

90 packets  
OF  
INSTANT  
NOODLES

DEB FITZPATRICK



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# [before]

*We're a few suburbs away from McKinley Street. It's after school, it's the beginning of summer, and there's nothing to do but cruise as the sky slides away from the day. We've both done this shit before on our own, but it's more nerve-wracking doing it with someone else, somehow. You have no idea if the other person is gunna freak out halfway through, at a critical moment.*

*Craggs is the one who notices it, as we swing past on our bikes. The garage door rolled up, the tools hanging in their special spots, power drills and an angle grinder, and on the workbench there's a router, a couple of circular saws, the complete Sidchrome set. That's what I want. The rest doesn't interest me much. This you open up and it has everything in there, ring spanners for every possible job, all lined up in increasing size, and the sockets nestled into purpose-cut spots.*

*We dump the bikes and head back. There's no one*

*around. We watch for ten, fifteen minutes before making our move.*

*Of course, it all weighs a fucking ton, but we are in and out of that guy's shed in less than a couple of minutes, and the blood is pumping, man, is it ever. I sweat fear in those minutes.*

*Craggs wants to do a second run to get the rest, but it's too risky. We run down the back lane behind the guy's house loaded up to the max as it is — anyone seeing us would realise what we were up to. We have to stash the heaviest stuff at a construction site a couple of streets down. (We go back later on and shift it over to Craggs's place.) But no one does see us. And at the end of it, I have the Sidchrome set.*

*I kept it afterwards, under some junk in Dad's shed. I never used it, in case Dad saw me, just opened it and looked at it sometimes. One day I'll change a whole engine using that thing. Craggs sold the rest of the stuff to some guy he knew, and threw me a hundred bucks. I didn't really wanna get rid of it because I thought we'd be more likely to get busted that way, but Craggs wanted the cash, so that's what we did.*

*That was about eighteen months ago.*

*It seems more like a decade.*

# 1

It was Dad who finally snapped over what had been going on. Said he couldn't watch me screwing up my life anymore, and for any good to come out of it he'd have to personally avert the course of legal justice. He said family justice was worse, much worse. So he went down to the cop shop and did a deal with that fat fucker who runs the juvenile crime squad. McPhee. Detective Sergeant McPhee. The guy hates me, so I don't know how Dad did it. McPhee slapped me across the face once, one of the first times I was in there. Fucking pimpslapped me, like I was his to have a go at, like it was personal. That was the most humiliating thing, being in the cop shop with other dudes watching. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to do violence. I reckon that was a real turning point for me. That's when I knew I'd do it again, I knew I was on a roll. I knew what I *was*. That backhander kind of made

it easier; it made me want to do fucked-up things, it made me hate things, hate certain kinds of people. The lowest feeling was that I knew I deserved to be cracked — I deserved worse, for sure — and it was probably his way of trying to scare me into stopping, into turning back from the bad shit, but it didn't. It fuelled me.

Somehow, Dad did this deal with McPhee. They hooked me up with a juvenile justice team and I had to agree to follow an *action plan*. I had to accept responsibility and agree to steer clear of *negative influences* for three months. It was a month in the slammer, otherwise. The old man swapped the month inside for three months out here — solitary, he said, tougher than anything the kiddies' jail could dish out.

We had a big meeting about it before Dad got what he wanted. Me and Dad; McPhee; my case manager, Sandy; a hairy dude from the juvenile injustice department; and the head copper down at Nallerup. Senior Sergeant Wardle. All these people, sitting around a big table, writing notes and shit, about me.

'From the department's point of view,' Hairy Dude said, 'it's highly risky to entrust the offender with his own punishment.'

'Yes. I know this is a very unusual approach,' Dad said, taking a sideways glance at me. 'I know ... we are

asking a lot. But perhaps that's where Sergeant Wardle could step in? If he would be willing to oversee things?'

Wardle squirmed in his chair and slid a document into the centre of the table. 'I'll agree to it — but I have some conditions.' He looked up at the people around the table. 'And I want to make it clear that this is a test case. I'm only approving it because my advice is that the offender is open to turning things around.'

Apart from Dad, no one looked at me during all this. There they were, discussing in detail what I'd be doing, with me sitting right there among them. It was more than weird.

McPhee looked the pages over and snorted. 'Dodgy idea if you ask me.'

'It's a *test case*,' Wardle said. 'A trial. And he'll have to report in each week.'

Sandy scanned Wardle's notes and said, 'I think these are fair. And I would like to add one thing: that Joel be required to return to school immediately once the three months are up. The school principal has expressed concern about his taking such a long break from study, but is willing to work with Joel's teachers to create a personal study program for him on his return.' She looked over at me. 'If you don't catch up, Joel, you'll have to repeat the year from scratch.'

Oh, happy days.

‘I think we all agree,’ she went on, ‘— and this is the reason we’re here — that Joel has a much better chance of a positive outcome if we can make this work. We’ve all seen the data showing that young offenders rarely rehabilitate once they’ve been incarcerated, and if we can avoid that, then for God’s sake ... This is so much more positive than anything we can offer him in a detention centre.’

There were a few grunts from the coppers. Dad looked like he was holding his breath. Sandy waited for a moment but when no one spoke, she said, ‘So, are we all in agreement that we should give this a go?’

‘If Sergeant Wardle is happy with it, then I would like to see this go ahead,’ Hairy Dude said. ‘It could become a precedent for other kids, if it works.’

‘Yeah. If it works,’ said McPhee.

And so here I am, in this shack in the middle of the forest somewhere down south, totally on my own for the next few months. Apparently, in order to contemplate life and what a balls-up you’ve made of it, it’s best to be out in the sticks. And, yeah, they reckon it helps with staying outta trouble.



Craggs has always been into the edgy shit. The kind of guy who smokes Winnie Reds in between cones and passes out at parties but you know he'll be okay in the morning. A total scruff but the teachers love him because he's smart, even though he never does any homework. He hardly ever rolls up for class, and he turns in huge test marks. We've been mates since our folks both bought houses in McKinley Street, about four years ago. He's a funny bastard, even if he can go way overboard, as recent events have proved. The first thing that Craggs did when he moved into McKinley Street was punch out Mario Ripelli. We'd been wanting to do that all year. Craggs just went and did it like you turn on the telly, slugged Mario a couple of times, then picked up his bike and we rode home like normal, me thinking that this guy was his own boss in every sense of the meaning. No one even questioned it; it was like, Mario's gunna get scrapped by this dude, just stand clear and let it happen.

Craggs is now in the slammer. His dad didn't have a shack in the bush to send him to. His dad didn't do anything much to help him at all, actually. I went and saw Craggs before I left and he was cheery as always but looked like he'd been to Weight Watchers, not the Young Offenders' Rehabilitation Program. The

detention centre didn't look too bad, what I saw of it. It's not like you get taken on a guided tour or anything. Craggs said there was sort of an open area with a TV and a yard with gym equipment, and a library. He was sharing a room with an older dude who looked pretty scary but Craggs reckoned everything was okay. He had a tiny calendar shoved in his back pocket, though, and when he pulled it out, I could see the days crossed out, scratched out, like mistakes on a school project.