

GOTCH'EM

Screenplay by
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Based on the book
"GOTCH'EM JOHNNY TAGGETT"

by
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FADE IN:

INT. NYPD SQUAD ROOM/JOHNNY'S DESK - DAY

October 23, 1939. JOHNNY TAGGETT, 30s, stares around the forty-eighth precinct station. It's his last day as a sergeant. He's got his meaty hands buried in a stack of old papers and photos, cigarette ash drifting down from his 6'2" height as he sorts what he wants to keep from what he can't care about anymore:

Old forms and memos, trophies he won playing football with the squad, framed snapshots from Christmas blasts and New Year get-togethers, one or two pictures of sexy dames.

The powdery ash falls over all this stuff as he rummages through it.

Somewhere under that pile is his beat-up wooden desk with its two long-necked telephones rising from the mess the way skyscrapers tower over slums. He stands there, tie loose around his thick neck, sleeves rolled up, and keeps digging through all the various crap he's built up over his years in the department. His whole official life in the form of junk he's better off leaving behind.

JOHNNY
(to himself)
Too much. I could never keep up
with all this secretary work.

Almost in a daze, he goes on shuffling through the remnants of the mess on his desk.

A SCREAM from out by the front processing area and a smashing of glass blast his eyes all the way open and his instinct has him jumping over a couple of chairs before he even knows he's moving.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Holy shit! What the hell is going
on?

INT. FRONT ROOM

Johnny's big muscular body joins a crowd of other cops from all over the tough precinct house with their guns drawn as they hustle toward the writhing, grunting clot of guys in suits and uniforms in the center of the station's big front room.

Johnny recognizes a bunch of detectives in the crowd; they're wrestling down some creep who must have thrown a metal chair through one of the glass doors. Johnny looks around at the chair lying on the floor, the smashed palm that used to decorate the lobby, the doorframe all wrenched out of shape and figures that this creep must be all coked up. All these flatfoots with their nightsticks swinging free, smashing into the creep's skull, must have put that together too; they're not stopping till they can hustle his limp form down the hall to holding. It leaves a trail of blood as they drag it.

Someone standing next to Johnny hollers. Captain Patrick Murphy, 60s.

CAPTAIN MURPHY

Make sure he's still breathing.
It'd look like shit if we killed
this lowlife.

JOHNNY

Hey, Captain Murphy. I guess
this'll be as good a time as any to
say goodbye.

There's a little catch in his growling voice, as if something in his throat was trying to get out. He stands there staring at the tough, old precinct captain for a moment. A flood of memories has got Johnny nailed to the spot and speechless.

QUICK FLASHES - JOHNNY'S MEMORIES

- Vegetable wagon slips on the cobblestones.
- Johnny's father dying.
- A young Johnny stands in front of two graves.
- A young Johnny Taggett fresh out of the peacetime army.
- A young Johnny Taggett getting hauled in to the forty-eighth precinct house more than too many times for fighting.
- A younger Captain Patrick Murphy brings Johnny into the police family.
- Captain Murphy gives Johnny odd jobs for a couple of bucks here and there, inspires him into the force, and becomes a second father.

BACK TO SCENE

Captain Murphy's gazing right back into Johnny's narrow grey eyes, watching him remember.

CAPTAIN MURPHY

You were always one for standing up for what's yours and knowing what's right. In every football game, in every brawl, you always kept coming until you knew the job was done, till you got what was yours, what was right. I like to think I taught you that. You sure this is right, going all the way across the country on your own?

Johnny squints and thinks for a second.

JOHNNY

I knew it was right when I lied about my age to get into the army, even though I didn't see the war. You saw when I got back how they trained me to fight, probably why you let me be a flatfoot. Anyway, this is just the kind of thinking you taught me to do, how to see my chance in a brawl or on the field. I see my chance in life here. I know this is right. I know I'm on my own anyway. Not one of my sisters sent a card when Mom died, and I don't even know if Tommy, my brother, lived through the War. It doesn't matter. I gotta make my own way.

He goes to put his cigarette back between his lips and notices that it's smoked out. He tosses the butt aside and lights a new one.

