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Faces

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Extract

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Chapter One

1969

'Am I, by any chance, keeping you up, Cadogan?'

The boy didn't answer, the fear of saying the wrong thing making him wary. He shook his head violently in denial instead.

'Oh, I'm sorry, child, did I interrupt your praying then? Only you close your eyes for two things in this life, sleeping or praying. Or am I a fecking eegit, and there's a third reason that I don't know anything about?'

'No. Of course not . . .'

The priest looked around the classroom, his arms outstretched in a gesture of complete innocence. He looked, for all the world, like a man interested in what a young fella might have to tell him.

'I mean, child, if you have something to *share* with the rest of us mere fecking mortals, if you have some kind of fecking phone line to the Almighty Himself that we don't know about, feel free to share your good fortune with those of us not deemed important enough to have the like ourselves.'

Jonjo still didn't answer him, knowing that anything he said would be misconstrued, distorted and then used against him.

'So, were you praying then, maybe to a saint, or the Blessed Virgin Mary herself. Or were you just fecking sleeping away the shagging morning? Now, I personally feel that the latter was probably the case. So, come on then, Cadogan, which is it to be?'

The priest was a short man, not much over five foot, with a

slight stoop and a drinker's gait. Grey before his time, his sparse hair was possessed of a life of its own. He always looked like he had just got out of his bed. His watery grey eyes were deep set and already had the shadows of cataracts on them. His breath was foul, all the boys who sat at the front desks complained about it. His tongue was a furry black point, and it snaked in and out of his mouth as he shouted at them. He was a fascinating chunk of human tragedy who they would remember for the rest of their lives. He was always angry inside and, as always, he vented his spleen on the nearest target he could find. His sarcasm was not only meant to demean and wound, but was also expected to be found highly amusing by the other children in his class. All the boys hated him, but they learned off by heart whatever he told them they had to, and they never forgot any of it either; he could go back to it at any time to try and catch them out.

'Were you asleep, lad? Praying to our Lord Himself, Him being such a grand friend of course, were you asking Him for a Special Intention maybe?' He looked at the sea of faces and said, with sarcasm, 'I *know* what you were doing, Cadogan, with your eyes closed and your mouth open like a gormless fecking mental retard, you were asking a favour of St Jude himself.'

He looked around the classroom, his eyebrows raised as if in wonderment, and he saw the relief in each and every pair of eyes that it wasn't them who had been singled out by him. Deep inside him the shame was overwhelming; after he demoralised a child in his care he always hated himself for his bullying. But the pettiness and discontent poured out of him as the boy he was singling out did nothing at all to defend himself from his vicious onslaught. That made him worse, made him feel they deserved everything they got. He started mimicking a little girl, a cockney girl at that, and this did manage to raise a few smiles from his class.

'Oh, Saint Jude, Patron Saint of *no* 'Ope, could you help me find me brain at all?' He sniggered then, enjoying his own wit, enjoying the boy's embarrassment more.

'Well, was that why you had your eyes closed tight while I was attempting to instil a modicum of education into that thick head of yours?'

'No, Sir, I mean, Father . . .'

Jonjo's voice was shaking with fright, but that didn't make him seem any less in front of his school friends, they would all have been the same had they been the one on the receiving end. Father Patrick was a hard case and they knew that. He was capable of bodily dragging a lad from his seat and thrashing him with fists and feet, for no reason other than he felt they were looking at him cross-eyed. That was a favourite expression of Father Patrick's, looking at him cross-eyed and, as most of the boys in the class were from Irish stock they knew exactly what that meant; it meant they had looked at him without respect, without giving him what he saw as his due. What it really meant though was that he was half pissed and looking for someone to take his anger out on.

The boys knew they had to accept his punishment, none of their parents would take a child's word over a priest's. None of the children there would have expected their parents to do that anyway, after all he *was* a priest. Christ's emissary on earth. He had his own creds as far as they were concerned. The fact that he had given up his chance to have a family, indulge in the sex act, and had dedicated his life to the betterment of others was enough for them. Who wouldn't get the arse now and again after that kind of promise? So they took what he had to give with a stoic calm that actually enraged him even more.

