



The drug dealer: public enemy number one. What is the reality behind this modern day pariah? Novelist Mark Piggott, who has written extensively on London's underclass, meets a dealer and two regular drug users...

It's a rainy Winter night in London's Clerkenwell, and the two suits don't know what hit them. One minute they're watching Man United in the Champions League, the next a bottle flies 20 yards across the bar and hits one of the men in the face. As he collapses, blood all over his shirt, there's a cheer from the sharp dressed gangsters at the bar: 'Bullseye!' The man mumbles something, shocked, confused, something like 'You fucking wankers,' and the thug with the Jocky Wilson elbow has to be restrained from coming over and beating him senseless. I feel dampness on my skull: the bottle missed my head by inches. We quickly drain our pints and decide to watch the second half somewhere else. Crap beer here, anyroad. Clerkenwell, sitting uncomfortably between the City and Islington, Ends East and West, is a smelting pot where businessmen, artistes and fledgling gangsters rub cautious shoulders. The City is full of wide boys with wide smiles and fat wallets, with no respect for class, past or future. Now is the time, and just for today Eddie is king. Just another City winebar. Eddie C, a thirtysomething Glaswegian, perches on a tall stool clad in designer gear, his mobile phone

dormant, expectant. The threat of the law makes no difference to him; he knows he's on borrowed time. His time to date has been spent watching friends die. He has a wife and kids- all of whom he's resigned to never seeing again. As a dealer, Eddie's got his own story. So, how did he get here? What's the motivation? 'Two years ago I was in the gutter. Now I make a thousand pounds a week, tax free. I am a perfect example of Blair's classless society. I'm one of eight kids, from a Catholic family in Glasgow. I used to be a baker; but I ended up sleeping rough behind the Savoy. I was there four months, scrounging through the bins. I was selling the Big Issue. I can't even read. 'I started getting heavy into the booze, and on the street there are always drugs around. You take stuff just to keep you warm. So I thought, I may as well sell it, make a bit more money. But I have ma standards. People who deal at the school gates are scum of the earth. I deal to barristers, pop bands, City types. They come to me, not the other way round. So why not?' A smartly dressed young man enters the bar and raises his eyebrows. With a sleight of hand David Blaine would be proud of, pills pass from Eddie's body belt to the man's pocket and cash goes into his own. After he's made his rounds of the wine bar, shaking hands, buying drinks and telling jokes with his many 'friends', Eddie tells me more. It's not a black and white morality tale; like life, it's blurred. You should hate

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Eddie. I should hate him. But...

'I'm doing pretty well for myself these days,' he says, 'with a few lads working for me, but I've been in some risky situations. One time I was trying to buy this big stash, so I heard about this guy down in Brixton. I went down there on my own, a big wad in my pocket, and he drove down this back street where two other guys got in the back. I thought: I'm dead.

'We drove round to this alleyway, and up this fire exit, and any minute I thought I was going to get jumped, or worse. I even had my keys poking through the knuckles of my fist to give myself a chance. But they were fine, gave me the pills, hundreds of them, counted out the money, and drove me back to the Tube!'

Eddie's face cracks up as he remembers. His ravaged face reflects a hard life. Doctors have advised him to cut out drugs and alcohol completely or die. The best prognosis is that he's got 3 years; the worst- he'll be lucky to see Hogmanay.

A recent government statement told young people not to touch ecstasy. But if ecstasy is that dangerous, why are some police calling for laws on cocaine and 'E' to be softened? The number who die from taking ecstasy each year is in the dozens; for both fags and booze, you're talking thousands.

The real danger of the softer designer drugs is that sometimes you're mixing with people who want to get you into the harder stuff. For some, the temptation to get new highs is too much.

And for every dealer, like Eddie, there are dozens of eager customers. Beneath London Bridge I find Feargal, a friendly young Northerner. Feargal shakes me by the hand, offers me a swig of Spesh and tells his story: 'I got this council flat with Rachel, we were both on the streets, but then I was up in Camden, and met this girl and we just clicked and so I went back to her place, and I went back the next day and Rachel flipped.

'So here I am again. I live behind a skip and I'm off the smack, have been for a year. Don't touch the stuff since my mate Ian died. I feel sort of responsible for his death; there was this guy up West who was selling his prescription for meth(adone), but it was getting kind of heavy so

I brought him back to the flat and Ian took some, and we found him dead.

'Ian's mates came round looking for me with a baseball bat- see this (he pulls up his sleeve to reveal a misshapen lumpy forearm) 'That's where they were battering me with the bat, I put the arm up for protection, broke my arm they did. Didn't go to the hospital though, not since I went in there and a nurse snapped a needle in my arm.