CAPTAIN MURPHY

(chuckling)

That's quite a speech, lad.

JOHNNY

Yeah. Anyway, I'll drop you a line when I get to Frisco, let you know how I'm doing.

CAPTAIN MURPHY

Even if you're fucking fingers are broke.

Murphy sticks out his mitt. Johnny shakes it, turns around, and goes back to the squad room, leaving the captain to run the precinct.

INT. JOHNNY'S DESK

And there's that crap still all over his desk for him to deal with. Johnny's rucksack on one side of it, a rusty trash can on the other, hungry mouths he's gotta feed his history into, one way or the other. His square jaw tightens as he notices a sealed envelope, yellow with age, stamped NO SUCH ADDRESS in ink faded to the pale red of an old wound.

JOHNNY
(grunting under his
breath)
Flagely.

EXT. BUILDING - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Eight years ago. A YOUNGER Patrolman Taggett (late 20s), just two years in, following his sergeant, FLAGELY (40s), up the fire escape toward the sixth floor where some creep with a hand cannon's holed up.

The rain's got the steps all slick as Flagely and Johnny scale up the outside, sealing off the creep's exit while they leave the inside to some guys a little less tough. The two cops climb up into the black sky, Johnny shivering behind, one hand gripping the slippery railing, the other clutching the little .38 he carried back then before he knew better.

Then he sees Flagely jerk and go stiff a second before the bang closer than the thunder, the blaze of light that outlines the sergeant's body for a second as it starts to fall.

Blind with shock, Johnny shoots twice. His little gun doesn't seem to do anything as Flagely's dying body falls down the metal steps toward him, bleeding, wrecked by a bullet to the head, tumbling over the railing down into the darkness. The sounds of the screaming creep and the shots from inside that end them fade above him as he stares and stares down to the invisible street.

END OF FLASHBACK

INT. JOHNNY'S DESK - DAY

Johnny stands there staring at the envelope on his desk, cigarette smoldered to a butt between his lips.

JOHNNY
(to himself)
Eight years, and that fucking
thing's been on my desk the whole
time.

After a beat or two, he picks up the envelope and drops it in the trash can's maw.

INT. JOHNNY'S DESK - DAY (LATER)

The trash can's packed solid with ugly souvenirs like that envelope and the rucksack's got Johnny's first squad football trophy and a few pictures from around the stationhouse he just can't get rid of. The surface of the desk, black wood pitted and scarred with experience, stares back at him.

Johnny glares at it for a beat and then rolls down his sleeves, pulls his double-breasted suitcoat on over his shoulder holster, and bends to his rucksack. It's as light as a ghost when he picks it up, slaps his hat on his head, and goes out to give the reception room one last look.

INT. FRONT ROOM

Some guys are sweeping up the last of the mess from that big scuffle earlier with the cokey wack job. Johnny watches them for a beat, then turns to notice a crowd of cops looking at him. JOE MCELROY, 30s, the guy he shares his desk with, is lollygagging around there, and so's the rookie, MIKE SHANAHAN, 20s, who they're already starting to call Shanny.

JOHNNY
Guess the water cooler survived for
all you bums to stand around.

He chuckles a little in the back of his throat. An answering chuckle comes back from the crowd. Some voice he doesn't even recognize calls out:

OFFICER 1
Good luck in Frisco, Johnny! Watch
your back while you're drinking
those beers! We won't be there to
protect you!

Johnny curls his lips into a mocking smile as he walks past.

JOHNNY
I won't need you goons. I got my
.45 to protect me.

His heels crack a fragment of glass the sweepers missed. The gang around the water cooler keeps gawking at him as he strides to the rectangular space the doors used to occupy. Without turning his head:

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
So long, suckers.

Shrugging on his overcoat, he steps out into the cool night.

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Down the concrete steps to the sidewalk, nearly dancing with relief, he murmurs to himself:

JOHNNY
Last time I'll be on these steps.
Ten years. Long enough.

As he walks away, oak trees shading the streetlights into bars that stripe the asphalt, he looks back over his shoulder to see the old building he's spent half his life in just once more, then keeps pushing forward into the night.

