Opening Extract from...

More Than You Can Say

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One

I had been living on the edge for the last couple of weeks. If I were truthful maybe for the last couple of years. Maybe ever since I had left the army. I had started looking over my shoulder again, mostly at things that weren't there. Camilla, my girlfriend at the time, used to say I had paranoid tendencies. I used to reply that, if she'd been where I'd been, she'd be paranoid too. It was a small thing, but it irritated her. Then at a party we had a falling out. It was one of those arguments like a summer thunderstorm, violent but not serious; at least I hadn't thought it was at first. I can't remember what the particular row was about. We were always having them. Anyway, I walked out of wherever we were at the time – a party, somewhere in Kensington – and went to a pub and had a drink. Then I had another drink.

It turned out it was serious after all – the row with Camilla, I mean. Apparently I'd said I would marry her. I can't remember exactly when I had proposed or whether she had said yes, 'I'll think about it' was more her style, but after I left her she rang me on my mobile several times. Eventually – this must have been after my third or fourth drink – I decided to throw my mobile phone into a bin. Then I decided that was a bad idea, because someone might find it and run up an enormous bill that I would have to pay. So I walked all

the way to the Embankment and threw it into the river. No more calls. No more Camilla.

Luckily I don't have the kind of job where you have to show up in the office every morning at eight o'clock. If I did, I would have been fired. I didn't turn up anywhere much before noon for the next fortnight. I drank too much; talked too much when I could find someone to talk to; stayed up too late and then woke in the middle of the morning feeling hung over and sweating. Sometimes I was still wearing the clothes I had put on the previous morning. Then I'd have a shower, tidy myself up a bit – but not too much – and go and have an enormous breakfast in the Greek café on the corner of my street in Camden. Sometimes I would try to take some exercise – go for a walk in Regent's Park, or to the gym. But exercise for its own sake bores me, so if I didn't have any jobs to do for my employer, I usually gave up, went back to the flat and opened a bottle of wine, then read the papers until the sky darkened, the streetlights came on and it was time to go out.

Where I went to depended on my frame of mind. Sometimes I went to the cinema. Occasionally I would call up a friend, from the diminishing list of those who would still speak to me, and try to persuade him or her – usually him, most of the 'hers' had put a line through my name in their address book – to go out for a drink or a cheap supper somewhere. In recent weeks the only invitation I'd received was a gold-edged card inviting me to attend a reception at Lancaster House for veterans of the Afghan Campaign. I don't know why I didn't throw it out. I don't like those sorts of occasions, on the whole, but I suppose it was the thought that I might meet one or two people I had once known. In the end I wrote and said I would come. Maybe it would make me

feel better to talk to someone else who knew what it had been like.

If I had nowhere else to go, I would go to the Diplomatic, a private members' club. Why it chose that particular name I do not know as diplomacy was not an obvious quality of most of the membership, either professionally or personally. If there was any common ground shared by the members, apart from a love of card games, backgammon and roulette, it would be hard to say what it was. We had a German Graf, an English marquess, an East End property dealer and a Turkish Cypriot drug dealer on our list. We even had a few bankers who lubricated the club with real cash. Most of us preferred to rely on markers and IOUs in various forms. The stakes were never enormous but, all the same, if you played there regularly, it was quite easy to lose serious amounts of money.

That was one reason why I hadn't been near the club for the last few weeks: I owed quite a lot of money. Several members were carrying my markers for a few hundred pounds each and it was becoming embarrassing. But that's the way cards run. I hadn't held a decent hand for weeks. We play poker mostly, and believe me, you can be a great player – which I am not – but you still need to hold a few good cards if you want to win. The night on which my biographer, if I ever have one, will say I finally lost the plot, I was flush with cash for once. I'd done a couple of jobs and to my surprise my employer had paid me not only for those, but also the considerable amount he owed me in arrears. That was the good news. The bad news was that he fired me.

What he actually said was, 'I think you need to take a nice long holiday. I'll call you some time.'

I said, 'Don't you like the way I work? I thought that was why you hired me.'

My employer – my former employer – said, 'You are showing just a *leetle* too much enthusiasm. You might need more balance in your life, I don't know. I'll be in touch.'

I'd been fired from all sorts of jobs before, for all sorts of reasons, but being fired for being too keen on my work was a first. Anyway, to get to the point, I had over two thousand pounds in cash on me when I went into the Diplomatic that night.

