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A Drop of the Hard Stuff

Written by Lawrence Block

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A DROP OF THE HARD STUFF

LAWRENCE BLOCK



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Late One Night…

"I've often wondered," Mick Ballou said, "how it would all have gone if I'd taken a different turn."

We were at Grogan's Open House, the Hell's Kitchen saloon he's owned and operated for years. The gentrification of the neighborhood has had its effect on Grogan's, although the bar hasn't changed much inside or out. But the local hard cases have mostly died or moved on, and the crowd these days is a gentler and more refined bunch. There's Guinness on draft, and a good selection of single-malt Scotches and other premium whiskeys. But it's the joint's raffish reputation that draws them. They get to point out the bullet holes in the walls, and tell stories about the notorious past of the bar's owner. Some of the stories are true.

They were all gone now. The barman had closed up, and the chairs were on top of the tables so they'd be out of the way when the kid came in at daybreak to sweep up and mop the floor. The door was locked, and all the lights out but the leaded-glass fixture over the

table where we sat with our Waterford tumblers. There was whiskey in Mick's, club soda in mine.

Our late nights have grown less frequent in recent years. We're older, and if we're not quite inclined to move to Florida and order the Early Bird Special at the nearest family restaurant, neither are we much given to talking the night away and greeting the dawn wide-eyed. We're both too old for that.

He drinks less these days. A year or so back he got married, to a much younger woman named Kristin Hollander. The union astonished almost everyone — but not my wife, Elaine, who swears she saw it coming — and it could hardly fail to change him, if only because it gave him a reason to go home at the day's end. He still drinks twelve-year-old Jameson, and drinks it neat, but he doesn't drink as much of it, and there are days when he doesn't drink at all. "I still have a taste for it," he has said, "but for years I had a deep thirst, and the thirst has left me. I couldn't tell you where it's gone."

In earlier years, it was not that unusual for us to sit up all night, talking the hours away and sharing the occasional long silence, each of us drinking his chosen beverage. At dawn he'd don the blood-stained butcher's apron that had belonged to his father. He'd go to the Butchers' Mass at St. Bernard's, in the meatpacking district. Once in a while I'd keep him company.

Things change. The meatpacking district is trendy now, a yuppie bastion, and most of the firms that gave the area its name have gone out of business, their premises converted to restaurants and apartments. St. Bernard's, long an Irish parish, is the new home of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

I can't remember the last time I saw Mick wearing that apron.

This was one of our rare late nights, and I suppose we both felt the need for it, or we'd have gone home by now. And Mick had turned reflective.

"A different turn," I said. "What do you mean?"

"There are times," he said, "when it seems to me that there was nothing for it, that I was destined to follow the one particular course. I lose sight of it these days, because my business interests are all as clean as a hound's tooth. Why a hound's tooth, have you ever wondered?"

"No idea."

"I'll ask Kristin," he said, "and she'll sit down at the computer and pop up with the answer in thirty seconds. That's if I remember to ask her." He smiled at a private thought. "What I lose sight of," he said, "is that I became a career criminal. Now I was hardly a trailblazer in that respect. I lived in a neighborhood where crime was the leading occupation. The surrounding streets were a sort of vocational high school."

"And you graduated with honors."

"I did. I might have been valedictorian, if they'd had such a thing on offer for young thieves and hoodlums. But, you know, not every boy on our block wound up leading a life of villainy. My father was respectable. He was — well, I'll honor his memory enough not to say what he was, but I've told you about him."

"You have."

"All the same, he was a respectable man. He got up every morning and went to work. And the road my brothers took was a higher one than mine. One a priest — well, that didn't last, but only because he lost his faith. And John, a great success in business and a pillar of his community. And Dennis, the poor lad, who died in Vietnam. I told you how I went down to Washington just to see his name on that memorial."

"Yes."

"I'd have made a terrible priest. I wouldn't even find a welcome diversion in molesting altar boys. And I can't imagine myself kissing asses and counting dollars like my brother John. But can you guess the thought I've had? That I might have taken the road you took."

"And become a cop?"

"Is the notion that outlandish?"

"No."

"When I was a little boy," he said, "it seemed to me that a cop was a wonderful thing for a man to be. Standing there in a handsome uniform, directing traffic, helping children cross the street safely. Protecting us all from the bad guys." He grinned. "The bad guys indeed. Little did I know. But there were lads on our block who did put on the blue uniform. One of them, Timothy Lunney was his name, he wasn't so different from the rest of us. You wouldn't have found it remarkable to hear he'd taken to robbing banks, or making collections for the shylocks."

