

## Chop Shop Guys

Vlad and his brother love the United States, their adopted country of 15 years. A GQ subscriber, Vlad has become the quintessential consumer, finding the latest fashions and wearing them with a zest that is frightening. Though he babbles on about ties and lapels and designers, this immigrant GenX'er knows what he's talking about. He knows what impresses the women at spots like Barfly and Mortons. "I wear Hugo Boss, Gucci, Armani," he notes. "Handmade fuckin' shoes. The doormen all know me and my guys. Think we're Czechoslovakian film producers."

But they're not.

Vlad and younger brother Rad steal cars and deliver them to chop shops - you know, those places that your car enters and never leaves. After Vlad gets hold of your car, neither you nor anyone else will ever see it again.

He spends most of his time at work behind the wheel of his own car, a 7 series BMW. You can see him often, cruising up and down Wilshire, in and out of parking garages. He's always on the lookout for the right vehicle - often a late-model Toyota, Nissan or four-wheel drive.

Vlad tells me about a recent work day, one that was a lot like many others. Younger brother Rad is driving. After spotting this Toyota in a snazzy off-gold, they glide past, then go around the block for a second look, finally deciding that there's too much foot traffic. Heading south down Centinela into Culver City, they see the same model in bright green.

Pulling in behind, Rad stays behind the wheel of the Beemer, keeping time while the stereo pumps out Sublime. Vlad walks around to his BMW's trunk and emerges with a handheld device that looks like a large walkie-talkie. This is actually a custom alarm decoder that would cost you close to five grand if you knew the guy who makes them. Needless to say, these are specialty items not available at your local hardware store. Vlad flips a switch and within minutes the Toyota's alarm chirps and the doors unlock. Vlad just loves those car alarms that also automatically unlock doors. (It's a great convenience both for the car owner and for him.) From that point it takes less than a minute to slap-hammer the ignition and get rolling.

Vlad fires up a Marlboro Light as he wends his way southeast on our lovely freeways to an industrial neighborhood. Along the way, he resets the radio for tunes more to his liking. And he obeys the speed limit like a Boy Scout.

As he pulls up before a walled-off yard defended by concertina wire, he dials a number on his cell phone, then barks: "Open up. Delivery coming in right now."

When the gate closes behind him, the roller doors to the garage are already open. They too slide shut as he drives in. As soon as the car stops, jacks are rolling under the frame so the dismantling process can begin. A crew descends on the car like a junkie on free dope. Doors, rims, tires, seats, engine, transmission, glass: Nothing goes to waste. These guys are poetry in motion; an Indy 500 pit crew couldn't touch these guys for speed and precision. In under two hours, the entire car will be parts.

The parts are immediately boxed and sent to the garage or dealer that ordered them: reputable dealers who don't ask unnecessary questions, and pros who buy parts by the truckload for resale

knowing full on that this shit is smoking hot. Installed in your car and billed to you as new. Once the disassembly is complete, the only thing remaining is the frame and, in some cases, the engine block, because the block itself has ID numbers so deeply etched into it that it's more cost effective to buy a trashed block at a junkyard with clean numbers, then transfer the guts.

But for Vlad and Rad the transaction ends at the chop-shop office, where the fridge is full of beer and the walls plastered with posters of leering women holding power tools like they're sex instruments. Think a vibrator works good? Just wait till you try the Makita Saws All. Oh baby.

Ivan the Boss kicks back behind his desk. Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" booms so loud that it drowns out the impact wrenches.

As Vlad enters, Ivan sets his feet on the floor. "Got a special order in for a '97 'Vette," he tells Vlad. "Ya want it?"

"How much?"

"Twenty-five hundred."

The take is tempting, but a custom order demands a lot. First you have to find exactly the right car to steal, then locate a matching car that's been totaled so you can transfer all the numbered parts and make sure the paperwork is impeccable.

"Naw, give it to somebody else," says Vlad. "I can bag five, six Toyotas and Nissans in the time it takes to track down a 'Vette."