If you don't already know the Diplomatic, I wouldn't recommend you go out of your way to find it. It is down one of those little alleys that still exist in the one or two obscure mews of Mayfair which have not yet been bulldozed to make way for a new office building or a block of service flats for rich non-doms. There is a front door, with no nameplate to indicate what lies behind it, a single lamp burning above it, and a small CCTV camera reminiscent of the entrance to a brothel. Once inside, the rich aroma of cigar smoke – the Diplomatic has not yet caught up with the anti-smoking laws – and the sour smell of stale alcohol immediately dispel this impression. In the tiny hall is a large man squeezed behind a pretty leather-topped desk. This is Eric, the hall porter. Eric checks your name against a list, to see whether you are a member or an invited guest. His orders are to make sure no one is admitted who is not on the list, nor anyone who is not wearing evening dress, so I had put on all the kit. Part of Eric's charm is that, no matter how often he meets you, he will always forget your face, or at least pretend to. If you can get past Eric – and not everybody does – you enter a larger, dimly lit room which is a bar. You can get almost anything you have ever heard of to drink there, and if you want to eat

then you can order from the list of bar snacks. I wouldn't recommend the food, but if you want to try a new brand of tequila, or you'd like a glass of Salon champagne, or if you want to drink one of the best dry martinis or whisky sours you can get in London, then Marco the barman will fix you up. Marco's dry martinis give your brain a jolt like an electric shock. I ordered one and sipped the chilly liquid for a second, waiting until the room reoriented itself around me. Then, feeling much better, I took my drink and myself upstairs.

Upstairs there is a large gaming room. There are also a couple of smaller rooms where private games for very high stakes are played. I don't go into those. You wouldn't either, unless you happen to be a Russian oligarch or a Saudi prince. My gang were sitting around a card table playing a variant of poker called Texas Hold 'Em. This particular version doesn't seem to have any rules, with nearly every other card a wild card. I watched for a bit. At the table was Bernie, a heavyset man who owned a lot of rented flats in north-east London; Willi Falkenstein, whose wide estates in southern Bavaria had mostly been mortgaged to pay for his gambling habit; Ed Hartlepool, a man of about my own age who spent most of his time in France to avoid paying too much income tax and then came to London for a couple of days each month in order to lose all the income he had saved. Then there was the mark.

I didn't, of course, know the mark. He was Bernie's guest, so he would be rich and probably stupid. Usually one or other of us would try to bring someone like the mark in order to give the game a fresh injection of cash. He was clearly in awe at being seated at the same table as a German nobleman, which was Willi, and an English one, which was Ed, and I felt sure that when he wrote the enormous cheque at the end of

the evening to cover his losses, he would feel a deep sense of gratitude for having been allowed to play with such eminent people. Ed looked up and saw me.

'Well, well – look who's here. It's the Leader of the Pack.'

They had always called me that, after the old song by the Shangri-Las, rather than my proper name, which is Richard. I had been given my nickname because I nearly wrote myself off riding a Ducati around Hyde Park Corner at a hundred miles an hour, which I had done at about three o'clock one morning after a jolly evening at the Diplomatic. It was for a bet.

Everyone turned to look at me except the mark, who blushed and kept his head down, not wanting to appear too familiar with his new friends.

Bernie said, 'Richard, you don't know Gussie here. Say hello to Richard, Gussie.'

The mark gulped and said something. It turned out he wanted to have the pleasure of buying me a drink, so I asked for another dry martini.

'Join us,' suggested Ed. 'But we're playing with cash tonight, Leader. No markers.'

'I have some cash,' I said carelessly. The two thousand pounds was most of the ready I had at that moment and might have to last me God knew how long. I needed at least half of it for rent. For all I knew I might be out on the street within a week if my landlord's patience finally snapped. I was unemployable, or as good as, my parents were unlikely to give me anything, I was broke, close to being homeless, practically destitute. But when had I ever worried about that sort of thing? I wasn't going to start now.

'I might sit in for a couple of hands, if you don't mind me cutting in and then cutting out.'

'The pleasure will be all ours, dear boy,' said Ed. He enjoyed needling me, but was careful never to push his luck. I patted Ed on the back in what I hoped was a patronising way, and pulled up a chair. A waiter handed me my second dry martini. I caught the mark's gaze and raised my glass to him. He blushed again.

The first hand was the best I had been dealt for months. My two hole cards were a pair of kings. Next came the flop: three cards dealt face up. One of them was another king. Then I was dealt a two and a seven. I was up against Ed, who had a pair of sixes showing and I suspected he had a third in his hole cards. He bet hard. I knew he thought I was bluffing when I stayed in and then raised him. At last came the river, the final card that is dealt face down. Mine was another seven, so now I had a full house. I let Ed try to buy the pot, then I called him. What a joy it was to see his expression when I turned over my hole cards to show him my hand.