Precinct crowd with his head in their cross-hairs. As he keeps stumbling forward, his hand wanders to his face, tracing his scar -- a thin scar down the left side of his face, from the salt-and-pepper at his temple to the jut of his jaw, usually too narrow to register -- but it's not sending him any messages just now.

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT (LATER)

Johnny makes a turn. He feels the skin on the back of his neck get that tingle; he feels a familiar itch.

JOHNNY
(gripping to himself)
Shit, a tail. That crazy Russian
doesn't quit. Well, what the hell,
he's probably as well-paid as I
used to be.

He snickers to himself, glances over his shoulder, squinting through the smoke from his cigarette, scanning the random walkers dragging along behind him. No one suspicious.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
One more reason to get out of this
city.

He keeps walking. A patrol car passes by him. In that car:

The YOUNGER Patrolman Taggett sits in the passenger seat, next to WALT MCBRIDE, early 30s, his best friend on the force. They're patrolling these streets.

FLASHBACK MONTAGE - JOHNNY REMEMBERS

-- PUB -- After shift. Johnny and Walt are at the bar of a pub, getting sauced together.

WALT

An honest cop can get by in this world real nice just looking the other way. Everyone pays off everyone else, so why shouldn't we get our share?

Wide-eyed Johnny takes it all in.

-- DOWNTOWN -- Johnny and McBride getting into scrapes with the local hoods.

-- CASINO -- Johnny gambles away hungrily.

-- APARTMENT -- Johnny and his WIFE are in the middle of a strong altercation. He walks out. The phone rings. She answers, suspicious.

-- EMPTY ALLEY -- Johnny quits scaring lowlifes for the racket and starts breaking legs.

-- CASINO -- Johnny, still gambling, looking for that one big score to get him off the hook, the big score that never comes.

-- NYPD -- Captain Murphy looks at a disheveled Johnny, disappointed.

-- APARTMENT -- Johnny arrives. It's dark. Just a note and half the apartment cleaned out.

-- BANK -- Johnny and Walt are in the middle of a botched bank heist. Walt gets a bullet in the hip.

-- PUB -- Johnny is alone drinking at the pub bar, playing with his wedding ring. Sound of gunshots echoes and screams then...

WALT (CONT'D)

Private dicks in San Francisco, buddy, that's the life. Your own business, your own hours, you pick the client and charge 'em what they can pay.

(MORE)

WALT (CONT'D)

Soon as I serve out my time in the
stationhouse and get my pension,
I'm on the next train.

BACK TO SCENE

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Johnny's hand slips into his overcoat to feel the flimsy
paper Walt's two-year-old telegram's printed on. It reads:

"Made Frisco. All set up. Waiting for you."

Twisting his neck, Johnny scans the crowd around him again.

JOHNNY

Just hope I'm getting out fast
enough.

His scar starts throbbing the way it always does when he
knows he's in trouble.

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

A crazy mob scene. A couple of street gangs fighting for turf
with Johnny and his men caught in the middle. Too poor for
guns, the punks are swinging baseball bats and chains and
switchblades, and there's Johnny holding his ground, knocking
down one screaming creep after another.

Shocks vibrate up his right arm as his nightstick smacks into
skulls. Then in a flash, a KID in front of him, weird little
smirk vibrating around his baby face. He smells like rotgut
sweat and reefer and just stands there glassy-eyed, staring
at Johnny.

JOHNNY

What the fuck?

And before he can blink, the kid's got a razor in his hand,
must have been hiding it in his sleeve, and he's slashing
Johnny's face. Johnny lets out a little grunt of pain. The
blood drips down his neck into his uniform. The kid snickers.

KID

I thought you were some kind of
tough guy, flatfoot.

JOHNNY

Tough enough for you.

Johnny's fist comes out of there as fast and hard as a cannonball and catches the weird kid across the jaw, his fingers curled around the brass knuckles.

The punk shrieks as his face goes all diagonal, jaw flapping loose, but he somehow keeps standing, so Johnny just puts his size 14 in the grasshopper's balls. That puts him down.

