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Written by George V. Higgins

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COGAN'S TRADE

George V. Higgins



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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. '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 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, I 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 calls 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 all 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, 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 this 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 eighty 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 that 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 onna 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's 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 in 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 everything.'

'Smack,' Amato said to Frankie. Frankie shrugged. 'I ask you to find a guy for me and I 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 hadda 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 in them tunnels. If there wasn't anything in the tunnel, that was a good day. Not so good days, 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 there

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 to 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 then 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 go 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 is 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. 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'd maybe cock off and wreck it, and take their word for it, they're gonna be all right. So all 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 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 really 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 take 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.'

2

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 I 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 not 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 pretty 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 broken glass in there.’

‘Look,’ Russell said, ‘you ought to know. I was pounding sand up my ass almost four 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 Malden. 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 I can 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, see 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, 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 checkered 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, 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 or 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 Drop-kick'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, they 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 hit 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 bottles. 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 they could tell, they could tell when one of them was stiff, and they started watching him, really 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'd 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 on. 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 fairly 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 things inna 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's 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. This 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, I 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 cents' worth of cheap lamb chops and it takes about two minutes and you're on your way. I got this 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 heavyset 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.’