war against the pet shop eventually escalated to the front door. It was the primitive Yale lock versus the trusty wire coat hanger. At first, they'd break in at night and mess around, just for kicks; throw some stuff about just to let him know they were there (and nick any loose change from behind the till). Soon enough a new padlock appeared. Their counter-attack was a crowbar, and so on. This was another cycle that repeated itself. Every time there was a new lock, it would give them a fresh challenge. An inadvertent academy for aspiring burglars. The pet shop man was their silent tutor and adversary. He never saw them, they never saw him; their only communication the setting and breaking of locks. It went on for months. A cold war that only ever had one loser. Dad tells me that if he could track anyone down and apologise for the wrongs he'd done, it would be that man. 'We terrorized him.'

They moved on to shops in town; those with the slightest weakness would be targeted. Retail Terrorism, it could be called. It didn't matter how secure the shop's locks were, if it

had a letter box, they had a way in. A broom handle with a metal coat hanger attached to one end would allow a whole clothes rail to be dragged across the room and 'unloaded' through the slit with relative ease. Fishing for clothes. They wondered whether the staff might even be quite impressed when they arrived at work the next day to a break-in without the break-in.

The Alexandrian thirst for new conquest being so strong, the stakes for mischief could only escalate. A church around the corner from the pet shop would also fall victim to the coat hook approach. A side door by the community hall led them into a secret room where the collection plate money was kept. It didn't matter who they belonged to, coins were coins. Even a war with God himself didn't seem to bother them.

Getting Bombed and Getting Nicked

'Back in the Forties, the world, it went mad,
And Hitler, he threw at us all that he had.
When the smoke and the dust had all cleared from the air,
"Thank God," said my old man, "the pub is still there."

- *In My Liverpool Home*

There is a popular myth that a certain young Austrian once spent a number of months on Merseyside whilst absconding from military service a short while before the outbreak of the First World War. Supposedly, he arrived on a train into the heaving and steaming Lime Street Station in the late spring of 1912. Nobody knows precisely what he did there, what he saw, where he liked to eat, but he is thought to have stayed at his Auntie's house on Upper Stanhope Street (a few streets away from Dad's old house). Auntie Bridget was a Dubliner (like Mam), brought over to Liverpool by her husband, Alois, the young Austrian's half-brother. Little did they know that in less than three decades' time, their summer guest – this peculiar young painter – would be returning to the city in the disembodied form of two thousand, three hundred and fifteen SC bombs. Tens of thousands of houses would be razed to the ground (including their own), and four thousand of their rare-accented neighbours wiped off the face of the earth. Unprecedented devastation. The heaviest blitz outside of London. Young Adolf must have seen something he liked whilst he was there – or rather, feared. Perhaps it was the incessant productivity. Liverpool was famous for it. Once heralded as 'the New York of Europe', the merchant city was always likely to attract the attention of the Luftwaffe, desperate to cut off the high output that had been churning out of the docks for decades. During the war, Liverpool's eleven mile stretch of docking quays handled ninety

percent of Britain's incoming war materials from abroad – some seventy five million tons. Liverpool was too productive for its own good; Lydia in the face of the Persians. The city's economy still sits in the shadow of the blitz to this day, perhaps never to reach its former heights again.

But in the wake of Adolf's ungratefulness to the city that once hid him, a young Dubliner-turned-scouser would soon be profiting from the consequences. Abandoned semi-destroyed house shells known as 'bombedies' still littered the city's landscape even in the early sixties. Tatty bookmarks of the past and dim lamps to the future. But where there's material, there's money – bombed-out or not. The professional bombedy-scavengers would do it properly; hire a van and ransack the house for all it was worth; copper-piping that would explode with spewing water when wrenched from the wall, and such like. It all had its price. When Dad was older Tony would take him along for these riskier ventures, but for now household bric-a-brac was enough.

A second-hand bookshop would pay good money for old magazines. Occasionally he would find huge collections, though they didn't always make money. One time he found an entire stack of *Housekeeping Monthly's* – almost as tall as him – which he awkwardly hauled down the road only to find out they were 'not worth a balloon'. This brought back an earlier Dublin memory: the rag-and-bone man who went from street to street in his horsedrawn cart giving young kids a balloon or two in exchange for old cloth or bits of scrap. He would signal his arrival with a hand bell and wait for the varied artefacts to be shuffled out of the surrounding houses and laid at his feet. A true antiques dealer; his speciality: old filthy rags. If something wasn't even worth a balloon to the rag-and-bone man, it was pretty much worthless. Hunting in the Liverpool bombedies, Dad quickly learned which kinds of magazines *were* worth a balloon. A pornography series from the forties called *Spick 'n' Span* (which, ironically, sounds more like a housekeeping magazine) would always be welcomed

by the man behind the counter. Dad was perhaps too young (or too driven) to be interested in the fleshly images themselves, but would happily trade them in for the more modest equivalent on the backs of coins. These were far more seductive. Heads always won over tail.

