

He knew him well

play for radio, adapted from his short story

Time: weekday afternoon

Place: quiet locals' pub within a mile of Bow bells, London

Cast: NARRATOR male, 21 years old, from Glasgow

OLD JOHN male local to area, 78

ROB 40s, the barman [half a dozen lines]

IVAN customer, 60s [3 or 4 lines]

NARRATOR It was three in the afternoon and the pub was quiet. The barman stood behind the gantry polishing glasses, staring up at the television, the volume turned low. I bought a half pint of lager. I saw the old guy at the table in the corner, where the landlady said he would be. In front of him was a bottle of stout, a glass three-quarters' empty. I went across. It was sad what I had to tell him. He had been reading a newspaper, the racing page, squinting at it as if his glasses weren't strong enough, a little bundle of blank betting slips nearby, a pen positioned on top. His tobacco tin and lighter were next to the bottle of stout and in one hand he held a half-smoked roll-up. Every few minutes he relit it, had a couple of puffs, then let it go out. He sipped at the beer while I spoke, his hand trembling a little. But I think it was because he was old, not because of what I was saying. I told him who I was. He wiped at his mouth, lifted the half-smoked roll-up and concentrated his attention on it, flicking at his lighter.

NARRATOR It was Missis Fitzgerald, she said I should see you...

OLD JOHN Did she, that's nice.

NARRATOR PAUSE] Just because ye knew each other so long

OLD JOHN Yeh, he drank in this place... [SNIFFS. DRINKS A MOUTHFUL OF BEER]

NARRATOR Ye knew him well?

OLD JOHN SIGHS] Not really, no

NARRATOR Aw

OLD JOHN SIGHS] No, never did get to know him. Well, never really spoke to him apart from Evening Dennis, Night Dennis.

NARRATOR oh

OLD JOHN He'd been in the navy

NARRATOR Had he?

OLD JOHN Torpedoed, far as I know.

NARRATOR I never knew that

OLD JOHN Well you wouldnt ['YOU' IS THE IMPERSONAL PRONOUN HERE] He never spoke much about it, not that I ever heard. Dont blame him... Talk too much they do, in this place. Never bloody stop, it's no good. (FLICKING AT THE CIGARETTE LIGHTER] Yeh...old Dennis... FLICKING AGAIN AT THE CIGARETTE LIGHTER]

NARRATOR PAUSE] The navy eh...

OLD JOHN Yeh... (CLINK OF GLASS, SIPS. SNIFFS] You want a glass of beer son?

NARRATOR SURPRISE] Eh, yeh, okay

OLD JOHN What is that?

NARRATOR Lager

OLD JOHN Half pint?

NARRATOR Yeh, thanks

OLD JOHN CALLS TO BARMAN] Hey Rob! [PAUSE] Me and the boy here, yeh. Yeh, same again Rob, yeh...ta for that [ASIDE, WHISPER] On the slate, pay him pension day...

NARRATOR Thanks

OLD JOHN CLINKS OF GLASS] Not supposed to drink this; says it's bad for me gut, the doctor.

NARRATOR Yeh?

OLD JOHN Yeh, that and the smoking, said it would kill me if I werent careful... Seventy eight I am, know that? Kill me! Ha - bleeding nut-case. [PAUSE] Yeh, them doctors [NERVOUS FLICKING AT THE CIGARETTE LIGHTER, CLINK OF GLASS, AND IRRITABLY] Where's he got to then...! Bleeding carsie, everytime ye look for him

NARRATOR WHISPERS] That's him now

OLD JOHN Yeh

SOUND THE BARMAN ARRIVES, PUTS THE FRESH BOTTLE DOWN AND THE

HALF PINT OF LAGER

ROB Alright?

NARRATOR Thanks

OLD JOHN CALLS] Good health Rob! [ASIDE, WHISPERS] I dont think

NARRATOR PAUSE, LIFTS GLASS] Thanks John

OLD JOHN Good health son [DRINKS]

NARRATOR SIPS BEER] Did you like him?

OLD JOHN What's that?

NARRATOR Old Dennis...did you like him?

OLD JOHN Did I like him? [PAUSE] Well, never really knew him did !! I would've though. Yeh, I would've liked him, if we had spoke... Yeh... (CLINK OF GLASS] Woops, there goes Ivan.

SOUND A MAN RISING FROM A CHAIR

OLD JOHN CALLS] Wotcher Ivan! Give em laldy!