Half an hour later I was a thousand pounds up. By two in the morning, I had won ten thousand pounds. It was the first time in God knows how long I'd been dealt such good hands. My run of bad luck had gone on for so long no one else at the table – apart from the mark, who hadn't a clue – could bring themselves to believe I held the cards. Time and time again they called my bluff, only to find out that I wasn't bluffing. I didn't need to. It was wonderful, but all the same something inside me kept saying 'Quit while you're ahead.'

Apart from the mark, the other big loser that evening was Ed Hartlepool, and it was beginning to irritate him. He held about a thousand pounds' worth of markers from me and I had made him tear those up. Now he owed me three thousand pounds in cash. The temptation to go on and see

whether I could seriously damage Ed's bank balance was strong, but just after two in the morning I yawned loudly and said, 'Well, I think I'm for my bed. Thank you all very much indeed. Is it OK if we settle up now?'

There was general agreement that the game had gone on long enough and, besides, the mark was beginning to show signs of real pain. His losses for the night must have been over eight thousand pounds. There was a general reckoning up at the end of which the mark handed me a cheque for just over five thousand pounds. Ed took out his chequebook, which of course wasn't Barclays or Lloyds or anything like that, but bore the name of some French-sounding private bank. He wrote out the cheque, not looking very happy, then held it up, out of my reach.

'Tell you what, Leader, do you want to double your money?'

'Double or quits?'

'Of course, double or quits. I'm having lunch at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford tomorrow with my uncle. If you can join us by one o'clock sharp, I'll tear up this cheque and write you another for six thousand pounds. And if you don't turn up, or turn up at one minute past, I'll just tear up this cheque.'

I thought about this for a moment. It didn't make sense.

'What's the catch?'

'The catch is,' said Ed, grinning at me, 'that you have to walk there, starting from here, and arrive on time. And you have to produce evidence that you walked all the way.'

There was some discussion around the table about what sort of proof I might have to provide. Road signs collected along the way was one bright suggestion. I ignored my companions and sat and thought about it. Bets of this sort

were not uncommon at the Diplomatic. Oxford was about fifty miles from central London, and it was now nearly half past two in the morning. That meant I would have to do four and half – nearer five miles – an hour. I'm a strong walker and I knew I could probably do it. I lifted my head and stared at Ed for a moment, then said, 'Bugger evidence. I'll do it, and I won't cheat. I'll start now and if you want to, you can get in your car and follow me. Otherwise you'll just have to take my word for it. Anyway, it should be fairly obvious when you see me in the dining room at the Randolph whether I've been walking or not.'

Ed looked at me. Then he held out his hand.

'Your word? All right, that's good enough for me.'

It was all very old-fashioned. We shook hands. Willi Falkenstein clapped me on the back and made an unfunny joke about mad dogs and Englishmen.

I said, 'I suppose I'd better get going now.'

A small cheer went up as I headed down the stairs. I heard Ed say, 'Well, that's the quickest I've ever won three thousand pounds back,' and Bernie saying in reply, 'You ain't won your money back yet, Eddie. He's a mad sod. He might surprise you.'

I nodded goodnight to Eric the porter, who ignored me, and left the club. It was raining, but not hard. I set off at a brisk walk in a westerly direction.

I have walked in some difficult places in both violent heat and bitter cold. For the first few miles this walk was, by comparison, a piece of cake. The gentle drizzle soaked through the back of my evening jacket, and my black loafers were becoming rather damp. Although they were quite sturdy, I wondered whether they'd make the distance. I wondered

whether I could walk fast enough to collect my six thousand pounds. My biggest worry was being stopped by an inquisitive policeman. I was already attracting some odd glances as I strode rapidly along in my evening clothes. I walked up Park Lane, then at Marble Arch I turned into the Bayswater Road and pounded along that until I reached Notting Hill Gate. From there I thought I'd head west through Shepherd's Bush and up the Uxbridge Road towards the A40.

My plan was to try to find roads that ran parallel to the main roads and motorways, where I would risk being picked up by a passing police car. My other concern was that I might be run over: walking along a road in the middle of the night wearing black clothes wasn't exactly safe, although it would be light by the time I got out of the city.

Somewhere near Shepherd's Bush I found a big all-night supermarket and managed to buy a road atlas and a couple of cans of Red Bull. I swallowed the first of these as I walked, studying the map as best I could under the orange streetlights. A gentleman of the road joined me, a tall, bearded man wearing a long navy blue coat fastened with baler twine and boots stuffed with old newspaper.