But whilst he was making money from the repercussions of the post-war depression, he would simultaneously be nicking war-themed comic books from the same shop that paid him. It was a series called *Commando*, which sought to present 'War stories in pictures'. With such titles as 'Jump or Die!', 'River of Death' and 'Knife For A Nazi' it brought up an entire generation of young boys in the ways of John Wayne masculinity (with a touch of xenophobia thrown in for good measure: 'Trap for a Jap'). It was the only 'literature' he had ever read out of choice. The pseudo-historical narratives gave him an insight (though hyperbolized) into the existence of the war-torn bombedies he spent his time rummaging through. Before *Commando* these ghostly house carcasses had simply always been there, stamped by that mysterious category of the past: 'war'. *Commando* dissected this word for him, and in a sense, taught him a lot about manhood. He became fascinated by each little battle, aided by the detailed descriptions of creeping up to bird's nests, breaking into German supply camps, even assassinating Hitler himself. He found himself drawn into the world of the lone soldier, transposing himself into every scene. This was a fantasy that didn't stay entirely within the confines of his own head, it became translated into the similarly battle-like world of moneymaking (as were most things). And by this point in his scavenging career, along with his accomplices, moneymaking inevitably led to outright burglary of some variety.

There was a shop on the Boundary Road intersection called Priors Jewellers; often nicknamed 'The Scouse Fort Knox.' Everybody knew about it. Bolted, buffered, barred, belled, alarmed. Security ad absurdum. This was undoubtedly the hardest shop to break into in Liverpool. There was no point even trying it. In terms of potential targets, it might as well have been invisible. Except for one thing, that is; and for which he had Mr. Hitler's return

visit to thank: a bombedy, sitting directly behind the shop. A fantastical plan immediately began to germinate inside their bright minds. Soon enough it became impossible to ignore. For the pure fun of it, Dad and two fellow Commando accomplices set about breaking into the most heavily guarded of all enemy outposts. It was their very own 'Great Escape' in reverse. The way they did it was nothing short of genius. The bombedy gave them relative cover from the back, allowing access to an exterior wall of the shop; and to the side was a large advertising hoarding giving direct cover from passers-by on the street. With time and space in which to work, their creativity was allowed to flourish. They set about getting in through the one place that couldn't possibly be locked: the bricks-and-mortar itself. Through their mutual interest in war stories, they had learned about why bombedies became bombedies in the first place; not just the impact of the explosion itself but the fire which followed, softening the cement until it gave way to the weight of the structure. All they had to do was recreate this effect on a smaller scale, brick by brick. So as in Dublin, and Bonfire night, Dad found himself gathering firewood again. They didn't have too far to go, most of it could be delved from the old bits of furniture lying around them in 'Bombedy HQ'. The trickiest part was controlling the size of the fire in perfect tension; large enough to generate enough brick-softening heat, but not so high for the smoke to be visible above the advertising hoarding.

Once it was set up, they could leave it a few hours, then come back and put it out; then return and do the same the next day. It took about a week, but they were eventually able to knock one of the bricks through with a mallet and an iron chisel; once one came loose the rest quickly followed suit. Mission accomplished. They were fortunate that there was no alarm at their point of entry, though you could hardly blame the owners for not expecting such an audacious break-in. Once inside, there wasn't too much to do, since all the valuable stuff was locked away in the safes, they just messed around with the cabinets, the old cutlery

boxes, the till roll. They weren't even too disappointed by the lack of profit; it was the challenge that mattered. That, and the pride that went with it, of course. For weeks they would avidly indulge in talking, telling, and romanticizing about how baffled the owners must have been upon finding the hole in the wall, standing there next to a group of unimpressed policemen, scratching their heads and staring at this masterminded entry which had left nothing stolen. Just a warning; letting them know that it *could* be done. Years into the future, Dad would have an expensive jewellery shop of his own. By that point he thought he knew every scam in the book, his own exploits feeding a chronic paranoia over being conned. He put so many locks on his front door that it took a full five minutes just to get it open every morning. But burglars are lateral thinkers. If there are locks on one side, why not just take the hinges off? Outsmarted by his own kind. But it still didn't compare to Prior's. Nothing ever could. For that, they were heroes.

The idea of even having his own shop one day was so far from his mid-teen thoughts to be utterly unimaginable. Shop owners were the ultimate rival of the street burglar; he could never become one of *them*. But the future was not his to see. More pressing on the agenda was staying in enough trouble to make money whilst avoiding the ever-present pursuit of 'the Bizzies'. Though Dad has always prided himself on being the more streetwise of the two in regards to avoiding arrest, he found himself tripping over big brother's footsteps sooner than he thought. Every once in a while, Tony would be in touch to request assistance for one of those ominous-sounding activities: 'a job'. These 'jobs' began with simple scrapwork for one of his man-with-a-van mates in and around the bombedies; a trade Dad knew well from the days of the magazine hunts. But it's amazing how easy the transition can be made from stealing from the dead to stealing from the living. There was one particular job in which Tony had been more aloof about the details, only revealing that he had been given some 'information' about a doctor's house. This made it sound exciting, the kind of thing big time

criminals said on films. In reality this 'information' was that they knew that this doctor would be out of his apartment and they knew he had some expensive jewellery in a safe somewhere. So the brothers-in-arms turned up in the late evening in their open-backed truck, crept into the apartment block, and broke into the flat. Inside, there were various antiques on offer, but they didn't have a clue what was what. As far as they were concerned, there was only one holy grail in the room; it was the one thing they couldn't see into.

