

# Can't Buy Me Love

Dan McNeil

C. 2012 Dan McNeil

*Urban Legend:*

*On February 9, 1964, the Beatles appeared before 73 million people on the Ed Sullivan show. For the hour they were on, not even a hubcap was stolen in New York City.*

Chapter One

January 30, 1964

If Sonny Carter had a gun, he would have blown Eddie Bishop's head right off his miserable pencil-thin neck. Sonny disliked guns, but he sure as hell would have made an exception in Bishop's case.

Sonny had poured over every detail, tied up all the loose ends and played out every scenario that could have screwed up their heist. Their plan was fool proof.

Except for one fuckin' thing.

And Sonny had twenty-five years to think about that one fuckin' thing.

The banging of a billy club on his cell's bars caught his attention. "Hello, Carter."

Sonny lifted his head and gave the jerk—Officer Hank Hubbard—a fierce glare.

"I understand yer leavin' our little family today, huh?" Hubbard's grin turned into a sneer. "Can't say we're gonna miss you much."

Sonny returned to tying his shoes. "You say that now, but the next thing you know you're gonna be at my door with your pants down and your hands on your ankles. I already told you, I don't swing that way, Nancy."

The guard scoffed. "Get yer shit together, scumbag. Ya got ten minutes." Hubbard punctuated the order by banging his club on the cell bars and continued down the long hallway.

Sonny already had his shit together—a battered suitcase filled with two books, an old photograph and a toothbrush. He was ready to meet the world with all his possessions.

He looked forward to this day for a long time.

Once outside and on the *other* side of the mammoth prison gate, he noticed a red 1956 Packard parked with the back of the car facing the gate. Sonny made out the silhouettes of Bernie Miller and Morrie Cooper moving around in the front seat.

One foot in front of the other and Sonny hit the ground into freedom. He inhaled a deep breath. The winter air gripped his lungs causing mild discomfort, but it felt great nonetheless. Snow dusted his shoulders as he headed toward the Packard and his freedom.

His bearings were slow and labored, but he wasn't about to let the guards watching have the satisfaction of thinking that prison had broken him.

As he neared the car, he heard snippets of conversation through the partially rolled down passenger side window.

He chuckled. *They're still bickering like a couple of old broads.*

Morrie checked his watch and cleared his throat with a large, wet cough. He followed this with a loud gulp, shifting in his seat and glancing at the iron gates. "What time you got?"

Bernie closed his eyes with a loud sigh and ran his fingers in a methodical downward motion over the steering wheel. "Please stop asking me that."

"I think my watch is busted." Morrie tapped the face of his watch. "How long we been waitin' for?"

"Damn it, Morrie. Stop asking me what time it is, and would you do me a personal favor? If you're gonna make that god awful noise, you wanna do it towards Jersey?"

Sonny slapped the palm of his hand on the roof of the Packard, interrupting Bernie's tirade.

Morrie spun his head around and broke into a wide grin. "Holy crap, Sonny. You tryin' to give us a heart attack?"

Sonny was shocked and sad to see how the years had robbed Morrie's once chubby face, and replaced it with a lined, gaunt one. Time sure is an unforgiving bitch, he thought.

"Sorry, buddy." Sonny's voice sounded rough to his own ears. "Man, you look like shit."

Morrie shrugged. "Yeah, well, I look better than I feel."

"Then you must feel like shit."

Bernie poked his head forward. "Hey, hotshot. I see you haven't lost any of your charm."

"Hey, Granddad." Sonny mouthed a "fuck you" and opened the passenger side of the vehicle.

Morrie flipped the seat and bent his body forward, allowing Sonny to get into the back where he settled in with a grunt. Bernie put the car in gear and pulled away.

Getting himself comfortable, Sonny took in the interior of the car. "Nice bucket you got here, Bern. New?"

Bernie peered at him through the rearview mirror. "Naw. Had it for six years now. I picked it up practically new a few weeks after I got out. Al dickered the price down and got me a great deal."

"I'm not surprised," Sonny said. "He was always good with numbers." Sonny ran his hand over the leather seat. "Man, this car looks like you just drove it off the lot."

Sonny recalled the large clunky box of a car Bernie had jazzed up back in thirty-nine. Too bad he never got the chance to find out how fast that Ford Fordor really was.

