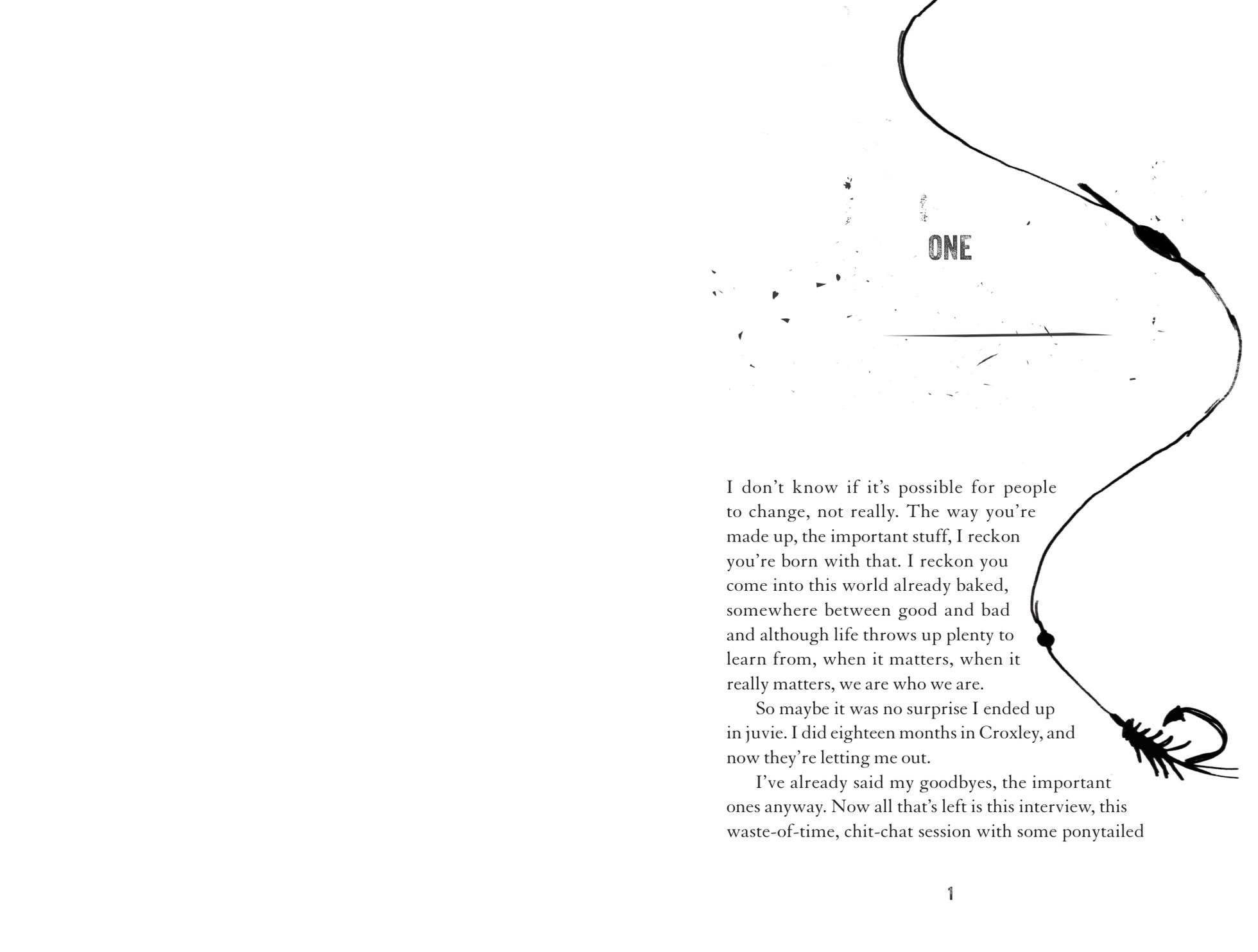


PROMISE
ME
HAPPY

ROBERT
NEWTON



ONE

I don't know if it's possible for people to change, not really. The way you're made up, the important stuff, I reckon you're born with that. I reckon you come into this world already baked, somewhere between good and bad and although life throws up plenty to learn from, when it matters, when it really matters, we are who we are.