'Sleep was it then, you *were* having a fecking nap! A quick bit of shut-eye! Do your parents not make you go to bed at all? Are you up half the shagging night to be so tired during the day?'

He had already dragged the boy from his seat and, feeling the solid weight of him, the priest knew that soon he would be too big for this kind of treatment. He was a lump, like his brother before him, another fecking thicko who had driven him to distraction on more than one occasion, and he set about Jonjo with a renewed vigour, knowing this was probably the last time he would get the opportunity to do so. Once they could look him in the eye he left them alone and Jonjo was big for his age. Thank God he was still so in awe of the church that he wouldn't even consider fighting back.

These children were the bane of his life, they were the scum of

the earth. He knew that what he did to them was wrong, but he couldn't help himself. In fact, the more they let him, the worse it seemed to make him. As he saw them watching him with a mixture of terror and acceptance, the more he wanted to beat the living crap out of them. They were a class of criminals in the making, none of them would ever amount to feck all. He was teaching them for nothing, filling in their time and his, until they hit the factories and he was finally put out to grass, and that galled him. These boys were able to get one of the best educations in the world for free, and none of them understood the importance of that. No wonder he took a drink. These children, poor as they were, had the opportunity to better themselves, and it cost neither them nor their families nothing, and they still didn't want to take advantage of it. Didn't understand how lucky they were to have that handed to them on a plate. To have the choice, a choice that was not offered to most of the world's population. And *he* was stuck here, teaching this shower of shite, because he was not deemed good enough to be put somewhere his learning would actually be of some practical use. If they were the bottom of the scrap heap then where did that leave him? And then they wondered why he took a nip to get him through the day.

Jonjo took his beating with quiet resignation and the priest, his anger now spent, his bony hand aching, went unsteadily back to his seat. 'Open your bibles, go to the Revelations of Saint John the Divine, and make sure you all know it inside out and back to front by the morrow, because I'm going to question you on every fecking word he wrote down and woe betide anyone who doesn't know the answers to my questions.'

The boys did as asked, confident in the knowledge that they knew it far better than he did. Revelations was his usual request and they obliged without any fuss.

Jonjo was dying to rub his aching shoulders, but he knew better than to do anything like that. Father Patrick would see him, and that would just start the whole bloody thing off again. He gritted his teeth and prayed to the Holy Virgin, asking her with every ounce of sincerity he possessed, to please stop him from wishing the priest dead at every available opportunity.

Father Patrick saw the boy's face and said angrily, 'You, you little fecker, can serve at the Mass for a week. The early one.'

'Yes, Sir. I mean, Father.'

The six o'clock Mass was a bastard, he would have to be up and out by five thirty but, on the plus side, his mother had always attended, so at least he would have a bit of company on the journey anyway. Something he knew she enjoyed as well. Plus, if he took communion he was guaranteed a decent breakfast; fried egg and fried bread at least. His mother rewarded them richly for their sacrifice, she dreamed of them all accompanying her to early Mass. It was only really to make the other women there feel inadequate because their children weren't beside them. His mother put a lot of store on what other people thought, especially when it involved religion and the church itself. It was just a shame that they only accompanied her when they were in trouble. Not that she let a little thing like that spoil her enjoyment, of course. To see them serve at Mass was enough for her, and she had so few good things in her life that, like his brother, Jonjo was happy to do it, just to see her pleasure and then to bask in her goodwill.

He was brought back to reality by the priest turning his vitriol on to a small Italian boy with huge dark eyes and an asthmatic's cough.

'Is this whole fecking class suffering from a plague of galloping narcolepsy? Is a sleeping sickness taking over from the usual boredom and ennui that I encounter every single day, or is it that, once more, the deadliest scourge of all has reared its ugly head, that old enemy of mine, hereditary stupidity? An English kind of complaint, not something I ever encountered in all my years in Ireland.' Father Patrick was on familiar ground now, this was something they listened to on a daily basis and it was also something that Father Patrick didn't ever expect an answer to. He was talking for effect, happy just to hear his own voice.