A tricky predicament; they couldn't get into it. They tried for at least ten minutes of tension-fuelled wrenching but it was impossible whilst seeking to remain quiet. Only one thing for it: take it with them. The only problem was, it was the heaviest object either of them had ever tried to lift in their lives, titanium-backed with extra weight at the base (presumably for occasions just like this). There was no way they'd get it down the stairs undetected. So, rather ambitiously, they decided to go out the front. Shifting it across the room with some astute leverage, they managed to drop the safe out of the first floor window, watching it thud onto the grass below. But even then the ordeal wasn't over; it had to be rocked across a garden, tilted over a brick wall, and shuffled around the corner to the next street. Each clunk of metal scraping on concrete shot through them with the fear of neighbourhood eyes. When they finally got it into the van, the weight almost broke the axle.

The drive back was stressful, full of suspense, mainly because the safe was visible to anybody who saw the truck (far more conspicuous than a can opener). There was no way they could explain why they were driving around Liverpool late at night with a safe in the back of a truck; they may as well have been wearing black and white stripes. Slow, alternative side streets dictated the route home; each new turning was a lottery, the chance of a police car lurking in the shadows or a pious member of society reporting the ludicrously suspicious behaviour. Perhaps it was so blatant that anybody who saw them thought they couldn't possibly be criminals since nobody would be that stupid. They finally got it home and into

the back garden. The next day required a tall tale to Mam, who by this point was far too concerned looking after the younger siblings to play the disciplinarian; their father, too, was preoccupied trying to start a cab business on the outskirts of Liverpool. They had both perfected the art of covering their bases. The safe sat in the back garden for weeks, surrounded by garden junk. Day after day they hacked away at it, bit by bit. Tony would return more frequently to show commitment to his stake in the anticipated treasure. But even after a few months they still hadn't broken in. Not knowing what was inside this dormant lump of metal ate them up. It was the most frustrating of holy grails. At least the *real* Holy Grail was mysterious and unattainable; this one was right in front of their eyes every single day, but was technically worth nothing. It sat there stubbornly with the weeds, silently mocking. For long periods they would give up, forget about it for a while and move on. Then occasionally, a fresh wave of determination might possess them to return to it and smash a few more dents in the door, to no avail.

The safe had seemingly defeated them until one day, after a sustained period of attack (and the addition of a sledgehammer to the arsenal) its defences were broken. They were in. Successfully storming the ramparts of the safe was the most astounding feeling, the mangled door swinging out to a victorious battle cry from the crowds of fellow soldiers (in their heads). Getting in was like a miracle (a sledgehammer-inspired miracle). They had won the safe battle at last (and to think, it had only taken them a quarter of a year). But the elation of this conquest lasted a mere matter of seconds. Inside this anticipated treasure trove they found nothing but files and papers. These were probably indispensable to the poor doctor, but absolutely worthless to them. This is a lesson Dad would continually have to learn in his moneymaking career: the subjective nature of value itself. Warren Buffett, a nineteen-thirties business entrepreneur, summed it up pithily: 'Price is what you pay, value is what you get.'

Later in life, he would use this maxim to his advantage. But for now, in these premature business years, scrapping for cash and avoiding the law were the priorities.

The ravaged safe stayed in the garden for days after the great opening; simultaneously both a gleaming trophy of triumph and a constant reminder of their ultimate defeat, sucked in by the lure of possibility. It was a case of winning the battle, losing the war, but at least they hadn't been caught for it. After a while they began to worry the police might turn up, so they tipped it over next door's fence, bellyaching with laughter as they did so. One day their neighbour Brenda, a mid-thirties woman with too many kids to notice, would look out into her cluttered garden and find a battered safe lying there. A gift from above (from a severely cash-strapped God, it would seem). Soon after the safe incident, the family moved to Bootle (presumably, Dad didn't need to ask for directions by this point) and the safe was never mentioned again. Whilst in Bootle, the only other 'safe job' he tried was in a bakery, which, after a good few hours of hacking, contained nothing but a packet of loose tea, at which he felt an indignant sense of 'injustice' (as if the bakery should have rewarded him). Safe-smashing clearly wasn't amongst his most fruitful business ventures.

The mid-teen foray into burglary was only ever skin-deep, and Dad managed to stay away from the law for a while, keeping a suitable distance from Tony's 'more serious jobs', as he put it (as if breaking into safes were a mere triviality). He ducked and dived here and there, but the house always wins in the end. And of all the ways to go, he got arrested for nicking a coat from a clothes peg in a university campus corridor (the closest he would ever get to a degree). The punishment was sixteen months at an all-boys 'Approved School'. This was – in effect – a kind of reformatory labour camp for juvenile delinquents too young for detention centre, or those deemed beyond their parents' control. It was a large ranch just outside of Reading run by a group of Franciscan monks, known simply as 'the brothers'. They were peaceable creatures, with far more compassion than the hell-driving nuns of St.

Philomena's. These monks would command discipline not with force but purely by their wraithlike presence; like quasi-human beings, only part-flesh.