We talked some about what might have been, and just how much choice a person had. That last was something to think about, and we both took a few minutes to think about it, and let the silence stretch. Then he said, "And how about yourself?"

"Me?"

"You didn't grow up knowing you'd become a cop."

"No, not at all. I never really planned it. Then I took the entrance exam, which back then I'd have had to be a moron to fail, and then I was in the Academy, and, well, there I was."

"Could you have gone the other way?"

"And drifted instead into a life of crime?" I thought about it. "I can't point to any innate nobility of character that would have ruled it out," I said. "But I have to say I never felt any pull in that direction."

"No."

"There was a boy I grew up with in the Bronx," I remembered, "and we lost track of each other completely when my family moved away. And then I ran into him a couple of times years later."

"And he'd taken the other path."

"He had," I said. "He was no great success at it, but that's where his life led him. I saw him once through a one-way mirror in a sta-

tion house, and then lost track of him again. And then we caught up with each other some years later. It was before you and I got to know each other."

"Were you still drinking?"

"No, but I wasn't away from it long. Less than a year. Interesting, really, the things that happened to him."

"Well," he said, "don't stop now."

I

I couldn't tell you the first time I saw Jack Ellery, but it would have to have been during the couple of years I spent in the Bronx. We were a class apart at the same grammar school, so I'd have seen him in the halls or outside at recess, or playing stickball or stoopball after school let out. We got to know each other well enough to call each other by our last names, in the curious manner of boys. If you'd asked me then about Jack Ellery, I'd have said he was all right, and I suppose he'd have said the same about me. But that's as much as either of us would have been likely to say, because that's as well as we knew each other.

Then my father's business tailed off and he closed the store and we moved, and I didn't see Jack Ellery again for more than twenty years. I thought he looked familiar, but I couldn't place him right away. I don't know whether he would have recognized me, because he didn't get to see me. I was looking at him through one-way glass.

This would have been in 1970 or '71. I'd had my gold shield for a couple of years, and I was a detective assigned to the Sixth Precinct in Greenwich Village when the prewar building on Charles Street still served as the station house. It wasn't long after that they moved us to new quarters on West Tenth, and some enterprising fellow bought our old house and turned it into a co-op or condo, and tipped his hat to history by calling it Le Gendarme.

Years later, when One Police Plaza went up, they did essentially the same thing with the old police headquarters on Centre Street.

But this was on the second floor at the old place on Charles Street, where Jack Ellery was wearing number four in a lineup of five male Caucasians in their late thirties and early forties. They ranged between five-nine and six-one, were dressed alike in jeans and open-necked sport shirts, and stood waiting for a woman they couldn't see to pick out the one who had held her at gunpoint while his partner emptied the cash register.

She was a stout woman, maybe fifty, and she was badly miscast as the co-owner of a mom-and-pop housewares store. If she'd taught school, all her pupils would have been terrified of her. I was there as a casual spectator, because it wasn't my case. A plainclothes cop named Lonergan was the arresting officer, and I was standing next to him. There was an assistant DA in the room, next to the woman, and there was a tall skinny kid in a bad suit who pretty much had to be the Legal Aid lawyer.

When I was wearing a uniform in Brooklyn, they had me partnered with an older man named Vince Mahaffey, and one of the few hundred things he taught me was to catch a lineup any time I had the chance. It was, he told me, a much better way to familiarize yourself with the local bad guys than going through books of mug shots. You got to watch their faces and

their body language, you got a sense of them that would stick in your mind. Besides, he said, it was a free show, so why not enjoy it?

So I got in the habit of viewing lineups at the Sixth, and this particular afternoon I studied the men in turn while the ADA told the woman to take her time. "No, I know who it is," she said, and Lonergan looked happy. "It's Number Three."

The ADA asked her if she was positive, in a voice that suggested she might want to rethink the whole thing, and the Legal Aid kid cleared his throat, as if preparing to offer an objection.

No need. "I'm a hundred percent positive," she said. "That's the son of a bitch who robbed me, and I'll say so in front of you and God and everybody."

Lonergan had stopped looking happy as soon as she'd announced her choice. He and I stayed in the room while the others filed out. I asked him what he knew about Number Three.

"He's an assistant manager at the market on Hudson," he said. "Hell of a nice guy, always glad to do us a favor, but I've got to stop using him in lineups. This is the third time somebody's picked him out, and he's the kind of guy, he finds a dime in a pay phone, he puts it back."

"He's got a kind of a crooked look to him," I said.

"I think it's that bend in his lip. You barely notice it, but it makes his face the least bit asymmetrical, which never inspires confidence. Whatever it is, he's been in his last lineup."