Jonjo relaxed, rubbed his shoulders surreptitiously, and wondered if his sister was all right as this was her first day at school and her first day alone in the world without either of her brothers to look out for her. Even at eight years old he understood the ties of family and about taking care of his sister: his mother had made sure of that much.

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'I want my money, Mrs Reardon.'

Mrs Reardon looked at the tiny woman standing on her front step and she smiled with an ease that belied her usual demeanour. All innocent now, she said quietly, 'And what money would that be, Mrs Cadogan?' She sounded genuinely interested in whatever answer she might be given, her heavy arms were crossed over her ample chest, and her feet were planted slightly apart, giving her the stance of a street fighter. She was not a woman to cross, and she knew that, had made sure of it, in fact. And this little thing with her thick black hair and pink-cheeked anger was about to find that out the hard way.

If push came to shove she would give her the battering of a lifetime before sending her on her way with a flea in her ear and the threat of the police. The Irish were renowned for their temperament, idle wasters, who wanted a day's pay for doing fuck all.

'You know full well what money I am referring to, and I'm warning you now, I'll get me due and you'll rue the day you tried to spite me.'

Elsie Reardon was impressed, despite herself. She often tendered work out and then collected the money owed, keeping it for herself. These women were ten a penny; as she watched one walk away another fifty were willing to take their place. Cleaning was hardly rocket science, and even the scruffiest of them were able to scrub a floor or a window. She had found that the first few weeks were when they worked their hardest, showed the most willing. So the householder would be thrilled at the job done, and she would be guaranteed a regular stint. The high turnover of staff was rarely noticed by the people who were employing them, so she was able to keep most of the money earned for herself.

'Look, love, I gave you a chance and you didn't make the grade. The lady of the house requested that I send someone else in your place.' She smiled again, her meaty arms lifting her pendulous breasts up as if to emphasise her point.

Angelica Cadogan was angry but, like her elder son, it wasn't evident to anyone around her. She had a slow burning anger that

she could unleash at will and, when she did let it go, the results were spectacular.

'You're a fecking liar and you know it. Mrs Brown has asked me to stay on permanent like, and I've said I will. So give me *my* money.'

Elsie Reardon was aware that most of her neighbours were watching the performance on her doorstep with anticipation. A fight was always a crowd pleaser. 'Do yourself a favour and fuck off.'

Angelica looked at the large unkempt women before her, she took in the grubby clothes, the hair still in its rollers from the day before, and the bright-red lipstick that was applied without any kind of finesse. Putting her large shopping bag carefully down on to the pavement, she squared up to the woman and said quietly, 'This is your last chance to pay me what you owe. I need that money, I earned it, and I won't leave until I have it safely in my purse.'

Elsie Reardon laughed then, really laughed. It was a nice laugh, in fact, in any other circumstance it would have made Angelica join in, share the joke. Instead, she drew back her fist and, smashing it into her antagonist's face with more force than expected, she quickly grabbed at the head full of rollers and, using them as a lever, dragged the protesting woman onto the pavement. The fight was over quickly, and with the minimum of fuss. Angelica could fight, could *really* have a row if she needed to, but that was the difference between the two women. Elsie Reardon could talk a good fight, but she couldn't actually have one; she depended on her bulk and her mouth to win the day for her.

Angelica, however, was a natural fighter. She took a child's sock from her coat pocket, a long white school sock she had filled with stones from her garden, then she set about battering the woman with gusto. Angelica knew that she would get her money, and she also knew that she was a fool to have trusted this woman in the first place. But this had been easier than she had believed possible. Reardon had had a fearsome reputation and she had taken that from her.