So maybe it was no surprise I ended up in juvie. I did eighteen months in Croydon, and now they're letting me out.

I've already said my goodbyes, the important ones anyway. Now all that's left is this interview, this waste-of-time, chit-chat session with some ponytailed

counsellor they've just hired. It's his first placement after graduating and he's got that misguided enthusiastic look about him.

When he calls my name, I haul myself up from my chair and walk through the door on my right. I close it behind me and head towards the square table in the centre of the room. He doesn't acknowledge me at first. He waits until I'm almost there, then he gets to his feet and throws me a smile.

'Hello, Nate,' he says. 'Can I call you, Nate?'

I shrug my shoulders and consider his outstretched hand and the tangle of plaited leather bands around his wrist. It's been a long time since I had the need to touch another human being and all of a sudden the idea of shaking hands with someone I've only just met seems kind of ridiculous. I decline the offer and see something register in his face.

'My name's Marcus,' he says, withdrawing his hand awkwardly. 'Why don't you take a seat, Nate, and we can get started.'

The plastic chairs are set for a chat, uncomfortably close, so I drag mine back a little then nudge it sideways with my knee. Once it's at the opposite end of the table, I push it forward then sit. Marcus does the same at the other end. He drops his gangly frame into the chair and smiles. Again.

'I suppose the first thing I should say is congratulations,' he says.

Counsellors hate it when you don't engage. As he starts to bang on I keep my mouth shut and give him the silent treatment whenever there's a pause I'm expected to fill. Basically, I'm not interested. I'm not interested in anything

he has to say. He catches on after a bit, and decides to read aloud some of the things I need to keep in mind when I'm paroled. No alcohol. No drugs . . .

I don't even know what he's saying after a bit. His words roll into each other and lose their beginnings and their ends. His voice becomes a meaningless drone and starts up a duet with the humming air conditioner on the wall nearby. I tune out and start to pick at the plastic trim around the edge of the table in front of me.

I don't have much luck at first. I scratch at rough bits and try to tear them free. Most of them break under my nail, but then I find one, a chunk of plastic that peels sideways and keeps going like a strip on one of those tri-coloured sour straps I used to buy when I was a kid.

'So, how are you feeling, Nate?' he asks.

The question catches me off guard. It makes me look up and just for a moment I find his eyes.

'Feeling? I say.

'Yeah,' he says, 'about getting out?'

'Orright, I guess.'

'Just orright?'

Marcus raises a finger and taps my file on the table in front of him.

'You're seventeen,' he says. 'You're well known to police and you've got an eighteen month term already under your belt . . . you've been busy, Nate.'

He pauses for a moment and lets the silence do its thing, but even in the quiet, something seems to pass between us. It's nothing you can hear or anything. It's a gentle prodding, a back and forth, chess-vibe kind of thing.

I turn my head and see a buzzing blowfly to my left,

butting its head against the window pane, over and over again. Marcus looks as well and the two of us watch it slam into the glass.

'You'd think it'd work it out after a bit,' I say.

But Marcus doesn't get it. 'Come on, Nate,' he says. 'Let's talk, hey? Let's talk . . . about him.'

Chess-wise, it's a big mistake. He's moved too early, exposed his King.

'Talk about who?' I ask.

'Your dad, Nate.'

I shoot some air from my nose and half snort. 'You already know what he was like,' I say.

'I know a little,' says Marcus, 'but why don't you tell me? He was violent, yeah?'

'Yeah,' I say. 'He was violent. But it's not happening.'

'What's not happening?'

'I'm not talking about him.'

'Why not?'

'Because I've been through this a hundred times before,' I say. 'I'm about to get out of here and I'm not talking about my father.'

Marcus takes a moment, lets a few seconds grind by.

'Don't you think talking can help?' he asks.

He's getting on my nerves now so I focus on the little tuft of hair below his bottom lip. He's a vegan for sure.

'Look, it's all in there,' I say, pointing to the file. 'The last bozo was into highlighting. He marked the good bits in fluoro green.'

Marcus dips his eyes to the file then looks up.

