



One for the Road

EJM Duggan

Eddie Duggan is a lecturer at Suffolk College, Ipswich in the UK, where he teaches Cultural, Media, and Literary Studies, including an occasional course in detective fiction. His Big House of Knowledge website is at <http://www.ejmd.mcmail.com>.

He lives in Ipswich with a partner and three children--twins are imminently due, bringing the total to five--and a rabbit called Arthur ('R' for rabbit). 'One for the Road' is his first attempt at fiction.

Eddie may be reached at: ejmd@cwcom.net

It was one of the last pubs along the Edgware Road, way up beyond Staples Corner, where North London thins out before giving way to the expanse of Hertfordshire. Pubs and other landmarks flick past the windscreen: Welsh Harp; boat shop; Red Lion; Volkswagen garage; Kings Arms; bingo hall; next set of lights. Left at the lights and then an immediate right across the path of oncoming traffic to park in the service road parallel to the main road.

Across the traffic of the Edgware Road, the detached sandstone and redbrick building looms up, one of those large 1930s pubs, all roof and tall chimneys, standing between a small, 1970s, plate-glass-fronted supermarket and a wooden greengrocer's stall, shuttered sides closed and large wooden wheels chained to a lamp-post. A broken wooden lettuce-box and traces of vegetable matter lay strewn beside the entrance to the Public Bar.

The Public Bar, with its bare wooden floor, chipped paintwork, and broken window, contains three kids, barely seventeen, sitting close to pints of fizzy piss masquerading as lager while a fourth chases three red balls around the heavily-stained baize of the small pool table. From the jukebox, Chrissie Hynde's nasal whine implores the listener to cease sobbing. A connecting door leads from Public to Saloon Bar, the contrast in atmosphere as cruel as a witty metaphor to a dull intellect.

A little too brightly lit, the L-shaped Saloon Bar packs in too much beige plush to be comfortable. Heavy beige drapes hang at the windows. Upholstered benches run along the left wall; a row of little wooden tables with iron legs, each surrounded by four padded stools, runs down the center. The heavy door closes itself gently,

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cutting off Chrissie Hynde in mid-sob while the Saloon Bar jukebox stands alone, silent and garish as an elderly whore.

Two figures sit talking quietly in the angle of the L while a scrawny, furrow-faced little man, clearly not the landlord, stands lost behind the large bar. The newcomer moves quietly across the carpet to the bar.

“Half a pint of your best bitter please.”

Needlessly, the till declares the barman’s name, Joey, by way of a small screen at the back of the bar. After paying for his drink, then sipping twice from the small glass by way of preparation for the next stage of his journey, silent foot-steps carry the newcomer uneasily across the carpeted expanse toward the seated figures.

The two heads break away from a whispered conversation, turn accusingly toward the stranger as he begins lowering himself to a sitting position at the table next to them. The stares are met with an appeasing eyebrow-flash and a nod as the bottom of the awkwardly-held half-pint glass taps loudly to announce its sudden contact with the wooden table.

“Alright...?”

A glance quickly takes in the detail of the two as the stranger’s sitting motion concludes. One, a near hippie-type, with greasy, shoulder-length black hair draped around a pointy-featured face with beard and moustache, wears a green army surplus-style jacket with numerous pockets. The other, with short, dark wavy hair, is clean shaven. Marks etched on both cheeks remain as a vivid reminder of an adolescence severely blighted by acne. An oxblood leather jacket—not the ubiquitous bomber, but a half-length job with patch pockets, epaulettes, buttons and belt—completes the trousseau. Two almost-full pint-glasses, one yellow, one brown, face each other across the dirty Embassy ashtray. Four empty glasses stand off to one side.

The stares continue; the leather jacket starts, “What...?”

“Do you know Bill? Wild Bill?” asks the newcomer, alternating a conciliatory glance between each face. “Someone down Paddington told me I could find him in here.”

“Wossit to you ’oo we know?” Leather Jacket continues aggressively.

“I thought you might know when he’d be in, that’s all.”

“That might depend on what you want,” offers Green Jacket sharply.

“It’s business. I heard he’s got something to sell. I want to talk to him about it.”

“Well, he might not be in ’til late. But if it’s business, I reckon I might be able to help you out.... Depends what you’re after.”

“It’s personal.”

