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Cogan's Trade
A Novel

GEORGE V. HIGGINS

Vintage Crime/Black Lizard
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AMATO IN A GRAY SUIT with a muted red stripe, textured pink shirt with his initials on the left French cuff, a maroon and gold tie, sat at the kidney-shaped, walnut veneer desk and stared at the two men. “I got to give it to you,” he said, “you’re a great-looking couple of guys. Come in here about four hours late, you look like shit and you stink. The fuck, you look like you just got out of jail or something.”

“His fault,” the first one said. “He was late. I stood around there and I waited for him.”

Both of them wore black boots with red suede inserts. The first one wore an army-green poncho, a frayed gray sweater and faded blue jeans. He had long hair, dirty-blond, and a pair of mutton-chop sideburns. The second one wore an army-green poncho, a gray sweatshirt and dirty white jeans. He had long black hair that reached his shoulders. He had the beginnings of a black beard.

“I hadda get my dogs in,” the second one said. “I got fourteen dogs, there. Takes me a while. I can’t, I can’t just go off some place, leave them dogs out.”

“You’re all covered with hair, too,” Amato said. “You been backing them dogs up to you, guess?”

“Comes from beating off, Squirrel,” the second one said. “I come out, I haven’t got your advantages, nice business waiting for me, all that good shit. I got to hustle.”

“‘Johnny’ around here,” Amato said, “you can call me ‘Johnny’ here. Most of the help call me ‘Mister,’ but you can call me ‘Johnny.’ That’ll be all right.”

“I’ll work on that, Squirrel, I really will,” the second one said. “You got to make allowances for me, you know? I, like I just got out of fuckin’ jail. My head’s all fucked up. I got to readjust to society, is what I got to do.”

“You couldn’t’ve got somebody else,” Amato said to the first one. “This item looks like shit and he don’t have no manners. I got to put up with shit like this?”

“I could’ve,” the first one said, “but you asked me, you know, get somebody that was a right. Russell, here, he’s maybe kind of a wise ass, but he’s all right if you can stand him.”

“Sure,” Russell said, “and a guy like you, he wants something done, hasn’t got the stones to do it himself, I think he oughta try pretty hard, too.”

“I really don’t like this prick,” Amato said to the first one. “He’s too fuckin’ fresh for my blood. How about going out and getting me a nice tough nigger? I don’t think I can stand the cocksucker long enough to tell him what I want.”

“Russell, for Christ sake,” the first one said, “willya shut the fuck up and stop jerking the guy’s chain? He’s tryin’ to do us a favor.”

“I didn’t know that,” Russell said. “I thought he wanted us to do him a favor. That the straight shit, Squirrel? You tryin’, do me a favor?”

“Get the fuck out of here,” Amato said.

“Hey,” Russell said, “that’s no fuckin’ way, talk to a guy. The fuck you sell driving lessons

to people, you go around talking to a guy like that?"

"This thing I got in mind," Amato said, "the two guys I get to do it're gonna cut up about thirty, I figure. Thirty K. Shitbirds like him, Frankie, shitbirds like him I can buy for eight cents a dozen, they throw in another free. Get me somebody else, Frankie. I'm not gonna put up with this kinda shit."

"Remember them habes we had?" Frankie said.

"Habes," Amato said, "what habes? We had about nine hundred habes. Every time I turn around that monkey's pulling out something else I got to sign. What habes?"

"They, the ones they bring us down for," Frankie said. "The federal ones."

"On the line-up thing," Amato said, "yeah. The time that big coon come after me."

"Long Tall Sally," Frankie said.

"I dunno what his name was," Amato said. "We didn't have no nice conversation or anything. He was just trying to get my pants off and I was just trying to stop him from getting my pants off, is all. 'Jes hold still there a minute, white boy, I'm gonna shove all my good time right up your sugah ass.' Fuckin' guy. He had white lipstick on."

"The next night he wasn't there," Frankie said.

"The next night I wasn't there," Amato said. "If I had've been that fuckin' nigger wouldn't've, boy. I got Billy Dunn a wood chisel for that fucker, he was gonna grab him in the yard if I was there. Fuckin' dumb screws, can't always depend on them guys showin' up when you need them like that, guy's liable to learn a new way, he's not careful."

"You were in Norfolk," Frankie said.

"I was in Norfolk," Amato said. "Sit there all day listening to some kid make a fuckin' asshole outa my goddamned lawyer, all I can think about's what Billy's gonna do to the coon, I get back there, and then it turns out, I'm going to Norfolk. Only thing I see that night there's this nun in a gray thing, there, wants to know, do I wanna learn the fuckin' guitar."

"I know her," Russell said. "She's all over the place. She was up to Concord once. I said to her, I said: 'Sister, I wanted to play the guitar, I would've grabbed a fuckin' guitar.' After that she left me alone. Lot of the guys liked her, though."

"That night the nigger was in the hospital," Frankie said.

"Good," Amato said. "I hope he fuckin' *died*."

"Nope," Frankie said, "but I seen him. He was missing about three feet of skin off his fuckin' head."

"Hey," Amato said.

"Him," Frankie said, nodding his head toward Russell.

"No shit," Amato said.

"Peeled him like a fuckin' orange," Frankie said.

"More like pulling bark off a fuckin' tree," Russell said. "Guy had skin like nothing I ever seen."

"He came after you?" Amato said.

"Somebody sure did," Russell said, "somebody looked to me like he hadda be the biggest chungo bunny inna world, come after me. I had this blade there, another guy I meet one way over, he told me, I give him a hundred out of my thing there and he had this blade for me. Said I was probably gonna need it. I bet I wasn't in there ten minutes and that nigger coming after me. Didn't do it again, though."

“That’s how come,” Frankie said. “He’s a prick but he’s got all the moves.”

“He clean?” Amato said. “Both you guys clean?”

“*Frankie*,” Russell said, “you been *using* something?”

“Shut the fuck up, all right, Russell?” Frankie said. “Yeah. I haven’t had anything but booze since I get out. Not that much booze, either. Mostly beer. I been waiting for payday, I start on the VO and other stuff.”

“You’re on pills,” Amato said. “You’re in, you’re on pills. I seen you, don’t forget. You were beating the hell out of them yellowjackets.”

“John,” Frankie said, “the yellowjackets were there. I didn’t see nobody serving no beer. I took what there was. I haven’t had none of that stuff since I was out.”

