

**THE
SCHISM**
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Now has come the last age of the song of the Cumae...

One

When I started at Elding Collections there were five of us: Brian, who'd told me about the job, Tony and Hameed, who worked north of the river, and Piers, the office manager, who did the paperwork and took the calls. We had one room, and a toilet on the next floor up that on winter days had been known to freeze. We had three desks and four chairs, some phones, a kettle, teabags, powdered milk, and wall calendars from three different banks (Tony also had one from the *Sunday Sport* which Piers made him keep in a drawer). Our office was over a shop that, in the time I was there, had sold everything from office stationery to discount kitchenware. Every few months one business would fail, the shop would be empty for a week or two, then another lot of short-lease optimists would move in and start losing money.

Elding Collections was the only thing that never changed, but then Elding Collections thrived on failure. Back then we collected credit cards, cheque cards and debit cards from subjects who'd overspent. We had strict rules. We weren't interested in money or furniture, only plastic. We were definitely not bailiffs. We carried business cards that identified us: *Elding Collections, A Discreet and Professional Service*.

This wasn't entirely honest. We were not discreet. If we couldn't find the person we wanted, we went straight to their neighbours and told them who we were and why

we were there. The neighbours were usually happy to help. As for ‘professional’, all that meant was that we were paid for the work. Criminal record? We don’t care. No previous experience? Not a problem. Odd gaps on your CV? Step right up. They were no exams to pass, no minimum standards to meet. All the job required was basic literacy and a *London A–Z*. You didn’t even need a car. Discreet and professional? I would have been happier if the cards had said: *Elding Collections, We’re Not Bailiffs*.

People assumed our job was dangerous, that it brought us into daily contact with the underclass, that we had to go from door to door in gang-controlled estates where the inhabitants stopped abusing their children only when it was time to defraud the DSS. Sometimes we’d explain that the underclass didn’t have credit cards – unless they’d stolen them, in which case they weren’t our concern. But sometimes we’d pretend the work was more dangerous and interesting than collecting pieces of plastic from people who had been told we were coming.

It was an odd job. It wasn’t what any of us had thought we’d end up doing. We were all treading water, waiting until we had a better idea. And it had some advantages. I wasn’t stuck in an office, I could work to my own timetable, and, above all, I got to wear a suit.

In those days I liked suits. I liked them so much I wore them at weekends. I had a suit for the pub, another one for restaurants, and one for staying at home, watching television.

Shona, my old girlfriend, used to say it was because I was a control freak. That was her joke about me: ‘You’re a control freak, Pat.’ It wasn’t a complaint; it was why she liked me. The first time she saw my flat she’d said, ‘It’s a bit... *sparse*, isn’t it?’ I didn’t have any ornaments or trophies, there were no posters or photographs, and everything was in its place.

‘I prefer to think of it as tidy,’ I’d said.

She'd laughed, which I treasured because she didn't laugh often. 'But do you actually *live* here?' She walked around the room, careful not to touch anything. 'Don't get me wrong,' she said, 'I like it.' She really did. She liked it enough to move in for a while. She didn't stay long, but when she left it wasn't because I was too tidy. No, when she left it wasn't personal.

I stayed in my spotless flat. I'd sit on my immaculate sofa in a suit and tie, and feel relaxed, or as close to relaxed as I ever feel. The only times I didn't wear a suit were when I ran in the mornings. My brother had been a schoolboy boxer, a promising welterweight; I had been a runner. Good enough to be chosen to represent the school; not good enough to win a race. My one talent was persistence. Every morning, if it wasn't raining or snowing, I still ran. I ran from habit, automatically. There were mornings when it was as if I'd woken up to find myself a mile from home and running already. I *dreamed* of running. Not of chasing or being chased, just running, and along the same streets I used when awake. The only difference between the dreams and reality was that in the dreams my brother would be running with me, a few yards behind, breathing heavily. I'd wake up with a sense of loss, check the weather, put on my running gear, and run. Later, I'd put on a suit and go to work, or, if it was the weekend, I'd put on a suit and go to the supermarket.

