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Thanks for the Drink, Mac

BY PHILIP WECK

He wouldn't be stalled. He shoved the rod into my back and said, "Get going, Eddie!"



A DRINK? Sure, I'll have a drink, Mac. I ain't changed that much. I'll always have a drink. Let's sit over here, where we can see the door. Bourbon and water, like old times.

Matter of fact, Mac, I ain't changed a whole lot. Not me. Still the same old Eddie. Play it smart, mind my own business, that's me. Only thing, no more cards. This is kind of cheap bourbon, Mac, but it's the best you can get in a crumby joint like this.

How's come no more cards? Where've I been? Well, I'll tell you, Mac, I just lit out. Got fed up to the gills on that stinking bunch of double-crossing sons, every one

of them, so I just lit out. Sure, I had a sweet thing going for me, managing Lefty's joint, that dirty rat, dealing a little, keeping my eye on the other boys. A nice thing, plenty of the green stuff. But I got fed up on it, that's all, on the double-crossing and the slop that was being tossed around, so I lit out and here I am. Like I said, it's cheap bourbon but you sort of get used to it.

How's Nervous John? Still around? Still a character? What a cat he was. Two years in Korea, two years in an Army hospital, and he still figures a package like that Joanie would sit on her can and wait for him. What a character.

Matter of fact, Mac, the day I lit out was the day he came back. No connection. It's just his coming back was what made me realize the kind of an outfit I was tied in with. I'll tell you about it if that stupid bar jerk ever gets here with another one.

Anyway, it was around three, four in the morning when he showed, this Nervous John. All the customers were gone and the boys were cleaning up and I went down to the back door to lock up. Pops was supposed to be on the back door. And he wasn't around.

Not a sign. His iron there on the little stool he used, the alarm switch closed like nothing was wrong, the alley door wide open for anybody to walk in. And no Pops.

Well, I eased into the alley, up against the wall. For all I knew, Pops had some tootsie out there; you remember how he was with the babes. I figured maybe I could catch him at it and have a little fun.

Only that wasn't it. A little ways down, back near that old warehouse, there was Pops, flat on his face. Out cold.

Somebody had clobbered him on the head.

I turned him over and saw he was still breathing and I'd just straightened up when I felt this rod in my back. Nervous John had sneaked up behind me and stuck his rod in my back, like I was a stranger.

It was a bad spot, all right. Four years he was away and I didn't know who he was coming after, what he had in mind, what kind of stories he'd been hearing.

Anyway, he said, "Okay, Eddie, take me in to him. Right upstairs into his office."

I felt a little better then cause I knew I wasn't it. This cat was after Lefty. Can you imagine it? Lefty. A punk like him gunning for Lefty.

I figured I'd stall a little and I said, "Whose office? Who you wanna see, John?"

He wasn't in no mood for stalling. He just shoved that rod further into my back and said, "Get going, Eddie! Move!"

I said, "He ain't in, John," and

he really wasn't. But John clobbered me anyway. On the back of the head.

Ever get a pistol butt on the back of your skull? First thing you know, your knees are giving out and you're falling. Things are getting black. Then you feel it, like an explosion inside your brain. Then you're down, like I was, right in the mud and the dirt with my two-hundred-dollar suit on, in all that filth beside Pops.

And your head really aches. I can feel it sometimes even today. That was the only time I was ever clobbered, but it does things to you. How about another drink? This bourbon ain't bad when you get used to it. Same thing for me.

Well, like I said, he clobbered me and he waited for me to get up and then he said, "Move it, Eddie. Right upstairs. I ain't taking no crap."

So I did. What else? Through the back door and up one flight to the main floor and then up to the balcony to Lefty's office. Sweating it out all the way. Maybe Big Louie would see me and tumble to the deal and start shooting. You know Big Louie. He'd shoot at anything and he didn't give a damn who he hit. Or maybe Pops would come to and Pops wasn't the kind of a guy to take a clobbering without a strong reaction. So naturally I sweated it out all the way into Lefty's office.

We got there all right, though.

We walked in and I hit the light button and sat down behind Lefty's desk.

Like I'd told John, Lefty wasn't in.

I said, "Like I told you, John, he ain't in."

