

His name is Fielding Wopuld. Of those Wopulds, the games family, the people with their name plastered all over the board of *Empire!* (still the UK's best-selling board game, by some margin). They're behind a heap of other stuff, too, of course, but that's the famous one, the one people tend to have heard of, whether it's the original snail-play version featuring cardboard, paper and plastic or its slick, attractively rendered and award-winning electronic successor, currently riding high in the computer games charts.

Vice-President, Sales. That's his position in the family firm: in charge of a multimillion-pound budget promoting their various wares around the world, persuading wholesalers, online concerns, retail chains and big store groups to stock and sell their product. Doing well at it, too – hefty bonus last year.

Henry Wopuld, the guy who first dreamed up *Empire!* back in Victorian times, was his great-grandfather, so for whatever it's worth he's kind of direct in line. Fielding is still just thirty and keeps himself in pretty good shape with a variety of sports. He drives a Mercedes S-class, has a whole bunch of friends, a very beautiful and sexy partner and generally lives the kind of successful life most people can only dream of.

All of which does kind of raise the question in Fielding's mind,

What the hell am I doing here? as he drives into this scummy-looking housing estate in Perth. This is Perth, Scotland, we're talking about here, not Perth, Australia. Perth, Australia, is a beautiful, bright, sunny kind of place sprawling between the desert and the ocean – lots of surf and sizzling barbies and gleaming bronzed bodies. Perth, Scotland, is smaller and a lot less high-rise, sitting surrounded by low hills, forests and farmland. It boasts a variety of nice buildings and some very attractive detached properties facing the river, but not a lot of bronzed bodies that Fielding can see. He knows Scotland a bit – various family members have chosen to reside here for reasons best known to themselves and the Wopulds still, for now, have one of those vast huntin', shootin' 'n' fishin' estates in the far north of the place – but this is the first time he's been to Perth, he's fairly sure. The Fair City they call it, apparently. And it's okay, he supposes, if you like old stuff and history and that sort of thing. He always had the impression that it was pretty posh and full of people wearing corduroy, tweeds and Barbour jackets, but this housing scheme on the outskirts looks like Chav City, Ned Central – a sink estate at the bottom of the U-bend.

He's driving down Skye Crescent – the whole scheme is nothing but islands – between long blocks of three- and four-storey flats covered in patchy pebble-dash spotted with poor-quality graffiti. The tiny gardens at the front of the flats are just plain unkempt. He's used to kempt.

There's a lot of litter about, some of it flying about in the breeze coming funnelling down the street from the bright September clouds. He hasn't seen any bottles of Buckfast lying in the gutters – or any people lying in the gutter for that matter – and the kerb is lined with cars rather than wrecks, but – well – still.

Okay, some shops here, doors open but windows covered in metal grilles even now, during the day. Couple of thin, pimply youths standing outside something called Costcutter, sharing a bottle and watching the car slide past. *Yeah, it's an S-class 500 AMG, boyz. Look upon it and weep. See what you might get if you do your homework*

and work hard. Whatever. Just keep your fucking hands off it. The delicate art of not making eye-contact while looking hard and supremely confident.

Uh-uh: there's a bottle, there in the gutter. Just a little green beer bottle. Beck's, possibly. Not so bad.

He finds number 58 by a process of elimination. The sat-nav gave up at the start of the street and there's no sign where the number should be, by the security grille at the side of the door; however, the entrance before was number 56 and the one after is 60, so he's pretty confident. Check for broken glass, park carefully, nice and tight by the kerb. Swing the wing mirrors up into their parked position, just to be on the safe side. Deep breath and prepare to go out into the mild air. First, though, into the glove box and administer a few quick squirts of Versace, up each sleeve and on the back of the neck. At least something around here isn't going to smell of shit.

He stands on the uneven pavement, watching from the corner of one eye as the car alarm flashes the indicators once. Smells like somebody is cooking tinned Irish stew for a late breakfast or an early lunch. What does he feel like? He feels like a shark out of water, that's what he feels like.

He knows this is how a lot of people live, and he's sure they're not all druggies and nutters, but, Christ, what a soul-destroying spot, what a place to basically get the hell out of as soon as you can.