Morrie interrupted his reflections. "Didja hear about Eddie Bishop?"

Bernie shot Morrie a dirty look then glanced into the rear view mirror and caught Sonny's stare, burning a hole into the back of Morrie's head.

"What about Bishop?" Sonny tinged his voice with menace. "Did somebody finally cut that asshole's throat?"

"Nah. Get this," Morrie said. "He's president of the Hudson Bank. Yeah, can you imagine? The goddamn Hudson of all places."

Bernie jammed his elbow into Morrie's side.

"Geez, Bern, whatcha go and do that for?"

Sonny let out a growl. "Are you shittin' me?"

"It's ancient history," Bernie said. "Let's forget about it, okay?" He flicked Morrie's ear with his finger. "What's wrong with you, stupe?"

Morrie twisted his neck and stared at Sonny with regret. "Sorry I brought it up."

They drove the next few miles in silence.

"Well, we're almost there," Morrie said. "Wait 'til you meet my nephew Gary. You'll like him."

Sonny stared out the window, with his thoughts drifting to the past. "Yeah? Can't wait?"

"My nephew's a big shot down at the network. At CBS, I mean. He's what you call an 'executive producer.'"

"Yeah, that's nice."

"Not sure what it is exactly, but it sounds important. Hey, wait a second. Turn that up, Bernie."

"You turn it up. I'm driving."

Morrie reached over and twisted the volume knob.

Machine gun fire prattle filled the car. "Good afternoon, New York," the radio DJ announced with enthusiasm. "It's all Beatles all the time on your all Beatles station. The countdown has officially begun for the arrival of your favorite recording group's stop right here

*in New York City. As the day gets closer we'll have live updates on John, Paul, George and Ringo. We'll have our own fifth Beatle himself, Murray the K, bringing you all the Beatle-riffic information that you need to know...."*

"Holy cow," Morrie said. "That's what Gary's been talkin' about for the last few days."

Bernie snickered. "It just occurred to me that your nephew's name is Gary Cooper. That's kinda funny."

Morrie scratched his head. "What's funny?"

"You know. Gary Cooper. 'High Noon'."

Morrie checked his watch and flashed it in Bernie's face. "It's just after four-thirty. You're way off."

"Jesus, I'm driving here, Morrie."

"Stay tuned to WINS-AM radio for all your Beatle news," the DJ said. "Coming up after this break, the number one song in the nation...."

"These Beatles guys are from England," Morris said. "They're the ones that are gonna be on Gary's show. We were just talking about this yesterday. Talk about ironing."

Bernie shook his head. "Irony."

"What?"

"The word is irony."

"What the heck is irony?" Morrie turned around and faced Sonny. "Wait 'til you see Gary's house. Very nice, my friend, very nice indeed. His wife will be puttin' on a great spread. Roast beef, potatoes, home made buns 'n gravy. Oooh, just *thinking* about it." Morrie made a low gurgling noise. Bernie gagged.

"You sure it's okay that I stay there for a few days?" Sonny asked. "I don't want to be no bother."

Morrie smiled. "Nah, it's fine. Gary and Louise don't mind. They love having *me* stayin' with 'em. It's all set, so just relax."

However, as Sonny took in the blurry winter scenery flying past the window, he couldn't relax. His blood boiled and his mind raced at the mention of Eddie Bishop.

That rotten son-of-a-bitch fucked him over twenty-five years ago, and now he was president of the Hudson National Bank and Trust Company.

*The Hudson National Bank and Trust Company.*

Sonny wasn't the most educated man in the world, but he knew what irony was even if Morrie didn't, and it wasn't lost on him either. Sonny's attention returned to the front of the car as Bernie maneuvered through the heavy snow while Morrie traced circles on the foggy window.

His mind took a detour to the one fuckin' thing that haunted him throughout his twenty-five year incarceration.

Eddie Bishop. The Hudson National Bank and Trust Company.

Sonny had done a lot of thinking in prison and now he had a shitload of vengeful ideas.

## Chapter Two

Sonny's anger dissipated somewhat by the time the car pulled into the driveway of a beautiful, two-story Long Island home. He stepped out into the cool dusk and spied a sleek, late model Plymouth parked in front of the garage and an expensive looking sled leaning up against the wall. Being a television executive-whatever must pay damn good.