"Where is he?" John said. He still had that rod out, close to his jacket where he'd kind of hidden it on the way up. "Where is he?"

I said, "how the hell would I know?" And at the same time I kicked the switch with my foot, the one on the floor that turned on Lefty's tape recorder hidden inside the desk.

"Don't hand me that crap!" John yelled and he walked over and stuck that rod up against my temple. "Where is he?"

Listen, Mac, I been around. I been in the rackets more or less for ten, fifteen years, so I've seen plenty. But you get a rod slammed up against your temple and some jerk holding it, his guts all torn up over something, and it makes you so sick at the stomach, you can't move.

That tape recorder was grinding away, making the little noise it always made, like an elevator was running somewhere in the building, and I couldn't turn it off. I couldn't budge a muscle one tiny inch. My head was pounding and the back of it felt like mush where he'd clobbered me and there I was with that rod up against my temple and this crazy jerk yelling at me.

I tell you, Mac, that ain't no spot to be in. All I could do was say I didn't know where Lefty was.

"I'm going to kill him, Eddie," John said. "I'm going to kill him and it don't matter to me if I gotta kill a couple other bums first. Where is he?"

I said, "Look, John, if I knew I'd tell you. We used to be pals, didn't we? Honest, if I knew I'd tell you."

"I'm going to kill him," he said again. "I'm going to put a slug in his groin, where it really hurts, and I'm going to jab one of his eyes out with my thumb, and I'm going to slice open his gut and let him die slow and painful. Where is he?"

Can you imagine it? A punk like Nervous John. Figuring out all them things he was going to do to Lefty. What did he think, everybody would sit around and let him do it? He was crazy. He wouldn't live ten minutes.

I told him. I said, "You're crazy, John, gunning for a man like Lefty. You ain't got a chance. Even if you do get him, you won't live ten minutes."

He moved the gun and he turned around and sat down in a chair.

"What the hell do I care if I don't live ten minutes!" he yelled. "I'm going to kill that son!"

For a minute he was quiet. Then he asked, "You seen Joanie lately?"

Can you imagine it? Gunning for a man like Lefty, over a babe?

Especially a drunken bum like Joanie had turned into, a cheap little streetwalker? What a character this Nervous John was.

Women are all right, you get your kicks out of them. But go gunning for a man like Lefty over a babe? No, sir. No babe is worth a knife in the belly to me.

But this was Nervous John, not me.

He said, "You seen her lately, Eddie?"

Well, I hadn't, not for five, six months. I said, "No, I ain't. Not for five, six months, John."

"I did," he said. "I seen her today."

"What did she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me nothing, Eddie. Not a word. She didn't have to. I know who's responsible."

He got up again on his feet and he said, "I'm going to kill that rotten, stinking son! I'm going to open his guts up! And you're going to help me, Eddie!"

I said, "Honest to God, I don't know where he is!"

He said, "Then let's go looking for him, Eddie. You and me. You ought to know where he hangs out. Come on, Eddie, let's go!"

And he stuck that gun in my temple again.

So what was I going to do? Sit there and wait for him to clobber me again. Or pull that trigger? Not me, Mac. My head was soft already from one clobbering. I got up and I went with him.

"How about the poolroom, Eddie?" Nervous John asked. "Does he still hang out in the poolroom?"

I said, "Sometimes."

So that was where we went first, to the Acropolis Poolroom around the corner. Walking out of Lefty's office, with the lights still on and the tape recorder still grinding.

How about another drink, Mac? You talk so long, your throat gets dry. I ain't used to talking much. Never was. You know me, Mac. Yeah, same thing. That's all I drink these days.

Well, anyway, they had a dice game going in the Acropolis, like always, a pretty big game. Lefty wasn't there. I didn't figure he would be. But I was kind of nervous anyway, hitting that joint. You see, big Stew Marcolis ran the place, you remember him, him and Nervous John was good pals before John got hitched and went in the service.

And in a way, you know, Stew was the guy who brought this Joanie babe around. Over to the club or in the bar maybe once a week or so while John was away. The boys see a babe like that, nice figure, big eyes, they see her with some other character and they know her husband's not around, they figure, well, here's something all set up. All you gotta do is just move in. And it looks like it ought'a be good. I understand Stew wasn't getting any himself,

but you know how the boys figure.