IVAN You want me to put a bet on for you?

OLD JOHN No. Thanks all the same. Good luck!

SOUND IVAN EXITS, DOOR CLOSING

OLD JOHN He's a Russian

NARRATOR Ivan

OLD JOHN They call him that, Ivan. It aint his name, not really. He hates the communists

NARRATOR Huh

OLD JOHN Ask him about them, when he comes back, the communists. [CHUCKLES] They used to come round here

NARRATOR Yeh?

OLD JOHN And the anarchists, drank down Grays Inn Road. Ask Ivan about them. The anarchists [AMUSED] He know about them he do. The anarchists [CHUCKLES, CLINK OF GLASS, DRINKS] Yeh, and he likes them bleeding horses!

NARRATOR Does he win?

OLD JOHN Sometimes. Well, we all win sometimes. [PAUSE] Them anarchists, they had a bookshop. [CHUCKLES] Yeh, old Ivan, he'll know about them [CLINK OF GLASS; SNIFFS, SIGHS] Old Dennis... No, we never talked much, him and me. I knew his brother better. A couple of years older than Dennis. And a real villain he was.

NARRATOR Yeh?

OLD JOHN Yeh. He was a villain. Had a nice wife. I used to work the racetracks meself back in them days, and sometimes met him down there; Epsom, old Ally Pally [AND WITH RELISH] Ally Pally. (FLICKING CIGARETTE LIGHTER). Course I was young, back then. About the same age as you

NARRATOR Yeh?

OLD JOHN Yeh, what are you twenty? twenty one?

NARRATOR Twenty one

OLD JOHN Yeh [CHUCKLES] We started young in them days. Of course Dennis's brother...he was older. He used to tell me a few things... He did make a living! Never came round here much. Had a nice house somewhere - Clapham I think, yeh, near the common. Yeh... [SIGHS]

NARRATOR [PAUSE] Did they get on the gether?

OLD JOHN What was that?

NARRATOR Dennis and his brother. Did they get on together?

OLD JOHN Well... (SNIFFS) Dont rightly know...

NARRATOR Okay

OLD JOHN They didnt speak much you see, not to each other. Some brothers dont you know. Yeh... They'd usually just sit drinking, sometimes laughing, you know. Not speaking though, not much - probably said everything I suppose. Course maybe Dennis might ask after his family, his wife and kids, something like that you know, that's what it'd be. You got brothers son?

NARRATOR Yeh, two

OLD JOHN Two? That's nice

NARRATOR yeh

OLD JOHN Sisters I had, four of em! Bell, Mags, Doreen and Doris. Doreen and Doris were like cats and dogs. [CHUCKLES] Fought all the time they did, wohhh! I had to duck for cover

NARRATOR CHUCKLES

OLD JOHN I was only a kid [CLINK OF GLASS]

NARRATOR Was he never married himself then? Dennis..

OLD JOHN Oh I couldnt rightly say; the Guvnor now, he'd tell you.

NARRATOR Who him? [PAUSE]

OLD JOHN What? Him! (SNORTS) The Guvnor! Yeh he would like that, bleeding Guvnor! No, Jackie Moore's the Guvnor... Rob there now he's his brother-in-law [WHISPERS] Bleeding ponce, that's what he is. Yeh, Jackie's been laid up now nearly a year. Something like that - broke his leg. Three places. Well, it's never healed proper, not proper. Him! (FLICKING AT CIGARETTE LIGHTER): He thinks he'll get this place if Jackie packs it in...

NARRATOR QUIETLY] Oh

OLD JOHN BECOMING EXCITED) No chance; no bleeding chance. Even his sister hates his guts. Hear what I'm saying,? His sister, yeh! What d'you think of that? Bleeding ponce

NARRATOR QUIETLY] Mm

OLD JOHN Yeh... [CLINK OF GLASS] He hears me alright. [PAUSE] You worried about him hearing me son? Dont worry

NARRATOR QUIETLY] No...

OLD MAN He hears me alright [CLINK OF GLASS, DRINKS] Dont you worry about that. Yeh... [PAUSE, WHISPERS] Look at him now, bleeding goggle box, that's all he does. Dont pay no attention; he hears me alright. Wont let on though. Ponce. What was I saying? Old Dennis, yeh. He could drink. Scotch he liked, drank it all the time. Dont care for it much myself. Drop of rum now and again, yeh, that does me. (FLICKS CIGARETTE LIGHTER) Used to play a bit of football you know

NARRATOR Dennis, did he?