Bernie rolled down his window and leaned out. "I'll see you guys tomorrow at Finn's. Say around three?"

Warm nostalgia flooded over Sonny at the mention of their old hangout. He tapped the hood of the car. “Thanks for the lift, buddy.”

Bernie gave him a thumb’s up and backed out of the driveway.

Morrie’s nephew stood at the front door. “You must be Sonny, I’m Gary.” He grabbed Sonny’s hand, shook it and ushered them into the house. “Welcome. Make yourself at home.” He sounded excited.

Gary was a gregarious sort in his mid-thirties. He had a full head of coiffed mousey brown hair and pale blue eyes behind thick, black horn rimmed glasses, and one of the widest smiles Sonny had ever seen. Although he had a slight build, Gary exuded a big personality.

“Sonny, it must feel good to leave there. I mean it must be nice to be out of...uh...you know....” Gary seemed to be having trouble grasping for the right words. “You’re probably tired from your...uh—”

“The drive or my stay in the clink?” Sonny asked.

Gary pointed to Sonny’s coat and released a nervous laugh. “Here, let me have that.”

Sonny removed his overcoat and handed it to Gary.

“Gary? Is that them?” a female voice yelled, the piercing screech startled Sonny. “They finally here?”

“Yes. Yes, they are, hon.”

“Well, it’s about time. Don’t they have clocks in jail?”

Morrie furrowed his brow and Sonny shrugged.

Gary forced out an awkward chuckle. “That’s my wife, Louise. Real cut-up that one. She’s got quite a sense of humor.” He tilted his head downward and picked off a few pieces of lint from his trousers. “She uh, had a rough day, but she cooked up a terrific dinner for us.”

The three made their way down the hall. The aroma of roast beef dinner hung thick in the air. Gary directed them into the living room and Sonny realized how famished he was, and how much he looked forward to a home cooked meal.

“Here you go, fellas. Have a seat. I’ll go see how dinner’s doing.” Gary headed off in the direction of the kitchen.

With a loud groan, Morrie settled himself into a stylish orange sofa. Sonny sat in an overstuffed chair and looked around the room. Above the fireplace, he saw a number of statuettes and framed photographs, presumably of well-known movie and television stars that meant nothing to the ex-con. His eyes drifted left of the fireplace to a television set, projecting a western movie, he gave it some attention, but it bored him after a few minutes.

A pale boy of about ten, holding a plastic guitar stood next to Sonny’s chair. What struck Sonny the most was the kid’s long hair, and the way it crowned his owlsh face, hanging down to his eyebrows. The mop-topped boy stared at the ex-con through a pair of heavy lidded blue eyes.

“Hello there,” said Sonny.

“Who are you?” asked the mop-top.

“Your Uncle Morrie’s friend.”

“Oh yeah?” He put his hand on one hip and squinted at Sonny. “So, you a jailbird too?”

“This here is Gary’s kid, Tommy.” Morrie shifted in his seat, coughing into this hand.

“And...you know, kid, that’s not a nice thing to ask a guest.”

The boy’s face was as impassive as an Egyptian statue. “Yeah, okay.” The kid went over to a table upon which sat a small box with the word Renzoniphone emblazoned across the front. He lifted the cover of the box and reached inside it. He took a small dark disc out of a paper sleeve and placed the disc inside the box. A clashing, dissonant sound rented the air.

“Jesus H. Christ.” Sonny almost fell out of the chair. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s the Beatles,” Morrie said.

Sonny cupped his hand to his ear. “It’s the what?”

“The Beatles,” Morrie repeated. “Remember, in the car? They’re those musicians from England.”

Sonny glared at Morrie. “You call that music?” He got up and moved to the sofa. “I’ve heard better sounds coming out of the shitters at Elmira.” He watched the kid bob his head back and forth in time with the beat. “Does it have to be so fuckin’ loud?”

Morrie shrugged. “I think it’s kind of catchy.”

“Hey, there.” Sonny waved at Tommy, trying to get his attention. “Tommy. Could ya turn it down?”

Tommy strummed the strings of his plastic guitar, tilting his head side to side with every “*yeah, yeah, yeah*” that came out of the record player’s felt covered speakers.