Ivan then pulls from his pocket a roll big enough to gag Linda Lovelace and counts out fifteen hundred bucks in various size bills, whereupon our man Vlad does a recount to make sure he hasn't been shortchanged. It's nothing personal, because all the guys in this ring are either related or come from the same town in the old country. Still, when it comes to cash, you always count it at least twice. Vlad pockets his fees and strolls out through the front door of the body-and-fender shop that doubles as Boris' Midnight Auto Supply. To call these guys organized would be an overstatement, but they're pretty good at what they do.

Vlad saunters back into the street and climbs into the waiting BMW, which is now fully registered, insured, legal and absolovely pristine inside and out.

Life in America is beyond a dream come true for Vlad and Rad and their extended family, it's a regular fairy tale. Even with our drive-by shootings and high murder rate, crime is not as lethal as where he came from.

I have to be a little vague on Vlad and Rad's background because it's not every gang of car thieves who are part of a large Greek Orthodox family. The kids would be truly shamed - chagrined and dismayed even - to have the clan's illicit activity exposed.

But aside from protecting the family name, Vlad is a confident crook. He started stealing cars "because it's easy. E-A-S-Y. Easy.

"When I first got here, my people were into lots of things," he explains. "Insurance scores, a little drugs, counterfeiting clothes and watches. When Ivan the Boss started with cars, we could just go rent one, report it stolen, give it to Ivan. He'd kick with five hundred to a thousand, depending on

the make and so on."

Vlad would get the rental with fake IDs made by "one of our guys." One day, though, he walked into a Hertz "and one of the chicks there recognized me from renting something a couple months before using a different name. That's what I get for flirting with all the women I talk to. I can't help it. They like me. I like them."

Anyway, he beat a fast retreat.

Vlad's accent is growing thicker as we talk at a local watering hole - he's been downing more than a bit of iced Stoli. But he's coherent enough to review some tricks of the trade, like his alarm deactivator, which he special-ordered from a high-tech Beverly Hills shop. Like many items of merchandise in Beverly Hills, it's an import. This baby was hand-assembled in one of the old Eastern Bloc nations. It sends out digital codes, just like the ones people use to turn their car alarms on and off or open their garage doors. He may not know your code, but his device will send out hundreds of signals until it hits the right numbers.

Ignition locks aren't a problem either: "Just rip the lock out and start it with a screwdriver."

He likes the car racket because he can steal three or four a day. Sometimes a custom order, but mostly standard Japanese imports and four-wheel drives.

"Think about it," he says. "They're all over the place. I spot what I want, then I stand around holding a transmitter. I'm not touching the car, not breaking any law." When the alarm chirps off, "I'm in the car and gone in under a minute. Unless I fuck up, speed, fail to signal, run a light, how am I going to get caught? Huh? Tell me."

I ask him about the Club and LoJack, and he laughs: "The Club can be drilled or cut, although they're a pain in the ass," he admits. "Speed is the thing, and the Club slows you down. I just keep looking until I find something easy. Why increase your risk factor?"

As for LoJack, "they have to know the car's gone before they can call it in. By that time it'll be chopped into little teeny pieces and the LoJack transmitter thrown into a moving garbage truck." If you've got to steal a car with LoJack, then it helps if you know the driver won't be returning for a while. The problem is, you don't always know that when you're cruising. So maybe the racket isn't as eternally foolproof as Vlad claims. I can remember when I had that confidence, that feeling that I would never fuck up.

Vlad is chain-smoking as we talk, lighting each cigarette from the butt of the last with fingers slightly yellowed from the continual smoke. But it doesn't detract from the jewelry on his fingers and wrists. His hair is cut perfectly, and he changes clothes two, three, four times a day. The fact is, this is a pretty motherfucker. If it wasn't for the insane energy coming off him and the manic look in his eyes, he probably could be a model or something.

He smiles: "I can spend a couple grand a week doing nothing. Clothes, women, my own cars, food. A couple grand easy."

Vlad spends a lot of his free time learning new dance steps, practicing kick boxing and reading magazines to make sure he's current with what's up and what's happening. "Ya gotta stay tan. Always have a tan. If I can't hit the beach or at least lay out for an hour or two a day, I hit the tanning parlor."

His future plans don't go much beyond tonight. "Going to Sky Bar. Want to go? Bitches for days, hot- and cold-running bitches, man. Check it out. You'll dig it."

I'm thinking that I probably would, but I turn him down anyway. I don't got the right clothes.