INT. NYPD/INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

A DOCTOR sews Johnny up under the precinct interrogation room's flat light.

DOC

You know, Sergeant Taggart, you were just an inch from losing an eye. You really ought to be more careful in the line of duty. As it is, you're going to have a little souvenir of your night downtown for the rest of your life.

Raising his finger to his face, wincing a little from the pain, Johnny just grins at the flabby civilian.

JOHNNY

I got all sorts of souvenirs, doc. Now, thanks for stitching me up, but I got work to do.

He lights up a cigarette as the old doc fiddles with his eyeglasses and slips out the door and back into the daytime.

END OF FLASHBACK

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

JOHNNY

All sorts of souvenirs.

Johnny keeps pushing on through the night crowd toward Union Station with nothing to his name but his suit, his .45, a half-empty rucksack, and a couple hundred he managed to sneak out of one of his stashes.

INT. GRAND CENTRAL STATION - NIGHT

Johnny makes it into the giant echoing station, crowded even at this time of night, and lights up a new cigarette. Yellow light from vast rows of light bulbs stains the station's

enormous marble floor, reflecting the citizens walking on it as pale shadows upside down.

The place is probably amazing, but Johnny's head is on a swivel for other reasons. He's walking around in circles, examining faces, trying to catch whatever creep's been following him from the precinct and making his scar throb.

JOHNNY

(under his breath)

So I'm looking for someone who
dodges my look...not that guy, he's
too straight-looking...any creep
working for that crazy Russian's
gonna have that weird dark stare a
stone killer gets...no, that guy's
too well dressed...and that one's
just a tourist, look at him gawking
around, he's gonna run into someone
if he's not--oh, I see, a lifter
looking for a heavy pocket, I
better stay out of his way...shit,
only a few minutes for my
train...well, hello there, you
gorgeous pair of pins.

A YOUNG LADY, late 20s, doesn't see Johnny as he makes a meal of her with his eyes; she's got legs that go all the way up to a soft curvy ass, plump cheeks under a skirt just a little too tight, hypnotically swaying back and forth as she walks and he follows.

Johnny tries to remember to keep his tongue in his mouth. Glancing around, he notices where they're both going.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Lucky thing she's on the same train
I am or I'd end up in Saint Louis
or something. Come on, Taggett, get
yourself together.

INT. GRAND CENTRAL STATION/PLATFORM - NIGHT

So there he stands on the platform. Johnny flicks away the burned-out butt and lights up a new cigarette as he watches the hot number get on.

JOHNNY

Hope she's in a sleeper car.
Wouldn't mind running into her some
dark night.

Looking around, he notices the PORTER, calls the boy over.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
I'm in the sleeper.

The kid gives him a slow once-over: Johnny sees him observing the state of his suit and his lack of anything for luggage but a half-empty rucksack. Dead-eyed, the boy jerks his chin in the general direction of the car the babe stepped into.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
(sneering)
Thanks a heap for all your kind
help.

The boy just snickers, scanning the sparsely crowded platform for a customer who'll actually tip.

Carrying his sack of apparently worthless memories, Johnny strides to the car that hot dish got into, steps up a few steps, and gets on the train.

INT. TRAIN/SLEEPER CAR - NIGHT

Feeling like a giant in a dollhouse, Johnny shuffles down the narrow corridor with doors to one side.

JOHNNY
Nice, wish I could afford a private
room, it'd be so much easier to
keep a low profile until I can get
clear of the city.

After four or five doors, the corridor widens to reveal the open section. Johnny checks his ticket; he's got an upper berth toward the end of the car.

Johnny hustles his big body and his rucksack down there and slips into his seat, hanging his coat and hat and shoving the rucksack under. Staring out the window at the passing tourists, he waits for the train to get going.

As he's idly ogling the ripe tomatoes all dressed up to ride the train, he happens to notice THROUGH THE WINDOW:

A COUPLE OF GUYS who look like they're trying not to be spotted.

Johnny chuckles to himself, he knows the type so well -- these half-smart, half-tough eggs with their overcoat collars sticking up, one holding up a newspaper like he's pretending it's a wall, the other staring at the tip of his unlit cigarette for some reason.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Wait a minute, I know these jerks. Where have I seen those ugly faces before? Don't think I ever busted these goons on the job, but that guy with the tip missing from his ear looks so familiar, he could be my damn roommate.