Sonny started to get up, but Morrie put his hand on his shoulder. Morrie went over to the record player and lowered the volume. Tommy stopped strumming his guitar. To a confused Sonny, it was as if the kid’s head moved but the hair stayed put. Morrie jerked a thumb toward Sonny and mouthed the word “headache” to the youngster. Tommy narrowed his eyes into slits that ran parallel with the bottom of the bangs of his unusual hairdo.

“Were you guys in jail together, Uncle Morrie?” Tommy asked.

Morrie shuffled his feet. “Uh...yeah, Tommy...well, no. Actually, Sonny was at Elmira I was at Attica, but we did our time and we paid our debt to society.”

It was obvious the mop-top relished making his uncle squirm with personal questions about his prison stretch.

“Did you ever try to bust out?”

“Well, no.”

“How about sticking a shiv in a screw’s throat?”

Morrie winced as if he were wearing a pair of tight shoes. “Never.”

“Ever shank a stoolie?”

“Of course not.” Morrie’s eyes widened. “Where the heck does a kid like you get this stuff?”

“Hmmm.” Tommy pulled at his lip and then turned up a sly grin. “Did ya ever have a guy come up behind you in the shower and ☒”

“Okay, that’s enough. No more questions.” Morrie grabbed Tommy by the shoulders and pushed him toward the kitchen. “How’s about seein’ how your mom’s doin’ with dinner, eh buddy?”

Tommy dropped his plastic guitar on the floor and ambled away.

Sonny watched the youngster leave and thank Christ, Morrie shut the music off.

Morrie trundled back to the sofa, flopped down next to Sonny and stared straight ahead.

“Tommy’s what you might call ☒”

“An asshole?” Sonny said.

“I was gonna say special, but okay.”

Gary reappeared in the living room, rubbing his hands. “Dinner time.”

Sonny and Morrie followed Gary down the hall, the aroma of the roast beef dinner like a siren’s song to the ravenous ex-cons. Gary directed them to their seats as Louise came through the swinging kitchen doors with a large serving platter. Sonny ogled the roast beef and thought

that he had never felt hungrier in his life. Louise placed the platter on the table with a loud thud, giving the dinner guests a start.

Sonny looked at his hostess for the first time. She appeared to be in her early thirties, but her tired blue eyes betrayed a somewhat older countenance. Her sallow blonde hair was done up in a bouffant [X] big on top with flips on either side of the ears. She wore a yellow dress with a deep, rounded collar peppered with bright white polka dots, no doubt, what all the wives of television executives wore to dinner.

Despite all the effort to present herself in an appealing way, her surly scowl anchored to her face sucked away any traces of real attractiveness. She threw Gary a withering look and marched back into the kitchen before Gary could introduce Sonny to her. Sonny saw the glare she skewered her husband with and felt sorry for Gary. Without a word, Gary reached for the roast beef and carved out thin slices of the pale red meat. Louise returned with a steaming bowl of vegetables.

Morrie sat next to Tommy, scraping his chair closer to the table as Tommy tried to flip his spoon into his glass of milk.

“Tommy.” Louise yanked the spoon out of her son’s hand. “I told you. Don’t wear that hair at the dinner table. Now take it off.”

The kid pulled at the top of his head and whipped the wig off, revealing a close-cropped shock of yellow hair. He tossed the wig bedside his utensils where it lay like a large squashed South American spider.

Although he had only been out of prison for a couple of hours, Sonny found things on the outside real odd. As a kid, Sonny would have never acted the way Tommy did and his mother would have never given his father the grief Louise gave Gary, especially in front of company.

What the hell was going on in the world, and what ten-year-old boy willingly wore a wig, for crissakes?

Louise sat at the opposite end of the table from Gary and the five of them dug into their meals.

Gary smiled at his wife, his gaze swinging from Sonny then back to her. “Honey, you haven’t met Uncle Morrie’s friend yet. Sonny, this is my wife Louise.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Cooper,” Sonny said. “I really appreciate it.”

Louise gave a curt nod and reached for the potatoes. They ate in relative silence, except for the sounds of the cutlery scraping across the china plates. To his embarrassment, Sonny realized he ate the meat and potatoes with a spoon [X] a habit he’d picked up in prison. He switched to his fork and hoped no one had noticed.

