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Opening extract from

Half Bad

Written by

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the trick

There's these two kids, boys, sitting close together, squished in by the big arms of an old chair. You're the one on the left.

The other boy's warm to lean close to and he moves his gaze from the telly to you, sort of in slow motion.

'You enjoying it?' he asks.

You nod. He puts his arm round you and turns back to the screen.

Afterwards you both want to try the thing in the film. You sneak the big box of matches from the kitchen drawer and run with them to the woods.

You go first. You light the match and hold it between your thumb and forefinger, letting it burn right down until it goes out. Your fingers are burnt but they hold the blackened match.

The trick works.

The other boy tries it too. Only he doesn't do it. He drops the match.

Then you wake up and remember where you are.

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press-ups

The routine is OK.

Waking up to sky and air is OK. Waking up to the cage and the shackles is what it is. You can't let the cage get to you. The shackles rub but healing is quick and easy, so what's to mind?

The cage is loads better now that the sheepskins are in. Even when they're damp they're warm. The tarpaulin over the north end was a big improvement too. There's shelter from the worst of the wind and rain. And a bit of shade if it's hot and sunny. Joke! You've got to keep your sense of humour.

So the routine is to wake up as the sky lightens before dawn. You don't have to move a muscle, don't even have to open your eyes to know it's getting light; you can just lie there and take it all in.

The best bit of the day.

There aren't many birds around, a few, not many. It would be good to know all their names but you know their different calls. There are no seagulls, which is something to think about, and there are no vapour trails either. The wind

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is usually quiet in the pre-dawn calm, and somehow the air feels warmer already as it begins to get light.

You can open your eyes now and there's a few minutes to savour the sunrise, which today is a thin pink line stretching along the top of a narrow ribbon of cloud draped over the smudged green hills. And you've still got a minute, maybe even two, to get your head together before she appears.

You've got to have a plan, though, and the best idea is to have it all worked out the night before so you can slip straight into it without a thought. Mostly the plan is to do what you're told, but not every day, and not today.

You wait until she appears and throws you the keys. You catch the keys, unlock your ankles, rub them to emphasize the pain she is inflicting, unlock your left manacle, unlock your right, stand, unlock the cage door, toss the keys back to her, open the cage door, step out – keeping your head down, never look her in the eyes (unless that's part of some other plan) – rub your back and maybe groan a bit, walk to the vegetable bed, piss.

Sometimes she tries to mess with your head, of course, by changing the routine. Sometimes she wants chores before exercises but most days it's press-ups first. You'll know which while still zipping up.

'Fifty.'

She says it quietly. She knows you're listening.

You take your time as usual. That's always part of the plan.

Make her wait.

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Rub your right arm. The metal wristband cuts into it when the shackle is on. You heal it and get a faint buzz. You roll your head, your shoulders, your head again and then stand there, just stand there for another second or two, pushing her to her limit, before you drop to the ground.

One	Not minding
Two	is the trick.
Three	The only
Four	trick.
Five	But there are
Six	loads of
Seven	tactics.
Eight	Loads.
Nine	On the look-out
Ten	all the time.
Eleven	All the time.
Twelve	And it's
Thirteen	easy.
Fourteen	Cos there ain't
Fifteen	nothing else
Sixteen	to do.
Seventeen	Look out for what?
Eighteen	Something.
Nineteen	Anything.
Twenty	N
Twenty-one	E
Twenty-two	Thing.
Twenty-three	A mistake.

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Twenty-four	A chance.
Twenty-five	An oversight.
Twenty-six	The
Twenty-seven	tiniest
Twenty-eight	error
Twenty-nine	by the
Thirty	White
Thirty-one	Witch
Thirty-two	from
Thirty-three	Hell.
Thirty-four	Cos she makes
Thirty-five	mistakes.
Thirty-six	Oh yes.
Thirty-seven	And if that mistake
Thirty-eight	comes to
Thirty-nine	nothing
Forty	you wait
Forty-one	for the next one
Forty-two	and the next one
Forty-three	and the next one.
Forty-four	Until
Forty-five	you
Forty-six	succeed.
Forty-seven	Until
Forty-eight	you're
Forty-nine	free.

You get up. She will have been counting but never letting up is another tactic.