OLD JOHN Oh yeh, the Palace I think it was. Yeh, the Palace...

NARRATOR Huh!

OLD JOHN Didnt you know that?

NARRATOR No, I did not

OLD JOHN Yeh

NARRATOR I wouldnay have figured that

OLD JOHN What because of his arm?

NARRATOR Well...yeh

OLD JOHN That was the war son that's where that happened

NARRATOR Right...

OLD JOHN AMUSED] What d'you think he was born that way?

NARRATOR I dont know

OLD JOHN CHUCKLES

NARRATOR Stupid...

OLD JOHN Yeh [CLINK OF GLASS. SNIFFS] Mind you, now I think on it, could've been the Orient. [PAUSE, AND FIRMLY] No, it was the Palace. [PAUSE] Jackie'll know. [SNIFFS] You like football son?

NARRATOR Yeh, I suppose

OLD JOHN SNORTS] The Marshes was as far as I got, that was my limit! Sunday mornings. [CHUCKLES] Them *were* the days!

SOUND DOOR OPENS

OLD JOHN CALLS] Wotcher Ivan! [PAUSE] Woops, dont tell me!

IVAN CALLS] Horses...!

OLD JOHN Yeh! [WHISPERS] Bleeding horses! What else...! [CALLS] Down the

tubes?

IVAN CALLS] Down the tubes!

OLD JOHN Oh well! [CALLS] What about old Uncle Joe my son he's down the tubes!

IVAN Yes, also!

OLD JOHN QUIETLY] Old Uncle Joe. Stalin, you heard of Stalin?

NARRATOR Yeh, Joseph Stalin

OLD JOHN SNIFFS] Hates the communists he do, old Ivan there. He's Russian, d'you know that?

NARRATOR Yeh, ye were saying

OLD JOHN Hates them communists [CLINK OF GLASS, DRINKS]

NARRATOR SNIFFS] Want another? Ye take another one?

OLD JOHN What? Oh, I dont mind, yeh, yeh son, bottle of stout there, a guinness

NARRATOR Okay

OLD JOHN Yeh, that'd be nice [FLICKING CIGARETTE LIGHTER]

SOUND NARRATOR SHIFTS CHAIR, MAKES TO RISE

OLD JOHN No, he sees you, he'll come. [CALLS] Yeh Rob! Same again!

NARRATOR Thanks John

OLD JOHN Yeh, he sees you. [SARCASTIC] Is that money? wohh, he sees you alright

NARRATOR QUIETLY] Yeh

OLD JOHN You're worried he hears me. [SIGHS] Yeh... Dennis' brother now *he* made a living. He was a villain. Back in them days. Well, you had to be son that's how it was, you want to survive. It was a bit of this and a bit of that. I used to work the tracks myself; did I tell you? (CHUCKLES) Done a bit of whispering. You know what that is, whispering? The old whispering, yeh... (EXAGGERATED WHISPER, ADOPTING VOICE): I got the goods on the third, you want the goods on the third! I got the goods! Old Prince what-do-you-call-him, he was there. Old Billy Devine, the old Coal Porter, that's what they called him, he was a coal man till then he went to the races. Yeh, he was there, old Billy. They

all were, back in them days. Dennis' brother now, he used to tell me things. Yeh, he kept me on the straight and narrow... Woops...

SOUND FOOTSTEPS APPROACH

BARMAN Alright?

SOUND SETTING DRINKS ON TABLE

NARRATOR PASSES MONEY] Thanks

BARMAN Alright John?

OLD JOHN Yeh Rob, you?

BARMAN Doing fine, yeh

OLD JOHN That's nice, how's the missus?

BARMAN Oh she's good

OLD JOHN Yeh?

BARMAN Yeh... [LINGERING]

OLD JOHN Glad to hear it

BARMAN Looks like rain, so they say

OLD JOHN Yeh?

NARRATOR LIFTS GLASS] Well, cheers

OLD JOHN Good health [DRINKS]

SOUND FOOTSTEPS RETREAT

OLD JOHN Facking hailstones!

NARRATOR CHUCKLES] Yeh

OLD JOHN SARCASTIC] Looks like bleeding rain! It's his hooter bothering him

NARRATOR Aye

OLD JOHN He wants to know about you

NARRATOR Me?