“There’s no skag around if that’s what you’re after, but there

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might be some jellies later if you need something.”

“What...? No... Someone I know who knows Bill told me he’s got something he wants to get rid of...that I ought to see him in here to talk about it.”

“You’re looking for a tool then?”

Sipping at the half pint glass, the stranger nods.

“Yeah, well I reckon we can sort you out with Billy. Have you got any transport?”

An affirmative reply prompts the emptying of glasses and the three file out into the early evening light. Across the Edgware Road, Green Jacket stands by the front passenger door of an elderly rust-colored Nissan Bluebird, Leather Jacket at the back as the doors click open. Pulling out of the service road, the Nissan turns right across the Edgware Road’s early evening traffic.

“Do a left at the lights... Right at the bottom of the hill.”

The houses disappear, leaving a strip of road running through a bleak urban landscape of concrete slabs and dry mud. A mini roundabout leads onto a long, curving outer ring road that circumscribes a vast housing estate. Dull, dark, grayish-brown boxes are fitted together in a childlike, nameless architectural style, much discussed by social psychologists and radio pundits in the wake of the eighties riots. Interconnected cuboid shapes, low-stacked boxes above narrow gaps, form a warren of roads, walkways and underpasses for teenage joy riders to rampage through between appointments with magistrates and social workers. The contractors’ JCBs have buried the ghosts of old Hendon aerodrome too deeply for them to be much troubled by the rumblings of a new generation of young heroes.

“Pull in there,” instructs Green Jacket, nodding toward the parking bay adjacent to an entryway in the estate’s dark outer wall. Nearby a steel bus shelter that might once have had windows provides a place of refuge for a fluttering collage of litter. Nobody waits for a bus.

“Have you got the money then?” asks Green Jacket.

“I’ll talk to Bill first.”

“You can’t. He won’t wannus just taking anyone up. He wants four for it. Givvus the money and I’ll go and get it, bring it out for yer.”

A long, slow inhalation preceding a reply that doesn’t come stirs Green Jacket to exclaim: “Look, don’t fuck about, we’re doin’ you a favor. Just givvus the money and I’ll go and get it.”

A thin wad of twenty pound notes passes quickly between hands. Green Jacket quickly thumbs the notes, “Twenty-forty-sixty-eighty one, twenty-forty-sixty-eighty two, twenty-forty-sixty-eighty three,” fanning out the last five notes, “and one’s four. And what about something for sorting you out? A drink—call it commission?”

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“Yeah... Forty on top,” suggests Leather Jacket from the back seat. “When I see it.”

Green Jacket folds the notes back into a wad and they disappear into a pocket. “Wait here.”

The absurdity of the situation begins to dawn on the purchaser: sitting in car with a stranger with whom he has exchanged fewer than half a dozen words, while a second stranger has just calmly walked away with four hundred beer tokens. What if he doesn't come back? How long will he have to wait? How long should he wait? Will this one in the leather try to get away? The chain of thought is broken as Leather Jacket opens the car door. All these thoughts, together with a new one: “Fuck—he's doing a runner.” are expressed simultaneously in a single, embarrassed-sounding “Hey—!”

“I'm 'avin a piss, alright?!”

Leaving the back door open wide, Leather Jacket turns to face the car and relieves himself against the side of the vehicle.

Fear of being suckered into handing over four hundred pounds briefly gives way to distaste as Leather Jacket appears to spend a little too long shaking the drips of piss from his prick. Leather Jacket eventually gives a little bob as he tucks himself away, dropping the flaps of his jacket to cover the dozens of small dark spots that pepper the front of his light-colored trousers, so many piss splashes that have ricocheted back from the wheel arch.

Closing the door as he lowers himself back into the car, Leather Jacket produces a tobacco tin, opens it, and begins building a small joint. The thick, sweet smell of hashish fills the car as a maroon Ronson Comet hisses a jet of burning gas. Thick, grubby-pissy fingers twist a roll of cardboard into place and quickly light the joint before slipping the tin into a safari-style patch pocket. Smoking two thirds of the spliff in silence, Leather Jacket thrusts it between the front seats in a gesture of offering.

“Hhmm! ...? No, no thanks.” The silence broken, he continues, “What's taking him so long?”

“Just wait. 'E'll come back.”

