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Opening extract from
We Come Apart

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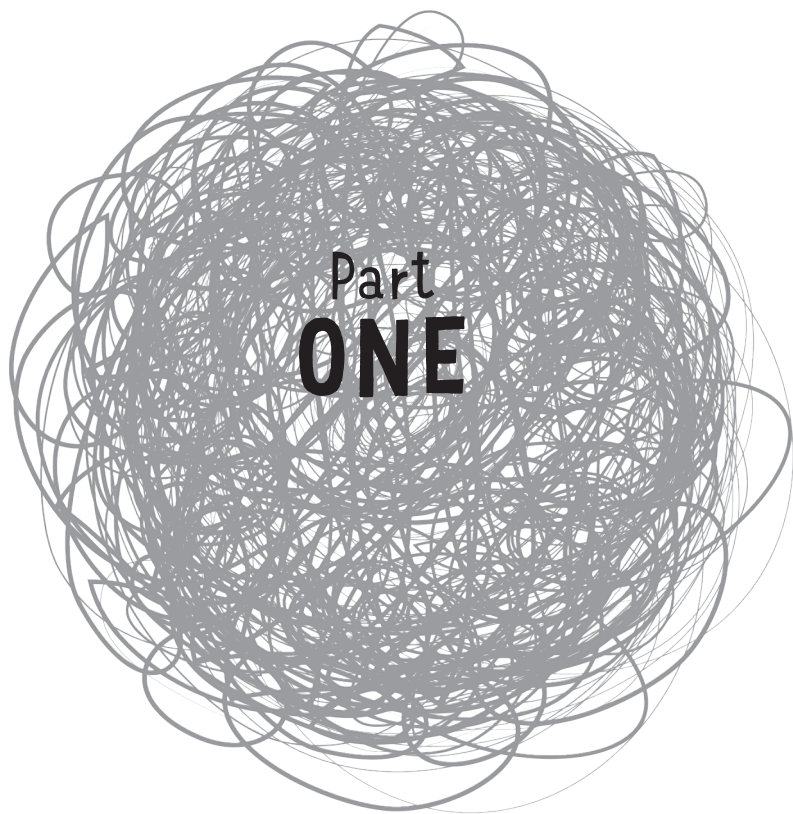
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Part
ONE

Caught

You have to be quick,
none of this pretending to be browsing business
that some shoplifters go for.

It's in
 grab what you want
and out again.

But the others don't get it.
They take ages making decisions,
like they might be legit buying,
so I know before we're done
 that
we're done for.

And I'm right.

We don't make it two steps out of
Boots
before a security guard
nabs me by the hood of my jacket.
Liz and Shawna are
legging it up the high street
 and away,
while Meg and I
get dragged back into the shop
and up to an office.

‘Empty your pockets,
you little scrubbers!’ the security guard shouts.

‘Can’t make us,’ I say.

‘You want me to call the police?’ he asks.

‘That what you want?’

‘No!’ Meg says,
and as quick as a heartbeat
turns her coat pockets
inside out.

But they’re empty.
No lipstick or nail varnish,
none of the mini chocolate eggs I saw her
stash away either.

‘I didn’t even do nothing,’ she says.
She bites her bottom lip,
starts to well up.
Looks all sorts of pathetic
really.

‘Now *you*,’ the security guard says,
poking the air around me with his fat finger.

I turn out my pockets
wondering if all the gear I tried to nick

will somehow disappear too,
like Meg's did.
But it doesn't.

Everything clatters to the floor:
lipstick, blusher, mascara, nail varnish
and
bloody mini chocolate eggs.

Mini chocolate eggs that *I* didn't nick.
Mini chocolate eggs that Meg can't get enough of.

She winks.
She winks to tell me to keep schtum,
to make sure I don't tell it as it is –
that she somehow managed to stuff *her* loot
into *my* pockets on the way up to the office,
that she's meant to be my mate
but is stitching me up
and letting me take the rap
for everyone else's thieving.

Again.

'What's all that?' the security guard asks,
pointing at the gear on the floor.

'Never seen it before,' I say.

‘Really?’ he asks.

‘Well, it just came out of your pockets.’

‘Can I go now?’ Meg asks.

I stare at her,
hard.

Is she for real?

Like, is she actually going to leave me here

on my own

with some mentalist security guard

and the threat of juvenile jail?

‘Mum’ll be expecting me,’ she says.

‘I ain’t nicked nothing.’

The security guard picks up the phone.

‘Yeah, you can go,’ he tells Meg.

Then he grins at me,
well pleased with himself –

Captain Catch-A-Thief.

‘But *you*.

You’re going down to the station.’

HERE

In the one month
since we
arriving to live in
London North, England,
it rain most
of days,
and sunshine only a few,
which is funnier because
we come here in
summer.

Tata say we here for
short time
only
to make the Queen's cash

then

return back
to our city, town, village
for to buy:

house mansion

then

car with top speed

then

fashions for impressing

then

gifts for my older brothers and sisters
who we leave in Romania.

Tata lucky he have connections
to give him strong job.

On some days after we
arrive
I helping Tata with his
tough work.
He driving his white lorry van
around streets,
spying
seeking
searching
for the metals that people in
London North
not wanting.

We put every items on lorry and
top man pays Tata hand cash
for metals.

It good for me to helping Tata
because now I am main son
and need to
quick learn
how to make family monies
and be
provider for all.

This is what my peoples do.
Roma mens
become cash provider,
for keeping all family happy
in clothings and food.

I am fifteen
and man now,
so my working in lorry van
make much sense.

Real reason we come to
England
is because I am
older,
and cannot be without
working
wealth,
or
wife.

And Tata must to make
sacks of cash
for to pay
family
of girl
back home.

And then
we can to marry.
Which make gigantic hurt in my head.

Caseworker

You can't even get into the youth offending services
building
without going through
a series of locked doors
and signing yourself in with
two different doormen.

Along every corridor are
blue plastic chairs
arranged in pairs,
kids in hoodies slumped in
them so you can't see their faces.
Some of them are with their parents,
some aren't,
but there's this low rumbling
of rage in the place.

You can smell it in the air.

I don't have to wait long to meet my caseworker
– 'Dawn Green' according to her badge –
who's got the smug look of someone
who thinks
she knows
more than most people.

But Dawn Green knows jack shit
about me.

She tilts her head to one side
like she's talking to toddlers:
'So . . . taking part in a reparation scheme
would save Jess from getting
a criminal record.'

'Reparation scheme?' Mum asks.

'Yes. As this is her third offence,
the police can't turn a blind eye.
She has to show a willingness to change,
to give back to her community.'

'So it's like community service,' Mum says.

Dawn bites the insides of her lips.
'It's helping out in parks
and attending self-development sessions.'

Always quick with an apology, Mum says,
'Well, she *definitely* wants to show she's sorry.'

'And she'll do what she's told,' Terry adds,
like he's my dad
and this is any of his bloody business.

What is he even *doing* here?

‘Great, so,
the police have proposed
a scheme lasting three months.
What do you think, Jess?’
Dawn turns to me,
finally,
and I know that
I’m meant to tell her
how sorry I am for being such a drain on society
and

of course
I’ll pick up crap down the park
to make up for it.

But a massive part of me
wants to say no,
wants to turn to Dawn and go,
*I’d rather do time
and get a record
than
hang out with no-hopers
and do-gooders
for the next twelve weeks.
Thanks all the same though.*

But I don’t get a chance to speak.

Before I can open my mouth,
Terry leans forward and grabs Dawn's hand,
shakes it like they've just done a deal
and says,
'When does she start?'