"As long as he stays out of trouble," I said. "So who were you hoping she'd pick?"

"No, you tell me. Who were you leaning toward?"

"Number Four."

"On the nose. I shoulda had you for my witness, Matt. Is that cop instinct talking, or did you recognize him?"

"I think it was the expression on his face after she made her

call. I know they can't hear anything in there, but he picked up something and knew he was off the hook."

"I missed that."

"But I think I'd have picked him anyway. He looked familiar to me, and I can't think why."

"Well, he's got a yellow sheet. Maybe you saw his handsome face in a book of mug shots. High-Low Jack, they call him. Ring a bell?"

It didn't. I asked his last name, and then repeated it myself—"Jack Ellery, Jack Ellery"—and then something clicked.

"I knew him back when I was a kid," I said. "Jesus, I haven't seen him since grade school."

"Well," Lonergan said, "I'd say the two of you took different career paths."

The next time I saw him was years later. In the meantime I had left the NYPD and moved from a split-level house in Syosset to a hotel room just west of Columbus Circle. I didn't look for a job, but jobs found me, and I wound up functioning as a sort of unlicensed private eye. I didn't keep track of expenses and I didn't furnish written reports, and the people who hired me paid me in cash. Some of the cash paid for my hotel room, and a larger portion covered my tab at the bar around the corner, where I took most of my meals, met most of my clients, and spent most of my time. And if there was anything left over, I bought a money order and sent it to Syosset.

Then, after too many blackouts and too many hangovers, after a couple of trips to detox and at least one seizure, the day came when I left a drink untouched on top of a bar and found my way to an AA meeting. I'd been to meetings before, and I'd tried to stay sober, but I guess I hadn't been ready, and I guess this time I

was. "My name's Matt," I told a roomful of people, "and I'm an alcoholic."

I hadn't said that before, not the whole sentence, and saying it is no guarantee of sobriety. Sobriety's never guaranteed, it always hangs by a thread, but I left that meeting feeling that something had shifted. I didn't have a drink that day, or the day after, or the day after that, and I kept going to meetings and stringing the days together, and I must have been somewhere in the middle of my third month of sobriety when I next encountered Jack Ellery. I'd had my last drink on the thirteenth of November, so it would have been the last week of January or the first week of February, something like that.

I know I couldn't have had three full months yet, because I remember that I raised my hand and gave my day count, and you only do that for the first ninety days. "My name's Matt," you say, "and I'm an alcoholic, and today is Day Seventy-seven." And everybody says, "Hi, Matt," and then it's somebody else's turn.

This was at a three-speaker meeting on East Nineteenth Street, and after the second speaker they had a secretary's break, when they made announcements and passed the basket. People with anniversaries announced them, and drew applause, and the newbies shared their day counts, and then the third speaker told his story and wrapped it all up by ten o'clock so we could all go home.

I was on my way out the door when I turned at the sound of my name and there was Jack Ellery. My seat was in the front, so I hadn't noticed him earlier. But I knew him at a glance. He looked older than he had on the other side of the one-way glass, and there was more in his face than the years alone could account for. There's no charge for the seats in an AA room, but that's because you pay for them in advance.

"You don't recognize me," he said.

"Sure I do. You're Jack Ellery."

"Jesus, you've got some memory. What were we, twelve, thirteen years old?"

"I think I was twelve and you were thirteen."

"Your dad had the shoe store," he said. "And you were a class behind me, and one day I realized I hadn't seen you in a while, and nobody knew where you went. And the next time I passed the shoe store, it was gone."

"Like most of his business ventures."

"He was a nice man, though. I remember that. Mr. Scudder. He impressed the hell out of my mother one time. He had that machine, you stood with your feet in the opening and it gave you some sort of X-ray picture of them. She was all set to spring for a new pair of shoes, and your dad said my feet hadn't grown enough to need 'em. 'That's an honest man, Jackie,' she said on the way home. 'He could have taken advantage and he didn't.'"

"One of the secrets of his success."

"Well, it made an impression. Jesus, old times in the Bronx. And now we're both of us sober. You got time for a cup of coffee, Matt?"

II

We sat across from each other in a booth in a diner on Twenty-third Street. He took his coffee with a lot of cream and sugar. Mine was black. The only thing I ever put in it was bourbon, and I didn't do that anymore.

He remarked again on my having recognized him, and I said it worked both ways, he'd recognized me. "Well, you said your name," he said. "When you gave your day count. You'll be coming up on ninety pretty soon."

Ninety days is a sort of probationary period. When you've been clean and dry for ninety days, you're allowed to tell your story at a meeting, and to hold various group offices and service positions. And you can stop raising your hand and telling the world how many days you've got.