I didn't know why I dressed like that, and still don't. I wore shirts with collars half an inch too small because I liked the feeling of tightness at my throat. It wasn't a sexual pleasure, except maybe in the kind of deeply buried way that's so deeply buried it doesn't count.

At Elding Collections the suits were mandatory. We were supposed to look official, as if we meant business.

It was one of those rare mornings when everybody was in the office at the same time. Piers was sorting the papers on his desk into even neater piles; Brian was leafing through

The Ring Magazine; Hameed was thoughtfully picking long blonde hairs from the sleeve of his jacket. I was staring out of the window. It was eight o'clock and raining, and the only jobs we had that day were tracers.

In theory the card companies put out tracers to find a subject who owed them money. In practice all they wanted was for us to confirm that their debtor had moved. It was a formality, a box to be ticked before they could write off the debt. If they'd really wanted to find someone they wouldn't have asked us: we were rubbish. We'd visit the last known address, telephone the last known employer, and then give up. We only found the ones who hadn't actually moved. According to Piers, that gave us a success rate of fourteen per cent. Tracing was easy work, but dull.

That morning we had sixty-eight requests and were reluctant to start.

'Bloody rain,' said Brian, for the fourth time.

We could hear the crashing from the staircase that meant Tony was on his way up. He burst into the room, panting. 'It is pissing down out there.'

Tony swaggered like a heavy in a TV procedural. He was thick-set, with a square head and bright blond hair set in a dandified little quiff. The hair was ridiculous, deliberately ridiculous, like a provocation, daring you to laugh at him. It was supposed to grab your attention while telling you he was so tough he didn't care what you thought. It didn't fool us.

He stood in the doorway, flapping his hands. He was drenched, the quiff smacked flat against his forehead, his face shining, though that might have been sweat. 'Car's packed in again,' he announced, gasping. 'Mile down the fucking road. Look at this.' He raised his arms like a man held at gunpoint. His suit was two distinct shades of dark green. 'How am I supposed to work in this?'

'You should have brought a brolly.' Hameed could always be relied on to say something sensible.

‘Didn’t have the time. I had a heavy session last night...’ And then Tony was off on one of his stories, all whisky chasers, violent misunderstandings and half-hearted punch-ups in car parks, usually with a girlfriend I suspected didn’t exist.

We’d all heard these stories. They were part of office life, like the bad heating and the frozen toilet. The details – the name of the pub, the amount drunk, the number of witnesses – might change, but the stories followed the same pattern, as formulaic as the shipping forecast. We never knew how much of each of them could be believed. I suspected not much. I suspected most nights he sat in a pub by himself dreaming up these altercations, if he went to the pub at all.

On the other hand, Tony had two things which set him apart from the rest of us: a criminal record and a degree. Piers had a degree as well, but he was the sort of person – middle class, professional – you’d expect to have one. Tony presented his academic career as a blip, a kind of lost weekend. He gave different accounts of his arrest. In one, he’d beaten up his ex-girlfriend’s future husband during a heavy drinking session after taking his finals. Others would hint at armed robbery or drugs, or whatever else was in the news that week. Tony was proud of his record, touchy about the degree, and vague about both. Like the rest of us, he was working for Elding Collections until something better turned up.

Piers handed him a worksheet. Tony glanced at it while still talking. It was a gift: he could read and talk at the same time, as if his story was pre-recorded. He had to wait until it finished before he could respond to the worksheet.

‘More bloody tracers? What’s happening to people? Oi, Piers, you know how many I had last week? Course you do, stupid bloody question.’ Tony paused, expecting laughter. We couldn’t be bothered. This didn’t stop him. ‘Place I looked at yesterday. Fucking weird. Fucking weird. Another runner. Piddling amount. Tower block. Rang the doorbell. Flat

battery. Farty sort of noise. Nobody's going to be in anyway, so I bang on the door a few times. Fuck me if it doesn't open. Some tart inside. Turns out to be our man's sister. She's looking for him too. You should have seen the state of the place. The walls had been painted black. Usually it's just dirt, or they've smashed the place up. This one had been fucking *redecorated...*' Some people took offence at the way Tony spoke; it was what he wanted, part of his act. At unguarded moments his voice changed – he'd sound like a Radio Three announcer, or Piers.