Shit, I forgot the fucking briefcase. Now he was going to look like a dickhead, getting out of the car, locking it and standing here, then having to unlock it again almost immediately and getting the case out. Maybe he should leave the briefcase in the car. There's only mail in it, anyway. A bunch of letters and bills and junk his dingbat cousin probably never wanted in the first place. Mail your man abandoned months ago, on another job, in another country.

Nope, can't leave the case in the car because it's sitting on the back seat, in full view. A Zero Halliburton aluminium case like you see in the movies, which in this kind of neighbourhood – well, in almost any kind of neighbourhood, to be fair – just shouts *Steal me!*

at a zillion fucking decibels. He can't see anybody watching him, but it feels like the whole street is. He unalarms and reopens the car, takes the case, re-alarms casually (but still makes sure the hazards flash) and strides purposefully up the short path to the security door, kicking the gaudy wreck of a broken toy gun out of the way as he goes.

The block's glass-and-metal door looks like people have thrown up on it and then tried to rinse off the mess by pissing all over it. This obviously didn't work because apparently then they tried setting it on fire. The button by the scarred plastic name-plate for flat E just sort of sinks into its housing. No buzzer sounds anywhere.

He pushes on the door and it scrapes open. Inside there are shiny concrete steps and a suspicious smell of disinfectant.

Well, Fielding, he tells himself, the only way is up.

'Hey, Al? Al? Al, ya dozy cunt, fucken wake up. Al! Come on, big man. Wakey fucken wakey.'

He opened his eyes one at a time, to allow for anything unforeseen. The world converged into focus, as though the effort was all its. The thin, pointy, slightly chipped-looking face of Mr Daniel Gow – Tango all the rest of the time when he wasn't wearing a suit and trying to look sincere while somebody more privileged pleaded his case – looked down at him.

'Tango,' he said, croaking a little. He rubbed his face, then shifted in the sleeping bag, feeling its nylon covering snag on some carpet tacks left exposed on the bare wooden boards of the small room. He looked up at the light coming through the thin sheet nailed over the window. 'What, late afternoon already?'

'No even eleven yet, pal. But ye've got a visitor.'

He blinked, rubbed his eyes and coughed, twisting and sitting up, his back against the bare, magnolia-painted wall. He scratched his chin through a fairly full brown beard. 'Official kind of visitor?' he asked. His voice was slightly slurred. 'Kind of visitor a person might associate with manila envelopes and threats regarding non-compliance, or

failure to attend an appointment arranged by an institution of a governmental nature?’

‘Naw, dude. Posh. A suit.’

‘A suit?’

‘Aye, a suit. He’s no wearin a suit, but he’s a suit all the same. Teeth like Tom fucken Cruise. Smells like a expensive hoorhouse; the dugs took one sniff of his shoes and started sneezin. They’ve retreated to the kitchen. Surprised ye haurnae caught a whiff of him already. Currently standin near the windae in the livin room, watchin nae bugger fucks with his motor. Briefcase like the kind that always has drugs or bings a money in it, in the fillums. Says he’s yer cousin.’

‘Ah.’ Alban McGill rubbed his face, smoothed his beard down as best he could and scratched fingers through thick, curly, light brown hair. His face and lower arms were the kind of deep tanned red that fair-skinned people get when they spend a lot of time outside, though his upper arms and torso, which were thickly muscled, remained pale. Part of the small finger on his left hand was missing. ‘A cousin,’ he said, sighing. He blinked at Tango, who was squatting, watching him. ‘Give a name?’

Tango’s pinched-looking face, stalagtital beneath the grey dome of a shaved head, wrinkled. ‘Fielding?’ he offered.

‘Fielding?’ Alban said, obviously surprised. Then his brows furrowed. ‘Oh, yeah; the teeth like Tom Cruise. Okay, fair enough.’ He scratched his chest, looked round the room at his boots, backpack and clothes. There was an open bottle of red wine on the floor near his watch, the top lying nearby. Further along the skirting board lay a shadeless bedside lamp. ‘Fielding Wubble-you,’ he pronounced. He reached out towards the wine bottle, then seemed to think the better of it, frowning.

‘Cup a tea?’ Tango suggested.

Alban nodded. ‘Cup of tea,’ he agreed.