Life at Approved School, though tough, was far more beneficial than skulking around the streets of Liverpool. They worked hard, but ate well, kept fit, and even got to play competitive football against other Approved Schools. One eventful treat for the boys was an ill-advised trip to watch Reading play in a cup tie at Elm Park. This resulted in half of the tearaways (including Dad, of course) disappearing before half-time to hijack and subsequently crash the bus. After this, the golden egg goose was well and truly put to death as the treats began to dry up. Upon arrival, detainees were forced to learn a trade for the duration of their stay, with the options of farming, painting-and-decorating, or building. Unsurprisingly, Dad chose building. He had, after all, spent so many afternoons rummaging through deconstructed rubble in the Merseyside bombedies that he thought he might as well try his hand at putting the rubble together in the first place. Each offender was required to pass the examined grade in their chosen job before being allowed to leave at the end of their sentence. It seemed to do the trick. The hope of freedom to the captive often proves the most effective of motivators. Songs would reverberate through shower times, especially from those soon to depart, sometimes to the tune of seasonal melodies such as *Jingle Bells*: 'Home at last I go, alas I cannot stay, on the train I go, laughing all the way, lots of friends to see, and lots of things to do, going home at last now boys, cheerio bye bye, toodle-oo.' The songs breathed a community spirit into the place, but were simultaneously bittersweet. It was a melancholic twinge felt most brutally by those – like Dad – who wouldn't be going home for Christmas that year. Other songs made light of the tedium of their confinement: 'Tis true, I've found life boring here, I miss the chip shop and the beer' (to the tune of Engelbert Humperdinck's 'Please Release Me'). The yearning for autonomy was the fire that drove them. It was, after all, the very thing that put them all there in the first place – that anarchic desire to rebel

against the incarceration of the law itself. Liberty was the only thing that mattered. Pleasant enough though they were, nobody fancied an extra winter with their catholic captors if they could help it.

The inevitable question of the monks' true virtue was always at the forefront of dormitory discussions, especially over one of the 'brothers' in particular who used to watch the boys shower. But for the most part, there was nothing in it beyond the usual boyish banter (though Dad admits to the possibility of being 'too naive to notice'). The greater problem for Dad's concern was the promiscuity of fellow inmates. Spurning advances from incarcerated, sexually frustrated teenagers was a regular occurrence; these advances were to be avoided at all costs. The cult film *Scum* (1979) epitomised life in the sixties and seventies detention centres in Britain, especially reflecting the emergence of pseudo-homosexuality as a result of unquenched sexual desire. This was, both in film and reality, evident in even the most toughened and seemingly homophobic of inmates.

There were some seriously vicious people to contend with, in all shapes and sizes, from the slant-eyed, loose-hinged twitchers, to the more traditional tattoo-laden 'big bastards'. Dad learned to pick his fights wisely, avoid the out-and-out psychos and earn respect from the 'middleweights' by standing his ground. It was all about learning from other people's mistakes, latching onto the strong for sustenance until they had served their purpose; a kind of brutal Darwinian instinct to look after number one, the very same concept upon which capitalism thrives. It was, in all likelihood, his engrained psyche of profit and self-preservation that got him through his time there, translated from coin-scrounging into pure survival.

When freedom finally arrived, it didn't last too long. Reunited with the same old gang, public mischief was the first thing on the agenda, with thievery the most likely outlet. An overflowing post box at the Pier Head one Saturday evening proved too tempting to

refuse. But it proved to be a big red Victorian fly trap as two navy nightstick-wielding giants appeared from nowhere. Immediately, three of the quintet fled the scene. Stranded, Dad and old accomplice Louie decided to hedge their bets and walk straight towards the officers as though completely innocent. Awful strategy. When it got to court, the policemen's testimonies were given to the jury in isolation, but one of them embellished his account. When asked how the suspects had been apprehended, the second had said, 'Well, they ran away as soon as they saw us. Edwards was a nippy little one, but I got him!' Despite the conflicting details of the arrest, they were found guilty. Dad was riled at the sense of injustice (despite the fact that he *was* guilty), an event that, even to this day, colours his view of the judicial system. The pompous phrasing of the charge: 'Larceny of her Majesty's mail, property of the postmaster general' is also something he felt didn't match up to the reality; making them out to be treasonous villains as if they had stolen from the Crown Jewells treasury itself. But for Dad, by far the most grating element of the affair was the fact that the jury believed he had been 'caught' by the mendacious policeman. Had it gone down to a race, he certainly believed there was no chance he would ever be beaten by any mere policeman (as a Championship of Berkshire Cross Country trophy would testify): 'Nippy? I was superman. They'd never have caught me.'

The punishment was six months in a detention centre; a full youth prison in Derbyshire called Foston Hall. An intimidating atmosphere. Though it was possible to stay out of trouble if you really wanted to, the unpredictable air of tension always lingered amongst this strange concoction of young men, bundled together at the peak of their youth. A peculiar lottery of the unfortunate, the greedy, and the potentially psychotic. It was inevitably the latter that would cause the greatest sense of unease. An inmate could never know when something would flare up. At any moment, one of the quiet ones might break out of their cocoon and unleash their years of pent-up aggression. You could never tell. One lunchtime,

Dad recalls the inmates in his block standing to attention outside the dining hall. As one of the screws walked past, one of the lads – for no apparent reason – broke ranks and swung a brick straight into the screw’s face before immediately resuming his place in the line. As if nothing had happened. An eerie silence soundtracked the spattered blood and broken tooth bits splayed across the wooden floor panels. The face-wrecked officer crawled away in retreat, groaning. He had made the mistake of walking his own corridor without a chaperone.