“How about him?” Amato said.

“*Gee*, Squirrel,” Russell said, “I wouldn’t take nothing. I, ah, I probably had a couple quarts of Ripple and some grass, and I might’ve had one or two dime bags once or twice, but I just snort them, you know? It’s not like I was using something. I go to Cub Scouts, you know? And they pat you down, there, they start teaching you how to tie them knots and do everything.”

“Smack,” Amato said to Frankie. Frankie shrugged. “I ask you to find a guy for me and you got this thing, and all I got to do is do it and we get some very nice money. All I got to do is find two guys that can do a fairly simple thing without fucking it up, and this is the best you can do for me. A fuckin’ junkie. And I’m supposed to just let you guys go in there and you’re gonna go in and once and for all you’re gonna fuck it up, a job that’s never gonna come around again in a million years. I don’t want to have a whole lot of *fun* with this thing, you know, because I had to go out and get a guy that looked all right when I got him and then he goes in and he’s on the fuckin’ nod or something. I want the goddamned money. That’s what I need.”

“Squirrel,” Russell said, “when I was a little kid I used to take off on Cheracol. I didn’t have any trouble. When I was working for my Uncle, I used to have to go down in holes for him, you know? The carbon black on my face and go down in them holes with a forty-five in my hand and a knife in my fuckin’ teeth and I went into them tunnels. Every day I went into them tunnels. If there wasn’t anything in the tunnel, that was a good day. Not so good day if there’s probably only a big fuckin’ snake in there or something that wants to eat you. Kinda bad days, there’s some skinny dink in there with a gun, tryin’ to kill you. Bad days was when the dink did it, or there was a piece of wire in there and you didn’t happen, you weren’t paying attention or something and it’s rigged up to something that blows up pretty quick, or else there’s a punji stick in there with a whole lot of dink shit on it under your hand and you go into your basic blood poisoning extra quick.

“I didn’t have no bad days,” Russell said. “I was in them tunnels almost two years and I didn’t have no bad days. I wasn’t buying up Mustangs and teaching little dumb shits to drive but I didn’t have no bad days, either.

“The thing of it is, *Squirrel*,” Russell said, “when I was having them days, I didn’t know for sure at the time that I wasn’t gonna have a bad one, you know? I started out, I thought it was all just a matter of balls. I don’t wanna hurt your feelings or anything, but I always had the balls, you know? And I thought, I felt pretty good, because I thought that’s all it was and I had them so I was all right. Then I see, I seen them cart out a couple guys that went in the

and put them in the green bags, you know? And a couple of them, they didn't have no balls when they come out, on account they didn't have no luck, they went in that time, and no cocks either, and that carbon black, don't do a thing for cuts and stuff. Fuckin' booby traps go right through it, like it wasn't even there.

"So that gets me to thinking," Russell said. "I'm no good at thinking. But that gets me thinking, and I see, well, I'm in the shit, is what I am, and I can't personally do nothing about it. All I can do is, I can have the balls and the luck, but the only thing I know about is the balls. I just can't have no bad days. Only, I don't know no way to do that. So, I used to come out, and I know, tomorrow I go in again, and the only thing I can think about is, I used up another day. That's all. So I smoke something. And it helped.

"Then I start looking at them other guys," Russell said. "I see them, I was still thinking, and they're all, most of them, at least're smoking. And them guys that're doing the grass, you know? Very heavy on it, and they slow down some. I was, I was keeping track of things. I could see it happening to me, it was happening to them, I got it a little bit and I begin to see that's what, them other guys, they started on it, it was probably just a little bit for them, too, when they start. You start forgetting things. All you want, you don't care about things, you know? Very funny thing. And then, some of the guys that're older, they drink a lot. And pretty soon they're sick a lot. And that's bad. Their hands shake. They're not paying attention either. And you get in there, there's the wire or the dink or something, well, you're gonna have to have a lot of time to think about it or else you're not gonna have no time at all. You can't let yourself get slow.

"So I try the horse," Russell said. "You got to have something. So I get some of that nice white shit, and what I did was, I used it after, right? *After* I come out again. I haven't got to go back in tonight. First I snort it. Then, a couple times I did it the other way, but mostly I snort it. But I used it. And I liked it.

"Okay," Russell said, "it don't, it makes you feel great, but it don't actually do nothing for you, you know that. When you're in there, doesn't protect you at all. But you been in, and you got out, and you got to go back in again and you don't want to think about that, maybe you're not gonna bring yourself out, you go in again, use up all your luck thinking. So the horse it's very fuckin' nice. Don't slow you down. Just makes you feel good, and that's what I was after."

"Sure," Amato said, "and that's what you're gonna be after when you're getting ready to go in on this thing I got, and you're gonna get it and you're gonna be flying and you're gonna get in stoned up to your ass and some poor bastard's gonna start hollering or something and he's gonna get shot, and a very good thing that a kid in his fuckin' right mind couldn't fuck up and you're gonna get fucked up. That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

"He'll be all right, John," Frankie said.

"*Maybe* he'll be all right," Amato said. "Maybe he won't be all right. Maybe *you* won't be all right. I don't want nobody getting hurt on this. There's nothing, there's no reason why anybody oughta get hurt on this, the guys that go in or the guys that're in there when the guys go in. This's money, just money, nothing else. No fuckin' *shit* and stuff that's gonna get everybody all pissed off and everything. It was something that was gonna be around, it was something like that, all right, I could maybe take a chance. I could take a couple guys that I was afraid of, maybe cock off and wreck it, and take their word for it, they're gonna be all right. So a

right, they go in, and they cock off and wreck it, it was a bank or something, it's gonna be there next week for two guys that've got more sense, all right. But this isn't. It's not like that. You fuck it up, it's fuckin' gone, it's gonna disappear. I got to think about this. I got to be sure. I'm gonna talk to some people. I'm gonna take my time about this thing, as much time as I got, anyway."

"John," Frankie said, "I need dough. I was in the can a long time and I haven't found anything. You can't fuck around with me like this."