Just then, the one with the cigarette and an ear and a half seems to catch Johnny watching. He bends over to the newspaper guy, who's not only shorter but rounder to boot, and whispers something. Just then a voice from behind Johnny's head intones:

PORTER (O.S.)

Drink, sir?

Johnny whips around to see the porter maintaining a neutral expression.

JOHNNY

What? Huh?

As he tries to keep an eye on the goons on the platform while he fishes his ticket out of his pocket. The porter's deep brown eyes are mildly piercing into Johnny's brain like friendly little ice picks.

PORTER

I say, care for a drink, sir. Train leavin' soon and lots of passengers like a drink as they pull out. Sir.

JOHNNY

Uh, yeah, okay, scotch and soda.

The porter just stands there, giving him the kind of patient smile people use on their half-witted relatives to keep from laughing in their faces. An awkward moment. Johnny figures out that he's not in the kind of speakeasy he's used to.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Oh, right. Glass of club soda.

The porter's eyes twitch to Johnny's hand, which doesn't move toward his pocket.

PORTER

Ah, that'll be fifteen cents, sir.

Growling a little, Johnny gropes around in his other pocket for a nickel and a dime and hands them to the old man, all the time trying to keep the window the transaction's got him turned away from in his field of vision.

The porter glances at the exact change in the palm of his white glove, lets out a polite sigh, and moves toward the dining car with all the enthusiasm of a barefoot boy on the first day of school.

Johnny whips his head back around to the window. The thugs are gone. He snaps his fingers.

JOHNNY

Of course! That guy with the ear, I remember him from the riot where I got my scar, he was working muscle for my bookie. Shit. I can't believe I didn't see those guys on the way over. Wait a minute, maybe I couldn't have, maybe they were here waiting for me...or someone else.

(blinking)

Try not to get all jumpy, Taggett. You're not the only lowlife gambler in New York City, I'm sure. Lots of mugs got trouble. I'm on my way the hell out of here and no two-bit hoods are gonna scare me into making a wrong move.

He squirms a little in the softness of his seat and lights up a new cigarette, squinting away from the smoke as he gives the platform one more once-over.

PORTER

Club soda, sir.

Johnny's hand still twitches toward the holster under his suitcoat.

The old man stands there mildly blinking at him, extending the short glass of club soda still fizzing. Little beads of condensation slide down the sides of the glass as they stare at each other for a lingering moment, then Johnny takes the glass and grunts what he hopes is enough of a thanks to get this guy out of his face.

PORTER (CONT'D)

(drawling slowly)

Enjoy your trip, sir.

He makes his easy way back along toward the private berths where the passengers are a little more likely to tip.

As soon as the porter's out of view down the corridor, Johnny reaches into his hanging overcoat for a little flask. Holding his glass under the window, he tips a little bootleg whiskey into it. A little smile curls the corners of his lips as he takes a sip, feels the heat going down and spreading in his chest.

Johnny barely notices the conductor's fatherly boom calling all aboard, the clanging of the bell as the last few passengers hustle into the car.

With a couple of tremendous coughs, the train jerks and starts to slide along its track, faster and faster, as Johnny feels himself finally start to relax after what seems like years of looking over his shoulder, his body getting heavier, sinking back into the welcoming cushion

Just at the brink of sleep, a sudden thought stabs Johnny like a needle in the back of the brain. His eyes jolt open.

JOHNNY

What if those hard thugs followed
me onto the train?

INT. TRAIN/SLEEPER CAR - NIGHT - TRAVELING

Johnny opens his eyes again. The car's flooded with amber evening light.

JOHNNY

Shit, I must have slept the whole
day through right here in my seat.

He fumbles for a cigarette and a match and lights up, looking around. Somehow, the car's empty except for him, all the berths folded back up into the walls. The gurgle coming out of his gut gives him the clue.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Dinnertime. Guess I better find my
way to the dining car.