These moments may have been rare, but when they happened, you remembered it, lest you get too relaxed. But it wasn’t all fear and anxiety; the community spirit was still at work within the main corpus of the inmates. Shortly after arriving at the Detention Centre Dad was soon introduced to a stream of newly rewritten shower songs (a seemingly recurrent theme for reformatories) including one which re-jigged the lyrics to ‘House of the Rising Sun’ by The Animals: ‘There is a house in Derbyshire, they call it Foston Hall, /It’s been the ruin of many a poor boy, /And God I’ve known, I’m one’. A shorter prison sentence it may have been, but it was far tougher than Approved School. No football, no day trips, endless gruel meals. Inmates spent most of their time in cells, allowed out only when working. And ‘working’ at Foston Hall wasn’t about learning a trade. Here it meant cold, hard, often meaningless labour, of the Sisyphus variety. The kind of labour that might make you want to smash somebody’s teeth out with a brick.

But on arrival, Dad had got a stroke of luck. A space had opened up on reception, preparing the ‘homeless kits’ for departing prisoners. When it came to administrative jobs, criminals of the ‘mail larceny’ variety were always preferred ahead of those deemed too dangerous for social interaction. However, putting a mail larcener near any form of outgoing post was surely a logical absurdity. The ‘homeless kits’ consisted of a few essentials to help the ‘rehabilitated’ members on their way back to society; mainly toiletries like soap, pants, socks, toothpaste. He soon noticed that he was the last person to check each pack before it

went out. This set the profit cogs whirring again. It was a scam waiting to happen. Realistically, he knew he could only get away with pinching one item per pack (to safeguard against random spot checks); and this chosen item virtually chose itself: toothpaste. Inmates were not allowed real toothpaste; they were given tins of gritty pink-red tooth powder called Pepsodent. An unpopular product, to say the least. Residual dryness in the mouth, sterile taste, and the harsh impact of the Irium (an abrasive agent that felt as though it were wrenching the plaque away with a chisel); it was resented by all, seen as an additional daily punishment (one you had to inflict upon yourself). Small tubes of real, smooth, minty fresh toothpaste were a precious commodity. Bargaining chips. He would trade them for Mars Bars, cigarettes, and occasionally, kudos (though usually, he didn't like to be without something tangible). His clientele would stash the tubes in divots carved into their bedposts. A tight operation.

It was a flourishing business (well, as flourishing as a business can be for an incarcerated sixteen year-old). But eventually he was found out. In a random cell check on one of the wings, a bed leg divot failed to do its job and a solitary tube dropped out onto the shiny black boot of one of the guards. The perpetrator, an African guy called Smeda, was ruthlessly interrogated. Dad knew it wouldn't be long before the game was up. Smeda tried to hold out (grassing, after all, was the cardinal sin), but the threat of being sent to Borstal was as terrifying as anything a Philomena nun could conjure up. Borstal was the place they sent 'the real nutters', where a brick in the face was getting off lightly. Even the very word, 'Borstal', so staunch, so unforgiving in its syllables, sounded menacing. In their minds it was the fabled place-of-no-return. A dark, petrifying lair where, not dragons but razor-wielding psychopaths laid in wait. Unsurprisingly, Smeda grassed. Dad avoided Borstal but was moved to Foston Hall's punishment block for the remainder of his sentence.

Alone with his thoughts, like the long distance runner, Dad spent solitary workdays lifting concrete blocks and mixing cement. Each day was dull and draining, beginning with a wake-up call at quarter to five. As soon as the guard entered the room for morning inspection, he was required to be jogging on the spot next to his bed. Knees-up, no excuses. It was tough, but character-building. He became further channelled down the path of self-dependence; an attitude that would be his personal preacher for life. *He* would overcome it, *he* would get through it, and *he* didn't need anybody else. But jarring with his own maverick world-view was the influence of a wise old man, a janitor who used to sweep the floors outside his cell. How janitors manage to acquire such sage-like wisdom and remain contented janitors is one of those unfathomable mysteries, but he was one of them, nudging out his two-cents with quiet dignity wherever there were ears to hear. He would recite a poem to Dad specifically, whenever he came past the door, over and over again until it was drummed into his head. It was called 'The Aristocrat' (by G.K. Chesterton). It spoke of the veiled ambitions of an exterior force in the world to which Dad – philosophically speaking – had been wholly ignorant: evil. It collided with his own system, which held that every action, every outcome, every high, and every low, was solely dependent on the will of the individual. Looking around his dusty, decrepit cell – the very place his sovereign will had supposedly led him – he would begin to ponder those subtle forces that lay beyond the trappings of self: 'The Devil is a Gentleman, and asks you down to stay, at his little place called What'sitsname (it isn't far away).' Dad would also recite that poem to me in my early teens, keen to pass on the legacy of that long-dead janitor. Like all fathers with all sons, perhaps he wanted to save me from himself.