She'd had no choice. Her old man was once more on the

missing list, and she hadn't even enough money to buy a loaf of bread. So, either way, she had to call in the debt owed her. She had tried asking politely and it had been futile, the hammering had been the decider. Finally, the money was paid over and she thanked the woman and walked back home with her head held high. In Bethnal Green market she bought a few bits and pieces for the kids' dinner, and worried once again how the hell she was going to pay the mountain of bills she had indoors. Big Danny, as her husband was known, had been gone for three days and now she knew she had no hope in heaven of getting any money out of him. It was Monday and she had last clapped eyes on him on Friday morning as he had left for work. She knew she had more chance of getting the Pope's inside leg measurement than getting any money out of the man she had married.

But what really hurt was the fact that she had been reduced to brawling in the street for a paltry fifteen bob, and that was something she would never forget and, as her husband would find out soon enough, she would never forgive, either.

Big Dan Cadogan was a seriously worried man. He was in a pub in north London drinking a pint bought with his last few bob. He had been on the missing list for three days and he was not only skint, he was now the proud possessor of a very large gambling debt.

He could vaguely remember getting into a card game with some heavy-duty players, and that was about all he could remember for certain. That he had been had over was a given; when under the influence of the toxic shandy he was an easy mark. But the worst thing was that he knew he had been the orchestrator of his own downfall – as usual. When drunk he was convinced he was the poker king of east London. He had more than likely bluffed away the six hundred quid he now owed on a pair of twos or an ace high. Cards were his downfall; one game was never enough and, coupled with the drink, he was a real liability. He had no recollection of any of the hands he had held, or the people he had played with. All he knew for certain was that he owed the Murray brothers six large and, like many a man before him, he was not stupid enough to

argue the toss over the finer points of his predicament. Not only was he unable to recall actually losing the money in the first place, he also knew that they would have witnesses to all that or, worse, that they would not even give him any kind of real timescale in which to pay them. They had already told him that he had one week to bring them their money before they would come looking for him. On their first call he would lose a finger or experience a broken bone or two, after that it would be open season.

But knowing that didn't make him feel any better. In fact, it made him feel worse because he knew that whoever he had played with had taken a major advantage. The bottom line though was that a gambling debt was still a gambling debt, so it had to be paid – even if that meant that his family went without. You could owe fortunes to a tallyman, even a debt collector, but a bet was a different ball game. It was a matter of honour to see that it was paid in full. The threat of violence aside, he would rather chop his own fingers off than be seen as a welsher. What he needed was a plan, something that would get him enough money to honour the debt and save his reputation.

Ange, as he called his wife, was going to cut off his balls and serve them up in a casserole when she heard about this, and he knew that he would be honour-bound to let her do just that to keep the peace. As hard as he could be with her, as handy as he was with his fists when the fancy took him and her fucking big trap was open, which, they both knew, was more often than not her downfall, he also knew that this time he had gone too far. His usual blarney and aggressiveness would not be enough to shut her up this time, she was in the right, and a woman with right on her side and three hungry kids was a woman capable of murder. Ange had a temper and, unlike him, she didn't need alcohol to fuel it.

He owed a fortune and he had no way of paying it off. For the first time in his life he was genuinely frightened. For the first time in his life he knew he was going to have to run.

Danny Cadogan was nearly fourteen, but he looked much older. He was already touching six foot and his body was filling out nicely; his mother was already despairing of ever keeping him in a

pair of shoes that actually fit his enormous feet. Today he was in agony because even his father's old boots were tighter than a vicar on a pub crawl. He was a big lad and that was a plus most of the time, especially when it came to getting a bit of work. His main bugbear was that he seemed to be growing bigger by the day. This would have been a welcome development if he had been born into a family with a regular wage, especially if that wage had gone into the household instead of over a bar or across a card table. But that was not something he could do anything about; his father was a law unto himself. Danny Junior had always put himself about, earned a few bob in whatever way he could so that when his mother was at panic stations over his father's absence, as she was now, he could allay her fears a bit by putting some food on the table.