Well, that's how it happened, see, Stew bringing her around and all the boys trying to move in. This Joanie, she played it dumb. It took a lot of cash working on her, setting up a phony dice game, presents for her old lady, you know. She could've had all that cash herself if she'd put a price on it right off, she was that nice-looking, but she was too damn dumb. Some babes. What happened to that drink? This here bartender, Mac, he's for the birds. Strictly for the birds.

What I mean, Mac, is I figured maybe this Nervous John knew Stew started the thing and the lead would fly and when lead flies you just don't want to be around. Besides, me walking in with John, maybe somebody would get the idea I was fingering Stew and you never know, even characters like that, they got friends. Here's the bartender now. Hey, Joe, get the lead out, will you?

But it seems like Stew wasn't there either, or Lefty, just some of the boys with the dice.

We asked them where was Lefty, but nobody cracked. Nervous John watched the game a bit, then he nudged me with the rod in his pocket and we went outside.

"Where do we go now, Eddie?" he asked.

I said, "Beats the hell outta me, John."

Right there, you know, you

could see he was kind of weakening. I was expecting him to clobber me again; that's what I would've done. You don't get information out of nobody just asking, not in a spot like that.

But not John. He slammed me against the wall with his left hand, his right hand in his pocket on the rod. Maybe he slapped me a couple times, I don't remember too clear. My head was still soft and my legs shaky and hell, this happened two years ago, Mac.

Anyway, I said that maybe Lefty was in the High Tail. So we hiked over there and it was a mistake, Mac. I sweated it out there, too, account it was in the High Tail this Joanie used to put on the dances. You know the kind.

This Joanie, like I say, she was sure dumb. She wasn't happy just moving into a guy's apartment, she says she wants to work, so somebody sets her up to be a dancer in the High Tail, only nobody tells her about the little shows they put on for the boys after the joint's closed to the public.

Just to show how dumb the babe was, well, the boys get kind of rough one night account of she wasn't going for a full strip, much less the stuff the other babes done. They therefore sort of took her clothes off of her.

And you know what that dumb dame done? She blew the whistle. Next day she ran down to the station. It cost fifty extra to the

desk sergeant on account of that dumb trick and her not knowing Lefty and hi boys had the cops in their back pocket.

Anyway, that's why I was sweating it out. You never know, maybe Nervous John heard about it and some of the boys who was in on the joke might be around.

But they wasn't. Them or Lefty either. This here joint, they sure serve you small drinks, don't they? I bet it ain't more'n three-quarters of an ounce. Lemme call the bartender again, or ain't you ready yet?

Like I said, nobody was there in the High Tail except the character behind the bar. So Nervous John and me, we had a drink. You can't just walk into that back room after hours and walk out without one drink, anyway. We had it and we asked if Lefty'd been around and he hadn't.

This Nervous John, he's leaning against me with that rod and he said, "Eddie, you wouldn't give an old pal the runaround, would you, especially an old pal who's going to put a slug in your gut if you are?"

Me, I didn't want to get clobbered again. I said, "Not me, I don't want to get clobbered again, John."

"Where is he, Eddie?" this character said.

You finished, yet, Mac? No? You're slowing up in your old age, Mac. No offense, I don't mean

really old. You know what I mean, Mac.

Well, John said, "Where is he, Eddie?" meaning Lefty, and I figured it was time for word to have spread so I said, "Maybe he's back at the club. Sometimes he sleeps there all night." So we hiked it over to the club.

Of course, I had to sweat that out, too, account I don't know if maybe we'll see Big Louie anywhere before we get into the office. And I don't know how much this Nervous John heard. Big Louie was the one pushed her around. Not bad; he didn't really hurt her. It's just that she put up a fight and he had to. The dumb babe. She should've known a guy, Lefty or any guy, gets tired of anything sooner or later, especially with her going in for those full strips after her first experience, and with her hitting the bottle kind of heavy, too. She should've known a guy's going to say to one of his boys, just to keep him in line, sure, help yourself. Especially when Big Louie walked in with the key, she should've known. But the dumb bunny, she put up a fight and she got pushed around a bit, a couple teeth knocked out.

So I had to sweat that out, too, maybe we'd run into Big Louie on the way.