He drags fingers through his hair, uses the flickering ghostly reflection in the window to straighten his tie, and crams his hat back onto his head.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Eh, presentable enough, I suppose.

Still blinking away the cobwebs, he takes a moment to observe the landscape rushing past him in a bright blur: no buildings, no black asphalt sky, just the greens and golds of the country regular types live in.

The sleeping car rattles gently as the train clicks and clacks along its track. He can't help smiling.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Here I come, Walt. Taggett and
McBride, private dicks, world by
the tail, just like you said.

Johnny feels the motion of the train carrying him away from the city's darkness, as he lets himself dream for a beat. He snaps out of it and staggers a little from the swaying of the car on its wheels as he makes his way toward--

INT. TRAIN/DINING CAR - NIGHT - TRAVELING

The car's just choked with passengers, men in suits with their hats hanging on hooks above them, women dressed up in elegant gowns. The buzz of conversation joins the clattering of forks on plates and the smell of steak and broccoli and butter to fill the car's close atmosphere.

Johnny stands at the doorway looking in: a single table on the right seems open, so he pushes his way over there, trying not to knock over a waiter.

He takes a seat, hangs his hat, and gets his head on its regular swivel, checking out the exits, who looks tough enough to start something, who's watching him. No one looks tough in this crowd, a bunch of Daddy Warbucks types and their dates pitching woo at each other, whistling while they can before the money runs out.

Johnny lets a little smirk curl his lips as the WAITER arrives, takes his order, leaves again.

INT. TRAIN/DINING CAR - NIGHT (LATER) - TRAVELING

A plate shows up weighted down with a thick bloody steak and a small forest of broccoli, all glistening with real butter. Johnny grabs his knife and fork and gets to work.

He's barely started cutting his meat when his scar starts itching. He stops moving. His eyes dart around the dining car. The men at the tables around him seem to be concentrating on their dates, acting impressive, none of them the kind of hard case that could set off his instincts like this.

The girls are just as harmless, everyone a regal citizen, except for the figure in black, regarding him from the other end of the car.

A FEATURELESS FACE seems to be staring at him, seated at a large table next to a withered OLD MAN nodding in a wheelchair.

It takes Johnny a second to realize that whoever's creeping him out this way is wearing a thick black veil that's ebbing and flowing as the dark figure breathes.

JOHNNY

Well, I guess it's human.

As he looks closer...

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Shit, that's a woman!

Along with that veil, the LADY wears a black hat, a plain black dress, and long black gloves. Johnny can't see her shoes under the table, but he's got a pretty good idea they're not orange.

The only color on her comes from the gaudy rings she's wearing on her gloved fingers. Sparkling as the dining car's electric lights come on, the rings flash gold and ruby and emerald and a bunch of colors he can't even name into his eyes.

Johnny blinks and keeps staring, ignoring the dinner that's cooling in front of him.

A long weird moment. Johnny realizes she's saying something. Worse, she's saying something to him: a voice breathy and ghostly but somehow as mellow as a glass of good whiskey is calling across the room.

LADY

Young man, young man, come over here.

Johnny pushes himself away from the table, grunting what the hell to himself, and makes his way over to the strange lady's corner of the car.

LADY (CONT'D)

Young man, my husband and I have observed that you're unaccompanied at your supper, and I just can't abide to see someone lonely if I can help it.

(MORE)

LADY (CONT'D)

I insist you dine with us and tell us the fascinating story of your life. I won't take no for an answer, young man.

That's when Johnny notices the other person at the table.

THE OLD MAN

An elderly party with a tuxedo flapping around his bony frame sits propped up in a wheelchair to the right of the woman in black. His black eyes glisten deep in their sockets, blank as a porcelain doll's abandoned in a moonlit alley at midnight.

Johnny forces his eyes away from the wreck's dangling head and back to the void the woman's veil makes of her face.

JOHNNY

(mumbling)

Uh, sure.

A gesture from a black-gloved hand brings a squad of waiters over with Johnny's dinner and his drink and a chair, so he shrugs and has a seat.

Hungry as Johnny is, it's hard to get much eating done.

