

A vertical composition featuring a grey background with vibrant red ink splatters and swirls. The ink is most concentrated on the right side, creating a sense of movement and depth. The central focus is the word 'FALL' written in a large, serif font. The letters 'F', 'L', and 'L' are white, while the 'A' is black. The 'F' and 'L's have a slightly distressed or ink-like texture.

FALL

SALLY GREEN

HALF BAD

SALLY GREEN



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For my mother

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“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

Hamlet, William Shakespeare

PART

ONE



THE TRICK

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.

Afterward 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.

The Cage



The trick is to not mind. Not mind about it hurting, not mind about anything.

The trick of not minding is key; it's the only trick in town. Only this is not a town; it's a cage beside a cottage, surrounded by a load of hills and trees and sky.

It's a one-trick cage.

Push-ups



The routine is okay.

Waking up to sky and air is okay. 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 humor.

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 vapor trails either. The wind is usually quiet in the predawn calm, and somehow the air feels warmer already as it begins to get light.

You can open your eyes now and there are a few minutes to savor 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 push-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.

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.

<i>one</i>	Not minding
<i>two</i>	is the trick.
<i>three</i>	The only
<i>four</i>	trick.
<i>five</i>	But there are
<i>six</i>	loads of
<i>seven</i>	tactics.
<i>eight</i>	Loads.
<i>nine</i>	On the look-out
<i>ten</i>	all the time.
<i>eleven</i>	All the time.
<i>twelve</i>	And it's
<i>thirteen</i>	easy.
<i>fourteen</i>	'Cause there ain't
<i>fifteen</i>	nothing else
<i>sixteen</i>	to do.
<i>seventeen</i>	Look out for what?
<i>eighteen</i>	Something.
<i>nineteen</i>	Anything.
<i>twenty</i>	N
<i>twenty-one</i>	E
<i>twenty-two</i>	thing.
<i>twenty-three</i>	A mistake.
<i>twenty-four</i>	A chance.
<i>twenty-five</i>	An oversight.
<i>twenty-six</i>	The
<i>twenty-seven</i>	tiniest
<i>twenty-eight</i>	error
<i>twenty-nine</i>	by the
<i>thirty</i>	White

thirty-one
thirty-two
thirty-three
thirty-four
thirty-five
thirty-six
thirty-seven
thirty-eight
thirty-nine
forty
forty-one
forty-two
forty-three
forty-four
forty-five
forty-six
forty-seven
forty-eight
forty-nine

Witch
from
Hell.
'Cause she makes
mistakes.
Oh yes.
And if that mistake
comes to
nothing
you wait
for the next one
and the next one
and the next one.
Until
you
succeed.
Until
you're
free.

You get up. She will have been counting, but never letting up is another tactic. She doesn't say anything but steps toward you and backhands you across the face.

fifty

“Fifty.”

After push-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 drystone 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 learned 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, 'cause you stop by the stream at the far end and rest 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 you're in Scotland).

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, 'cause 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 okay. 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, 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. And 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 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 okay. 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 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—

Ironing



“You nearly lost your hand.”

It’s lying on the kitchen table still attached to your arm by bone, muscle, and sinew that are visible in the open, raw groove round your wrist. The skin that used to be there has formed lava-like rivulets running down to your fingers as if it has melted and set again. Your whole hand is puffing up nicely and hurts like . . . well, like an acid burn. Your fingers twitch, but your thumb is not working.

“It might heal so that you can use your fingers again. Or it might not.”

She took the band off your wrist at the loch and sprayed the wound with a lotion that dulled the pain.

She was prepared. She’s always prepared.

And how did she get there so quickly? Did she run? Fly on a bloody broomstick?

However she got to the loch, you still had to walk back with her. That was a tough walk.

“Why don’t you speak to me?”

She’s right in your face.

“I’m here to teach you, Nathan. But you must stop trying to escape.”

She’s so ugly that you’ve got to turn away.

There’s an ironing board set up on the other side of the kitchen table.

She was ironing? Ironing her combat trousers?

“Nathan. Look at me.”

You keep your eyes on the iron.

“I want to help you, Nathan.”

You hawk up a huge gob, turn, and spit. She’s quick, though, and snatches back so it lands on her shirt not on her face.

She doesn’t hit you. Which is new.

“You need to eat. I’ll heat up some stew.”

That’s new too. Usually you have to cook and clean and sweep.

But you’ve never had to iron.

She goes to the pantry. There’s no fridge. No electricity. There’s a wood-burning range. Setting the fire up and cleaning it out are also your chores.