"My friend," Amato said, "my wife, Connie? Makes great roast pork. She stuffs it, you know? It's really great. The other night she makes roast pork. First time since I been home. I couldn't eat it. I told her, I said: 'Connie, don't make no pork for me, ever again.' But I used to love it, I always said it's the best thing she makes, and she's a good cook. I mean, a real good cook. That's why she's so fuckin' fat all the time, she likes to eat and she likes to cook and she cooks great and she eats it. 'Bacon,' I said, 'ham, I don't care if it does come off a pig. But no kind of pork. You make baked beans, all right? Don't gimme none with the pork on it. The beans I'll eat. Not the pork.' And, well, I went down the clamstand and I ate in my fuckin' car, and I haven't, until a month ago I didn't eat with my family for almost seven years. I still ate down the clamstand. Something got fucked up once, you remember that? I picked a wrong guy for something, everybody's in a hurry, we got to move, we need the dough, this and that, he'll be all right, and I, it, I was worse'n the rest of you. So we took him, and I knew, he's a guy I'm really not sure about. I couldn't tell you what it was, I just knew it, this was a wrong guy. But I take him anyway. And he was a wrong guy, and I eat greasy, shitty pork, seems like every day, almost seven years, and my kids're growing up and my business, it's all right, it's not doing as good as it should be, and I'm in the can, and now, I can't get that back, you know? So now, I can't eat my favorite things any more, because they remind me, I'm, from now on I'm taking my time, and that's all there is to it. No, I don't care about you, what's bothering you. We can do something, great, we'll do something. If we can do it safe and without fucking up something that's really good and getting ourselves in the shit again. But I ate the last fuckin' pork I'm ever gonna eat. I had my last fuck-up. Call me Thursday. Thursday I'll know. I'll let you know."



RUSSELL STOPPED about four feet from Frankie on the second underground platform of the Park Street MBTA station. "All right," he said, "I'm here. We going out there or what?"

Frankie leaned against one of the red and white pillars. "Depends," he said.

"Don't depend on me," Russell said. "I been up since quarter five. I'm *all* beat to shit. And also, I got a chance to get laid if I don't go out there."

"Don't people get laid at night any more?" Frankie said. "My sister, we're kids, you couldn't keep Sandy inna house at night if she was tied up. Now she's out Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. I been there five weeks, she's never home them days."

"Must be a fireman," Russell said, "night guy inna fire station. Young guy, too, she's never going out, weekends."

"Or a fuckin' cop," Frankie said. "It'd be the same thing with a cop. I said to her: 'None of my business, Sandy, I just hope you're not rolling around with some fuckin' cop, is all.' She looks at me. 'Why?' she says. 'What've you guys got that cops haven't?' I pity that kid."

"You oughta pity yourself," Russell said.

"I do," Frankie said. "She never had a clean shot, though. She always got around prett good, I don't mean that. She just never hadda clean shot."

"Nobody ever had a clean shot," Russell said. "What the fuck else is new? I was talking to this girl, she wants me to come over there this after. I said to her, look, I hadda be some place. What's the matter, tonight? She's gotta work. She gets off late. I don't care. I been up late myself before. She's a nurse. She says: 'Look, I'm gonna wash old men's asses and everything all day. Then I'm gonna be out on my feet. You think I wanna get laid, after that? That what you think? I don't.' "

"That oughta be something," Frankie said. "I can just see what kind of broad she's gonna be, you can screw off an ad inna paper. Beautiful. Probably got a couple handfuls of broke glass in there."

"Look," Russell said, "you ought to know. I was pounding sand up my ass almost forty years. I would've fucked a snake, I could've got somebody, hold it for me. These broads okay, you wouldn't want to rape them if you saw them, you know? But they got the fuckin' plumbing."

A badly coordinated heavysset man appeared on the southerly platform across the tracks. He wore white coveralls and carried a blue plastic pail. He turned his back and stared at the tile wall. He put the pail down. He put his hands on his hips. On the wall in red spray paint were irregular letters eighteen inches tall. They read: *SOUTHIE EATS IT*. He stooped and removed a steel brush and a can of solvent from the pail.

"I wished I could look at things like that," Frankie said. "I can't seem to get my mind on anything. I thought, I used to think, boy, if I ever get out of this fuckin' place, they just better get all the women out of town that day, you know? But you know what I do? I sleep all the

time. You were to just leave me alone, I think that's really what I'd do, the way I feel right now at least. Just sleep and sleep and sleep. That's why, this thing, I dunno how it is, what he's got in mind. I admit, he's kind of a crazy bastard. But he's at least got something in mind, you know? I haven't. He come out and the day he come out, he was looking around. And I keep thinking, it's all I do, Jesus, if I could just get some money. I could go out and live like I was a regular human being. But I can't, I haven't come up with anything, no way to get no money. Dean, my brother-in-law, he's not a bad guy, basically, he don't say anything. You know what he does? He reads catalogues. All them catalogues, come inna mail? Son of a bitch, he works, he goes to work at noon, noon till eight-thirty, down the gas station. He comes out, he reads catalogues. Fuckin' electronics catalogues. And she's, he's down there busting his hump, up to his ass in oil and stuff, she's out fuckin' some guy. So I'm sleeping on his couch and I'm drinking his beer, he don't know me. He's from Maiden. Where's he know me from? They got married, I was inna can. But he still, he tells me, 'Look, don't tell Sandy, all right? Because you tell her and she's probably gonna start wondering, how I find this out. But you probably wanna get your ashes hauled, there's this broad I know, she works, her husband thinks she gets off at midnight, I guess. She gets off about ten.' So I say to him, well I don't tell him, I was inna big hurry for names, Sandy'd be the one I'd ask, he don't need that kind of favor from me. So I just say, I appreciate it. But I haven't got no place to go, where can I take a broad, you know? I haven't got no car. I got less'n thirty bucks. I mean, what am I gonna do?

"So he says," Frankie said, "he says him and Sandy'll go out, I can use their place. Yeah, and probably one of the kids isn't gonna get up inna middle of the night and come out, so how come I'm making so much noise, getting laid onna couch. It's not gonna work, and that's it, it just won't work. I got to get some dough and I can't, this thing John's got, it's the only thing I got in front of me right now. I got to listen to the guy."

"Shit," Russell said, "listen to him. I'm willing to listen to him. He just didn't want to say anything in front of me that I could hear. Fuckin' guy, he don't like me. Okay. But I'm not gonna go around and check myself into something I don't even know what I'm getting into or anything. I did that before. I'm not doing that again. This thing I'm doing, I can do that. It's probably gonna take me longer, get what I need from it, but I can do it. I'm picking my own spots from now on. I don't have to sit around and take no shit from the Squirrel."

