

GREEN DIESEL

James Rogers

Funny, articulate, well crafted story of an encounter in a pub over a discussion on the uses and abuses of this agricultural fuel. The author has such a good ear for dialogue and draws the characters really well, showing how they interact, slag each other off and yet remain close if not being exactly close friends. h

"WELL, FRANCIE," Tony said, sitting at the bar with a glass of Guinness halfway to his mouth. He tapped the newspaper on his knee with his free hand. "You made the papers."

Francie grunted as he sat up on the stool at the other end of the bar. "Does that thing have to be on?" he said, nodding at the telly above the optics.

Tony, rustling through the Observer, glanced at the screen. "You're not a fan of Fair City?"

"Awful rubbish. Where is he?"

"Peter? He's in the shop, training up the young fella. He'll be in in a minute." Tony found the page he was looking for. "Here it is now." He folded the paper, half, quarter. "Car used for pushing bales," he read.

Francie grunted again. Peter came through the plastic curtain. "Francie."

"Peter," Francie rumbled with a nod to the counter in front of him.

"Did you hear this?" Tony asked Peter.

"Hear what?"

"Car used for pushing bales."

"What are you on about?" Peter asked as he delivered the half-one to Francie.

"That man before you, now. Stood in front of the judge and said he was entitled to put green diesel in his car because it's not a car."

"Is that right?" Peter looked at Francie. Francie took a sip.

"It's all in here," Tony said, tapping the paper again. "I'll let you read it yourself. Don't want to spoil it for you."

"And how is it not a car?" Peter asked. He took the remote and turned down Fair City. His son came in from the shop.

"Here's the young fella," Tony said.

"Now then Mark, when is a car not a car?"

Mark looked at his father, then at Tony. He frowned. "When it's a Lada?"

"Good one," Tony said with a smile. "But not the answer we're looking for. Francie here has a car that's not a car, because it's a tractor."

"Me tractor was out at Heslin's," Francie grumbled.

"Indeed. So the car was forced to take on the part of agricultural machinery. And was therefore entitled to drink green diesel. So went the counsel for the defence."

"Did you win?" Peter asked.

"I didn't," Francie said, his body hunched about the glass, making it look smaller than it was.

"Where did they catch you?"

"Out at Cox's."

"Oh the hours. They love that spot. You can't see them 'til you're on them. Another, Tony?" Peter nudged Mark. "Put on a glass of Guinness there for Tony."

Mark took the glass to the tap, tilted it, poured the stout three quarters' way, placed it carefully on the plastic tray to settle, all the while his father towering over him like a puppeteer.

"You'll be able to retire soon, Peter,"

Tony said, "with a mighty man like this about the place. How old are you now?"

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen, be God. And pulling pints already. Pulling pints then pulling women."

"Ah now," Peter said.

"You'll have to keep an eye on him. Not much use to you when he's pulling women."

"Ah now," Peter said again, "there's time enough for that, now. Time enough for that." He turned to Francie. "You got Heslin to fix the tractor?"

Francie threw his head. "Took him long enough."

"He's a busy man," Tony said.

"Some man with a machine," Peter said. "You remember the lawnmower?" Mark asked.

"Ah yeah. The lawnmower." Peter scratched behind his ear. "The lawnmower."

"Well what about it?" Tony asked. "Or are you just going to stand there all night saying lawnmower?"

"It was Grannie's," Mark said. "He tried to fix it."

"'Twasn't running right," Peter jumped in.

"He took it all apart and couldn't get it back together again."

"I'll tell it," Peter said. "Top that up for Tony, or did you forget about it?"

Mark turned sheepishly to the tap. He had forgotten and felt stupid for it.

"I took it apart," Peter went on. "You know the way you do. But I had a bit of trouble getting it back together. So I said to hell with it, out to Heslin. God, he's a sight. Tipped the lot out onto the floor. A quick look, flicking through the bits with his finger and you're missing a part, he says. No, I says, it's all there. I made sure. You didn't, Peter, there's a spring 'bout this long." Peter held his thumb and finger an inch or so apart. "Go back and look for it, he says. And I did and he was right, it was there in the gravel."

"He could spot that?" Tony asked as Mark placed the glass on the counter before him. "A spring? By looking at it?"

"Straight away. I came back and he put the thing together in seconds."

"NASA he should be with," Tony said.

"It was like watching a magician."

"He looked like you in reverse," Mark said. Tony let out a big laugh, his head back.

"He's not well in the head," Francie said. "The state of yon tractor."

"What tractor?" Mark asked. He was getting amongst the men now, emboldened by Tony's laugh.

"You must have seen it," Tony said.

"With the armchair in the transport box."

"That tractor. I thought it was someone bought an armchair and was brining it home."

"Not at all. It's for Lizzy. The wife. They come into town of a Saturday evening and

he parks the tractor down at the fire station and then the pair of them do a pub crawl."

"Same route," Peter said, "every time. Ending up here."

"Aren't we blessed," Francie said.

"Don't you enjoy having her, Francie," Tony teased. "Her and the big laugh. She's like a barrel of crows."