While she’s in the pantry you go to look at the iron. Your legs are weak, unsteady, but your head’s clear. Clear enough. A sip of water might help but you want to look at the iron. It’s just a piece of metal, iron-shaped, with a metal handle, old. It’s heavy and cold. It must be heated up on the range to do its job. Must take ages. She’s miles from anywhere and anything, and she irons her trousers and shirts!

When she comes back a few seconds later you're round by the pantry door and you bring the iron down hard, pointed side against her head.

But she's so bloody tall and so bloody fast. The iron catches the side of her scalp and sinks into her shoulder.

You're on the floor clutching your ears, looking at her boots before you pass out.

The Trick Doesn't Work



She's talking but you can't make sense of it.

You're back sitting at the kitchen table, sweating and shuddering a bit, and blood from your left ear is running down your neck. That ear won't heal. You can't hear at all on that side. And your nose is a mess. You must have landed on it when you fell. It's broken, blocked up, and bloodied, and it won't heal either.

Your hand is resting on the table and it's so swollen now that the fingers can't move at all.

She's sitting on the chair next to you and is spraying your wrist with the lotion again. It's cooling. Numbing.

And it would be so good to be numb like that all over, numb to it all. But that won't happen. What will happen is that she'll lock you back up in the cage, chain you up, and it'll go on and on and on . . .

And so the trick doesn't work. It doesn't work, and you do mind; you mind about it all. You don't want to be back in that cage, and you don't want the trick anymore. You don't want any of it anymore.

The cut on her scalp is healed, but there's the wide ridge of a black-red scab underneath her blond hair and there's blood on her shoulder. She's still talking about something, her fat slobbering lips working away.

You look around the room. The kitchen sink, the window that overlooks the vegetable garden and the cage, the range, the ironing board, the door to the pantry, and back to the ugly woman with nicely pressed trousers. And clean boots. And in her boot is her little knife. She sometimes keeps it there. You saw it when you were on the floor.

You're dizzy so it's easy to swoon, sinking to your knees. She grabs you by your armpits but your left hand isn't injured and it finds the handle and slides the knife out of her boot while she grapples with your dead weight, and as you let your body sink farther you bring the blade to your jugular. Fast and hard.

But she's so bloody quick, and you kick and fight and fight and kick but she gets the knife off you and you've no kick and no fight left at all.

* * *

Back in the cage. Shackled. Kept waking up last night . . . sweating . . . ear still doesn't work . . . you're breathing through your mouth 'cause your nose is blocked. She's even chained your bad wrist and your whole arm is so swollen that the shackle is tight.

It's late morning, but she still hasn't come for you. She's doing something in the cottage. Tapping

Smoke's coming out of the chimney.

~~It's warm today, a breeze from the southwest, clouds moving silently across the sky so the sun is~~ managing a series of appearances, touching your cheek and casting shadows from the bars across your legs. But you've seen it all before, so you close your eyes and remember stuff. It's okay to do that sometimes.

PART
TWO



*HOW I ENDED UP
IN A CAGE*

My Mother



I am standing on my tiptoes. The photograph is on the hall table but I can't get hold of it properly. I stretch and stretch and nudge the frame with my fingertips. It's heavy and hits the floor with a clatter

I hold my breath. No one comes.

I pick the frame up carefully. The glass hasn't broken. I sit under the table with my back against the wall.

My mother is beautiful. The photograph was taken on her wedding day. She is squinting into the sun, sunlight on her hair, a white dress, white flowers in her hand. Her husband is beside her. He is handsome, smiling. I cover his face with my hand.

I don't know how long I sit there. I like looking at my mother.

Jessica appears. I'd forgotten to listen for her.

She grabs hold of the frame.

I don't let go. I cling onto it. Tight.

But my hands are sweaty.

And Jessica's much bigger than me. She yanks it up, pulling me to my feet, and the frame slides out of my hands. She holds it high to her left and brings it down diagonally, slicing the edge of the frame across my cheekbone.

"Don't ever touch this picture again."

Jessica and the First Notification



I am sitting on my bed. Jessica is sitting on my bed too, telling me a story.

“Mother asks, ‘Have you come to take him away?’

“The young woman at the front door says, ‘No. Absolutely not. We would never do that.’ The young woman is sincere and keen to do a good job but really naive.”

I interrupt. *“What’s naive mean?”*

“Clueless. Dumb. Thick. Like you. Got it?”

I nod.

“Good, now listen. The naive woman says, ‘We are visiting all White Witches in England to notify them of the new rules and to help fill in the forms.’

“The woman smiles. The Hunter standing behind her has no smile. He is dressed in black like they all do. He is impressive, tall, strong.”

“Does Mother smile?”

“No. After you are born Mother never smiles again. When Mother doesn’t reply, the woman from the Council looks concerned. She says, ‘You have received the notification, haven’t you? It’s very important.’