He'd been sober sixteen months. "That year," he said. "I had a year the last day of September. I never thought I'd make that year."

"They say it's tough right before an anniversary."

"Oh, it wasn't any more difficult then. But, see, I more or less took it for granted that a year of sobriety was an impossible accomplishment. That nobody stayed sober that long. Now my sponsor's sober almost six years, and there's enough people in my home group with ten, fifteen, twenty years, and it's not like I pegged them as liars. I just thought I was a different kind of animal, and for me it had to be impossible. Did your old man drink?"

"That was the other secret of his success."

"Mine too. In fact he died of it. It was just a couple of years ago, and what gets me is he died alone. His liver went on him. My ma was gone already, she had cancer, so he was alone in the world, and I couldn't be at his bedside where I belonged because I was upstate. So he died in a bed all by himself. Man, that's gonna be one tough amends to make, you know?"

I didn't want to think about the amends I'd have to make. *Just put that on the shelf,* Jim Faber told me more than once. *You've got two things to do today, and one is go to a meeting and the other is don't drink. Get both of those things right and all the rest will come along when it's supposed to.*

"You went on the cops, Matt. Or am I mixing you up with somebody else?"

"No, you got it right. That ended a few years ago, though."

He lifted a hand, mimed knocking back a drink, and I nodded. He said, "I don't know if you would have heard, but I went the other way."

"I may have heard something."

"When I say I was upstate, it was as a guest of the governor. I was at Green Haven. It wasn't exactly up there with the Brinks Job and the Great Train Robbery. What I did, I picked up a gun and walked into a liquor store. And it's not like it was the first time."

I didn't have a response to that, but he didn't seem to require one. "I had a decent lawyer," he said, "and he fixed it so I took a

plea to one charge and they dropped the others. You know what was the hardest part? You got to do what they call allocute. You familiar with the term?"

"You have to stand up in court and say what you did."

"And I hated the idea. Just flat-out hated it. I was looking for a way around it. 'Can't I just say *guilty* and let it go at that?' But my guy tells me no, you do it the way they want, you say what you did. Well, it's that or I blow the plea deal, so I'm not completely crazy and I do what I'm supposed to do. And you want to know something? The minute it's out, I got this rush of relief."

"Because it was over."

He shook his head. "Because it was out there. Because I said it, I copped to it. There's the Fifth Step in a nutshell, Matt. You own up in front of God and everybody and it's a load off your mind. Oh, it wasn't the last load, it was just one small part of it, but when the program came along and they told me what I was gonna have to do, it made sense to me right from the jump. I could see how it would work."

AA's twelve steps, Jim Faber had told me, weren't there to keep you sober. Not drinking was what kept you sober. The steps were to make sobriety comfortable enough so that you didn't feel the need to drink your way out of it, and I'd get to them in due course. So far I had admitted that I was powerless over alcohol, that it made my life unmanageable, and that was the First Step, and I could stay on that one as long as I had to.

And I was in no great rush to get past it. They began most of the meetings I went to with a reading of the steps, and even if they didn't there'd be a list of them hanging on the wall where you couldn't help reading it. The Fourth Step was a detailed personal inventory, and you sat down and wrote it out. The Fifth Step was confessional—you shared all that shit with another human being, most likely your sponsor.

Some people, Jim said, stayed sober for decades without ever doing the steps.

I thought about the steps and missed a few beats of what Jack was saying, but when I tuned in he was talking about Green Haven, saying it was probably the best thing that ever happened to him. It had introduced him to the program.

"I went to meetings because it was a chance to sit in a chair and zone out for an hour," he said. "And it was easier to stay dry inside than it was to drink the awful shit cons brew up for themselves, or buy pills that the screws smuggled in. And, you know, I can't say I blame alcohol for the turn my life took, because I chose it myself, but going to meetings it began to dawn on me that every time I got my ass in trouble, I was always high. I mean, like, invariably. It was me making the choice to do the crime, and it was me making the choice to take the drink or smoke the joint, but the two went together, you know, and I was seeing it for the first time."

So he stayed sober in prison. Then they let him out and he came home to New York and got a room in an SRO hotel a couple of blocks from Penn Station, and by the third night he was drinking blended whiskey around the corner in a place called the Terminal Lounge.

"So called because of its location," he said, "but the name would have fit the place even if it had been in the middle of Jackson Heights. Fucking joint was the end of the line."

