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BARE FREEDOM



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diffusion

First published in Great Britain in 2016

Diffusion
an imprint of
SPCK
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spck.org.uk

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ISBN 978-1-908713-03-2
e-Book ISBN 978-1-908713-17-9

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally reprinted in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

*In memory of Carl Jacques
(1977–2015).*

Thanks again to Insy.

*This book is for anyone trying to walk
a straight line in a crooked world.*

Freedom means warmth and protection against harsh exposure to the elements. It means food, not garbage. It means truth, harmony, and the social relations that spring from these. It means the best medical attention whenever it's needed. It means employment that is reasonable, that coincides with the individual necessities and feelings.

George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (1971)

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1

Love your probation officer

Barry gave his name to the woman behind the glass. She nodded at him and asked him to wait. He sat down on one of the comfy chairs by the window and smiled up at the CCTV camera.

He was early, as usual. These days Barry was always early. He knew that he could not afford to be late for a meeting with his probation officer. So he always arrived far too soon.

Every Tuesday for the past month Barry had been coming here to meet with his probation officer, or 'offender manager' as he liked to call himself. Barry was never really sure what the point of these meetings was supposed to be. They had discussed his licence conditions at the first meeting. But since then they seemed to spend most of the time talking about Barry's hopes and his feelings. The probation officer kept saying, 'Yes, Barry, but how do you *feel*?'

The probation officer seemed friendly. He told Barry to call him Colin.

Yet Barry knew that this man could have him recalled to prison in a heartbeat. Barry tried to play along. But there was no way he was going to start talking about the things that really mattered with a probation officer.

On the other side of the glass, people were busy typing on their computers. Some were wearing headsets and seemed to be talking to themselves. Behind the main desk there was a huge pot plant and a fish tank. On the far wall was a poster that said: 'Keep Calm and Love Your Probation Officer'.

In the tank a large blue fish was swimming round and round, as though it was looking for something. He could see why some lads called Seg the 'fish tank'. This poor old fish was in solitary 24/7. There was nowhere it could hide from the gaze of anyone watching. Round and round and round it went. No matter how far or how fast it swam, the fish always ended up back where it started. So much effort without ever getting anywhere, thought Barry. He knew how the fish felt.

The water-cooler burped as he poured himself a plastic cup of cold water. The woman behind the glass was talking on the telephone. As she did so, she was trying to scratch her back between her

shoulders with a pencil. Behind her the office was full of filing cabinets and computers, reports and assessments. All this was needed to keep tabs on people like Barry.

He tried to imagine the world these people lived in – their holiday rotas, pension plans and leaving parties. Did the guy with the beard fancy that young black woman sitting at the desk next to him? Was that fat bloke stuffing his face with crisps worried about his weight? Did any of them ever try to imagine the lives of the people who passed through this office? Or were people like Barry just numbers to them?

Back in the tank, the fish was still swimming round and round. Whatever it was looking for, Barry felt certain the fish was not going to find it. A fish only has three seconds of memory. Then everything starts again. A new beginning, a fresh start, a clean slate, a new leaf – all the things they like to talk about in this place. The only problem was that the slate was never completely wiped clean here. There was always a file somewhere, a piece of paper or a digital memory. The past followed you around like a dog. No matter how fast you ran, your record was always there, sniffing at your heels, reminding you of your mistakes.

Eventually Barry was buzzed through the glass doors. Colin was waiting for him. His glasses hung round his neck in the usual tangle of security passes, car-park tokens and name badges. Barry smiled to himself as he pictured the headline in the local newspaper: 'Probation Officer Strangles Himself with Own Security Pass'.

He followed Colin into a small office at the end of the corridor. It was bare except for a table and two chairs, a flip-chart and another pot plant. There were bars on the frosted windows. Someone had written 'What is freedom?' in red pen on the flip-chart. Good question, thought Barry.

Colin looked up from the file in front of him and took his glasses off. 'Well, Barry,' he said with a grin, 'I think it's payback time.'

What do you think?

Why is Barry always so early?

Why does Barry think he knows how the fish feels?

Do you think it is ever possible to wipe the slate clean?

2

Little Chris

Outside the probation office, Barry stopped to roll a tab.