After dinner, Sonny, Morrie and Gary retired to the living room with their coffee. Gary took his place in the overstuffed chair while Sonny and Morrie settled in on the sofa. Morrie gulped his coffee and asked Gary how things were going at work.

Gary brightened. “Next Sunday is shaping up quite nicely. It could turn out to be bigger than Elvis.”

“Elvis?” Sonny asked. “What’s an Elvis?”

“What’s an Elvis?” Gary chuckled. “Elvis Presley is one of the biggest stars in show biz. He’s been on the Ed Sullivan Show three times. We had sixty million people watching the first time he was on. It was the biggest single audience in television history.”

“I’m guessing that he’s some sort of entertainer?” asked Sonny.

“Oh, he’s more than just an entertainer. He’s a singer. In fact, he’s probably the most popular performer in the whole world, but all that’s going to change with the Beatles.”

Sonny leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “The Beatles? You mean that shi☒I mean that noise Tommy was listening to? Whatever happened to Glenn Miller or Benny Goodman?”

Gary threw his head back and laughed. “These guys are going to be bigger than Elvis.”  
“Someone better tell Elvis.”

“Would you like to know the best part? These guys fell right into our laps. Their manager...oh, what’s his name? I’ll have to check with my assistant. Anyway, *he* called *us*. He believes this will be their big break in the U.S.” He blew at the steam rising from his coffee cup and took a sip. “I think that just about everyone who has a TV set will be watching next week.”

“No offence to you and all of your Beatles fans, but I think I’m gonna pass,” Sonny said.

Gary drained the rest of his coffee and placed the cup on the table beside him. “That won’t be a problem. What’s one viewer compared to seventy million?”

## Chapter Three

“Well, would you look at that?” Sonny stopped walking and pointed to the large, snow covered letters above the doorway of the gothic building☒the Hudson National Bank and Trust Company.

“Place hasn’t changed much.” Morrie brushed the accumulation of snow from his coat. “Come on, let’s keep going, I’m freezing my ass off.”

Sonny pulled his coat's collar up around his neck, he kept his feet rooted to the icy ground, and stared at the bank's faded bricks. Thoughts about that fateful day twenty-five years ago bombarded his memory.

The plan was simple. All they had to do was walk into the bank and take the cash. There were three guards on duty that day—one was out sick, another was running late, thanks to a well placed bribe and the third guard—two weeks away from his pension—didn't care about doing a good job. Guns were unnecessary.

Their ace in the hole was a bank teller—Eddie Bishop, their supposed *trustworthy* accomplice who wanted in on a piece of the action. All he had to do was hand them the cash.

It should have worked—that is, if Bishop hadn't duped his friends. The day before their planned heist, the sonofabitch tipped the cops off and since the boys were unarmed, it was an easy arrest. Sonny knew that he shouldn't have trusted anyone outside the group but, goddamn it, they needed someone on the inside.

Morrie nudged him with his elbow. "Hey, Sonny, look over there."

Sonny followed Morrie's gaze to an older man, exiting the bank with a young, pretty woman. He was dressed in an expensive overcoat, topped with a wool derby, carrying a leather briefcase, and twirling a brass topped antique walking stick.

"Dirty prick." Sonny had often wondered what he'd do if he ran into Eddie Bishop again.

Morrie took a step away from the bank. "Let's get out of here."

"Not until I say hello to our old friend." Sonny watched with loathing as their former accomplice sauntered down the snowy sidewalk toward the taxi stand. The yellow cab he was hoping to catch pulled away.

Bishop checked his watch before surveying the busy street for another. "What the hell?" he said to the woman. "Since when are there no cabs waiting in line in this goddamn city?" He took off his hat and brushed the snow from the brim.

Sonny sidled up beside him.

Bishop backed away and tilted his head to the right. "If you're looking for the soup kitchen, it's about three blocks north of here." He put his hat back on at a rakish angle, turned around and continued his attempts to flag down a taxi.

Sonny edged closer to Bishop's side. "How's it going, Eddie?"

The bank president turned and gave Sonny a probing gaze. "Do I know you?"

"You should. You owe me four-hundred-grand and twenty-five years of my life."