"I don't know what she has to be laughing about."

"Sure we all know it's you gets her going, tickling her with words and fingers."

Peter was about to jump in at that point as he could see Francie was getting annoyed, but Mark saved him the need.

"She sits in the armchair?" he said. "That's mad."

"She's as comfortable as could be," Tony said. "He has the box rigged up with slots for the chair. Spring loaded. Push the chair down and the springs snap, holding the legs firm. The next time you see the tractor down there at the fire station, take a good look. It's set up so that the chair's at an angle when the box is on the ground. You'd think it was going to fall out, but he has it that way so that when he lifts the box the chair's on the level."

"More than he is," Francie mumbled.

"He thinks of everything," Peter said.

"Indeed," Tony continued. "Couldn't have poor Lizzy sliding to one side all the time, though she does be by closing time."

"And doesn't he have a canopy for her?" Peter said.

"He does. Copper piping and polythene. She pulls it over herself if it's cold or it starts to rain. The final flourish was the electric heater, hooked up to the battery. They go everywhere, the pair of them, in the tractor."

"Does he not have a car?" Mark asked.

"Plenty of bits of cars. Finest mechanic in Ireland and he doesn't have one himself. Isn't it funny?"

"Why would he bother with a car?"

Francie said. "Going around the country on green diesel. How is that any different to what they did me for?"

"You think he should be up in court?" Tony asked. "Tractor used for lugging wife. Would that be the argument for the prosecution?"

"Tractor used as a social vehicle?" Peter offered.

"But they wouldn't get him," Tony went on. "Because he doesn't use green diesel. Well, he does for the farming, the little bit of farming he does. He explained it all to me here one night how he has it calculated. Miles per gallon, miles per week, all that. And he buys the necessary amount of ordinary diesel to cover his social outings."

"He does in me arse," Francie said.

"I'm telling you. Heslin does things by the book. You watch for him, down there by the diesel pump at Booth's."

"The man's even dafter than I thought."

"That's what they say in Booth's. But weren't you just complaining about him getting away with the green diesel a minute ago."

"Yeah, well, still. What sort of a bollocks would put ordinary diesel in a tractor?"

"What's the difference?" Mark asked.

"Green diesel is tax free," his father explained. "But it's only to be used for farming. It's just a dye they put in it."

"Used to be red," Francie said.

"Why did they change it, I wonder," Peter said.

"Independence. Like the post boxes and the telephone boxes, they used to be red."

"Don't be daft," Francie said. "It was red diesel up until recently."

"Took them that long. You know what the civil servants are like. An age to get anything done."

"You're talking pure shite now," Francie said.

Peter could see Francie was coming to the boil. He'd been annoyed with Tony from the start for bringing up the court case. And then the ridiculous talk about tickling Lizzy. Everyone knew Francie had a thing for Lizzie, back when they were in school. Nothing ever came of it and people were happy enough to smile with the memory, inside their heads. Except Tony. Tony loved annoying people, especially Francie. He'd niggle away now until he got the level of response he craved, unless Peter put a stop to it. "Of course he's taking shite," Peter said. "He could talk shite for Ireland at the Olympics."

"Peter, now, you're very naïve," Tony said. "You don't know the lengths Francie

will go to. He'll have poor Heslin jailed for improper tractor use and into the barrel he'll get with Lizzy."

Francie slammed the counter with his fist. The stool went from under him, clattering across the floor. "You're nothing but a prick!" He made for Tony, but Tony was already dancing across the floor on his toes like Nijinsky, one arm out for balance as he drained the last of the Guinness in mid-flight. He went through the door with a giggle, no doubt heading across Glebe Street in search of more trouble and stout.

Mark looked on with wide eyes. Peter nudged him. "Go out and pick up the stool," he said before turning to Francie. "Never mind him, Francie. The gobshite lives for rising people."

Francie took the stool from Mark and returned to his slouch. He nodded at Peter, the signal for another. Peter got Mark to fill it. "I'm going upstairs for a cup of tea," he said. "Come and get me if you need me."

"Ok."

"I'll leave you with the young fella, Francie."

"Sound." Peter disappeared through the curtains. Francie turned to Mark. "Turn off that shite," he said, nodding at the telly.

Peter came down a while later to find the bar lined with customers, men in cloth caps and close chats. He watched from the curtain as his son got on with the show.

"Another one, Francie?" Mark asked.

Francie nodded. Mark turned to the optics, hesitated. Looking back over his shoulder, he called to Francie. "Hennessy, isn't it?"

Francie grunted. "Tell the whole world, why don't you?" he complained when Mark placed the glass on the mahogany.

Mark was taken aback. He looked over at his father, the question in his eyes. What did I do wrong? Peter smiled, winked.

Tony appeared around the corner. Peter got ready to move out the other side of the bar, but he soon saw there was no need. Tony went straight up to Francie and the pair continued a conversation that had been put on hold by Tony's trip to the toilet. Peter smiled again. "Are you sure you want to inherit this mad spot?" he asked Mark.