Colin had talked to him about the Community Payback programme. Barry felt his heart sink. He had done this stuff once before, when it was called Community Service. He had wandered around the town in a bright orange jacket, scraping chewing-gum off the pavements. Barry did not mind doing things that were really useful. But he had once spent the best part of a week trying to clean some graffiti off the walls of the railway station underpass. The graffiti had been really pretty, unlike the underpass.

Suddenly he heard a shout. 'Baz!'

Only one person ever called him that. Little Chris. And here he was, wearing his drugs-dealer shades and bling. He was with two of his minders. Barry knew what this was about.

Barry said to him, 'Chris. All right? No worries, Chris. I've told you. You'll get your money. I just need some time to get sorted.'

A few years ago Barry was meant to deliver some phet for Little Chris to a flat on the Meadows estate. He had stopped at an off-licence to ask for directions. When he came back outside, the car had gone. So had the drugs. Of course, Chris had blamed him. Going to jail usually meant that your debts were cancelled. But Chris was not like that. Ever since Barry had got out of prison Chris had been hassling him for the money. And Chris did not make threats. He just made demands.

Chris replied, 'What makes you think I'm here to talk about money, Baz? We go back a long way, you and me.'

Exactly, thought Barry.

'But now you mention it,' Chris continued, 'how much was it? I've forgotten. How much of my money did you lose? How much do you still owe me?'

Barry sighed. 'You know. Eight hundred quid. And it wasn't my fault.'

Little Chris whistled. 'That's a lot of dosh, mate. But I tell you what, I'll forget the interest. For old times' sake.' He pushed his face towards Barry's and said, 'You've got a month. Then you're working for me.' Chris turned to go, but then added, 'Oh, I almost forgot. Abi sends her love.' He blew Barry a kiss and disappeared into the crowded street.

Barry took several deep breaths and tried to calm his rising anger. As he lit up, he realized that he was shaking.

In prison, most lads had photos of a girlfriend on their pad walls. Some had photos of their children. But Barry did not have a girlfriend. And he did not have any kids. The only picture on his cell wall had been a photo of him and Abi. It had been taken on a trip to the zoo when they were kids. Since the death of their nan, Abi was the only family he had left. On his last sentence, Abi had got involved with Little Chris. Somehow Barry had to try to get her away from him.

But he also had to pay Little Chris the money.

If Barry agreed to work for Little Chris his debts would be cleared, and he might be able to look out for Abi.

On the other hand, he knew that working for Little Chris was the quickest way of ending up back inside.

Barry finished his tab and bought a packet of crisps at the newsagent's on the corner. There was a black dog by the railings. It was a thin-looking greyhound in a bad way. Its ears had been cut off. Some people lost interest in a greyhound the minute it stopped winning races. And you can't trace a dog with no ears. This one was lucky it had not been buried alive. Barry shook his head at the thought of such cruelty.

He bent down to stroke the dog. As he raised his hand the dog flinched. 'It's OK,' said Barry, 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

Judging by the thin ribs showing through its skin, the dog had not been fed in a while. Barry offered the dog some crisps. The dog looked at Barry for a moment, as if unsure whether or not to trust him. Then it started to nibble the crisps.

'Here, you can finish them,' said Barry, tipping the crisps out onto the pavement. 'Looks like you're even hungrier than me.' He left the dog wolfing down the last of the crisps.

For the next couple of hours Barry walked round the town centre, trying to work out what to do about Little Chris. Outside the leisure centre he caught sight of his reflection in the mirrored windows. He badly needed a shave and a haircut. If he was not careful he was going to end up a mad loner talking to his own reflection. Eventually he sat down on one of the benches outside the central library and rolled another tab. He was almost out of burn.

He felt something brush against his leg. It was the dog, underneath the bench, looking up at him expectantly. 'Go on, boy!' said Barry. 'Go home. I haven't got any more crisps. Go on! Clear off.' The dog refused to budge. Barry pretended to throw a stick for the dog to chase. Still the dog would not move. Barry went and sat on a different bench. The dog followed him.

The dog was still trotting beside him when Barry reached the gate of the bail hostel. 'Sorry, lad,' said Barry, bending down to stroke the greyhound. 'You can't come in here.'

The dog looked up at him with its big greyhound eyes.

'Anyway, you wouldn't like it. Take it from me.'