Except of course it wasn't. The line ran its zigzag course for another couple of years, during which time he stayed out of trouble with the law but couldn't stay out of the bars. He'd go to meetings and begin to put a little time together, and then he'd have one of those oh-what-the-hell moments, and the next thing he knew he'd be in a bar, or taking a long pull on a bottle. He hit a few detoxes, and his blackouts started lasting longer, and he knew what the future held and didn't see how he could avoid it.

"You know, Matt," he said, "when I was a kid, I decided what I was going to be when I grew up. Can you guess what it was? You give up? A cop. I was gonna be a cop. Wear the blue uniform, keep the public safe from crime." He picked up his coffee but his cup was empty. "I guess you were dreaming the same dream, but you went and did it."

I shook my head. "I fell into it," I said. "What I wanted to be was Joe DiMaggio. And, but for a complete lack of athletic ability, I might have made that dream come true."

"Well, my handicap was a complete lack of moral fiber, and you know what I fell into."

He kept drinking, because he couldn't seem to help it, and he kept coming back to AA, because where the hell else was there for him to go? And then one day after a meeting an unlikely person took him aside and told him some home truths.

"A gay guy, Matt, and I mean gay as a jay. Obvious about it, you know? Grew up in a lah-de-dah suburb, went to an Ivy League college, and now he designs jewelry. Plus he's more than ten years younger'n I am, and he looks like a wind of more than twenty miles an hour could pick him up and whisk him off to Oz. Just the type I'm gonna turn to for advice, right?

"Well, he sat me down and told me I was using the program like a revolving door, and I'd just keep going out and keep coming back again, only each time I came back I'd have a little less of myself left. And the only way I was ever gonna break the pattern was if I read the Big Book every morning and the Twelve & Twelve every night, and got really serious with the steps. So I looked at him, this wispy little queen, this guy I got less in common with than a fucking Martian, and I asked him something I never asked anybody before. I asked him to be my sponsor. You know what he said?"

"I'd guess he said yes."

"'I'm willing to sponsor you,' he said, 'but I don't know if you'll be able to stand it.' Well, fuck, man. Come right down to it, what choice did I have?"

So he went to a meeting every day, and sometimes two, and a three-meeting day wasn't unheard of. And he called his sponsor every morning and every night, and the first thing he did when he got out of bed was hit his knees and ask God for one more sober day, and the last thing he did at night was get on his knees again and thank God for keeping him sober. And he read the Big Book and the Twelve & Twelve, and he worked his way through the steps with his sponsor, and he made ninety days, not for the first time, but he'd never made six months before, and nine months, and, incredibly, a year.

For his Fourth Step, his sponsor made him write down every wrong thing he'd ever done in his life, and if he didn't want to include something, that meant it had damn well better be there. "It was like allocuting," he said, "to every goddamn thing I ever did."

Then the two of them sat down together and he read aloud what he'd written, with his sponsor interrupting now and then to comment, or ask for amplification. "And when we were done he asked me how I felt, and it's not exactly an elegant way to put it, but what I told him was that I felt as though I'd just taken the biggest shit in the history of the world."

And now he had sixteen months, and it was time to start working on the amends. He'd made his Eighth Step list of the people he'd harmed, he'd become willing to take steps to set things right, but now it was Ninth Step time, which meant actually making the amends, and that wasn't so easy.

"But what choice do I have?" he said. And he shook his head and said, "Jesus, look at the time. You just heard my entire qualification. You sat through three speakers and now you had to lis-

ten to me, and I went on almost as long as all three of them put together. But I guess it did something for me, talking to somebody from the old neighborhood. It's gone, you know. The old neighborhood. They went and ran a fucking expressway through there."

"I know."

"It probably means more to me. The neighborhood, I mean. You were there what, two years?"

"Something like that."

"For me it was my whole childhood. I used to be able to work up a pretty good drunk out of it. 'Poor me, the house I grew up in is gone, the streets where I played stickball are gone, di dah di dah di dah.' But my childhood wasn't about the house and the streets. And it's not gone. I'm still carrying it around, and I've still got to deal with it." He picked up the check. "And that's enough out of me, and I'm paying for this, and you can call it amends for talking your ear off."

When I got home I called Jim Faber, and we agreed that Jack's sponsor sounded like a real Step Nazi, but that seemed to be just what Jack needed.

Before we parted, Jack had given me his phone number, and I felt obliged to give him mine. I wasn't much on picking up the phone, and Jim was the only person I called on a fairly regular basis. There was a woman in Tribeca, a sculptor named Jan Keane, with whom I generally spent Saturday night and Sunday morning, and one of us would call the other two or three times a week. Aside from that, I didn't make many calls, and most of the ones I got were wrong numbers.

I copied Jack Ellery's number in my book, and figured I'd run into him somewhere down the line. Or not.