"Okay," Frankie said, "that's what I'm saying. You can take it or you can leave it alone and that's fine. I wished I was you. But me, this's at least ten apiece the guy's talking about. You don't want the ten, all right. But I do. And I haven't got no place else to get it. You have."

"Not that much," Russell said. "I'm not gonna get ten out of this. Five, seven's more like it. No ten. You gimme ten and I'll be gone so fast it was like I never was here. I know exactly what I'm gonna do, I get that kind of dough. But, I don't have to get it from what he's gonna do that he's got in mind to do. It's gonna take me a while longer, but I can get it from what I'm doing anyway, and that, that's on balls, see? Balls. It's something I think up myself, how I'm gonna do this. So, the guy don't like me? All right, I still don't have to kiss his ass, I don't want to. Fuck him. So it's up to you and him. It's up to you guys. You want me, you want me in this, I'll come in. He's the guy with the big ideas. Fine. You want to go and get somebody else, also fine. Don't matter to me."

A blue and white train pulled in from Cambridge. The doors opened. An elderly drunk stood up unsteadily, ignored the doors open behind him and lurched toward the doors open in front of Russell and Frankie. He wore black suit pants and a white dress shirt and a greenish checked jacket. He had not shaved for several days. There was a large red bruise on his left cheek. His left ear was bloody. His black shoes were open along the welting and his bare bunions protruded. He made it most of the way across the car before the doors shut. He bent over reaching for the curved edge of the orange seat with his left hand. It was bloody at the knuckles. He reeled backward into the seat. The doors shut and the train departed for Dorchester.

“Must’ve been a pretty good one,” Russell said. “Like to see the other guy.”

“He fell down,” Frankie said. “My father used to come home like that. He was a strange bastard. Payday was no trouble at all. He’d get his check and work all day and come home and give the dough to my mother and they’d go out that night, go shopping. And they’d come home and watch TV and he’d maybe have two beers. At the most, two beers. Lots of times you’d come down in the morning and there’d be the glass on the table next to his chair, full of flat old beer. I remember, I tasted it, the first time I tasted it, I thought: how the hell can anybody drink anything that tastes like this. And he’d go to work. But then some times nothing on the shape-up. Lots of times. And most of them times, he’d come home and read something. Never talked much. But some times, there wasn’t anything, see, you wouldn’t know that, he didn’t come home, not all the times but some times. And he always, he knew he knew when he was gonna do it. Because when he didn’t come home, when he was late, my mother’d start to get worried and walk around a lot, and when he wasn’t there, she’s saying Hail Marys and everything, when he wasn’t there by seven-thirty she’d go to the cupboard. That’s where they kept the money they didn’t use onna shopping. In a peanut-butter jar. And if he wasn’t there, the jar was always empty. Always. And he’d be gone for at least three days, and when he came home, that’s always the way he looked. He always fell down.

“I remember,” Frankie said, “the last time he’s up at the farm. I had to take him up there and he was, well, it was mostly my mother. She told me: ‘You’re twenty now. You take care of him. I’d do it but I’ve had enough. You take him up.’ So I took him up to Dropkick’s Doctor P. K. Murphy’s farm. And I checked him in and he was as bombed as you can get. So he just had new teeth. And he says to me, well, I knew what he was trying to say to me, he wanted me to take his teeth. Paid two hundred and sixty dollars for his teeth. Now what the fuck was I gonna do with the old man’s teeth? I’m probably gonna lose them myself. So I said to the guy, I said, look, he was probably gonna come out of it, one way or the other, the better keep his teeth. And they put them in a box. I saw them do it.

“I go back about a week later,” Frankie said. “I mean, I liked the old bastard. He never hurt anybody. Used to drive him nuts, Sandy’s running around the way she did, he couldn’t do nothing about it. But he wasn’t a bad guy. So I went up there, go up there and see him.

“They used to sit around in the back room,” Frankie said. “It looked, they had these tables and a television and it looked just like a fuckin’ bar. I dunno, probably they wanted it that way. They got a drink at nine o’clock and one at lunch and one at six, and some of them Christ, the whole place, the woods’re full of botties. A guy’d decide, he was gonna check himself in, and he would, and before he did it he’d get a couple friends of his and they’d come down every day and put ten nips in the woods where he said. The guy told me, he said

there was one guy, he was stoned all the time and he never went near the woods, and the could tell. they could tell when one of them was stiff, and they started watching him, real careful. And when they, he didn't think they were watching them, see, he come up in his car and he'd go out in the yard and get under the car with a cup or something, he filled up the radiator with vodka before he checked in. They thought he was drinking antifreeze. They always had guys bringing in enema bags full of the stuff. At night they'd go around and look in the tanks of all the hoppers. Guys always used to stash pints in there.

"So I go up there," Frankie said, "and the old man's got a buddy. One of the guys he used to work with. They're both on paraldehyde. A little glass of water and the guy comes by every so often and he's got an eyedropper, and a pitcher, and he puts some of the paracki in the glass and some water and they sit there and they sip it, and they, the television's going, they're watching quiz shows or something, they dunno what they're watching, they got cigarettes in their hands and those butts'd burn right down between their knuckles and you could smell their skin burning and you'd tell them and honest to God, that was the first they know about it. You'd tell them and they'd look and they'd say: 'Oh, yeah.' And take the cigarette out and look at their fingers and then put the fuckin' thing *back*. They couldn't feel nothing.

"The guy's name was Burke," Frankie said. "My old man's friend was Burke. They were both on paracki and they both smelled like skunks. Just like skunks. That stuff makes booze smell like perfume. And the old man's complaining. He's been up there a week and he's feeling lots better and he wants his teeth. And the guy can't find his teeth. He goes on and orders Brand-new teeth, guy can't find his teeth, where the fuck's his teeth, now he feels good, he wants to eat, where's the teeth. Burke's asleep in all of this. I think he was asleep. His eyes were closed. I know he wasn't dead.

"I go see the guy," Frankie said. "'Look,' I say, 'my old man wants his teeth. He's in fair good shape now. Not gonna bite anybody. Where's his teeth?' And the guy tells me, same thing the old man tells me. 'I dunno where his teeth are,' he says. 'I put the damned thing in a box, and the box's still there but the teeth're gone. Him and Burke, they been talking about his teeth ever since he come in. I just don't know. I don't find them, I'll buy him new teeth. I can't understand it.'