Hameed had a similar story. A shared flat, the absconder's room painted black... Tony drew the conclusion. 'Maybe they're Satanists. Maybe they hang crosses upside-down. Farrell, you're the Catholic boy, what do you reckon?'

'Don't ask me. I'm lapsed.'

'You? You're the most Catholic Catholic I've ever met. If Armani did hair shirts you'd be in your element.'

Brian stood up, shaking his head. 'I can't stay here any longer. Patrick, shall we make a start?'

Out in the street, we split up. I didn't have a car, so when I worked alone my range was limited. Fortunately our office was in the middle of the defaulters' area of choice – Piers had once explained the economic reasons – so there were always subjects within walking distance. More than once I'd had to go no further than the shop downstairs.

According to the charge sheet the first subject owed about eight thousand pounds, most of it on a credit card he was still using. He was, we'd have said, typical. I went to the rat hole where he was supposed to be living, one of those divvied-up tenements made shabbier still by waves of students. We hated students at Elding Collections. Freeloaders, we thought – pigs in shit. Even Tony hated students, and he'd been one. I was ready to dislike this one more than usual because he'd made me walk through the rain.

The door was opened by a thin kid with a straggly beard. I knew straight away he was the subject. His cheeks were stained with patches of vivid red and black, as though he'd recently been involved in a lab accident. It was a dark morning, but he still blinked as if the light was too strong. Eight thousand pounds in debt, and whatever he'd spent the money on hadn't involved fresh air or personal hygiene.

As soon as I saw him I expected hostility. It was the way his mouth was already open. Not in the slack-jawed way of some of our subjects, but as if he'd been about to say something and I'd interrupted.

I went through the formalities. 'Is Joshua Painter in?'

He half closed the door. 'Who wants to know?'

I showed him the business card, explained what I wanted. He looked hard at me for a second or two, then declared, 'I can't let you have it back.'

'You don't have a choice, Mr Painter.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'No, Mr Painter. I just want the card.'

I expected him to slam the door in my face, which would mean I'd have to come back the next day and at random intervals after that. As we charged our clients for each visit, this wasn't so bad. But instead he opened the door wider, stepped forward, and pushed his face up to mine.

'Don't lie to me. Your coming here is a threat, understand? But you don't frighten me.'

His breath was like the dustbin behind a pizzeria. I took a step back. 'We don't make threats, Mr Painter. I've just come to collect the card.'

'I have a *right* to that card.'

Another subject who hadn't read the small print. I wondered what he was supposed to be studying. I explained why he did not have a right to the card. It's a standard speech, and comes as a surprise to some people. It was a surprise to Joshua, though he tried to conceal this by nodding impatiently.

‘I know all that.’

‘Then can I have the card?’

He pointed at me as if he was picking me out of a line-up. ‘I’m going to get the card. I’m going to my room to get the card. Stay here! I don’t want you coming in. I know what you people are like. You step through that door and I’m calling the police.’

He disappeared into the black hallway. It wasn’t worth following him. An old woman on the other side of the street watched me, attracted by the raised voice and the prospect of an argument. I smiled at her until she walked on.

Joshua came back, stamping down the stairs. He threw the card on to the wet pavement behind me. ‘There. Take it.’

I bent to pick it up. ‘Thank you, Mr Painter.’

‘I bet you’re proud of yourself. I bet you’re really proud of yourself. I bet you really fucking get off on this.’

I pocketed the card. A lot of subjects, once the plastic’s out of their hands, try these public displays of scorn. It gives them something to tell their friends afterwards. *I really let him have it*, they probably say. *You should have seen his face*. We provide a discreet professional service, so we’re not supposed to say anything back. I didn’t even say goodbye.

He spat, missing me by several feet, and closed the door. I thought I’d seen the last of him.