As Danny shifted the scrap metal for a local merchant, he saw that the man was watching him again. Louie Stein was always on the look out for good earners, and this kid was a grafter if ever he had seen one. He worked without a break, his young arms straining against the weight of the lead as he piled it neatly against the far wall. It was out of sight if Filth came around, and yet it was near enough to the front gates for a quick removal if that was required.

Louie walked over to Danny Cadogan and smiled, his gold teeth glinting in the weak sunshine, reminding Danny of a shark he had once seen in a picture book.

'Why aren't you at school?'

Danny shrugged and carried on working.

'Answer me, boy. If someone asks you a question you should at least attempt an answer, even if it's just a fabrication. A lie.'

Louie's words were clipped and Danny knew he had annoyed him. So he stopped what he was doing and, looking into the small man's wrinkled face, he said seriously, 'I need the money. What other reason would there be for doing this all day?'

He said it respectfully, but Louie knew he was also trying to be sarcastic. He understood that, liked the boy for his spirit. He weighed him up; he was very young but he acted like a boy much older than his years. He had the arrogance that extreme youth seemed to command, still sure in the knowledge that he had many

years ahead of him in which to live his life and achieve a few of his dreams, his goals.

'Why do you need the money so badly?'

Danny looked at the older man with a mixture of pity at his obvious stupidity and a natural cunning that made him want to see how the conversation progressed in case he could use it to his advantage. 'Me mum needs a few quid in her bin, she's skint.'

Louie nodded, as if expecting the answer he had received. 'You're Big Dan Cadogan's boy, aren't you?'

'Why ask me when you already know the answer? It's not a secret.'

Louie grinned once more. 'A little bird told me that he is into a couple of hard cases for six large.'

Danny forced his face to remain neutral, and he shrugged theatrically, as if this news was nothing to get wound up about. 'He'll pay them, what are you fucking telling me for?'

Louie shrugged back, his shrunken body lost in the folds of his gabardine suit. Then, laughing, he wiped his nose on a dazzling white handkerchief he pulled from his trouser pocket with a flourish. It was like a magician's movement, exaggerated and over the top, and Danny knew he was paying him back for his overstated shrug.

'Forewarned is forearmed, my boy. Remember that, it will hold you in good stead all your life. Now, shift that lead, Filth will be scrabbling around soon; they know it's here but they don't like it if it's on display. I pay them to look the other way and they take the money, as long as they don't feel I am extracting the urine, if you get my drift.' He laughed once more, his bony shoulders shaking with his idea of mirth.

'Out of sight, out of mind. Another great saying to add to your collection.'

Danny rolled his eyes in annoyance. 'I'll bring a pen and paper next time, shall I? Write everything down in case I forget it.'

Louie walked away, his laugh louder than ever, and Danny watched him with anger and shame in his heart. Six large, that was a lot of money. The few quid for his day's collar seemed like nothing now. He shook his head at the shock of the man's words,

at the realisation of what they actually meant to him and his family. Six large. It was enough to buy a house, and his old man had gambled it away when they couldn't even pay the rent on the roof over their heads, let alone buy it. And he was reduced to wearing a pair of boots so dilapidated that even his father had abandoned them. His mother was dressed like someone from the good old days, and his brother and sister were both far too young to understand about the intricacies of money and what you actually needed it for. And yet, despite that, his father, his fucking *useless waster* of a father, had lost a small fortune on the turn of a card.

Louie watched the lad as what he had told him sank in. He saw how he picked up the heavy lead and swung it as if it weighed nothing. He knew he would work out his anger before going on his way. He knew the boy was upset and he was sorry for that, but Louie knew that if it had been him, he would have wanted to know about it sooner rather than later.

He had five daughters himself, five lovely girls with great personalities and no real looks. Danny would have been a blessing for someone like him, someone to leave his business to, someone to carry his name on. Life was unfair, but then you played the hand you had been dealt, as his father had always said. But, if you were really unlucky then you found yourself playing the hand the Murrays dealt you. Fucking gamblers, losers every last one of them. And this boy and his family would be branded as losers along with their old man; a debt like that was owed by everyone even remotely related to the debtee.