"So I go back," Frankie said. "Burke's awake now, at least his eyes're open, and the old man's all pissed off, talking the best he can without his teeth, 'Fine fuckin' place this is, you come in here and they take your teeth, fuckin' bastards,' it's all ung, ung, ung, he hasn't got no teeth, and Burke's sitting up straighter and straighter and finally Burke laughs. And he got two sets of teeth. His own, that're his, and my old man's. Looked like a fuckin' man eating shark. I thought the old man was gonna kill him. Gets his teeth back, wipes them on his sleeve, puts them in his mouth, I think the old bastard was almost sober. 'See?' he says 'See, you little shit? Make something of yourself and stay off the fuckin' booze. See what happens to you? Get out there and make some big money and stay the fuck away from Burke. You cocksucker.' Then he's gonna beat up Burke.

"I tell you," Frankie said, "I think he was right. I always thought he was right."

"You got caught doing it, though," Russell said, "that fat little fuck. And now you're gonna go out and get caught again."

"I didn't meet you at the ball park," Frankie said. "Keep that in mind. You're already

pushing your luck again, and you could get grabbed too.”

“For what I’m doing?” Russell said.

“Not gonna matter very much,” Frankie said. “What’ve they got over you?”

“Year and a half,” Russell said.

“Plus what they give you for doing it,” Frankie said. “And all the guys, they’ll be shitting all over you, stealing dogs, for Christ sake.”

“You know something?” Russell said. “I bet they wouldn’t. I bet they wouldn’t even violate me for that. I bet they wouldn’t. And Jesus, it’s gotta be the easiest thing a guy ever did. The morning there, we go out to Sudbury? Those silly shits. They get up and they come downstairs and they let the dog out. They don’t know what they’re doing. You sit there, think you could park right in their yard if you wanted. They wouldn’t even see you. They let a four-hundred-dollar animal out, right out the door at you, woof, woof, woof, ‘Here, boy, here boy,’ and you wave a little meat at him. Jumps right in. You tried to go in that house and he was in there, he’d take your fuckin’ leg off, probably. But you show him eighty cent worth of cheap lamb chops and it takes about two minutes and you’re on your way. I got the Labrador today, beautiful dog, scoffing down the meat and drooling all over the place before they get the door shut, big tail going whump, whump, whump, happy as a pig in shit because he’s eating and he’s getting his ears rubbed. That dog loves my ass. You talk about money. It’ll be Saturday before those stupid bastards even know he’s gone, and I’ll sell him in Florida next week for two hundred without even pushing the guy. Don’t take no brains. Just the rocks.”

“Two hundred,” Frankie said. “John’s talking about ten apiece.”

“Yeah,” Russell said, “but he didn’t say, he didn’t say how we’re gonna get it, that he’s too chickenshit scared to do it himself so he wants us to do it and he just sits back there and takes his piece without doing nothing. I didn’t hear him say nothing about that. He just decided he wanted to get all pissed off because somebody might’ve used something or maybe was doing something or something.”

“If he says it’s there,” Frankie said, “it’s there. And you got to, if the guy’s worried about something, well, he doesn’t want to go and fuck it up, is all. You can’t blame a guy for that. He’s all right.”

“Yeah,” Russell said, “yeah. He’s so careful, how much’d you do the last time he got something set up for you? About sixty-eight months, am I right?”

“Five and a half,” Frankie said. “That wasn’t his fault. He did time too, don’t forget.”

“Forget nothing,” Russell said. “He was the guy that set the thing up, wasn’t he? And now he’s got another bright idea. Okay. But me and Kenny, you give me another week with Kenny and we’ll have ourselves about twenty good dogs, and I guarantee you, the coke’ll be there and I’ll be where the coke is and I’ll have the money and I am *on my fuckin’ way*. One month from today I got a Moto Guzzi and no shit from anybody.”

A silver train pulled in from Cambridge. The red panel on the front read: QUINCY. It blocked the view of the heavysset man as he finished removing the E in SOUTHIE and started on the E in EATS.

“So I guess you’re not coming, then,” Frankie said.

“Look,” Russell said, “go and see the guy. See if you can get him to tell you something about it. I’ll be around. You find out what it is, you’re still interested, don’t matter to me.”

You decide, you want to do it, it's all right, I'm in. Without knowing. He still wants me out. I'm out. I'm not gonna waste the whole afternoon on it, though. That I'm not gonna do."



“HE’S GETTING LAID,” Frankie said. “He said he hadda choice between coming down here and getting laid, and he decided to get laid.”

“Can’t blame a guy for that,” Amato said. “Somebody put one like that up to me today, probably wouldn’t be here myself. So, I assume you’re still in for it, who else’re we gonna get? You think of somebody?”

“I didn’t,” Frankie said. “I don’t know, he’s still interested. He didn’t, the only reason he didn’t come down here, he said if you wanted him to come in on it, okay, he’d come in on it. And if you didn’t, okay, no hard feelings, he’s doing all right.”

Amato was silent. Then he said: “Frank, I just don’t like the guy, you know? I just don’t like him.”

“He’s all right,” Frankie said. “He comes on kind of strong when you first see him, but he’s basically all right. And he’s very, very stand-up.”

“Which, after the Doctor, we could both use,” Amato said.

“Yeah,” Frankie said. “I wouldn’t mind running into that son of a bitch some time ago when I felt good.”

“I don’t think you’re gonna,” Amato said. “Nobody’s seen the Doctor for a while, the way to get it.”

“That so?” Frankie said. “I wonder where he could’ve gone.”

“Well,” Amato said, “you know, it’s hard to say. He was in San Francisco, he was in the service. He was always saying, he’d like to go back there some time. He said it was too cold, it got too cold for him around here.”

“That’s probably where he went, then,” Frankie said.

“Yeah,” Amato said. “Of course, this was Dillon, I get this from. He knows a guy.”

“Oh,” Frankie said.

“Dillon don’t look good,” Amato said. “He don’t look good at all. I was in town the other day and I saw him. He looks white, all white around the gills. I didn’t say anything to him, but he don’t look good at all.”

“Dillon’s getting old,” Frankie said.