The next two subjects were an ex-machinist and a store manager. The ex-machinist was a lamb. A woman I took to be his mother let me into his dingy flat and pointed out the card on the oak-effect coffee table. The subject himself was in a dressing gown, watching television. He didn’t protest or even seem to notice I was there. Afterwards, when the woman showed me to the door, I said I hoped her son would find work soon. It’s the kind of meaningless courtesy that usually goes down well. She took it badly. ‘That’s my husband.’

The store manager wasn’t at home, so I went to his shop.

He tried to make an argument of it, accusing me of driving away customers. I'd been in the shop for half an hour without seeing a customer, and said so. He offered me a discount on some Venetian blinds. I told him I preferred screen blinds, but he didn't have any.

A typical day. And then I visited my brother.

I went to see Mike every few days. The visits were as predictable as Tony's stories. I'd close the door behind me and sit on the end of his bed. The mattress was old, sunk in the middle as if an invisible man were sleeping there. His room had a single bed, an old wooden chair, and a small, high window. No radio or television, no newspapers or books: the window gave him all the entertainment he needed. He could spend whole days standing on the chair, looking out at a few hundred yards of untidy grass, and, beyond that, the trees that hid the wall. 'Mike,' I'd say. 'How are you, Mike?' He would stay on the chair, his face pressed so close to the window that his breath would keep misting the glass. The chair had uneven legs and every time he wiped the windowpane with his sleeve it would rock and I'd lean forward slightly, ready to catch him. He never fell. He'd spent so long on that chair, he knew all its movements.

Sometimes he'd say something like, 'There were three of them here today.'

'Yeah?' I'd say. 'Three of them?' I often wondered if he was aware who was in the room. As far as I knew, I was his only visitor. Our parents never went and he'd never really had any friends of his own. 'Where were they, Mike?'

'They were walking on the path. They didn't see me.'

'Yeah?'

'On the path. They were waiting.'

'Yeah?' I'd try to make it sound like a conversation, as if there was a third person in the room I was trying to impress. *See how normal we are.*

‘Yesterday there were two of them.’

‘Two?’

‘They stayed over by the trees. They didn’t think I could see.’

After a few minutes a nurse would come to the door. The nurses would change but somehow they all had the same hesitant speech and sleepy expression as the patients.

‘Would you – er – like me to bring you some tea, sir?’

They always called me ‘sir’. It must have been the suit.

‘No, thanks. Bring one for my brother, though.’

I’d learned to refuse the tea after the first few visits. It took too long to prepare. I’d forget I’d asked for it and then, just as I was about to leave, the nurse would come back with a chipped institutional mug of something cold, which I then had to stay to drink. They meant well, the nurses; they wanted the best for everybody. But the dull glaze on the cups, like the long grass outside, like the old chair, like the old mattress, was just another reminder that you were in a place where things were wrong.

The nurse would leave. Mike would stay on his chair, looking out of the window, while I told him about my job or the latest about our parents. There was never much news about them. ‘They’ve got new carpets in the bedrooms. Mum says they’ll have to get new wardrobes now, but Dad’s happy with the old ones...’ It was all at that level. I’d pass on whatever gossip I had about people he used to know. Sometimes, if there was nothing to tell him, I’d invent things – small, credible accidents, say, or plausible visits from relatives – and out of some vestigial politeness he’d say, ‘Yeah?’ or ‘Really?’ before returning to the one subject that interested him: ‘They let anyone in here. People walk in off the streets.’ And then I’d start again, with a story about Dad redecorating the guest bedroom or the latest about Paul Kavanagh. I didn’t know how much he understood but I’d tell him anyway, as if my scraps of news could make a difference, as if hearing

about Dad's DIY for the thirtieth time could bore him into sanity. I sometimes had the idea that it wasn't really my brother standing on the chair but someone who'd taken his place, a changeling who might bring back the real Mike if I pretended I hadn't noticed. The real Mike had been fit, a promising amateur welterweight who might, if all else failed, have become a decent professional middleweight. But all else had failed: the man on the chair seemed to be in his thirties, too old to be Mike, and flabby and pale.