My names Tango, this is my house. Technically it belongs to the council, but you know what I mean. Al is my guest, welcome to

crash here any time. Met the big guy in a pub year or two ago with the guy's he was working with. Foresters, chopping down trees and the like. Been doing just that somewhere nearby, living in caravans in the mighty forests of Perth and Kinross. Serious drinker's. The ones he was with, anyway. Few games of pool, few rounds of drink. Him and one of his pals came back to mine for a couple of cans and a smoke. Also, Al was getting on very well with a girl we were with. Sheen, I think it was. Maybe Shone. Either way. Think him and the lassie went off together late on.

No, wait, Sheen/Shone (delete as applicable) went off with Big Al's tree-chopping compadre, not him. Al seemed keenish for a bit but then got all that dead quiet way he gets when he gets stoned and drunk and doesn't say much and all he seems to want to do is drink some more and stare into corners or at blank walls at maybe something nobody else can see, so Shone/Sheen turned her attentions to his mate. Fair play to the girl. Must have thought she was doing all right with Al – he's not bad looking and he's nice and got a soft, well-speaking kind of voice – and I think Al's pal said Was it OK? even if it was said just with the eyebrows and a sideways nod kind a thing, and Al just grinned and nodded, so, like I say, fair do's.

Well, I think so. Truth be told I was a bit out of it by then.

Anyway, he's been back a few times since and he's spent the last couple of weeks here at the abode of yours truly since he got invalidated out of the forestry service for growing insensitivity. Which sounds a bit daft I know but apparently is true. He looks about my age (I was born in November 1975, so I've got the Three-Oh coming up in a couple of months – fucking hell!!!) but he's actually five years older than me. Probably look even younger if he ditched the face-fungus.

Anyways, here we go with the making of the tea. While I'm doing this, tripping over the dogs and checking in the fridge on the milk situation the door goes again and I let in Sunny and Di and they go in and nod to the Fielding guy – who is still standing at

the window so he can see his car – and they sit on the couch and spark up a couple of Camel Lights, On Which Duty Has Not Been Paid. Their both trying to give up so only smoking Lights and so find they have to smoke more for to get the full effect. They'd both be about ten years the younger of me. Sunny's full name is Sunny D and his even fuller name is Sunny Daniel, to distinguish him from me, as I'm a Daniel too, even though people call me Tango and that's more my real name than Daniel, same way that for at least the last few years now Sunny's name has been just that, not Daniel. Meanwhile Al is voiding noisily in the toilet. Sorry, but it's true.

'Dinnae open the window, pal, you'll let the budgies out!'

'Sorry,' the Fielding character says, not sounding it, and closes the window again. He glances down at Sunny and Di, still drawing hard on their Camel Lights. Must be one of those real anti-smoking types, I suppose. I do worry about the health of the livestock sometimes. Have I stunted the growth of the hounds by keeping them in a flat where people smoke all the time? Are the budgies going to be more prone for respiratorial diseases in later life? Who can say?

Anyway, it's not cold out and you'd have to say the man does have a point. I make sure the budgies are in their cage, close it and tell the Fielding guy he can open the window again, which he duly does, giving a tight wee smile. Anyway, the smell of his aftershave is honking the place out worse than the fags.

And so to tea. Fielding inspects the insides of his mug quite carefully before accepting any, the cheeky bastard. He's still up at the window, keeping his clear view. The shiny metal briefcase is at his feet. He's wearing jeans with a crease in them, a soft-looking white shirt and an expensive jacket of mustardy leather that looks softer than the shirt. Them shoes with hundreds of holes; brogues? Anyway they're brown. Sunny and Di have switched the TV on and are watching a shopping channel, taking the pish out of the presenters and whatever it is this hour that you canny buy at the shops.

Al comes through – jeans and T-shirt as per usual – and nods at

Fielding and says hello and sits down in the second best easy chair, but no friendly or family hugs or even the shaking of the hands for these two. I'm looking for a resemblance but answer comes their none.

'Sorry,' Al says to Fielding, looking round us all. 'You been introduced?'

'Sunny and Di, this is Fielding,' says I. 'I'm Tango,' I tell him, as I think we might have missed on that nicety. I nod at the good chair. 'Take a seat, pal, make yourself at home.'

'I'm fine,' Fielding says, glancing out the window. He makes a stretching motion. 'Been driving all morning. Good to stand up for a while.'