But I guess this Nervous John, he didn't hear too much. While we were walking, he said, "You ain't seen her lately, eh, Eddie?"

I ain't seen her much since that night Big Louie mussed her up. I heard she'd turned into a lush, walking the streets. But I didn't tell John, I just said, "I ain't seen her for six months, John."

"I seen her this afternoon," he said. "She's in Dunning."

Well, it figured. Anybody gets to be an alcoholic like that, they wind up in the nut-house.

"She just sits there staring at the wall," he said. "The doc tells me she ain't said a word to nobody for three weeks. Not a word. And she didn't even know me, Eddie. I'm going to kill that son. I'm going to kill him slow. Real slow."

But I could see he was easing up. He didn't go into details. He didn't curse it out, like he had at first. I gave him a little of the crap the cops always dish out. I said, "It won't do you no good, John, because you won't live long enough. And it won't do her no good either. Besides, you ain't the killer type, John. You and me, we ain't the killer type."

He grabbed me by the throat and he said, "You ain't talking me out of nothing, Eddie. Get moving."

See, he was weakening. How about that drink now, Mac? Hey, bartender! Over here, you jackass!

In we went, upstairs, no sign of Pops or Big Louie or nobody until we walk into the office. They were waiting there, like I figured they would be. Pops, Big Louie, Lefty.

They clobbered John soon as he walked in. They took his rod away. They pushed him into a chair and Pops stood over him, ready to clobber him again.

"Well," said Lefty, "if it ain't Nervous John. I heard you're gunning for me, John."

He didn't say nothing. He just sat there glaring at me, then glaring at Lefty.

"I hear I'm going to die slow, John," Lefty said.

This John, he started to curse then. In a low voice, all kinds of curses. He sat there and called Lefty every nasty name he ever heard all his life.

People didn't talk to Lefty that way. Not Lefty. He got red in the face and he said, "Shut up!"

John kept right on cursing and Pops gave him the back of his hand in the teeth. John shut up then, all right. You know how Pops was with that backhand.

He just sat there, John did, glaring at Lefty, the hate in him so hard he was shaking.

That's when I found out what kind of a double-crosser Lefty was.

He said to me, "Okay, Eddie, he's all yours."

Can you imagine that? The character coming around gunning for Lefty, and me making a neat package out of him, and Lefty saying, "He's all yours, Eddie."

What a cotton-picking, chicken-stealing, double-crossing son he turned out to be.

I said, "Whadda you mean he's all mine? He's got a slug for you, Lefty, not for me."

Lefty said, "So he heard it wrong. That ain't my fault."

Can you beat it? After me setting it up for him. I told him so. I said, "After me setting it up for you. The tape recorder and all."

"Look," Lefty said, "I don't like nobody gunning for me. It's bad for business. But that don't mean I go around cleaning up somebody else's mess. He's your headache, Eddie, not mine. I never touched his babe."

The double-crossing son.

That's when I lit out, Mac, see? Soon as I found out what kind of a character this Lefty really was.

Nervous John, he made a break for me, but Pops sat him down again with one to the teeth and one to the gut. That was when Lefty said, "He's all yours, Eddie," and then he and Pops and Big Louie they took off.

And me, I did, too—while Nervous John was still out. What was I gonna do, throttle him with my bare hands? I never packed an iron in my life.

I had a couple bills in my pocket, half a G in my desk, and I grabbed it and took off. Got me another job dealing out on the Coast. That's how it happened, Mac. That's how come I left town. So you been noticing, eh, Mac? How about a drink? Hey, bartender! Noticing how I watch the door.

All right, so it wasn't him. So it didn't even look like him much. So I didn't have to hit the floor.

There. That's better. Thanks. Thanks for the drink, Mac.

Guess I ought to break the habit, sitting where I can watch the door. I tried. But I don't feel right if I'm anywhere else. That's how come I quit the cards, Mac. Right after I first got out to the Coast I picked up

this habit, watching the door. It got so I couldn't even read the cards any more, Mac. My back felt a mile wide. But sitting this way . . . well, I quit flat. You can see why, can't you? Mac, you ain't got an extra sawbuck have you? I'm flat. I'd like to go back to my cards, but . . .

Thanks, Mac, thanks. And thanks for the drinks, too. It's good to see somebody from the old town.