“We all are,” Amato said. “Look at me, the way I let that little shitbird of yours get to me the other day? I never would’ve done that before. I’m yapping at the kids all the time, for Christ sake. For seven years the only time I see the little bastards’s once a month or so, and now I’m finally home and I’m giving them hell all the time. I’m always fighting with my wife. I never used to fight with my wife. I used to, she was being a big pain in the ass, I used to do a kind of roll with the punches, you know? Now I don’t. I’m getting old. And I swore, boy, I was in? I swore when I got out I was gonna make every minute count, the rest of my life. You ever get me some place again, I can go to sleep without some asshole shoving his dick through the bars, all right, that’s all I ask. And am I doing it? No. Of course I’m not. I’m ju

as big an asshole now as I was before.”

“Russell’d get to anybody,” Frankie said. “It’s the way he is.”

“Yeah,” Amato said, “but the way I used to be, I wouldn’t’ve cared if he could piss on everybody inna world, you know? He couldn’t piss me off. If he was right for the job, he’d be right for the job. Screw, I’m not gonna marry the guy. All I want, all I would’ve been thinking about is, is he right for this job, and if I thought he was right, that’d be it.”

“Well,” Frankie said, “you change your mind or something?”

“I dunno,” Amato said. “I been asking around about him. You know, not too many guys around here, all, I don’t want it to seem like maybe I had something in mind. That I don’t need. But, well, I’m afraid, I’m afraid he’s not the kind of guy we oughta have in on this. You go around the way you do, thing inna wrong way, you could get somebody hurt, and I don’t want that. There’s no reason for that, you know? You hit somebody, you’re not gonna get any more money or anything. It’s just, it don’t make no sense. You got to have guys that can, that’re not going to get you in haywire or something, is all.

“These people,” Amato said, “these’re not the kind of people, that’re around a bank or something, they *expect* maybe some day a guy or somebody’s gonna come in there and try to rob them and, it’s not their money, people tell them, how they oughta act. They’re not the kinda people at all.”

“Heroes,” Frankie said.

“Heroes,” Amato said. “They’re a different kind of guys, and they’re liable, some of them, you never know when one of them’s gonna do it, go right off his ass and start making trouble, and then you got to fuckin’ shoot somebody, for Christ sake. Some of them, they think they’re pretty hot shits. Somebody comes in there that’s not absolutely cool, well, that the cops can see right off doesn’t know what he’s doing and he’s not taking no shit off anybody that wants to fuck around with him, well, then it’s gonna be different. *Bad*, different.”

“You’re not gonna promote that North End thing to me again, are you, John?” Frankie said.

“The barbut?” Amato said. “Nah, this’s different. Although I got to say, I still think you could do that thing if you thought about it long enough and you went in there with the right type of guys, knowing what you’re doing. A few guys, some day somebody’s gonna knock that thing off, and then he’s gonna have a whole lot of money. A whole bunch of money.”

“I wanna meet that guy, afterward,” Frankie said. “I think probably, I’m ever gonna meet him, I better meet him quick, is what I think. Fuckin’ thing. You ever look that thing over there? There’s a guy on the corner in the phone booth. Funny how come the phone company put that thing right there, huh? And then there’s always a guy that’s sitting up in the window and looking out at the guy in the phone booth. Coldest night in the year, go down there, there’s a guy in the phone booth. He’s not doing nothing. I think maybe that’s how he makes his living. I wouldn’t want it, maybe, but it’s fuckin’ steady’s what I think. You wouldn’t even think anybody’d go out, and there he is, and then there’s that alley and I bet there’s no more’n fifteen heavies in that room with the pieces all set to go.”

“There’s still a lot of money in there,” Amato said.

“‘So much money they lose it, they lose the dice in it some times,’ ” Frankie said. “‘You go in and you get it, they’re never gonna be able, report it, no government types chasing you around, you just go down past Billy’s Fish and up the stairs and you’re set for life.’ Yeah, and Dillon gets better so fast you wouldn’t believe it, I bet, and fifty guys helping him, too. I been

hearing about that place since, I think I was about fourteen when I first hear about the place,” Frankie said. “The thing of it is, all that time, nobody ever did it. I wonder how come.”

“My daughter’s fourteen,” Amato said.

“Jesus,” Frankie said. “It don’t seem that long.”

“Yup,” Amato said. “She’s fourteen years old. And the other day, she left her stuff out of the dresser? I see this light blue cardboard thing. I go in and I look. She’s onna Pill.”

“No shit,” Frankie said.

“I couldn’t fuckin’ believe it,” Amato said. “I said to Connie: Tor Christ sake, willya tell me, what’s going on here?’ So she tells me. ‘So what? They’re all on it.’ I said to her: ‘Whaddaya mean, they’re all on it? Who’re they? What the hell’s she doing on it? Tell me that, all right? I don’t care about the rest of them.’ Oh, so that makes me the automatic bastard. ‘You want, you’d probably rather she gets pregnant or something.’ I couldn’t, I just couldn’t believe it, was all. ‘Connie,’ I said, ‘she’s *fourteen years old*, for Christ sake. Fourteen. That’s kind of early, I think.’ ”

“I think so too,” Frankie said.

“Yeah,” Amato said. “So, you know what she says to me? She says: ‘How old’s Rosalie when you’re going with her?’ ”

“How old was Rosalie?” Frankie said.

“Eighteen,” Amato said, “which is a hell of a lot different. Only, of course, I couldn’t say that. I always, whenever she asked me, I denied that. And Rosalie wasn’t on no Pill then either. Every month ... Ah, she was a lousy lay anyway.”

“She didn’t look it,” Frankie said.

“She was, though,” Amato said. “Shit, getting into Fort Knox would’ve been easier. More fun, too. I hadda tell her every time, it’s true love, all that shit. I hadda be an asshole, or that. And she, she didn’t *do* nothing. It was like fuckin’ a stump. I used, she also didn’t do nothing *about* doing anything. I used to say to her: ‘Rosalie, for Christ sake, will you get something? You don’t want to get pregnant, do you?’ And then she’d start crying. It’s a mortal sin. I don’t know. I didn’t. I used to think, I was an asshole, I used to think I really had something there. Now, now I dunno why I did it. It wasn’t worth anything near like what I hadda put up with to get it.”

“She was one good-looking broad, though,” Frankie said.

“See the game the other night?” Amato said. “I did. I was home. Connie finally went to bed. Muscles in her jaw got tired. That’s what I like about TV, boy. You can turn off the sound. They had this shot of Snead coming up behind this big Swede center’s ass. You see that?”

