

Scrumping

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“Stop” he bellowed. He was a lot closer since he last shouted it, so I realised he must have been gaining on me. Of course, I didn’t stop; my little legs speeded up until they were pumping like pistons as I headed for the second wall. If I could get over that, then another field and the third wall, I’d be safe. A bit ambitious in retrospect!

I reached the wall. It was very high, with no real footholds. I was sizing up which to use to scramble up and over when I felt a large hand grabbing me by the collar. I was done for. He hauled me back towards the scene of the crime. He may have been a PE master; fit, tall, mid to late 20s I suppose.

It was 1950; I was 12. We lived on a newish estate on the outskirts of town. Estates had been thrown up in the postwar rush to provide homes for all the servicemen and women returning from the war.

It was a beautiful autumn evening. We were in a fairly high latitude (55N) where in midsummer it stays light until at least 11 pm. I suppose that on this evening, sunset would be about 9.30. It was now about 8 pm.

I normally would be with my close friends during the evenings, all neighbours and all my age, but this evening none of those was available and for some strange reason I fell in with a group of three older boys from another part of the estate. I knew them vaguely by sight. They were rougher than we were and aged 13 to 15.

We were kicking our heels looking for something to do when one bright spark suggested we go to Oakbank for some scrumping. Oakbank had a very attractive orchard, currently full of laden apple trees. “Scrumping” means stealing apples from other people’s trees.

Oakbank was a mysterious place, not far from where I lived but very secluded. It had been a stately home and was situated in its own very large grounds. It was separated from us by two fields, which meant three walls. The walls were almost works of art, obviously built by craftsmen in years gone by. They were at least six feet high, made from odd shaped pieces of granite all cemented together with black mortar. They were a credit to their builders.

We never really knew what Oakbank was. All we knew was that it was a government facility; that a lot of adolescent boys lived there; that they never left the premises and kept themselves very aloof from the townspeople. It was some kind of correctional establishment, not exactly a Borstal but not, at the other end of the scale, a normal boarding school. All I can surmise is that it was on the spectrum between the two, a kind of place where boys who were found to be troublemakers were sent for some kind of re-education.

To tell the truth, I was scared of the place, so it was with some trepidation, and after a lot of belittling name calling from the others mainly impugning my masculinity, that I reluctantly agreed to join the older boys.

To get there, we had to climb the first wall, cross the first field, climb the second wall, cross the second field then climb the third wall into the grounds and thus get to the orchard.

This we did, with me definitely bringing up the rear. We got to the third wall, Oakbank’s boundary, and half climbed the wall to peek over the top to suss the place out.

All appeared to be quiet and peaceful, so one after the other, me last, we dropped over the wall and into the grounds. We were now trespassing, but the apples looked great. We started picking, and filling our jumpers with gorgeous fruit, gnawing on one each as we did it.

Then suddenly all hell broke loose. The inmates must have seen us coming and taken up position in the shrubbery. There must have been 50 of them, all haring towards us; all baying for our blood. We dropped all the apples and tore off in the reverse direction.

Over the first wall and into the field. I was at a big disadvantage here; the other boys were bigger than me and they made much greater speed. This is where I was caught.

I must say that the master who caught me was decent, to some degree at least. He was semi polite and not rough as he hauled me back to the orchard. He made me climb the wall and I dropped into really enemy territory; 50 recalcitrants all wanting to tear me apart.

The master called for silence. "OK boys, shall we call the police or get him to fight?". "Call the Police, call the Police" roared 50 ugly, malevolent voices in unison! I shrank into a ball.

The master addressed me. "Which do you want, the Police or three rounds in a boxing ring?" I'd never boxed in a ring before, but I'd never, ever, had any dealings with the police and hated the thought of it. So I signified my agreement to box.

They formed a square. The master brought two pairs of boxing gloves, gave one to me and one to a boy roughly my size.

When we were ready, he blew a whistle and hostilities commenced. Fortunately, despite my smallish size, I was not bad with my fists and had a mean left hook. I made mincemeat of him.

Then came the first unfair bit. For Round 2, another boy took the gloves from Boy 1 and was put in the ring against me. I suppose I held my own but I certainly didn't win that round.

Then more unfairness; the gloves were given back to Boy 1 for Round 3. Needless to say, he'd had the opportunity to get his breath back and also to study my technique. And work up a lot of hostility after his ignominious public drubbing. He repaid the mincemeat with interest!

At the end of it all, the rotters still wanted the master to call the Police, but he struck by his bargain.

He told the inmates to stay in the grounds and climbed over the wall with me.

Instead of walking across the field as we had done before, we walked down the field to where the country road bounded the field. No words were spoken as he and I got to the wall and I climbed over, dropping about 8 feet to the roadway.

Now finished with them and free, my last act of defiance took the form of my cupping my hands to my mouth and shouting "**You bloody bugger**" up at him, this being the worst epithet I knew. He glared down at me then turned back towards Oakbank.

Then I tore off in the direction of home. I didn't say a word to my parents to explain the cuts and bruises, and the nascent black eye. And, wisely, they didn't ask!

I don't think I encountered my three temporary companions ever again. And I stopped scrumping for ever!