His own father, a tough disciplinarian with the same entrepreneur spirit, would soon be re-exerting his own influence on his wayward son. Out of gaol for the second time, Dad was determined to steer clear of trouble. Nobody likes the loss of freedom, but to a young

man intent on shaping his own destiny and overcoming all obstacles, this loss is felt to an even greater degree. No more crime, no more messing around, he needed a job, like real people. His father's cab business was, by this point, booming. 'Reliance Taxis' had expanded to include bus routes to the workers on the outskirts of Liverpool and fast became 'Reliance Coaches'. He decided to give Dad a chance. At the age of sixteen, without a hint of a licence, he was driving fifty-two seater coaches as far as Manchester and back on a regular basis. But this was no cushy job. If anything, his father was a harder taskmaster than any of the guards at Foston Hall. He worked long hours for below-average pay, and would often be forced up at four in the morning to clean the vomit off the coach from the previous night's journey. His dad was unreasonable, inarguable, and closed to any suggestions that were at odds with his own perspective. These included claims from Dad that he was being conned by some of the other drivers who used to keep back portions of the bus fares for themselves. Dad could tell a scammer, and was frustrated to see his own father swindled in front of his eyes.

But though infuriating in his stubbornness, his father seemed to know what he was doing. Soon enough, Reliance Coaches grew to become the third largest bus service on Merseyside. It had regular contracts around the city, including one for the famous 'Hilda Fallon Road Show', a travelling talent show for children, on national television at the time. He even had specially commissioned bus stops for the outskirt routes. Business was bright and beaming, so much so that he purchased a fleet of new coaches on equity to cope with the excessive demand. Soon enough, Hertz Cars came knocking and offered him a substantial sum to buy out the business. But he turned them down, believing that with enough enterprising and graft, he could eventually become number one in the city. The little *hubris* Devil had led him down to What'sitsname quietly and without fuss (like a true gentleman). With his eyes fixed firmly on the road, he failed to take a sideways glance at the seemingly irrelevant political scene in the nation at the time. Within weeks of rejecting Hertz's generous

offer, Labour were voted in and immediately nationalised all local bus services, rendering any private enterprise redundant. He was given six months to get out, with no compensation. Just as his son had been told when trying to flog housekeeping magazines, the third largest bus service in Liverpool was suddenly 'not worth a balloon'. He was declared bankrupt after the risky coach purchases, still unpaid-for, and subsequently blacklisted for life. After seven years of scrupulous building, his cherished business became a bomby overnight. He went back to being a cab driver, and stayed one for the next forty years. He would never borrow money or start another business again.

The hurt of seeing his father castrated of his natural entrepreneurial spirit was difficult to take, and an ensuing resentment against the political perpetrators ran deep. The way Dad saw it, socialism had ruined the man who started with nothing and built himself up; the hard-working were penalised and help was given to those who didn't want to help themselves. Before then, Dad had never even blinked in the direction of politics, but there was no question where his vote would be going from then on for the rest of his working life. Blood would prove thicker than ballot slips.

The Missing Milkmen of Aladdin's Cave

A month shy of his seventeenth birthday, Dad was officially kicked out of the nest. In a sense, he had already left of his own accord, many times. But Mam wanted to make it official, since there was no space in the new (significantly downsized) house on Sheil Road. And she made it clear that he wouldn't be allowed back, no matter what he got himself into. It was a move that brought the brothers back together again, if only temporarily. Tony had a flat in Newsham Park, something of a posh area at the time, and welcomed someone to halve his rent. They had the penthouse flat in a large apartment block, and Tony got him a job at the Co-Op Dairy, working on the forklifts in the warehouse. Jobs were scarce at the time, so the manager could afford to be unreasonably strict. Long early morning hours where steady concentration was the arbiter between a man and his paycheque. Whilst loading the crates onto the trucks, if a worker broke their bottles more than once, they immediately got the sack. The two-strike system. In a sense, it felt like a prison. Warehouse walls slowly sapped the mornings away under the watchful gaze of the uncompromising warden. No scope for creativity or intuition; just follow the formula as you are told – *exactly* as you are told – until home time. Dad was envious of the freedom Tony had, working on the milk floats; his own boss. For Tony, an accomplished house burglar still very much up to his old tricks, it was something of a dream job. The beautiful thing about it for him was not so much the freedom it afforded, but the fact that house owners would regularly leave a helpful note letting him know when they were going to be away, and for how long. Priceless research. And the incredible thing was that he got wages, too. He was effectively being paid to rob houses. It was the most lucrative milk round in all of Liverpool.

Tony would bring his loot back to the flat to stash it away, selling off bits here and there, but for most of the time the place was overflowing with stolen property. Televisions stacked on top of one another, tables full of antiques, hooks wrapped with necklaces, buckets of broaches. A trove of plunder. Dad was determined to stay out of the burglary game but he didn't mind acquiring some of the already-stolen goods from Tony. They used to trade over games of pinball at Capaldi's, a thriving working men's cafe run by an Italian family around the corner from the flat. Most of their time away from work was spent there, bartering shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the glass-sealed world of ramps, bells, buzzers, bumpers and multi-balls. Dad had always had a bit of a love affair with pinball. The chaotic frenzy of motion, the vibrancy of the flashing lights, the varied uncertain path of the metallic sphere. He liked to preside over this erratic city, relishing in the tension of spontaneity and intent. The deftness of two index fingers was the only wilful force to determine the ball's fate; a deity battling in sovereignty over his reckless creation. Any spare money he had would usually go towards perfecting his flipper technique, learning the most profitable bonus zones, and perpetually seeking to push his hi-score to new limits. Mr. Capaldi himself used to award the highest pinball score of the week with a free breakfast (which, more often than not, went to Dad). He was the best there, and he knew it too; the self-proclaimed 'Pinball Wizard of Capaldi's', something that would bug Tony incessantly.