After half an hour I'd have run out of things to say. 'Well, Mike, I'd better be going.' I'd stand by the bed for a few seconds longer. Sometimes he'd say goodbye, sometimes he wouldn't. He never turned away from the window. In the hall I might pass the nurse coming back with the tea.

'How - er - is your brother, sir?'

'No different.'

'Ah.' And the nurse would nod sadly and take the tea through to my brother's room. I'd cross the TV lounge as quickly as I could, and then go back to work.

That day Brian picked me up outside. 'How was he?'

'Same as ever.'

'Bloody shame.' He showed me the worksheet for the afternoon. 'Might as well get cracking.' Even allowing for the sclerotic London traffic we calculated we could get most of the work done before four if we worked together. Thirty house visits, most of them in the same area, then back to the office for the phone calls.

The first half-dozen were easy enough. No answer, or someone telling us our subject was gone. We pretended to believe them. We weren't interested in actually finding anybody. A successful trace meant paperwork.

House number seven was another divvied tenement. Brian sat in the car while I sprinted through the rain to the door and found the bell for the flat.

To my surprise, Joshua Painter answered. He looked just as surprised to see me. 'You again. Are you following me? I gave you the card, right. What do you want now?'

I took a step back. 'I'm not interested in you, Mr Painter. I'm looking for Peter Bedding. Does he live here?'

'Why should I tell you?' He stepped forward. Angry subjects do that: they're so intent on what they want to tell you they'll follow you right out of their houses and not notice until they're in the street. The rain stopped Joshua. He glared at the sky and retreated into his hallway. 'Why should I do anything to help you?'

'Does that mean he lives here?'

He looked thoughtful. I wondered if he was preparing a speech. 'He's moved. He doesn't live here any more. Are you happy with that or do you want to search the place?'

'I'm happy with that.'

This surprised him. It didn't give him the chance to say what he'd intended to say. He settled for something else. 'Do you know what you are? You're scum, that's what you are.'

'It's just a job.'

'That's what they said in the gas chambers.' He slammed the door in my face.

'What happened?' Brian asked, back in the car. 'He looked cross.'

'The usual. The sub's not there any more, and I'm scum. I'm a Nazi.'

'Someone who knows you, then.'

'Actually, yeah.' I told him about the earlier meeting.

Brian thought about it. 'So what do you think he was doing there?'

I said, 'Who knows what these people do?'

Sixty-eight people were missing that month. We weren't concerned. It wasn't as though it signified the collapse of society. Our runners left for the traditional reason: to avoid

paying debts. Whether these were accumulated through carelessness or bad luck didn't matter. Tony liked to say the subjects were either losers or shits, and it didn't matter which because we treated them all the same. They were names on a list, paperwork. There were other people who disappeared, of course, the ones whose out-of-date photos were taped in shop windows: 'Not seen since...' We weren't concerned with those.

We knocked on doors, made telephone calls, then went home and forgot, knowing our runners, economic fugitives, would have to turn up somewhere. Anything else that happened to them had nothing to do with us, nothing at all.

At around visit number sixteen we began to get fed up. We'd had three abusive answers in a row, and the rain still hadn't stopped. We sat in a parked car at the edge of a housing estate, one of those places supposed to be rough. That was how we spent a lot of our time: sitting in cars, waiting for the rain to stop. Brian looked at a drenched poster stuck to a dirty grey wall. I looked up at the sky, the big dramatic clouds bunched over the maisonettes. It was three in the afternoon and there were no pedestrians.

'I beat him once,' Brian said.

I had been thinking about my brother, the way I often did after a visit. 'Beat who?'

Brian nodded to the posters covering one wall. A forthcoming contest, local boy challenging for a national title. 'Him.'

'I'm not surprised. He's a welterweight.' Brian had fought at light-heavy.