'I'm not scared of using needles myself, I was shooting up for ages, when I went in for my last HIV test I put it in myself. I'm HIV positive, but I'm not bothered, it's just karma, I just want to see my grandchild once and then I don't care if I get hit by a bus.'

There is no tone of bravado or swagger in Feargal's voice; nothing to indicate he is exaggerating. He is bright, funny, intelligent and likeable, and I hope he makes it. His misery-bizarrely- mirrors that of dealer Eddie, albeit that Eddie's got the lifestyle Feargal would covet.

I was going the same way as Feargal in my teens; drinking from eleven, magic mushrooms, lighter fuel, dope, acid and speed. When I moved to London, drugs were cheaper and there was more variety. When I helped some friends move into a tower block, my mate gave me some coke to speed things up. I looked out over the bright lights and thought: I'm gonna like it here...

Everyone seemed to be dealing or using or usually both. I got bored of it all; the rainy afternoons, the gouching out, the nutters with knives, the junkies selling their body. When I discovered ecstasy in Amsterdam, I preferred its effects. But all the time newer and harder drugs were emerging, and the most feared of them all was crack.

There's a lot of misinformation about crack. When I checked into a seedy place in New York's Times Square and was given a bag of crack, I chucked it away because I believed the stories. But a few years later, out of curiosity, I tried it and didn't find it addictive; in fact, I found the effects nauseating, like taking poppers.

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Nevertheless, it must appeal to some. In parts of Brixton, Peckham, Dalston, Shepherd’s Bush, Notting Hill, King’s Cross, Tottenham, Kilburn, and Harlesden, you can go to the newsagent for your lottery ticket, put a bet on a horse, go to the pub, get a take-away, call a mini-cab firm, and in each place buy a wrap of crack.

Smack’s even cheaper; outside some London schools they give it away for free. This is not scare-mongering. This is fact.

Finally, I go to check out a mate I’ve not seen in months called Mallon in his new place: a council estate in South-East London. The only contents of the fridge are a few cans of Special Brew and a couple of lemons (a dead giveaway of a junkie- providing as it does instant sterilisation). Slumped on the old sofa are Mallon and his mate, Spike, practically comatose from smack, with tattoos all over his face.

Spike’s rambling monologues are almost entirely unintelligible, but the subtext of menace evident. Occasionally he tries to stand, to strip off his shirt and provoke a fight, but keeps He shakes his head sourly as we walk over to his local, a just-about sawdust on the floor job- the opposite of the trendy, yuppified City wine bar Eddie frequents during 'working hours'. 'I used to live in a house with the lad,' he says, referring to Spike, 'I feel sorry for him. He's just a fucking mess. I've heard sometimes he'll even inject water into his arm. That's how bad it can get. People develop a needle fetish.'

Eddie has lived with any number of addicts; he says that of the ten or so people he has shared accommodation with over the last few years, seven are dead. Even his own brother is a heroin addict. Yet he feels no remorse at continuing to peddle drugs. 'I don't even sell down the clubs, it's too dangerous. You never know down there

falling over. After a couple of hours of this there is the fight he so desperately craves; everyone in the room sucked in to the petty drama, wearisome because you know something similar happens every night in the Groundhog Daze of addiction.

Looking at the results of their trade- and Spike is an extreme but relevant example- it's so very easy to dismiss all dealers as the scum of the earth, but the reality is more complex. I've met quite a few over the years; even went out with one once. Lisa sold dope to supplement her dole. Although he makes a lot of money from dealing, Eddie C. still lives in a dingy basement flat in Hackney.

He does have a peculiar- if not overly developed- sense of morality when it comes to his trade. While I'm there he has a furious row with a young man who has come to buy some pills, swallowed them immediately, only to discover he doesn't have the full price. It is the one time I see Eddie get angry, but finally he relents and lets the young man off. 'whose toes you're treading on.'

Despite all the potential pitfalls and dangers that go with his trade, there's just one thing Eddie is genuinely scared of. I speculate what it might be: other criminals, dodgy heroin, getting nicked? He shakes his head ruefully. 'Do you know what my worst nightmare is? Legalisation. If they bring that in, I'm finished.' It's an interesting ground zero view on the drugs debate. It's enough to give even a government like this one- with its cannabis tolerant zone in Brixton- the shakes. Whatever happens, the likes of Feargal, Spike and indeed Eddie C. already have their lives mapped clearly and distressingly out in front of them.

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