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The Long Drive Home

Stan Rogal
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In the cultural trade between Canada and America, it's usually American pop culture that sells. Canada has purer air and water, a slight moral superiority and Toronto as a frequent film stand-in for Manhattan, but America seems to own the genre of gritty gun-toting low-life. A Canadian's view on this would be welcome. The Long Drive Home, told in quick cinematic scenes with pop song fade-outs, gathers up, in the tradition of the road novel, a promising mix of terminally unhappy couples converging on a Quebec motel.

It opens well: a nervous woman with a flat tire, and a too-helpful stranger who reappears later at the same roadside motel. Her daughter noticed he wore a gun; unfortunately, her mother has one too. A nice Hitchcock set-up. Each chapter's new character is dealt like an ace from the bottom of the pack. From a tired waitress to a wheezing motel owner, the author, a Canadian playwright/director, shrewdly catches his characters sizing each other up as cheap marks.

A middle-aged gay hitman fuming over drinks in a strip bar about his creative writing teacher starts out like a brilliant comic riff worthy of Elmore Leonard's shady characters, but its punch line suddenly goes awkward with self-pity. A tigerish Toronto adulteress fondles her lover's hand-gun, but it's the intruder downstairs shuddering at her choice of Michael Bolton's reedy torch songs on the stereo who steals the scene by mocking her musical taste. These notes of black comedy get lost when, almost imperceptibly, the gears downshift and the characters veer toward seriousness. The little girl reads the motel brochure about Magog's resort attractions, but her mother, drunk and disposed to self-mutilation, knows Magog as the Biblical reference to Satan's city of sinners. In the next room, a lawyer plans to commit suicide with a gun after his Chinese take out dinner. By midnight when they and the cross-dressing detective all face off in the parking lot, their guns drawn, its abrupt freeze-frame climax feels like a shaggy-dog story that ends only because it has nowhere else to go.

Somewhere inside The Long Drive Home is a black comedy desperate to get out. Perhaps with his second novel, the author will give in to it. As the actor's adage has it, dying (and gun play) is easy. Comedy is difficult.
LEETA TAYLOR (August 16, 1999)

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