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She doesn't say anything but steps towards you and backhands you across the face.

Fifty 'Fifty.'

After press-ups it's just standing and waiting. Best look at the ground. You're by the cage on the path. The path's muddy, but you won't be sweeping it, not today, not with this plan. It's rained a lot in the last few days. Autumn's coming on fast. Still, today it's not raining; already it's going well.

'Do the outer circuit.' Again she's quiet. No need to raise her voice.

And off you jog . . . but not yet. You've got to keep her thinking you're being your usual difficult-yet-basically-compliant self and so you knock mud off your boots, left boot-heel on right toe followed by right boot-heel on left toe. You raise a hand and look up and around as if you're assessing the wind direction, spit on the potato plants, look left and right like you're waiting for a gap in the traffic and . . . let the bus go past . . . and then you're off.

You take the dry-stone wall with a leap to the top and over, then across the moorland, heading to the trees.

Freedom.

As if!

But you've got the plan and you've learnt a lot in four months. The fastest that you've done the outer circuit for her is forty-five minutes. You can do it in less than that, forty maybe, cos you stop by the stream at the far end and rest

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and drink and listen and look and one time you managed to get to the ridge and see over to more hills, more trees and a loch (it might be a lake but something about the heather and the length of summer days says loch).

Today the plan is to speed up when you're out of sight. That's easy. Easy. The diet you're on is great. You have to give her some credit, cos you are super healthy, super fit. Meat, veg, more meat, more veg, and don't forget plenty of fresh air. Oh this is the life.

You're doing OK. Keeping up a good pace. Your top pace.

And you're buzzing, self-healing from her little slap; it's giving you a little buzz, buzz, buzz.

You're already at the far end, where you could cut back to do the inner circuit which is really half the outer circuit. But she didn't want the inner circuit and you were going to do the outer whatever she said.

That's got to be the fastest yet.

Then up to the ridge.

And let gravity take you down in long strides to the stream that leads to the loch.

Now it gets tricky. Now you are just outside the area of the circuit and soon you will be well outside it. She won't know that you've gone until you're late. That gives you twenty-five minutes from leaving the circuit – maybe thirty, maybe thirty-five, but call it twenty-five before she's after you.

But she's not the problem; the wristband is the problem. It will break open when you go too far. How it works,

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witchcraft or science or both, you don't know, but it will break open. She told you that on Day One and she told you the wristband contains a liquid, an acid. The liquid will be released if you stray too far and this liquid will burn right through your wrist.

'It'll take your hand off,' was how she put it.

Going downhill now. There's a click . . . and the burning starts.

But you've got the plan.

You stop and submerge your wrist in the stream. The stream hisses. The water helps, although it's a strange sort of gloopy, sticky potion and won't wash away easily. And more will come out. But you have to keep going.

You pad the band out with wet moss and peat. Dunk it under again. Stuff more padding in. It's taking too long. Get going.

Downhill.

Follow the stream.

The trick is not to mind about your wrist. Your legs feel fine. Covering lots of ground.

And anyway losing a hand isn't that bad. You can replace it with something good . . . a hook . . . or a three-pronged claw like the guy in *Enter The Dragon* . . . or maybe something with blades that can be retracted but when you fight, out they come, *ker-ching* . . . or flames even . . . no way are you going to have a fake hand, that's for sure . . . no way.

Your head's dizzy. Buzzing too, though. Your body is trying to heal your wrist. You never know, you might get

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out of this with two hands. Still, the trick is not to mind. Either way, you're out.

Got to stop. Douse it in the stream again, put some new peat in and get going.

Nearly at the loch.

Nearly.

Oh yes. Bloody cold.

You're too slow. Wading is slow but it's good to keep your arm in the water.

Just keep going.

Keep going.

It's a bloody big loch. But that's OK. The bigger the better. Means your hand will be in water longer.

Feeling sick . . . ughhh . . .

Shit, that hand looks a mess. But the acid has stopped coming out of the wristband. You're going to get out. You've beaten her. You can find Mercury. You will get three gifts.

But you've got to keep going.

You'll be at the end of the loch in a minute.

Doing well. Doing well.

Not far now.

Soon be able to see over into the valley, and –

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