'There are lots of good bits in here, Nate,' he says. 'Drugs, alcohol and a list of priors as long as my arm. But

let's go with the reason you're in here, hey? The break and enter and the aggravated assault. Nasty business that. Something you'd like to take back, I bet?'

If there's one thing you get a lot of in juvie, it's time. You can tell the boys who've been in Croxley a while. They learn how to slow things down and make the little things last. They learn how to walk slow, talk slow, even clean their teeth slow. But no matter how long you've been in, slow doesn't work at night. When the screws lock the cell doors, when they shut down the lights and they trip off down the corridor, a ghostly black creeps into the cells and swallows everything up. You get to thinking then, about all sorts of stuff. There's nothing else to do.

So, yeah. I wish I could take it back.

'He wasn't supposed to be there,' I say.

'But he was there,' says Marcus. 'The poor old bloke came back while you were robbing the place and you put him in the hospital.'

Marcus sits back in his chair and makes a clicking noise with his tongue. He fixes his eyes on me and tilts his head like I'm a puzzle he's trying to solve.

'I'll tell you what's interesting though, Nate. No one seems to think you're the violent type.'

I stare back at him. 'So, what type am I, then?'

'Not sure yet,' says Marcus. 'You've been pretty well-behaved here in Croxley. A few punch-ons, self-defence mostly, but nothing you've instigated, nothing . . . malicious.'

He holds his gaze, and I feel his eyes on my face.

'So why, Nate?' he says. 'Why did you put an old man in hospital?'

I look down at the strip of black missing from the edge of the table in front of me.

‘Nate?’

‘I never meant to hurt him,’ I say.

I reach a hand out and pick at the plastic trim again. ‘It’s not something I’m proud of.’

Marcus picks up the pen, tucks it behind an ear and flicks through the pages in the file.

‘According to the police statement, there were three intruders that night. Not just you, like you claimed.’

I breathe in and let out a giant sigh.

‘Do you think your friends would have done the same for you?’ asks Marcus. ‘Do you think they would have lied? You got an extra six months for that, you know?’

I shrug.

‘I’d like to help, Nate,’ he says. ‘I’m not the enemy.’

‘So, you’re my friend, are you?’ I ask.

‘I could be. Why not?’

‘You’ve got a ponytail.’

Marcus isn’t sure what to say about that. He plucks the pen from behind his ear and finds a space on the page in front of him.

‘Doesn’t . . . like . . . ponytails,’ he says, as he writes. ‘I’ll highlight that later, by the way, in fluoro green.’

He’s really starting to annoy me now so I sit up straight in my chair. ‘Listen, Marcus . . . can I call you Marcus?’

‘Sure.’

I know you think you might be onto something, right? You think you’re about to unlock something all the other counsellors failed to see. But the truth is, Marcus, you don’t know shit. Neither did the last bloke or the lady before him.’

‘I see.’

‘No, you don’t see, not yet, but you will. Do you want me to tell you how it’ll go?’

Marcus sighs. ‘Knock yourself out, Nate.’

‘Okay, so you’ll do this for a bit, you’ll have your little sessions with your table and chairs. You’ll ask your stupid questions and the boys out there, they’re going to answer. And they’ll tell you their stories, their sad little stories one after the other. Oh, it’ll be great at first. You’ll think you’re special. You’ll think you’re actually making a difference when no one else could. But then slowly things’ll begin to change. The days’ll become weeks and weeks’ll become months and before you know it all those sad little stories, they start to sound the same. And one day that smile on your face will turn into a sneer, and you’ll decide that life’s too short to be banging your head against a brick wall so you’ll pack it all in and take up mowing lawns.’

Marcus cocks his head. ‘Wow. That’s mighty insightful of you, Nate.’

I raise myself up from my chair and as I get to my feet I hear a familiar voice booming in the hallway outside the door. It’s the only voice that scares me in Croxley. I catch Marcus’s eye and throw him a smile.

‘Something funny?’ he asks.

‘Not funny,’ I say.

‘Really? Why are you smiling, then?’

I crane my head to the door.

‘You’ve got Jackson next,’ I say.