Bishop leaned into Sonny, examining him as if he were a bug under a microscope. "Well, well. If it isn't criminal mastermind, Sonny Carter. Knocked off any banks lately?" He turned to the woman beside him with a cocky sneer. "Sarah, allow me to introduce you to a couple of old acquaintances."

She smiled at both Sonny and Morrie and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Sarah Garrett."

Bishop made a face and pulled her hand away from them. "I was being facetious, dear."

"Facetious?" Sonny asked. "That means dickhead, right?"

"How droll." He turned to the woman. "Be a good girl and flag down a cab, please"

Without taking her eyes off of Sonny, Sarah moved away. "Yes, Edward."

"It's *Edward* now?" Sonny blew out a sneer. "To me you'll always be Eddie the asshole."

"Ah, there's the charm."

Sonny would have loved nothing better than to grab Bishop's walking stick and rearrange his long, priggish face with it. "You'd think that with that cushy job that you got by fucking your buddies over, you would have learned to be a little nicer."

Bishop put his hands up in a defensive pose. "I don't want any trouble. We're right in the middle of a busy street with about a thousand witnesses, so I suggest you don't do anything stupid. Again."

"I wouldn't waste my time on a piece of crap like you. I've got bigger fish to fry."

"Fish to fry? Well, at least you have a job."

"You always were a laugh a minute." Sonny gave serious thought to grabbing the walking stick again. "We could have pulled it off and been set for life."

"No we wouldn't. No guns? Who the hell robs a bank without guns?"

"I didn't want anyone to get hurt."

Bishop shook his head with derision. "How idiotic. I knew you didn't have a chance so I did the smart thing and told the police. The bank was *very* thankful. As you can see, they were helpful in my rise up the corporate ladder."

"Do you have any idea what a miserable prick you are?"

A malevolent grin curled Bishop's lip. "Why yes. Yes I do." He glanced at Morrie. "Still a real 'Chatty Cathy' I see, huh Cooper?"

Morrie shrugged. "I got nothing to say."

"Better to remain quiet and let people think you a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt, right?"

"What?"

"And there it is." Bishop put the briefcase down and reached into the inside pocket of his coat. "Here." He extracted a leather wallet, removed a number of bills and held them out to Sonny, as if he were offering a bone to a hungry dog. "Here's fifty bucks. Let's let bygones be bygones."

"Why don't you go fuck yourself?"

Bishop waved the money in Sonny's face. "I'm sure you can use it, and I assure you, I can spare it."

"You can shove that money up your ass."

"Are you sure? This offer is only good for the next five seconds." He looked at his watch. "No? All right then." He put the bills back into his wallet. "Tell you what. Why don't you come and see me on Monday and we'll set up an account for you at the bank." He chuckled. "Think of the irony. Imagine, you putting money into the bank instead of trying to steal it."

Sonny took a step closer to the asshole. *By Christ, just one crack with that walking stick.* The sound of Sarah's voice calling for *Edward* halted his steps.

Sarah placed herself between Sonny and Bishop. "I have a taxi."

"Very well." Bishop twirled his walking stick. "It's been a real, uh, treat seeing you two again. Maybe we can talk again in another twenty-five years."

Sarah gave Sonny and Morrie a sweet smile. "Nice to meet you, fellows."

"Me too." Sonny nodded. "By the way, is old Eddie here still hung like a hamster?"

Sarah put her gloved hand over her mouth to hide her laughter as she and a sneering Bishop entered the cab.

The cab pulled away from the curb and Sarah gave Sonny a little wave.

Now *that* was interesting, he thought. He watched the cab as it slid around the corner and then returned his attention to the snow covered letters of the Hudson National Bank and Trust Company.

Sonny shoved his hands deep inside his pockets. “Let’s go to Finn’s, Morrie. The guys’ll be there soon.”

Finn’s was Sonny’s favorite watering hole and it was where he, Morrie, Bernie and Al Cardinelli had planned their ill-fated bank job.

Sonny entered the bar and a wave of nostalgia washed over him. Not much had changed with the place. *The World’s Fair*, *Gone with the Wind* and *Blondie Bringing up Baby* posters still adorned the walls, only time had now faded them.