OLD JOHN Yeh, what's your story, that's what bothers him

NARRATOR I've been in before

OLD JOHN Yeh? Not much you aint.

NARRATOR Couple of times

OLD JOHN What you sitting with me for, that's what he wants to know. Yeh... [DRINKS BEER, SIGHS] Yeh... [FLICKS AT CIGARETTE LIGHTER] Funny he should've waited so long. Course his arm, maybe his arm had something to do with it. What d'you reckon?

NARRATOR I dont know

OLD JOHN Talk in this place they do. Wouldnt if Jackie was here. No, not bleeding likely they wouldnt, not if Jackie were here. [FLICKING LIGHTER] I cant get this thing going. Tobacco, this aint tobacco, I know tobacco, this aint it. Yeh... [PAUSE] You dont say a lot

NARRATOR Me?

OLD JOHN You Scotch then?

NARRATOR Yeh

OLD JOHN Got a sister married to a Scotchman. He's dead now. So's she... [PAUSE]

NARRATOR DRINKS BEER

OLD JOHN Where d'you find him then? (PAUSE) What I mean like when you found him... [SNIFFS]

NARRATOR Yeh well, like it said in the paper

OLD JOHN I read it

NARRATOR I just hadnay seen him for a couple of days. Missis Fitzgerald as well, so she got a bit worried.

OLD JOHN She would, yeh

NARRATOR Me too. Usually I seen him somewhere, down the kitchen or whatever,

going round the dairy, walking about, just whatever.

OLD JOHN Yeh?

NARRATOR He liked going for walks.

OLD JOHN Yeh, yeh he did, he did like a walk, you're right.

NARRATOR So when she said to me, I just thought it was best maybe just to...just find out

OLD JOHN Well yeh

NARRATOR I went up the stair and banged on his door.

OLD JOHN Good, good for you

NARRATOR Nay answer. I banged and banged. Missis Fitzgerald was there. So I took a walk to the library

OLD JOHN The library?

NARRATOR Yeh well, I was nay quite sure what to do, so I just... I used to see him there

OLD JOHN What in the library?

NARRATOR Yeh

OLD JOHN SNIFFS] Yeh...expect you would, now I think on it. The library...

NARRATOR He went maist days, in the morning. And as well as that I suppose I was wanting to think about it, just about what to do, I was nay sure, so I thought the walk would be good.

OLD JOHN QUIETLY] I can see that son yeh, yeh...

NARRATOR So then I just went back and I chapped Missis Fitzgerald's door. She didnay want me to force the door in but there was nay option, I told her, I would just have to do it unless maybe if she got the police, but they would do the same

OLD JOHN Yeh

NARRATOR Or else maybe they would get a joiner, and he would do it with the hinges, just maybe a chisel or something. I didnay know really so I just thought it best to do it myself, just force it...just because of time

OLD JOHN VERY QUIETLY] Yeh...

NARRATOR She just left it to me, what I thought, just whatever. So I went ahead ye know I just - I stuck the boot on it, twice, that was it and it just like snapped. He was lying at the side bed

OLD JOHN QUIETLY] Yeh

NARRATOR PAUSE] he was wearing his pyjamas

OLD JOHN QUIETLY] Was he?

NARRATOR Yeh but then his hand was in the basin of water, it was on the floor

OLD JOHN Yeh?

NARRATOR A big old basin. It was terrible. [CLINK OF GLASS, DRINKS

OLD JOHN MATTER-OF-FACTLY] And the eating, it said about the eating..?

NARRATOR That's right, in the paper. The doctor said he couldnay have been eating for a long while.

OLD JOHN The coroner

NARRATOR That's right, a post-mortem

OLD JOHN Yeh well they got to, it's the law. [SNIFFS] Bloody fool. [SLOWLY] He should've ate. That's one thing you gotta do you gotta eat. I eat something every day. I make sure of that. Well you got to. [FLICKS AT CIGARETTE LIGHTER]

NARRATOR Yeh

OLD JOHN A drop of soup's good you know.

NARRATOR RISES FROM CHAIR]

OLD JOHN You going?

NARRATOR Yeh

OLD JOHN Alright

NARRATOR It was Missis Fitzgerald eh, she said I should eh...

OLD JOHN That was nice, yeh, I appreciate that

NARRATOR Okay. See ye then

OLD JOHN Yeh, alright

end