'Not him. On the undercard.' You couldn't tease Brian. I'd never seen him lose his temper. The unruffled calm might have made him good at Elding Collections but it also made him the dullest successful fighter in a dull division. Eight professional victories, so tedious no promoter would touch

him. I'd seen his last match. It had gone the distance – all his fights went the distance. I'd soon given up trying to watch. By what felt like the thirty-fourth round I was examining the lights or attempting to flirt with the card girl's sister. All around me people were pinching themselves or miserably studying the programme, while in the ring, oblivious to the catcalls and cries of derision from his own corner, Brian plodded to victory as casually as a man painting a fence on a hot afternoon. Afterwards he had been able to give a blow-by-blow account. He remembered every detail of all of his fights, amateur and professional. Probably he was the only person who cared. None of his opponents ever became successful. Here, five years later, one of them was still on the undercard.

Prompted by the poster, Brian started telling me everything he could remember about their old fight. It took nearly half an hour. 'I might go and see him,' he concluded. 'See if he's got any better. Want to come? It's not as if you have anything better to do.'

'Maybe.' I'd been keen on boxing once, mainly because of Mike. I knew Brian through Mike's old gym. Shona had trained there as well. If I followed the sport now, it was because of Brian: it gave us something to talk about, and involved memorising fewer names than football.

'Good. I'll see about the tickets.' Brian looked up at the sky. 'Bloody rain. You know,' he added, as if it was hardly worth mentioning, 'I'm seeing Sue tonight for a drink. You should come.'

'I don't want to get in the way.'

'You won't be. You should get out more. It'll do you good.'

'I do get out. I run.'

The rain slackened and stopped. Brian yawned. 'Sue thinks you should come. Let's go back to the office.' He started the engine. A pedestrian, the first we'd seen, ran across the road

a little ahead of us. ‘There’s your friend,’ Brian remarked. ‘Coincidence.’

I was thinking of Mike again and hadn’t really noticed the thin man in a large black coat. He turned as he passed, though he didn’t look in our direction. It was Joshua Painter. He stood for a while in the middle of the road, staring up at the sky, then wrote something in a notebook and walked on.

‘No friend of mine.’

‘Too many drugs.’ Brian sounded philosophical, as if taking too many drugs was something anyone might do, by accident, say, or through sheer absent-mindedness. ‘Too many psychotropics.’ Brian, in his slow, methodical way, was keen to expand his vocabulary. From the way he said it, I knew ‘psychotropics’ was a recent acquisition and that I would hear more of it in the next few weeks. We’d gone through the same process with ‘anomaly’ and ‘dyspraxia’.

We drove back to the office.

We found Tony on the phone. ‘So you haven’t seen him since then? No, no, thank you for your time.’ Tony sometimes used his middle-class voice on the phone, though he pretended it was put on. He always swore as soon as he put down the receiver. ‘Fucking lying cunt, he was there last week.’ He pretended to notice us. ‘You tossers find anybody?’

‘Nobody.’

‘Same here. Where does that leave us, Piers?’

Piers didn’t even look away from his monitor. ‘In one day our monthly average has dropped to two per cent. To one point eight seven per cent, to be precise.’

If Elding Collections had been a space opera, Piers would have been the alien who didn’t understand human emotions.

‘Getting close to that magic number.’ Tony signed a report with a flourish, as if it was an important treaty and the world was watching. ‘What happens when we reach no success at all? Or negative figures? What would that be?’

‘Finding people we’re not looking for,’ I suggested.

‘No.’ This was the kind of question Piers found interesting. ‘It would be not finding people who are there.’

We debated the point. Brian didn’t take part. He sat at his empty desk and looked at us tolerantly.

To kill the last hour we started making calls. *I’d like to talk to... Could someone in personnel help?* If it was a small company, a garage or a shop, we said who we were. If it was a big company we’d pretend we were friends. *Not there any more? Not to worry, I’ll catch him at home later.* We tried to vary our voices, except for Piers, who only had one. Tony had the full range, from upper middle to dead common, with a few provincial accents for relief. We asked the same questions, were given the same answers.