The old man's got a big bowl of some kind of gruel in front of him, smells like someone in the kitchen just ground up the whole dinner, and she's feeding him from it, filling up a soup spoon and wiping it over his lips, pushing it into his mouth, almost snarling at him to eat it up like a good boy.

Every so often, she has to wipe the brown paste from his jaw on a napkin tucked into the gaping neck of his tux.

Johnny tries to keep his eyes on his own plate and away from the spreading stain on the napkin and manages to get through the meal without puking on his plate. This goes on for a while and then the squad of waiters reappears and takes everything away.

A long awkward moment of silence.

The strange veiled woman fixes a cigarette to a long ivory holder and slides that through her veil, which Johnny can see is made of three or four layers of netting. He gets his matchbook from his pocket and lights her smoke.

LADY

Thank you, young man. I observing
you've been looking at my rings all
this time. Perhaps you're
interested in their provenance.

Johnny lights up a smoke of his own and lets out a little
cough of a laugh.

JOHNNY

Yeah, I don't really know what that
means, but I'll tell you, I'm a lot
more interested in who you are. You
people got names?

A sound that must be a chuckle drifts from behind the veil.

MRS. FOULSWORTH

Of course, how rude of me. I am
Mrs. Vivian Foulsworth, and this is
my husband, Edgar.

Edgar seems to twitch a little at the mention of his name as
Mrs. Foulsworth extends a black-gloved hand, rings glinting
right into Johnny's eyes. He takes the hand.

JOHNNY

(mumbling)

Johnny Taggett.

Johnny finds himself staring into one of the rings, an
evening-colored stone so clear somehow. Faint voices scratch
at the surface of his awareness, whispers in a bunch of
languages he doesn't know. He can feel his jaw going slack,
his cigarette falling into his drink.

MRS. FOULSWORTH

Fascinating, isn't it? A ring seven
centuries old, found on the finger
of Genghis Khan himself, a diamond
even older. We've traced it through
stories and legends back to the
court of Rameses the Great.

(beat)

Imagine it, Mr. Taggett. Imagine
the power such a gem must have had,
passing through the hands of
uncountable collectors, feeling
their gaze through all those
millennia. Think of the brave men
who gave their lives mining it,
just reaching it, how their devoted
souls must have entered its
perfection. The Violet Diamond.

Her voice has lowered to the kind of hushed tone Johnny remembers from the last time he was in a church. He hasn't managed yet to let go of her hand. Mrs. Foulsworth lets a soft sigh flutter her veil.

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)
Edgar brought this back from
Ethiopia for me. He's a great
gemologist, he and his brother Sal.

The creepy figure in the wheelchair gives another twitch.

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)
We're just coming from Sal's
funeral, actually. Such a strange
ceremony, such odd characters
behaving with such bizarre
precision, as if they were in some
kind of cult. Something happened to
my husband and his brother there in
Ethiopia or perhaps it started when
Sal ran into that odd one-eyed
Chinaman or when he told us he'd
found the Fountain of Youth and got
Edgar so worked up, he had to hire
a boat for Africa right then. I
suppose I'll never know. When I met
my husband at the dock at his
return, he was like...like this.
(shuddering)
Please excuse me. I have to...to
compose myself.

She takes her hand back as Johnny blinks and barely remembers to rise with her as she leaves the table, thin black figure swaying back toward the sleeper.

Johnny can't think of anything better to do than light up another cigarette and get a better look at Edgar.

The old man might or might not be staring back: the glistening of his glassy eyes can barely escape their cavernous sockets. The nose between them is somehow curving down over lips the color of calfskin to nearly touch his chin. Fine wisps of hair drift across the spotted expanse of his scalp, and the skin the face is made of reminds Johnny of pictures he's seen of Egyptian mummies. Flecks of white matter seem to be flaking from it.

Johnny smokes and shudders and then notices that the creepy old guy seems to be twitching with a purpose. Those leathery lips are twisting and a kind of feeble grunt seems to push them apart. One of Edgar's bony claws is gesturing, index finger out, and waving like a palsied baton.

JOHNNY
(blinking)
You're trying to say something.

A nod from Edgar.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Trying to point to something?