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The door of the flat clicks shut as Green Jacket, his right hand pocket sagging under newly added weight, performs a task of mental arithmetic while pondering how the details of the story might be shaped so as to maximize his personal profit. He muses on how he will present to his associate Bill's bargaining acumen as such that he would not be moved from the newly-upped asking price of three-fifty, leaving a profit margin of a mere fifty quid. Obviously, as he himself has done the majority of the work, he is entitled to most of the profit. A thirty-twenty split seems more than generous. Forty-ten wouldn't be unreasonable. Setting off along the

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walkway, Green Jacket smiles inwardly in acknowledgment of his own skill in a neatly managed scam, the pleasure heightened by a coca-flavored dripping sensation in the sinuses, induced by a hard sniff.

A little over a fortnight previously, Bill had let it be known to a select group of saloon bar associates that a certain piece of hardware had come into his possession and he would be prepared to pass it on to a new owner for the considered sum of three ton. He had let on to no-one, however, how he had acquired the matte-black 9mm Glock automatic pistol.

Bill's standing among his peers would be enhanced if it were thought that he was well enough connected with the criminal fraternity to be able to come into possession of a shooter. The appropriate kudos would not be gained, Bill was sure, were it widely known that he had come across the weapon by merely lifting a floorboard in order to gain access to a blocked air-brick in the kitchen of an empty house in which he had been laboring for fifty pounds a day to supplement his dole money.

Green Jacket had reasoned to Bill, albeit expressed differently, that, as he had found a punter, he was morally entitled to some commission. While Bill accepted the premise he was less than chuffed with the figure proposed. Green Jacket produced a small, round mirror on which he set up two generous lines of reasonable coke—not pharmaceutical, but not cut with too much crap—to help sweeten Bill to the deal. This was followed by twenty minutes of reasonable and good natured haggling over a spliff and a can of lager, which were provided by the host, bringing the deal to a conclusion.

Bill couldn't admit that he was scared—shit scared—at having had a gun under his bath for the past two weeks. If Bill's missus found out, she'd be off again—and probably for good this time. While he would be relieved to see the back of the pistol, he attempted to manage the deal with as much bravado as he could muster, so as to not appear too keen to get rid of the weapon at the first opportunity. The agreed sum of two-fifty would finance the purchase of a wide screen Nicam telly, a wide screen video or, hopefully, even both.

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Green Jacket emerged from the gap between two walls he disappeared into half an hour earlier. Walking quickly, his head moved from right to left, scanning the approach from each direction as he approached the orange Nissan. He was breathing quickly as he ducked into the front passenger seat. "Right. I've got it. Now givvus the forty quid."

"I want to have a good look, decide if I want it."

"Look, don't fuck about, this isn't fucking Tesco's. I'm not the

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fucking nigger with the video in Jackie fucking-Brown. You've got what you wanted, it's not fucking sale-or-return and I ain't a fucking charity. Now givvus the forty fucking quid and we can all fuck off."

The green-sleeved arm held its right palm open, in a Christ-like gesture, while the left lay folded over the bulging pocket. The palm closed around the two purple notes, folding them and slipping them into a top pocket in one easy movement, concluded with three short jabs, tamping the notes securely down. Then the right hand joined the left hand in a concerted movement to slip the bulging jiffy bag out of the pocket.

"Right, here you go," said Green Jacket, amiable now, passing the jiffy bag. "Be very fucking discreet with this, OK?"

The business-end of the weapon stares out of the padded envelope, returning its owner's gaze like the dull, single eye of the urethral opening of a black steel prick.

"Look, put it away, put it under your seat or something. Drop us back at the pub, OK?"

Its passengers seated in a suspicious silence, the car follows the arc of the outer ring toward Mill Hill and the M1. The apartheid of residential planning, owner-occupiers on the left facing council tenants on the right, gives way to the shared amenities of a tube station and a parade of shops. Green Jacket breaks the silence: "Drop us at the lights, OK?"

As the car slows to a halt, the two curbside doors open simultaneously to allow the passengers out. Leather Jacket slams the rear door closed with a force much harder than necessary. Green Jacket turns, leaning into the car before closing the door to remark: "Listen, you've not been here, you don't know me. Be very fucking discreet, OK? Be cool with that thing."

Driving south along the Edgware Road, a thought breaks simultaneously in the head and the stomach pit of the driver of the orange Nissan: he didn't ask if it was loaded.



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