The Cain instinct was, to an extent, prevalent in both brothers, but it was pinball that seemed to bring it out in Tony. A steadfast determination to exert every minute of his extra eighteen months on planet earth would draw him into a mindless whirl of betting against his little brother. He was as stubborn as Dad was arrogant, which only fuelled the self-defeating frenzy. At first Dad only had a bit of spare cash to put on the table, which he was more than happy to risk. Since he tended to win the vast majority, he soon accumulated a small stash of his own; a few stereos, some jewellery, old watches, and even a few antiquated coins. This

could have been the moment where Dad made his first steps into the antiques trade he would later learn to master. But it wasn't. The flippers of fate had something else in mind.

One evening, he and Tony had been drinking in the Grafton Pub, another of their regular haunts. Dad went home early and got to the flat to find a police van outside, with policemen streaming in and out of the building clutching various electrical and household items that he soon recognised as their own. The treasure trove had been discovered. Walking towards it, one officer locked eyes and stared at him all the way down the road. Jangling nerves piped up as he sensed his beloved freedom withering away under the cold light of exposure. He had to continue walking with no deviation, showing no signs of guilt; the penetrating eyes were getting closer with every step. Absolutely no idea what to do; couldn't go home, couldn't turn around, and certainly couldn't walk through the flood of officers on his path. He walked right up to the officer, then at the last moment took a left into the flats next door; a split second decision with no follow-up plan. Fortunately, there was a porch at the front entrance where he could wait. But he couldn't stay long. Within a few minutes one of the residents appeared from upstairs, casting a look of silent distrust at his skulking neighbour. Dad picked up the foyer payphone and pretended to be having a conversation about the Liverpool game the night before. The man walked out through the porch and turned left towards the crime scene. As he did so, Dad came out a few paces behind and walked back in the opposite direction, hoping the suspicious policeman's eyes were now preoccupied.

The fear of being halted by a siren or a nightstick at any moment made each footstep a painstaking marathon, as though he had to learn how to walk all over again. He'd confidently sauntered down that street hundreds of times before, but at that moment it became utterly alien and oppressive. A mythical metropolis formed itself from the increasingly unfamiliar objects that surrounded him. Lampposts leered with sardonic malice, traffic lights became spies communicating with code to his pursuers, and each paving slab threatened to open up a

trap door to the world below. He held out to the corner, where his feet immediately snapped out of their shackled reverie, sprinting back to the Grafton faster than he had ever run in his life. Approaching Tony's table, he took him to one side and delivered four nauseating words: 'We're on the run.' In an instant, they had nothing to their name except for what they stood up in.

Home was a no-go zone, so they had to stay on the move, sleeping rough for weeks. Accommodation was whatever they could find without being found. Sheds, bombedies, back gardens, churches, public toilets. The best night's sleep they had was breaking into a church hall where they dragged the curtains down from the high-windowed walls and wrapped themselves up in them as duvets. It was a frightening time for both of them, but simultaneously exhilarating; and they had to depend on one another to avoid being caught. They were officially 'wanted' now, after all. This was a fact they had learned when picking up the Liverpool Echo one morning to find the incident had made front page news, with the headline: 'Aladdin's Cave Discovered in Newsham Park' (something they were rather proud of). Stealing from shops and fruit markets tided them over for a while; a regular source also stemmed from the bottles of milk that lay dormant and unguarded on front doorsteps in the early hours of the morning. They had been delivered by the same dairy the two of them had abandoned.

But exciting though it was, the romance of being on the run began to wear off as the Liverpool winter set in. They knew they wouldn't last much longer, and that if they split up, there was less chance of being caught. Upon doing so, they both agreed to a pact that whoever got caught first would take the rap for both of them. That way whoever lasted out the longest would be free rather than the blame being shared. Survival-of-the-fittest, indeed. Dad got a job in a pub, having lied about his age and previous barman experience. He set about starting life again, sick of the illusory freedom that went with being chased. Being on

the run meant he was never fully in control of his next move, something which warred against his very nature. Whenever a police car drove past, his pulse would jolt as the incessant fear of recognition set in. One night, walking up Kensington Street from town, those ominous blue lights – unsettlingly similar to those on the pinball machine – slowed towards him. The window wound down steadily and out of it barked that most unsettling of enquiries: ‘Who are you?’ No time to ponder the philosophical implications (that would come later); he had to react with whatever his mind threw up: ‘I’m John Gosling.’ ‘Where do you live?’ ‘Sheil Road’. ‘I don’t believe you’. ‘You can give me a lift home if you want...’ ‘Get lost, you cheeky git!’ The blue lights of the law were driven away. Salvation through audacity.