Young Danny Cadogan could feel old man Stein watching him, and the shame of his situation made his face burn. The six large was still in the forefront of his mind and he knew that what Louie had told him was the truth. The old boy was trying to soften the blow, better it came from him than hearing it from a hairy-arsed debt collector one Saturday morning. He wondered if his mother knew, and whether he should be the one to tell her. Life was hard, and this growing-up lark was not all it was cracked up to be either. He went back to stacking the lead, hoping the physical work would help take his mind off his troubles.

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Annuncia Cadogan, known as Annie, was in her element; for the first time in her life she was alone. No mammy watching her every move, and no brothers making sure that she didn't do anything to make their mammy angry. She sat in the small classroom and beamed a wide and pretty smile at all who looked in her direction. It was the smell she had noticed first, a mixture of floor polish and fresh paint. Now though, added to that was the musky scent of thirty small children, some bathed for the first time in weeks. Most of the children were wearing their older siblings hand-me-downs, and a few others, like herself, were in painfully new uniforms that caused them to stand out even more than the Asian kids, who were still new to the area and spoke English with an accent.

Like many of the children around her, Annie had a working knowledge of the Bible, and of the church itself. A lot of the children were from parents who educated their offspring in the Catholic religion, even though they weren't beating a path to the church door themselves. They just didn't have the time or the inclination after a hard week's work. Work took precedence over a lot of things in England and, unlike Ireland, where most of their parents hailed from, the church, though still a big part of their lives, didn't dictate their every waking hour.

Carole Rourke was sitting next to her and Annie held her hand tightly as she listened to the story of St Francis of Assisi. She loved hearing about him because she prayed to him nightly that she might be allowed a pet of some kind. Her mother had refused her requests for a dog or a cat, but she was sure a rabbit or a hamster might be within the realms of possibility.

As her first day at school passed she felt the weight of her home life being lifted off her shoulders, and she hoped that this feeling of excitement would not leave her. By home time she had decided that this place was not going to be the bane of *her* life as her brothers seemed to believe it was theirs, and she was looking forward to coming back the next day – much more than she was looking forward to her father's eventual return to the family home, even though she knew she was his favourite.

Trouble was brewing there and she knew it would come sooner rather than later. Her father was a man who was either terrorising

the life out of them all, or making them laugh their heads off. There was never a happy medium where he was concerned. But this new school lark would guarantee that she was out from under her mother's watchful gaze for a few hours at least.

'Oh, Jesus fecking cross of Christ, six hundred pounds! Are you sure, Dan? Surely even that fool I married wouldn't be that stupid?' But even as she spoke she knew it was the truth.

'I'm sorry, Mum. Louie Stein told me about it today; I think he was trying to be helpful. I know he's a front wheel, but he's always been straight with me. He's offered me some more work this week and all.'

Angelica wasn't listening to him now, she was reeling with the news her son had just imparted. The consequences would be dire; that much she knew. There was no way they would be able to raise that kind of cash. If they had been able to get their hands on six hundred pounds they would have been living the life of Riley and eating like a gladiator on his day off. Her husband had pulled some stunts over the years, but this was a blinder – even by his standards.

Danny watched his mother as she digested the information, and he knew that she had not even noticed the two pound notes he had placed on the table. His father's debt had made his contribution to the household look paltry by comparison. He was working when he should be in school, he was dressed like a tramp when how he looked was all important to him, he had few friends because he couldn't afford to take part in any of their teenage high jinks; even the Saturday morning pictures was out of his league. He was an outcast among people who were classed as the poorest of the poor. He was trying to make a difference for his brother and sister, ease his mother's burden, the same mother he knew, who was not even aware of the sacrifices he made to try and lighten her load. Turning from her he went into the bedroom he shared with his younger siblings and, lying on the bed he shared with Jonjo, he forced back the tears, because he knew they were a luxury he couldn't afford.