“The woman flicks through the papers on her clipboard and pulls out a letter.”

Jessica opens out the parchment she is holding. It is a thick piece, large, and the folds make a deep cross shape. She holds it delicately, as if it is precious. She reads:

“Notification of the Resolution of the Council of White Witches in England, Scotland, and Wales.

“It was agreed that to facilitate increased protection of all White Witches, a record of all witches in Britain should be made and maintained.

“A simple coding system will be used for any witches and whets (witches under age seventeen) who are not of pure White witch parentage, using the references: White (W), Black (B), Fain/Non-Witch (F). Thus Half Codes will be recorded as (W 0.5/B 0.5) and Half Bloods recorded as (W 0.5/F 0.5) or (B 0.5/F 0.5). The mother’s code will be the first code, the father the second. The 0.5 codes will be maintained for as little time as possible (and not past age 17) until an absolute code (W, B, or F) can be designated to the person.”

“Do you know what it means?” Jessica asks.

I shake my head.

“It means that you are a Half Code. A Black Code. Non-White.”

“Gran says I’m a White Witch.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“She says I’m half White.”

“You’re half Black.”

“After the woman has finished reading out the notification, Mother still doesn’t say anything but goes back inside the house, leaving the front door open. The woman and the Hunter follow her in.

“We’re all in the lounge. Mother is sitting on the chair by the fire. But the fire isn’t lit. Deborah and Arran have been playing on the floor but now they sit on either side of her on the arms of the chair.”

“Where are you?”

“Standing right by her.”

I imagine Jessica standing there with her arms folded, knees locked back.

“The Hunter positions himself in the doorway.

“The woman with the clipboard perches on the edge of the other chair, her clipboard on her tightly clenched knees, pen in her hand. She says to Mother, ‘It’ll probably be quicker and easier if I fill the form in and you just sign.’

“The woman asks, ‘Who is the head of the household?’

“Mother manages to say, ‘I am.’

“The woman asks Mother her name.

“Mother says she is Cora Byrn. A White Witch. Daughter of Elsie Ashworth and David Ashworth. White Witches.

“The woman asks who her children are.

“Mother says, ‘Jessica, age eight. Deborah, five. Arran, two.’

“The woman asks, ‘Who is their father?’

“Mother says, ‘Dean Byrn. White Witch. Member of the Council.’

“The woman asks, ‘Where is he?’

“Mother says, ‘He is dead. Murdered.’

“The woman says, ‘I’m sorry.’

“Then the woman asks, ‘And the baby? Where is the baby?’

“Mother says, ‘It’s there, in that drawer.’”

Jessica turns to me and explains. “After Arran was born, Mother and Father didn’t want any more children. They gave away the cot, the pram, and all the baby things. This baby isn’t wanted and has to sleep on a pillow in a drawer, in an old, dirty onesie that Arran used to have. No one buys this baby toys or presents, because everyone knows it isn’t wanted. No one gives Mother presents or flowers or chocolates, because they all know she didn’t want this baby. Nobody wants a baby like this. Mother only gets one card but it doesn’t say ‘Congratulations.’”

Silence.

“Do you want to know what it says?”

I shake my head.

“It says, ‘Kill It.’”

I chew my knuckles, but I don’t cry.

“The woman approaches the baby in the drawer, and the Hunter joins her because he wants to see this strange, unwanted thing.

“Even asleep the baby is horrible and ugly, with its puny little body, grubby-looking skin, and spiky, black hair.

“The woman asks, ‘Does he have a name yet?’

“‘Nathan.’”

Jessica has already found a way of saying my name as if it is something disgusting.

“The young woman asks, ‘And his father . . . ?’

“Mother doesn’t answer. She can’t because it’s too awful; she can’t bear it. But everyone knows just by looking at the baby that its father is a murderer.

“The woman says, ‘Perhaps you can write the father’s name.’

“And she takes her clipboard to Mother. And Mother is crying now and she can’t even write the name. Because it’s the name of the most evil Black Witch there has ever been.”

I want to say “Marcus.” He’s my father and I want to say his name, but I’m too afraid. I’m always too afraid to say his name.

“The woman goes back to look at the sleeping baby and she reaches out to touch it . . .

“‘Careful!’ the Hunter warns, because even though Hunters are never afraid, they are always cautious around Black witchcraft.

“The woman says, ‘He’s just a baby.’ And she strokes its bare arm with the back of her fingers.

“And the baby stirs and then opens its eyes.

“The woman says, ‘Oh goodness!’ and steps back.

“She realizes she shouldn’t have touched such a nasty thing and rushes off to the bathroom to wash her hands.”

Jessica reaches out as if she’s going to touch me but then pulls her hand away, saying, “I couldn’t ever touch anything as bad as you.”

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