Tony, however, wasn’t quite so adept at avoiding arrest. Six weeks after the ‘rap pact’ had been made he got caught burgling a house in Kirby; and true to his word, he accepted full responsibility for ‘Aladdin’s Cave’ (a fact he likes to remind Dad of to this day). With the pressure eased, Dad knew he needed a new start to escape the ever-nagging lure of petty crime. For all the exhilaration it brought, it was never truly a *real* life. Tony’s eighteen month sentence struck that truth home. The same amount of months that separated them as brothers, Tony was about to lose. And with it, a shift in balance was to occur. Tony never managed to conquer that urge to take what wasn’t his. Even today, in his sixties, he sits in prison cells for the same kinds of jobs he was doing back then. Two degrees, in Philosophy and English (both gained on the inside), seemed to do him no good. Whatever he set his mind to doing – including an attempted novel about the Black Plague – the big house always called him home in the end. Tony’s perpetual demise and lifelong institutionalisation would be an enduring lesson for his little brother: the art of knowing when to stop.

Dad knew he had to leave Liverpool if he was going to avoid a similar fate. He got together with Louie – his former mail larcener accomplice – and boarded the Birkenhead

ferry to the Isle of Man. Not quite the land of hope and glory, but it was as detached a place as they could get to on a minimal budget. Arriving in Douglas, they approached the first hotel they saw and rather than asking for a room, they changed their mind and asked for a job instead. This was the first time either had ever set foot in a hotel in their lives, but they somehow managed to spin a story of having been fully trained silver service waiters at the Adelphi Hotel back in Liverpool. The repute of the Adelphi at the time was akin to the Ritz, so their honorary expertise was enthusiastically snapped up by the owner looking for staff for the upcoming holiday season. By the time they met the other waiting staff, they already carried the reputation as ‘the Adelphi boys’ as though they would be able to teach the rest a thing or two. Fortunately for them, the hotel wasn’t opening for season for another ten days, in which time they managed to befriend two Irish brothers – the Kellys – and convince them to teach them the ropes on the sly. The Kellys were shocked at how these two scousers had blagged their way in, but nonetheless admired their cheek. They picked up silver service soon enough, and were able to maintain their ‘Adelphi’ reputation to the rest of the staff, who continued to view everything they did in a better light due to their perceived pedigree. Five weeks later, Dad was promoted to Head Waiter on account of being ‘the most qualified’ of all the staff, and was given a special blue jacket in which to distinguish him from his ‘inferiors’ (much to the Kellys’ indignation).

Before long, he was promoted again, to evening bar manager. This was a far easier and better paid job, with the potential scope for extra profit. The nameless owner was a short Jewish man who liked to frighten his staff with an air of dangerous secrecy. He seemed determined, above all, not to be hoodwinked by anyone, least of all his own staff. Nobody knew what he actually did, just that he was on the run from Canada and would frequently imply some sort of gangster connection (and nobody dared ask about the details). Upon Dad’s promotion, he was ushered into the hallowed territory of the man’s office, where he

opened up his safe to show him its contents (a far easier entry than in his previous encounters with safes). Inside was a large wad of banknotes and a handgun. He pulled it out and let Dad clutch it for a few moments; he was struck by the incredible sense of power he felt with this single object in his grasp, wielding the ability to take a life in an instant. He was also handed a wad of money to caress, accompanied by a phrase Dad has never forgotten: 'This is more money than you will ever see in your life' (perhaps it spurred him on). Once the peacock display of intimidation was complete, the man showed Dad around the bar he would be working on, and added a severe warning: 'I know where you're from, I know what your kind get up to, and I'm telling you now, there's no way you can fiddle this bar, so don't even try it, ok? I've got *every* angle covered.' It was the stupidest thing he could have said; red-rag-to-bull stupid. Immediately, the scamming instincts in Dad's psyche were re-awoken and his determination to find that elusive loophole in the *unbeatable* system became a primary concern.

After a day or so on the bar, he had already clocked a handful of angles. The most profitable of these revolved around a familiar old friend: the glass bottle. The hotel sold small bottles of Schweppes mixers; lemonade, cola or fruit juice, which cost a shilling each. But at the same bar, they also sold large two litre plastic bottles of pop for kids, costing one-and-six. Again, it was perception that played the significant role. Once he had sold a few of the small mixers, he would keep the bottles, wash them out and refill them with the cheap stuff, clicking the caps back on. Once mixed, nobody could tell the difference. The sight of the Schweppes bottle being opened gave them the illusory assurance that they were paying for quality, and their psychosomatic palate did the rest. For every mixer he sold he could pocket the shilling, keep the bottle again, and repeat the process. By the end of a week, he could make a small fortune in extra shillings, sometimes almost doubling his own wages. He would use some of his profit to pay for the big bottles, so it never showed up at the weekly stock-

take. He outsmarted the man who had a gun in his safe. And he never found out about the Adelphi, either.

Hotel jobs being seasonal, he left the Isle of Man the following winter. His next stop was London, where he floated around various restaurant jobs before making his way to another of Britain's surrounding islands: Jersey. It was here that his pursuit of coins would begin an ascent to greater heights than he could ever have imagined. Ten years later, a double-page spread in the New York Times would read: 'Come and Meet David Edwards, Europe's Foremost Antiques Dealer.'

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