



THE BOOK GAMBLERS

Simon Lake

Fame corrodes. It's like bathing in a tub of acid. The more of it you have the quicker it eats you up. Eddie wanted fame. He'd had a taste, but the taste wasn't enough. When I met him it was like he was passing the final stretch of a twenty-year fast.

'I got sent a cheque the other day for fourteen pounds. Apparently one of the cable channels is repeating all those classic variety shows. There are whole new markets opening up. I tried calling my old agent – turns out he's been dead for eight years.'

Eddie was a magician. Not a great magician, sure, but good enough to get regular slots on the northern circuit back in the seventies and eighties. Good enough to keep the girls at Al's café entertained by making sachets of tomato sauce disappear. Maybe even good enough to get booked on some cable channel, but the next big break never came for him.

I guess he saved his greatest trick until last.

Eddie was the one who came up with the idea of gambling on books. I remember how he first explained it to me, early one morning amongst the

bustle of Al's café. He'd just got back from doing an overnight delivery to Aberdeen. There was a battered old Agatha Christie paperback resting on the table next to him. I picked it up more out of curiosity than anything else.

'I only started reading them to pass the time in service stations,' Eddie explained. 'Used to be you'd get some decent conversation, but most truckers these days can't string two sentences together.' He gave me a look that told me the comment wasn't aimed at me. 'Trouble is, now I'm always getting ribbed about having my head in a book.'

'So? Just ignore them.'

'I've had a better idea. I've decided to run a sweepstake instead.'

I frowned, not making the connection.

'C'mon, those guys bet on dogs, football, horses and practically anything else that's going ... why not bet on the outcome of a murder mystery?'

The radio was playing as it always did at Al's, too low to make out one song from the next. I finished my tea and told him it sounded like a crazy idea.

'You wait and see.' His face was animated now. 'All I have to do is write up a list of suspects. Everyone pays in a fiver and picks a name. By the end of the week I'll have finished the book. Whoever gets the murderer sweeps the pool. Couldn't be simpler.'

I often wonder if Eddie could smell the fame on me. The first time we met he seemed keen to attract my attention. 'Son, I can tell you're not one of them. It's all in the eyes; yours reflect back the light while everyone else's just suck it all in.'

Of course I didn't want people to know who I was. Or even worse, who I used to be. I was happy with anonymity and the open road. I'd bathed in enough acid to last me a lifetime. But I liked Eddie. If I couldn't do anything else, at least I could listen to his story.

‘Sometimes I feel like I’m a living cliché. The out of work entertainer with a wife and three daughters who I never see.’ He ran a hand through his greying hair. ‘I had a taste of fame, I liked it. I don’t want to be rich or famous, I just want a little more of that magic. Is it asking too much?’

The steam at Al’s sometimes blurred people’s expressions, but you could’ve been in dense fog that day and still seen the yearning that lit up Eddie’s face.

‘I hate to burst your bubble, but technically you’re not out of work. And if you wanted to be a real living cliché you’d also need to have a drink problem.’ I raised an eyebrow. ‘You don’t have a drink problem, right? In which case I’d say you’re no more fucked than the rest of us.’

‘Yes, but I don’t want to be like everyone else.’

‘Then find another agent. Look in yellow pages or try the internet or something.’

Eddie stared hungrily at me. ‘Hey, maybe you know somebody?’

I shook my head and finished the last of my tea. ‘Listen Eddie, I’m just a trucker. I love driving trucks. I’ve no ambition to do anything else.’

‘You really think you’ve got it all sorted out, don’t you?’ He was smiling at me like he didn’t believe a word I’d just said.

‘The Moving Finger’ was my first win in the mystery sweepstake.

Steve – one of the other drivers – watched on through bloodshot eyes as the pot was handed over. He’d just returned from a long weekend in Sunderland with a hangover and an empty wallet.

‘Fucking Miss Marple. Who’s to say she didn’t finger the wrong person? I mean she’s an old lady, she can probably barely see. And as for that Poirot guy, I’ve never trusted the French...’

‘Hercule Poirot is Belgian, not French,’ Eddie explained patiently, but by that point no one was listening apart from me.

I stuffed the crumpled notes inside my wallet and headed off for the

cab. Eddie ran to catch me up.

‘Hey, I wanted you to know I’m seeing three different agents next week. Only don’t tell any of the others. I’ve already had more than enough ‘Can you make my truck disappear?’ cracks to last me a lifetime.’

I wished him good luck, because I figured that’s what he wanted. I wondered whether fame would bring his family back for him or drive them further away. Maybe it didn’t matter. The bright lights of the road simply didn’t shine hard enough for people like Eddie. And when you stared out through them there was no one looking back at you, only wide open spaces.

Like Eddie, I’d spent most of my life out on the road. Of course he could smell the fame on me. For three years I’d been the singer in a band tagged as ‘Liverpool’s next big thing’. We recorded two albums, had three top twenty singles and managed to split up one week before we were due to start our first American tour.