'Aye, sure,' I say, taking the good seat myself.

'So, what brings you to the Fair City, Fielding?' Al asks. He sounds tired. We've both, over the last fortnight or so, been skelping the arse off the drink and a wide selection of herbal and pharma logical merchandise, all provided by the generosity of Al's last pay packet.

'Well, cuz, I need to talk to you,' the man in the sharp creased jeans says.

Al just smiles, stretches and says, 'Talk away.'

'Well, you know, it's family business.' Your man Fielding looks round at the rest of us, granting us what you might call a sympathetic smile. 'I wouldn't want to bore, ah, your friends with it, you know?'

'I bet they wouldn't be bored,' Al says.

'All the same.' The smiling of the Fielding is a tight affair indeed at this point. 'Plus, I brought some mail,' he says, looking down at the briefcase.

'Fucken wicked case, man, by the way,' Sunny says, seeing the offending article for the first time. He's got one of those high, nasally weeje voices. Di widens her eyes at him and elbows him in the ribs for some reason and they get into a elbowing competition.

'Well, let's have a look at it,' Al says. He starts clearing a space on the coffee table in front of him, redistributing empty cans, ditto

bottles, full ashtrays and various remotes onto the mantelpiece and the arms of other seats and the like.

Fielding appears unhappy, looking round us all again. 'Look, ah, man, I'm not sure this is the right place . . .'

'Na, come on,' Al says. 'Here's fine.'

Fielding does not look happy at this idea, but sighs and comes over with the case. Meanwhile I'm helping with the table-clearing, getting a beamer (that means going red in the face, by the by, not anything else) because I hadn't got out of bed in time to do the clearing up in here. Canny get the staff these days, know what I mean? The briefcase is placed on the – being honest – fairly sticky table. The case looks like it's been worn down from a solid ingot of silver at the bottom of a stream for a few hundred years, all sort of worn-polished and curvy-edged and round-cornered. Al is presented with his mail – a big slidey pile of your usual assorted nonsense – and the briefcase is snapped shut again. Fielding looks like he wishes he could handcuff himself to it. Obviously hasn't spotted the stickiness yet. 'Anyway,' he says to Al, 'we still need to talk.'

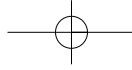
Al just grunts and starts sorting through the envelope's, throwing most of them unopened onto the tiles of the fireplace, skidding into the base of the electric fire. Fielding stands looking over Al's shoulder for a bit until Al actually opens one of the smaller envelopes and looks up and round at his cousin, who takes his briefcase and goes to stand back at the opened window, checking outside on his wheels again.

'Hey, Tango,' Sunny says, staring at one thumb. 'Where'd you think'd be the worst place to get a paper cut?' Him and Di have desisted from the elbowing of each other and are sitting rubbing their ribs.

'No idea,' I tell him. 'Your eye, maybe?'

'Naw, man,' Sunny says. 'I reckon your cock. Right on the top, along the slit, man; that's goanae hurt like fuck, so it is. Ow! Ya –!'

It's back to the mutual elbowing session again for the young happy



couple on the couch. Tea is spilled. Your man Fielding stares out the window with patented disgust.

Al ignores all this and continues through the rest of his mail, discarding most of it, then finally opens one letter, looks at it for a moment and stuffs it into a back pocket in his jeans.

Meanwhile Sunny has jumped away from Di – fare enough, it does look like she has the sharper elbows – and squatted down at the fireplace, looking at Al’s mail discard pile. “Alban”, he says, picking up one junk-mail shrink-wrapped envelope, covered with official-looking stamps and personalised just for Alban like only a big company on the make can. ‘Is that really your real first name, big man? Fucken weird yin that.’ He grins an already gappy grin at big Al and holds up a bunch of the junk mail. ‘Ye finished wi all this, aye, Al?’

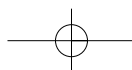
‘Yeah, take it,’ Al says, standing. He looks at his cousin.

There’s an alarm going off in the street but it’s obviously not coming from Fielding’s car because he looks relaxed about it. He puts his mug down on the window ledge. ‘Can we talk now?’ he asks.

Al sighs. ‘Aye, come in to my office.’