“I was out,” Frankie said.

“Well,” Amato said, “I seen Rosalie the other night, I seen her down the Artery. Connie had me stop, get some fuckin’ bread. That’s another thing, I don’t know why it is. I don’t ask her to do some of my business. Why the fuck’ve I gotta stop on the way home and do her business? Anyway, I see Rosalie. She’s bigger’n that Swede now, I swear to God.”

“She was a real good-looking girl,” Frankie said.

“Ah,” Amato said, “she got married. That’s what she wanted. That’s the thing she used to worry about, I was humping her. I was worried, why the fuck’s she such a lousy lay. She was

worried, how the fuck's she marry me, I'm married to Connie? I didn't wanna get married again. I got married once. Once's enough for any guy, isn't crazy. But that's what she wanted. She's pregnant now. About her fourth, I guess. That broad? I bet, she's got legs on her now, bet she couldn't get my pants on, is how big she is. Everything goes to hell if you wait long enough. Connie says to me: 'You don't like certain things? Okay. You talk to her, Mister Deal Father, that's spending six or seven years in prison while she's growing up. You talk to her. You tell her what a bad girl she is.' Of course Connie couldn't've told me, I was in there, what the fuck's going on. How'm I supposed to know it? Shit. There's nothing you can do anyway. It don't matter. It just pisses me off, is all. It pisses me off."

"Look," Frankie said, "I don't mean nothing, all right? I don't care how pissed off you are. You at least got something."

"Still come up dry, huh?" Amato said.

"You know what I did?" Frankie said. "I went down the Probation. Like I actually believe all that shit they're always handing out, there, all that stuff. 'Here's something for you. Place in Holbrook needs assemblers. One thirty a week. Four to midnight. Steady work and it keep you out of trouble.'

"Beautiful," Frankie said. "I'm living in Somerville. How the hell'm I supposed to get to Holbrook in the middle of the afternoon? Never mind, for Christ sake, how the fuck I'm supposed to get home inna middle of the night. 'Buy a car. You need a car for your job, we help you get your license back.'

"With what?" Frankie said. "I haven't got no money. What am I gonna buy a car with? Why the fuck they think I need a job, I'm living with my sister and everything. So I can keep warm? I haven't got no money, a car. 'Maybe you can get a ride,' they tell me. Right. Hang around the Square every day, I find somebody that just happens to be going down to Holbrook. Just at the right time, too. Assholes.

"'Move down there,' they tell me," Frankie said. "Same thing. I still haven't got no money. I had money, I could move down there, I'd move some place else, I wouldn't be bothering them in the first place. Well, they're sorry. That's all they got right now, that they're prett sure the guy that does the hiring'll take a guy like me. I should probably go down the welfare and get enough dough, I can move out there. The guy's just sick of talking to me. He want his fuckin' coffee or something. Okay, that's the end of that. Then I see Russell. He's going right along. He'll probably buy a hotel or something in a couple weeks or so."

"Not on dogs," Amato said.

"He's just doing that," Frankie said. "He's gonna use that to buy something, soon's he gets enough. That's what I'd like to do, I got something in mind like that myself. But first I got to get the money to buy the stuff."

"What is it?" Amato said.

"There's this guy I know," Frankie said. "I see him, he naturally wants to know, how're things going? So we have a couple pops, he's buying, and we talk, and then he says, well, he gotta go over this place and I can come along if I want, maybe I'll see something.

"So we go down this place," Frankie said, "and it's money. All twenties. Beautiful stuff. I had, I could've bought some of that stuff. I hadda thousand on me, I could've bought twenty thousand dollars of that stuff. And I tell you, it's beautiful. You could move it under floodlight."

“Better call the guy up,” Amato said. “Tell him bye-bye. He’s gonna get grabbed. He better pass the first one inna drugstore and get himself a new toothbrush. He’s gonna need one.”

“John,” Frankie said, “wrong. This stuff is really good. The paper’s good, the ink’s good, the colors’re right. I tell you. I really looked at that stuff. The guy that made it oughta get to take some of it to the government. It’s better’n the real stuff.”

“The guy’s Chubby Ryan,” Amato said.

“I dunno him,” Frankie said.

“He’s not around,” Amato said. “He’s in Atlanta. He’s doing ten fuckin’ years for the beautiful stuff. That funny? You know something? I agree with you. It’s beautiful stuff. It’s fuckin’ near perfect. But Chubby, Chubby knows a lot about printing and all of that, but, see, Chubby hasn’t got no fuckin’ brains. Just like your friend, there, Doglover. He’s all right. He just don’t know anything. Guys like him, the guys you’re always hanging around with, well, they’re the only guys’re stupider’n Chubby. Because all that stuff’s good for now, except for wiping your ass on it, it’s to sell to guys like you, don’t know any better, what’s gonna start happening to them when they go out and start moving the stuff. That’s why the price’s so low.

“You know what’s the matter with that stuff?” Amato said. “I’ll tell you. Chubby took it out to fuckin’ Wonderland, is what Chubby did. He hasn’t got no brains. He thinks, it’s good, he’s gonna move it all by himself. He’s gonna go out the dog track and move the whole run, he’s so proud of that funny. So he did. He moved about ten thousand of it, all by himself, on a single fuckin’ night. Five hundred of them goddamned beautiful things, and every single one of them’s got the same goddamned number on it.

“Now of course,” Amato said, “them guys, run dog tracks, they’re all stupid, aren’t they? Betcher ass. Dumb as shit. Never occurred to them, race track’s a good place to pass funny. No, not on your life. So they never train them tellers, look out for anything like bogus. So of course, them tellers never spot anything, the night Chubby’s there, throwing twenties around like he’s apeshit and everything, absolutely not. So they only had about nine hundred security guys and some cops and the Secret Service all over the place when Chubby comes back, the eighth race. And you know what he says? They give him his rights and everything, he don’t have to say a fuckin’ word, and if he didn’t know that already, which he should’ve, he know now. And they tell him, he’s in the shit for counterfeit. And he looks at them and he says, ‘Jesus Christ. I put them in coffee. They don’t look new.’