It used to sound glamorous, but I soon grew tired of telling people the same stories over and over. No one wanted to know how many times we trekked across the country; tired, broke, sleeping on floors or in the back of vans. When it all fell apart I was offered the chance of a solo career, but I wasn’t interested. There was something romantic about starting over with something completely different.

Eddie went away for a week. The book gamblers found something else to burn their money on. I carried on crossing the same routes I’d seen over and over again in my past life. The views might not have changed, but I was enjoying them much more second time around.

When Eddie came back it turned out my wishes of good luck hadn’t been enough. He hadn’t lost his enthusiasm at that point though. He was still putting on a show for the girls at Al’s. Later he bought me coffee so he could catch me up on all his news.

‘It turns out I’m not the only faded star that wants to make a

comeback.’ Eddie stirred the bottom of his cup, creating a small trail of steam that snaked up between us. ‘Magic artists come pretty low in the pecking order. I visited several offices, most of them no fancier than this place, and the best they’d do was put my CV on file.’

‘Well there must be other places to try... perhaps someone will spot you on one of those cable re-runs.’

‘I don’t know, maybe I’m deluding myself. What kind of a magician am I anyway? My wife and family disappear and I can’t bring them back. If this were a book at least there’d be an ending. Sherlock Holmes could climb in my cab and tell me what I should do next.’

It was getting late. The skyline outside was black, broken only by the scattered lights of the passing traffic. I didn’t really want to leave Eddie right then, so I offered to take him out for a beer.

He laughed. ‘Thanks son. It’s about time I started working on that drink problem.’

Once he’d worked his way through Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes, Eddie began hunting for similar books he could add to his collection. ‘Death in Disguise’ was one of a series of American pastiches he’d unearthed in a charity shop somewhere in Wales. On the chalkboard at Al’s where they marked out the specials, Eddie had listed all the potential suspects. I picked one of the names at random and put my five pound stake down along with the rest of them.

It must’ve been a couple of days later that I saw Eddie for the last time. Grey clouds had swallowed up the horizon and there was rain that came in waves as the wind gusted across the open highway. Eddie’s rig had broken down just south of Manchester. I was in the area so they sent me to bail him out until the company could get a recovery service over to fix the truck.

It felt weird not having the cab to myself. I’d grown used to the silence and the simple pleasure of counting down the miles from one destination to

the next. Eddie looked smaller, as though he'd shrunk standing out waiting in the rain. His skin was almost translucent and the grey in his hair seemed more pronounced than before.

I asked him how he was doing, but he didn't answer much beyond nodding his head and saying: 'Umm, you know ... just another day out on the road.'

When the silence started to weigh too heavy I decided to switch on the radio. I was gambling again and this time I lost. The opening bars of the tune that was playing were enough, I didn't want to let it get to the part where I started singing.

Eddie shifted from his position hunched down in the depths of my cab. 'Looks like they're playing your song.'

'Huh?'

'I always knew you weren't one of us. Too thin to be a real trucker.'

I told him there was no such thing as a real trucker. People go out on the road searching for something or else trying to find some form of escape. 'Everyone has a past, Eddie, it just divides between those who want to talk about it and those who don't.'

Eddie smiled. 'Maybe you've got a point. I figure you for being a smart kid: you might swear like the rest of them, but you can use words with more than one syllable. As long as you're happy, what else matters?'

I switched the radio back on, just in time to catch the last few bars of the song. The music seemed to cheer Eddie up a little.

'What about your wife and kids? Maybe you could...'

Eddie broke in before I could finish the thought. 'That ship sailed a long time ago. I've had enough of chasing pipe dreams.' He pointed to the open road ahead. 'I guess there's a whole other world out there. Still got time to go and check it out.'

By the time Friday came around I'd had a call from the drummer of my old band. There were rumours of interest in getting the show back together to tour America. I wasn't sure how I'd tell Eddie. I was being given my second chance at fame and I was about to turn it down. But now that I think about it, far from being jealous, I think he'd have understood. Eddie was smarter than most people gave him credit for.

They found his truck parked up by a loch in the highlands of Scotland. There was no body to identify and no formal inquiry to provide a clean ending, but everyone assumed it was suicide. Apparently the courts were chasing him over maintenance payments for his children. We used the money from the pot to buy flowers to leave at the scene where Eddie had disappeared.

After two further offers from the band I gave in to the pressure and joined that American tour. I owed it to Eddie to admit how good that light feels, the spotlight that picks you out and reduces everything around you to a peripheral blur. I figured I still had a little more corrosion to go.

When I got back from the States there was a package sitting on my doorstep. No note inside, just a copy of 'Death in Disguise'. I was curious to see if I would've won that final sweepstake, but I soon realised the truth. For once no one at Al's would've claimed the pot: there was no murderer. The victim had simply faked his own death so he could go and start a new life.

First published by Pulp Net (www.pulp.net)

<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/35/the-book-gamblers.html>

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