Finally he gets the guy out of that scuzzy, smoke-filled living room, down a dim, narrow hallway made even narrower by what looks like a roll of carpet underlay lying on the floor and piles of card-board boxes. The carpet feels sticky, like something from a cheap nightclub. Opposite the kitchen, where a couple of thin, nervous mongrels cower, there’s a fist-sized hole in the plasterboard at shoulder height. They enter a small, bare room with a piece of thin material nailed over the window. Al hooks the makeshift curtain up over another nail to let in more light.

No carpets in here and no proper flooring either, not even laminate – just bare floorboards, unpolished and unfinished. Each wall is a different colour. One has what looks like Power Rangers wallpaper, half ripped off, exposing plasterboard. Another has been



partially repainted, from green to black. Another looks like it's covered with silver foil, while the last wall is sort of off-white, heavily scuffed. There's a sleeping bag by the wall, a big camouflaged backpack leaning nearby spilling clothes and stuff on to the floor, and a small chrome and fabric seat that looks like it was designed in the Seventies. Al takes some clothes off the seat, dropping them on the floor.

The soft bits of the fragile-looking little chair are covered in brown corduroy. Stained brown corduroy. Stained brown corduroy with little bits of grey stuffing showing round the edges where the stitching has given way.

Al says, 'Take a seat, cuz.'

'Thanks.' Fielding sits down gingerly. The room smells of drink and stale sweat with a hint of what might be air freshener or maybe male grooming product from the more budget end of the range. There's an open screwtop bottle of red wine in one corner. No shade or bulb attached to the ceiling fixture. A dark stain covers a quarter of the ceiling. One shadeless lamp near the wine bottle. Al bunches up the sleeping bag to make a seat, then sits leaning back against the wall and waves one hand.

'So, Fielding, how are you?'

Al looks ruddy, fit – *better quads and abs than me, the fuck*, Fielding thinks – but his hair is a mess, the beard looks like you could hide a flock of starlings in it and there's a sort of crumpled set to his face and a beaten look around his eyes Fielding doesn't remember from before. At least, not as bad. 'I'm fine,' Fielding says, then shakes his head. 'No, I'm not fine. I'm not happy in this situation.'

'What situation?'

'This situation. Look, d'you mind if I close the door?'

Alban shrugs. Fielding closes the door then goes to sit down, then doesn't. He looks about the place, waving. 'I'm not happy here. In this place.' He looks around the room again, wanting to shiver, then shakes his head. 'Alban, tell me this isn't where you live. This isn't your home.'

Alban shrugs again. 'I'm just staying here for now,' he says casually. 'It's a roof over my head.'

Fielding looks up at the stained ceiling. On closer inspection, the stained bit looks slightly bulged. 'Yeah, right.'

Another shrug. 'I guess technically I'm of no fixed abode.'

'Wow. What age are you again?'

Alban grins. 'Over twenty-one. You?'

Fielding looks round the place again. 'I don't know, Al, I mean, just look at this. What have you done with—?'

Al gestures at the corduroy seat. 'Fielding, will you sit down? You're making the place look untidy.'

This is one of Gran's phrases. Fielding guesses Alban means it ironically, an attempt at humour.

Fielding says, 'Let me take you for lunch. Please.'

There's some nonsense about taking the dogs for a walk but there's no way Fielding's letting these mangy mutts in the Merc so he pleads an allergy. Then the chav couple with the tobacco habit ask if they'll be going anywhere near the 'middle o' toon'.

'Why?' Fielding asks, in case they're going to ask him to score them some drugs or – worse – bring them back a McDonalds.

'Wur goin' that wiy, boss, ye know?' the male one says. 'Save us the bus fare.'

Fielding's about to piss all over this idea too but then somehow just looking at their pathetic, pasty, thin, proto-junky faces makes him think, *Oh fuck, I'm bigger than this*. The car'll smell of cigarettes for a day or so just from their clothes even if he doesn't let them smoke in it, but what the hell.

Al throws on a grubby-looking green hiking jacket that probably cost a lot when it was new. The Tango guy announces he's got cleaning and stuff to do and waves them off down the echoing, disinfected stairwell. The car is unmolested, the briefcase goes in the boot and Al navigates them out of the scheme towards the centre of the little city. Di and Sunny amuse themselves playing