“You know what he did?” Amato said. “They give him his phone call and he calls Mike. And Mike says, Mike tells him, keep his mouth shut. And Mike goes down there, and, Mike knows everybody. So he goes in, and they’re all laughing at him, and he knows it, and he asks: ‘Why?’ And they show him the reports and stuff. And then Mike’s gonna go see his client. And he walks inna cell and he looks at him and Chubby says: ‘Boy, am I ever glad, see you.’ And you know what Mike says? He looks at him, and he says: ‘Chubby, this one’s for free. Plead it.’ And he goes out.

“See,” Amato said, “that’s your main problem you got today. You got guys that know how to do things but they don’t know nothing about having no fuckin’ brains, is all. They haven’t got no imagination. The only thing they can think of to do is the first thing they can see that looks good to them. Only, five hundred guys already did it before and *everybody* knows what’s going on, so you automatically go out there and you do it and they’re watching for

you and they get you. You got to think of a different angle, something nobody else thought of for a while, or else you got to go down to Holbrook there and you go to fuckin' work. Everything else's a waste of time, and it's dangerous, too, because you're gonna do time."

"Okay," Frankie said, "you're the guy with the angle. Tell me what the angle is. Only, don't tell me, it's the barbut, is all. I'm not going down that alley behind Billy's Fish some night and wind up in Everett with a couple in my head. No fuckin' way. I want dough. I'm not getting dead, gettin' it."

"How about," Amato said, "well, look, let's talk about it. Before we decide. You think Doglover there can handle a card game?"

"Well I mean," Frankie said, "shit. Sure, anybody can. They can find one where they can go in and they haven't got to go up against some kind of an arsenal. Those fuckin' things, they just got less money in them'n the barbut's got, is all. Those things're protected. You can't do them unless you're so fuckin' dumb you actually like having everybody going around tryin' to take off you."

"There's one you can do," Amato said.

"There's ten I can do, John," Frankie said. "I know of at least ten of them I can do. But then after, somebody, everybody's gonna have at least eight hot ginzos out looking for me."

"Uh uh," Amato said. "Do this one and they'll, they won't even look for you."

"Why not?" Frankie said.

"Because the minute it fuckin' happens," Amato said, "they're gonna know right off, who it is."

"For some reason," Frankie said, "that don't make me feel better, you know, John?"

"Not us," Amato said. "Keep in mind, I know how these guys think. They're not gonna think, they're never even gonna think it might be us or even somebody else. They're pick on a guy, right off, and go find him and whack him out and that'll be it. And you and me and the little prick, if that's the guy we get, we cut up about forty, fifty thousand dollars. No fuckin' sweat."

"I don't know's I go for setting somebody up," Frankie said.

"You're not setting him up," Amato said. "He set himself up. Mark Trattman runs the game. This's the second game Markie's had. The other game got knocked off. Markie did it."

"Ah," Frankie said.

"He did it," Amato said, "and there was all kinds of shit. One of the guys that got robbed was a doctor, and he had a brother was a state cop, and he was mad as hell, he was gonna do this and he was gonna do that and everybody's running around, they hadda give the guy back about, I dunno, three or four thousand, to shut him up, and they go around and see Trattman. And he puts on this great act. And they believe him.

"So everybody pisses blood for a while," Amato said, "the way they always do when the shit hits the fan, and there's about a month or so goes by and everybody, nobody's running any games or anything, and then, I think it was Tommy Balls, somebody says: 'Fuck this,' and he hires about ten guys to stand around and opens up and nothing happens. So they all look at Testa's game, and nothing still happens, and after a while everybody's open again and everybody's happy.

"So one night," Amato said, "the guys're hanging around and they're talking and all, having a few drinks, and finally one of them says how it's funny, they had that thing and everybody

got all jumpy and now they're all running again and nobody's tried it again. Probably having more guys around, huh? Well, Markie starts laughing. See, he can't resist it. So he tells them he did it himself. He got two guys to come in and he did it himself. The guys got five apiece they're a couple guys carrying hood that he happens to know or something, and he come out of it with close to thirty."

"He's lucky they didn't put him to sleep," Frankie said.

"Well," Amato said, "he is. But you got to understand Mark. All the guys like Markie. He's a genuine hot shit. And look when they find out: when everybody's open again. They'd've found out it was him when the games're all closed and everybody's hearing footsteps and nobody's making any money, then, I think, they would've done it to him. But they didn't. And then, when they did, well, what the fuck, huh? It wasn't none of their money and just as long as it doesn't happen again, because all the customers, you're not gonna get them coming in unless they think it's protected, but the protection's really there, well, shit on it."

"I bet it probably wouldn't happen again that way," Frankie said.

"And that's the angle," Amato said.

"What's it good for?" Frankie said.

"I figure," Amato said, "I was there twice. I been there twice since I got out. I run in on Markie one night, I was in town seeing what's going on and looking around and I run in on him and we had a couple drinks and he says, he tells me he's got this thing and I should come up. So, twice, both times onna Wednesday. He runs it two nights a week, Wednesdays and Fridays. Now the guys that're there, that come on Wednesday, there's a few that come both nights but it's really a different group the two nights. There was probably, I would say about forty thousand flying around the nights I was there. There's this one creep that wears fuckin' velvet pants, and he had at least five on him both the nights I was there. So, a little more, a little less. And of course that's just what I saw. Most guys, go to something like that, they carry a little more'n what they're gonna let you see, case they get a bad run of cards and they got to ride something out. So you go in there, you're gonna give everybody a nice little massage and everything, you're probably gonna come up with, say, ten more."

"Not bad," Frankie said.

"Now there's guys," Amato said, "I was there, I heard talk, see, Markie just got divorced again and apparently he had a little party, had a couple hookers come in and eat each other and everybody had a great time and some of these guys're pissed off, he didn't invite them. 'Friends only, no customers,' he says. So they get on him, and some of the Friday night guys were there and that's how these guys find out about it. 'They're good customers,' Markie said. 'good customers're the same as good friends, my book.' So I got an idea, there's more dough there onna Friday'n there is onna Wednesday. So the question is, when're we gonna do it. And I think, I still think, a Wednesday. Friday that place's different. During the week it's pretty quiet, but on Fridays and Saturdays they got a lot of people coming and going, getting laid and all, and that's just another fuckin' thing you got to think about, parties going on and everything. And I think, I dunno, I kind of think maybe there's some guys in there, Friday don't come Wednesdays, the kind of guys I don't want to get pissed off. I didn't see nobody there Wednesdays, had any muscle. I think it's better."

"How're we cutting this?" Frankie said.

"A third," Amato said. "I get a third."

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