The head shakes from side to side. Johnny takes a frustrated breath.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
You need something to write with?

Another nod. Johnny reaches into his coat pocket for the pad and pencil he's been carrying. He lays them down in front of Edgar's unsteady hand as it reaches forth from the old man's lap.

Grunting with effort, Edgar forces his bent fingers to grip the pencil, to lift it, to drop it onto the paper and carve out letters. Johnny squints at the paper as letters form, trying to read upside down.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
Death? Is that what you're--yeah,
'Death in the... in the what?

The old man's wheeze is getting louder and faster, and he seems to be trying to speed up his writing.

Johnny glances away from the paper, and there's Mrs. Foulsworth, coming at them down the length of the car. He looks back into Edgar's crumbling face to see what looks like some kind of panic.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
You don't want her to see this, do
you?

Edgar's leathery head shakes back and forth as his hand stutters over the page.

Johnny snatches another glimpse at what Edgar's trying to write -- "DEATH IN THE RI" or something like that and then just a crazy spider web of scribbling -- and smoothly slides the pad and pencil back into his jacket just before Mrs. Foulsworth makes it to the table.

MRS. FOULSWORTH
I hope you've been having an
amusing time with my Edgar.
(MORE)

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)

No doubt you've been sharing many
fascinating anecdotes.

Another one of those wooden noises that must have been a chuckle blows the veil out a little as she fits another cigarette into her holder, slides that through the netting, and waits for Johnny to supply a light. It doesn't take him more than half a second to catch on and light her smoke for her.

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)

I suppose I must apologize. My little joke is in poor taste. As I was saying, Edgar doesn't communicate, really. I suspect only I can understand him at this point, isn't that right, my darling, and half the time, I have no idea what he's gibbering on about. He's trapped in his body.

(toward Edgar)

Aren't you, my precious?

A gloved hand reaches to cover one of Edgar's palsied claws, and the leathery old man gives a twitch and a grunt. Johnny shivers a little but keeps his face from twisting into a scowl of revulsion.

The veil turns back to face Johnny. It flutters as:

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)

I see that all this conversation has utterly exhausted my Edgar. Be a dear, Mr. Taggett, and help me take him to bed.

She gets up, and so does Johnny, and then she doesn't make a move. After a moment, he figures out what she's expecting and takes the handles of Edgar's wheelchair, pulling it back from the table, making a kind of three-point turn, and pushing him back toward the sleeping cars.

While he's pushing, Mrs. Foulsworth takes his arm; he can feel her fingers clutching his biceps the way a banker clutches his most recent dollar. She's so strangely tall that her veil comes almost to the level of Johnny's face, that weird breathy murmur worming its way through those layers of netting almost straight into his ear.

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)

I'll tell you a strange tale, Mr. Taggett.

(MORE)

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)

You'll recall that I described our journey tonight as the return from my Edgar's brother's funeral.

(beat)

Well, I could swear that I saw him there, Sal, my deceased brother-in-law. He was standing right there at graveside, looking younger than he did when we first met. I tried to catch his eye, but he was deep in conversation with some strange Oriental type.

(beat)

I looked for him after the service, but he had disappeared completely. Could I be losing my mind, Mr. Taggett? Or did whatever transformed my Edgar into this...this...

Her voice catches and something behind the veil makes a faint clicking sound.

MRS. FOULSWORTH (CONT'D)

...this mockery has something to do with Sal? I can't begin to understand.

As the wheelchair squeaks along the aisle in front of them, Johnny can only make what he hopes is a reassuring sort of grunt and then--

INT. TRAIN/SLEEPER CAR - NIGHT - TRAVELING

They're at the door to the strange couple's private berth. Mrs. Foulsworth pushes the door open, and Johnny pushes in her husband.

INT. PRIVATE BERTH

The three of them take up about half the space; a wide platform a little higher than Johnny's chest takes about a quarter of the rest.

Mrs. Foulsworth turns to him and extends her hand.

MRS. FOULSWORTH

It's been lovely to meet you, Mr. Taggett, and I insist that you dine with us for the rest of our voyage together.

(MORE)