The bar was practically empty, so they were able to get a booth in the back. They ordered a couple of beers from a bored waitress while they waited for the others to arrive. Sonny twirled the salt shaker and listened as Morrie made innocuous observances about the bar and the weather. After so many years in jail, common niceties like small talk had become as difficult for Sonny as trying to say “she sells seashells by the seashore” with a mouth full of marbles.

“Hey,” Morrie said. “I just thought of something. Remember that time when you and me were kids? I think we musta been about nine or ten.”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“Billy Vincent—remember him? His dad owned that candy store near the Battery.” Morrie chuckled. “Our first heist.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

Sonny and Morrie’s criminal careers began at the tender age of nine. While Morrie distracted Billy’s father, Sonny emptied the till and stuffed fourteen bucks in his pocket.

When it came time to split the take, Morrie was stunned that Sonny had taken cash instead of candy and began to cry. Sonny felt terrible, so he took Morrie to another candy shop a few blocks away, and spent fourteen bucks on peppermint sticks and licorice whips. The owner of the second store, justifiably suspicious of two kids flush with cash, called the police.

“Man, was your dad pissed,” Morrie said.

“You know what he was upset about? Not that I robbed a store. He lost his mind because I spent it on candy and that I got caught. I had to sleep on my gut for two days.” He sucked in a deep breath. “It was my mom that I felt bad for.”

“Yeah, I remember. She wouldn’t let us play together for weeks.”

Sonny stared off into the distance. “Things were never the same after that,” he said in a quiet voice. “Sometimes I wish...” He bent his head and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Funny running into Bishop, huh?” Morrie said, changing the subject.

“Yeah.” Sonny snorted. “My sides are still splitting

“That girl he was with, sure was pretty.”

“Yeah, she was.”

“What’s wrong?” Morrie mashed his brows together. “You got a funny look on your face.”

Sonny slid the salt shaker back in its place. “Just thinking.”

Al and Bernie arrived. Although Sonny saw Bernie yesterday, he hadn’t seen Al in twenty-five years. The lenses on Al’s massive spectacles were as thick as moon pies and their

magnifying effect made his eyes look like green flying saucers. He wondered if his old friend had gone legally blind.

“Hey, somebody call the cops,” Al said. “I think we got a crime syndicate here.”

Sonny stood and slapped Al on the back. “Well, well. If it isn’t Al Capone’s ugly cousin.”

“Capone was overrated and dumb as shit.” Al slid into the booth. “At least I do my taxes.”

Sonny and Bernie took their places in the booth and ordered drinks.

“So,” Sonny said, “what’s happening? What are the plans?”

Al blinked twice and readjusted his glasses. “Plans?”

Sonny grinned. “C’mon, you know. *Plans*. Jesus, I know you guys all have jobs and are respectable citizens now, but you know what I mean.”

Bernie and Al exchanged nervous looks. “We got no plans, Sonny,” Bernie said. “I mean, I don’t know about you guys, but I got a good deal over at the garage.”

“Yeah, and I’m happy at the library,” Al added.

Sonny frowned. “Are you kidding me? What are you, a bunch of old ladies?”

“No, just a couple of guys who’ve been enjoying life outside prison walls for the past six years,” Bernie said. “Beats getting’ slammed in the showers.”

Sonny shook his head in disgust. “Librarians are old fuckin’ ladies with grey hair and glasses yellin’ at everyone to shut the fuck up.” He jammed a finger towards Al. “You telling me you like doin’ that?”

“I’m not the librarian,” Al said. “I’m the accountant.”

Sonny scoffed and jammed a finger at Bernie. “You were a smooth driver in your day. Why do you want to waste your time changing the oil in some asshole’s Hupmobile?”

Bernie shifted in his seat. “Jesus Sonny, they haven’t made a Hupmobile for about twenty five years.”

Sonny slammed his fist on the table. “Who gives a shit?” He took a long hard look at each one of them. “You wanna know something? The only thing that kept me from swallowing my tongue in that filthy can was knowin’ that when I got out, we would score big. I figured that we’d all do it together.” He took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair. “You guys telling me you’re ready to roll over and play dead?”

“You want to wind up going back to the joint?” Bernie said. “Man, you just got out.”

“What the hell’s wrong with you crumbs?” Sonny’s voice rose louder than he’d intended. “C’mon. What happened to the guys I knew back in thirty-nine?”