'I'm going your way,' he said, exhaling aromatically over me. 'Let's walk together. I'll tell you the story of my life, then you can buy me breakfast. I know a nice little caff not far from here.'

I reached into my coat pocket and peeled a note from the large wedge of cash inside. I had a quick look – it was a tenner. I waved it in front of my new companion, then let go, and it fluttered away in the breeze. He went after it and I increased my pace. I saw no more of him.

As the sky began to lighten, I found myself on a road bridge above the M25, approaching Gerrards Cross. I looked

at my watch. It was just after six in the morning. I was beginning to feel quite footsore, and I wondered once again how long my shoes would hold out. For the first time I began to doubt whether I would get to Oxford at all, let alone in the next seven hours. It crossed my mind to go into the next town and find a taxi rank, but I suppressed the thought. In my place, I felt sure Ed Hartlepool would have taken the taxi.

I walked on through Gerrards Cross and along a B road that ran parallel to the A40. I was in the zone now, the way it used to be, my feet pounding the pavement in an endless beat. By now I felt I could go on for ever. The flayed feeling on the soles of my feet belonged to a different person in a different world. My whole body was covered in a thin film of perspiration. The volume of traffic had been steadily increasing and was now a constant roar in both directions. I was becoming increasingly aware of the closeness of trucks thundering past, and cars racing towards me. Occasionally someone would sound his horn as a sign of encouragement or derision, I wasn't sure which. Daylight had crept up on me in the last hour or two without me noticing it. My watch said twenty past eight. I was only just going to make it, as long as I did not slacken my pace. From somewhere a smell of bacon drifted on the air and for a moment I was overwhelmed by the desire to find a café and have an enormous breakfast: a breakfast that would cost me six thousand pounds if I stopped to take it. I kept walking.

Somewhere between Stokenchurch and Wheatley, following a minor road that avoided the heavy traffic, I heard a car behind me and automatically moved closer to the grass verge so that it could pass. It was a bright, clear September morning and I was no longer concerned about being knocked over. All the same I didn't want to take any chances and looked

over my shoulder to see where the car was. A black Range Rover was idling along some twenty-five yards behind me. I turned my head to the front again and kept walking. The road ahead was empty.

There was a brief purr as the car accelerated. The next thing I knew it was right alongside me, crowding me into the edge so that I almost stumbled on the grass verge. I shook my head in irritation and again waited for it to pass me. It didn't. It had tinted windows through which only the dimmest outline of its occupants could be seen. Then the nearside front window opened and the driver leaned across the passenger seat.

'Want a lift, old man?' he asked.

The speaker had a pale, narrow face and pale, curly hair. Enormous wraparound sunglasses obscured most of his features.

'No thanks.'

'Good party last night, was it?'

I did not reply, waiting for him to lose interest and drive on.

'Where are you headed?'

This idiot was beginning to annoy me. I could not hold a conversation with him and continue walking at nearly six miles an hour. If I walked any more slowly I'd lose my bet.

'Are you lost, old man? Don't know where you're going? Get in and we'll give you some breakfast and then set you on your way.'

I managed to find enough breath to answer him.

'Would you very kindly fuck off?'

'Oh, if you'd like us to fuck off, then of course that's what we'll do.'

The window of the Range Rover wound up again and

then, instead of overtaking, the car pulled into the verge behind me. I resisted the strong temptation to look over my shoulder again and see what the driver was doing. I could hear the motor running. Half a mile ahead of me was a straggly line of houses marking a small village. Suddenly it seemed important to me to get to that village, where there were other people around, and away from the Range Rover. I tried to speed up a little. Behind me I heard the snarl of the engine as the driver gunned it. I thought, thank God, he's going, whoever he is. There was something about the narrow face of the driver with its enormous aviator sunglasses that had made me feel uneasy.

Suddenly I felt a huge blow to my right side. I was pitched forward into the ditch at the side of the road and my head struck something hard. I was stunned and winded and in so much pain I thought I was going to black out. Then I heard, through the mist of concussion, two car doors being slammed. The next second two sets of hands were lifting me and I was dragged around to the rear of the car, blinking and semi-conscious. The tailgate was opened and then one pair of hands transferred itself to my ankles. With a grunt the two men lifted me up to the height of the tailgate. They must have been strong because I am not a small man, at thirteen stone and six foot two, but they managed it. I was rolled on to the tailgate and then folded up so that I fitted into the rear compartment of the car. Then the tailgate was slammed shut and I was left in complete darkness, the parcel shelf pressing down on me. The car drove off, and I screamed as we went around a corner and I was flung against the side of the car. I remember thinking that I should have looked over my shoulder after all – then I might have seen them coming.