‘Christ, this is dull,’ Tony said towards five. ‘Jesus fucking Christ, this is dull.’ He threw a paper dart at me. I unfolded it. He’d written, *At least we’re not selling double glazing.* I screwed it up into a ball.

Brian finished his own call.

‘Don’t complain,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘At least we’re not selling double glazing.’

Tony slapped his desk in triumph, then glared at me. ‘Laugh, you bastard.’

I threw the ball of paper into his face. ‘I can’t. It’s not as funny as it was the first six times.’

‘What is it with you? Jesus, you’re uptight.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with me.’

He slapped his desk again. ‘Oh, yes, there is. You are screwed so tight something’s going to snap. You don’t relax a bit, mate, you’re gonna end up in the cackle factory.’

‘Careful,’ Brian said, but Tony was on a roll. He knew about Mike, they all did. But Tony got carried away. He said things because he liked the sound of them.

The office had a lot of telephone directories. I picked one up from the floor, balancing it on the palm of my hand.

‘Still,’ Tony said, ‘least it’s somewhere they know you. Fuck, they’ll probably let you share a room. They could rename it the Farrell Wing –’

‘Don’t,’ said Brian. Too slow. Tony caught the spine of *E-K* square in the face. It almost knocked him off his chair. Almost: I’d thrown it sitting down and didn’t have the leverage. Tony cupped his face in his hands and turned away howling.

‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ Brian said mildly.

‘I know. I should have stood up.’ I vaulted on to my desk and took a long step on to Tony’s. He might have had a weight advantage, but I’d hurt him first and he didn’t see me coming. I put my foot against his back and pushed hard. The chair was on castors and went down with him. He hit the floor heavily, with a hoarse gasp. His face was bright red, and there was a black line across the bridge of his nose. He put his hands up for protection, untangled his legs from the chair, and tried to roll away. There wasn’t enough room. He was trapped between his desk and the filing cabinet. I jumped down from the desk, got in two sharp kicks, then jumped clear of his stabbing feet.

Piers didn’t say a word. He’d seen it all before.

Tony pulled himself back up, then righted the chair. He stood leaning against his desk, one hand over his nose, the other pressed against his side, just under the ribs. He couldn’t talk, and his white shirt was grey with sweat. Brian laughed gently. I moved back behind my desk. Tony was too out of breath to hit me, but he might have thrown something. We watched him. Gradually he stopped rubbing his side and experimented with taking his hand away from his nose.

Hameed came in with a worksheet. He looked at us looking at Tony, handed the sheet to Piers, and left. Piers glanced through the paperwork. ‘Our monthly average is now two point one eight.’

‘Ham had a good day, then.’ Brian was beginning to get tired of watching Tony. ‘That’s good.’

Tony finally spoke. He was still out of breath. ‘What’s good about it?’

Brian shrugged.

Tony glanced at me, then stared at his hand, looking for blood. There wasn’t much: a little thick, dark seepage from the top of his nose.

‘You’re a mad cunt, Farrell,’ he said, admiringly. ‘Don’t think I won’t hold this against you.’ He pulled at where his damp shirt clung to his stomach. ‘I’ve had enough. All I’ve had today is aggravation.’

He picked up some papers from the floor, threw them on to Piers’s desk, folded his jacket over his arm, and left.

Tony should have been used to aggravation. He was, as Brian used to warn me, a wind-up merchant. The only one of us who hadn’t taken a swing at him was Piers, and that was only because Tony would get bored long before Piers showed any signs of getting angry. I’d hit Tony before; Hameed had nearly broken his arm; Brian had allegedly once knocked him cold (he was supposed to have done it impersonally, on behalf of somebody else). Tony accepted it as proof he was tough. I sometimes thought he’d have been disappointed if I *hadn’t* hit him. Now and again he’d hit back, but his heart wasn’t in it. For all his swagger he wasn’t very good at fighting. His retaliation was mostly verbal.

‘Those kicks were a bit unnecessary.’ Brian, as a fighter, had always believed in doing just enough to win. ‘You should relax a bit more. Maybe try some psychotropics. Let’s go to the pub.’

A typical day.