

# Runs in the family

It was on his way to school that Tom decided to run away. He didn't plan it; just knew it had to be done.

At the corner of his road he met up with his mate, Luke. They never bothered to greet each other but just got straight into important things—like “Jenny’s dumped Max again.” or “ I see City got beat last night?”

This morning Luke said:

*“I heard up the road last night they’re after you Tommo. What you done this time?”*

*“Nothing.”*

*“Bryan says Shaun’s going round saying you grassed him up in French yesterday. Says it was you who put gum in Jenny’s hair.”*

Tom had had fights with Shaun before. And others. His Dad always said just stick up for yourself, learn to fight your own battles Tom. Just make sure you get your punch in first: most of them will run away after that ‘cos they’re all mouth. Dad was right—they did run away. But they always came back with friends. Every time Shaun wanted a fight, a circle of his mates gathered round and put the boot in. Tom was not a coward but he was scared of these groups, especially the older boys who hung round with Shaun.

Last time Tom told his Dad about these boys, Dad was so angry he went round and threatened one of their fathers. Tom was scared his Dad would have another heart attack. He'd had chest pains last time Tom had told him about a fight and Tom felt guilty. Suppose he made his Dad die?

So he planned to run away.

Tom never said much on the way to school so Luke was used to his silence. Tom needed to think anyway. What he'd do is go in with Luke into the canteen and get a bacon roll. And a Mars Bar. Then when Luke went to register with his tutor group he'd walk straight out the gates. Then even Luke would think he was in school.

As soon as Luke had gone into his tutor room, Tom left school with his hoodie over his head. He already knew where to go where they wouldn't look. Most people who bunked off school went to 'The City'—a group of old brick buildings with all the windows long gone. But you never knew who you'd meet up there. Could be a weirdo.

So Tom went up to the pig farm. He was in a hurry. It was cold today and it was good to get up a bit of heat. He hadn't really planned this but anything was better than Miss Franks in French. "Très bien, Rachel". And Shaun would soon find out he wasn't in school anyway.

Up in the pig field the mud had spread like solid ripples around the feeding troughs. There was no grass left and nowhere dry to sit. Tom turned back and looked out over the city. Now that he was on the hillside the wind went right through his hoodie so Tom crawled inside

a pig house. He sat hunched for a while, knees up and nose buried between his knees.

Time for thinking.

As Tom thought, he got angry. Angry about Shaun, angry about Miss Franks, angry about school—couldn't they see he needed help with reading? Angry with all the hangers on who couldn't keep out of fights. Dad said it was tribal. If you had two of them having a fight, within minutes there would be dozens of them on each side. None of them would have a clue what it was all about.

Then Tom got angry with himself ... useless thicket, reading's supposed to be normal. And why was he smaller than all his friends?

Tom got quite hot getting worked up. He could feel his face red. Just like Dad. Then Tom's anger switched to his Dad. Why couldn't he stop smoking if he's got a bad heart? Why was he out every evening? Why couldn't he listen? Why did he always have to get so stressy?

When Tom calmed down, he felt cold. The wind zipped straight down the pig house. It was only a giant tin can anyway and the wind on the metal roof made thrumming noises.

Tom looked out. The next pig house was at right angles to his—better shelter. He ran doubled up, like they do near helicopters. He saw a rat. He hunched up inside the new shelter. It was better, less wind. But it was noisier because the wind blew across the mouth and howled. Tom hoped it wouldn't do it at night.

Night! For the first time Tom realised he hadn't thought beyond today. He tried to reach into his pocket. His cigarettes and lighter were in his trousers. He had to stand up to get at them. He had to go outside to stand up. Stupid pig house. Tom kicked it. Dong! Three pigs looked round. Stupid pigs.

***“Mind your own business, pigs!”***

He lit up. He'd smoked since he was ten. Then he got out his mobile from his hoodie and checked the time. What? Only 11.28?

*“Put your mobile away, Tommy.” “If I see it again, Tom, I'll confiscate it.”* He mimicked teachers.

For most of the rest of the day Tom played games on his mobile. Luke texted him:

**where r u tommo?**

Sent at 11.10: break time. Tom half wished he was back in school.

Text from his sister Kim:

**y r u not in school? mum dad will be v  
angry. shaun not in 2day.**

Well, at least two people had missed him. But Kim was a stirrer and she'd tell Dad.

By 3 o'clock Tom felt rough. He was cold. He'd no food or drink and he had only one cigarette left. Then he felt something soft move by his hand. A rat. As he moved his hand, Tom felt a sharp jab in his thumb. It had bitten him! Just his luck! Now he'll probably die. Rabies most likely.