“They got old,” Al said.

“What a swell bunch of stiffs.” Sonny blew out a loud breath. “I thought you guys had balls but I guess I was wrong. Sorry for wasting your goddamn time.”

An uncomfortable silence cloaked the booth.

“Look,” Al said. “That heist at the Hudson was our big chance and we blew it. Christ, we’re in our fifties now.” He ran his finger along the outer rim of his beer glass. “I’ll admit it, I’m not crazy about working in a library, but it’s a job. I can pay my rent, eat, and get drunk when I want. I don’t want to fuck all that up.”

Sonny held two thumbs up and winked. “Sounds like you’re really living the dream there Al. All that’s missing is getting your asshole examined every year.”

“We’re not kids anymore,” Bernie said.

“Yeah, well it sounds to me like you’re not exactly men either.”

Al pushed himself out of the booth, stood, pulled out his wallet, grabbed a couple of bills and dropped them on the table. "Here," he said. "This is for the drinks. Have another on me." He turned to Sonny. "Yeah, I know, I work at the library and I'm a boring old accountant, but I'm okay with that. I'm fifty-nine years old, my wife's gone and I don't take care of myself too good, so I probably don't have a whole lot of time left. But it's *my* goddamn time.

"I...I should say, we...we all did a lot of stupid things when we were young, and I lost a whole chunk of my life that I can't get back, so I'm bein' careful with what I got left." He paused. "I'll just say good luck, and I hope you find what you're looking for. I hope you don't do anything stupid, but, hey you're a big boy. And for crissakes, Sonny, take the time to appreciate the second chance you've got."

Al put his hands on the table and leaned forward. "I'm gonna give you some advice, Sonny. Banks aren't the same as they were twenty-five years ago. They have alarm systems and tougher vaults. They're practically bust-proof. If you try to break one open, you'll find yourself behind bars again, and at your age, that's a death sentence." He stood straight and gave a curt wave to the group. "I gotta go. My daughter'll be getting worried."

Sonny watched Al shamble toward the door. He was shocked to see how much his friend had slowed down over the years. The Al Cardinelli he remembered was a spit-in-your-eye kind of guy, someone who always had your back. Maybe all those years in the can had taken their toll and had broken Al down, and yet, Sonny was sure that there was still a spark somewhere inside the man. Or maybe Sonny wanted so much to believe that there was still a spark in him.

He turned his attention back to the other guys and observed the saggy jowls, hanging down the faces of Morrie and Bernie and then stared at his own reflection in the mirror over the bar. It saddened him to see that it too showed the effects of time. However, he didn't feel old. Sure, he was a step slower and he'd packed on a few pounds in the joint, but that stuff happens when you get older. It sure as hell didn't mean it was time to curl up into a little ball and give up.

"You know, Sonny," Bernie said, "I could probably get you something at the garage. You know your way around a motor pretty good, so ☒"

"Not a chance. I'm not workin' in a garage, or a library, or anything like that." Sonny held up his hand. "I can't do that. I'd rather be back in the can, or dead." He pushed his glass away then stood and turned to Morrie. "I suppose you feel the same way as the rest of the guys?"

Morrie stared down at his hands, resting on the table.

Sonny blew out a sigh. "I'm gonna go for a walk and get some air. That beer went straight to my head." Morrie got up, but Sonny motioned him to sit back down. "I need to be alone for a while. I'll meet you back at Gary's later on." He turned to Bernie. "It was good seein' you. Let's meet up for a beer again sometime."

As Sonny turned to leave, he heard Morrie tell Bernie that he felt he had let Sonny down. Sonny continued to the door, passing by a large, wildly colored Wurlitzer jukebox and recalled that the last time he was at Finn's ☒ "If I Didn't Care" by the Ink Spots had been playing on it. The vocal now blaring out of the speakers wasn't Bill Kenny's haunting tenor. It was the same cacophonous noise that Tommy mop-top was bopping his head to on the record player the previous night.

He buttoned up his coat, stepped into the crisp wintry air and wondered why the hell things couldn't stay the same.

But then again, if things remained the same, his ass would still be warming up a flattened cot back at Elmira.

*Not going back to the joint. It's gotta work this time.*