Tom's teachers called him strong-minded in his reports. They meant stubborn. "Tommy should aim to develop his negotiation skills." "Too often Tommy backs himself into a corner." Well they were probably right but now wasn't the time to change. He was staying put.

Then his phone rang. It made him jump.

Tom had not meant to leave it switched on. He was scared he might give in and answer it. It rang and rang and rang. So he switched it off.

The daylight started to fade. Why are days so short in winter?

Then it went dark suddenly. A pig blocked the sky and started to come into Tom's shelter. Then to his relief it went out again.

***"Bacon!"***

As it went dark, he checked his messages. The screen was nice and bright. Friendly.

12.35:

**U OK? Rachel.**

Wow! Rachel! Tom never expected her to get in touch. How did she get his number?

13.28:

**Tom Kim says you are not in school. Why not? Where are you? Get yourself home. Like now! Dad.**

13.41:

**Hey Tom. Why don't u answer? Has Rachel rung u? She says she fancies u! Ring me.**

(That was Luke's number).

Voice messages:

14.17:

*"Tom, its Luke. I've skipped assembly. Your Dad's in school and he's not happy. He's blaming the school for not ringing him at the start of school. Mr Webb's called the Police in. Your Dad's worried about you. He's been out looking. I've told him I'll come out with him to find you. By the way, Shaun's not in today but the twins are looking for you."*

14.35:

*"Tom, this is your last chance to come home on your own. If we have to come and get you're in trouble, big time, so get your... ."*

Typical Dad, thought Tom. Oh no! The battery's empty!

No watch and mobile not working. Tom sat in the dark. He was incredibly stiff and he had the shakes. He was starving and beginning to feel ill. Was this the rat bite?

With nothing to do, Tom went to sleep. When he woke up, he felt something warm and heavy next to him. Dad? Then Tom remembered where he was. Pig! It's a pig—could have attacked him! He tried to move but his knees seemed locked and one foot was dead. He rolled out into the open air. Then he cried out—his foot was coming back to life.

Tom started to think about his Dad. He suddenly realised he did actually care more about the risk of his Dad dying than about getting into trouble—big time.

He headed home.

He felt really unwell but he forced himself to keep walking. He stumbled in the ruts, hoping he didn't walk into any sleeping pigs. Or rats!

As Tom entered the town, he heard a yell.

***“Hey! Tommo!”***

That big shape could only be Luke, great lump. Tom stood where he was and waited. Good old Luke. He was so overweight he could hardly

run—but he was trying. When he arrived he was so puffed out and Tom so weak that they propped each other up.

*“I’ll come in with you, Tom”*

*“Thanks.”*

*“What’s the time?”*

*“Dunno, Luke.”*

*“You got a fag?”*

*“One left.”*

*“Let’s share it.”*

Tom’s house had a police car outside. And two policemen inside. Having Luke with him as well, Tom felt protected from Mum and Dad’s anger.

It was 11.30 pm.

Dad looked ill; too ill to be violent.

He gave Tom a hug. A long hug. It was the first he had ever had.

*“Glad you’re back, Tommy. We were worried. You look terrible.”*



*“So do you, Dad.”*

*“Hey! I’ve told you. No smoking for you in this house.”*

*“You do.”*

*Fair dos, Tom. I’ll do a deal with you.”*

*“What”*

*“We’ll give up smoking together.”*

*“You’ll never manage it, Dad. You’ve given up at least once a year.”*

*“Yeah, but this time I’ll have a right stubborn little whatsit watching me. And he won’t let me get away with anything.”*

*“Who’s that?”*

*“You Tommy,”* said Mum.

In the morning Tom woke up at 11.40. It was another first. First time he’d been allowed a lie in. And he was allowed to stay off school. So was Luke—he’d not got home until just after midnight. His mum had thought he was in big trouble when the policeman rang the doorbell.

Later in the day Tom saw his doctor and had a jab because of the rat bite. Then he had a meeting with his Head of Year and Shaun to sort

things out so he could go back into school. His Dad tried suggesting he had another day off school but Tom insisted he was OK. He wanted to see Rachel.

After the meeting, Tom's Dad said:

*"Let's celebrate you being back, Tommy. We'll eat out. Where do you want to go?"*

*"What, with Mum and Kim?"*

*"No, son. Just you and me."*

*"McDonalds"*

*"Don't you want a steak or something?"*

*"No. McDonalds."*

Tom had a special reason for choosing McDonalds. There were other kids from school there, other kids from his street. So they all saw Tommy come in—with his Dad.