

## The Picture

Anton Marino straightened his legs over the expanse of sheet that may have been white at one time. The rusty metal bed frame issued a single squeak of protest but held firm. A shapeless cloud of dirty white smoke rose up from the cigarette dangling between his lips, hovered over his head for an instant, then dissipated into the dingy corners of the room. A talk show flickered and droned from a small television perched atop a brown particleboard dresser. Next to the television, almost invisible beside an overflowing Budweiser ashtray, a pretty young woman with long dark hair smiled wearily from within a cheap gold picture frame.

Marino didn't see the ashtray next to the picture; he didn't see the television or even the room. His eyes, gazing inward at the fragments of a bad dream, could only see the white flame of his own anger flaring and flashing haphazardly.

Just four weeks out of prison, he despised this ugly world into which he had been unceremoniously deposited as a condition of his parole: the small furnished (if you could call the few sticks of Salvation Army rejects scattered about furniture) room in a second-rate rooming house populated by ex-cons and recovering drug addicts, the job washing dishes at the Fifth Street Diner. He wanted the old life back, the good life when women were easy and you hung with men you grew up with, men you could trust to have your back when things got rough, as they so often did.

Now, all that was gone, vanished, leaving behind only the tantalizing memories of what once was. He trusted no-one and blamed everyone, but especially the men who had abandoned him without hesitation, who had let him take the fall for a job gone bad, who had not sent him so much as a postcard the entire five years he was inside.

He had lived with misfortune and hardship from the moment he was born: rundown neighborhood, debilitating poverty, father who was serving a life sentence for murder, mother who died of a drug overdose when he was seventeen. He knew it all, could have written a book on how to survive on the streets, if he had been able to write more than two coherent sentences at a time. A poster child for the consequences of a dysfunctional social structure; a case study in every social worker's handbook.

But the loyalty of the guys he had grown up with was the one thing in an otherwise miserable life he thought he could always count on. They had suffered and prospered together; they had protected each other's back when no one else would. Even though he was mostly a joiner, a common foot soldier, a street thug with more pretensions than brains, he understood only too well that he had been betrayed by those he had most trusted and believed in. He had sat in a prison cell, just trying to survive, while those he had so fervently thought were his friends lived free and easy, took scores with impunity, and had sex with as many women as they could talk—or somehow coerce---into bed.

For five years, his hate festered and grew. So now, all he could think about was vengeance, hurting those who had hurt him, making them suffer and pay the way he had suffered and paid. The only problem he faced was figuring out how to do it and stay alive. He understood only too well that there was no viable solution to this only problem.

As he sat up on his bed, he did the only thing prison had fully prepared him for: dream and wait. And in the dark lonely evenings he left his room and washed dishes and scrubbed pots and pans, bought cheap whiskey, and drank himself into a stupor.

Occasionally, in his more melancholy moments, moments when the dark days of his former life took a different turn, he would look at the picture of the young woman with the crooked little smile and think about how things had been once, how one gentle

generous person in the world had tried to love him and teach him to love her, teach him that maybe there is some good in this world after all.

He had a plan, of course. That was another benefit of his time in prison. As soon as it was safe to do so, he had put the word out through the informal street network that he was back, that he held no grudges, and that he might be available for an occasional job. He wasn't particular; he would do almost anything to gain access to the human infrastructure that ruled his little part of the world.

But either times were slow or he had been completely forgotten or written off because offers hadn't exactly been pouring in. Thus, yesterday, when he spotted Michael Francone eating alone in the diner, he took a chance and approached his old street companion, now a respected lieutenant whose star was on the rise. They had a short discreet conversation, after which Francone promised to see what he could do about helping Marino, maybe even extend an offer. He said he would stop by and they could discuss it further.

Now, as the early afternoon sun began to burn its way through the grimy window that overlooked an alley, Marino fretted and waited for the visit that he felt certain would change his luck, lead him to the reckoning he most coveted. A bottle of whiskey stood unopened on the cluttered nightstand next to him. He understood that he had to be cold sober when he met his old friend.

Just as he was crushing out his fifth consecutive cigarette, Marino heard footsteps followed by a gentle knocking at his door. Quickly, he scanned the room, slid off the bed, and silenced the television. As he approached the door, he smoothed down his Fifth Street Diner T-shirt and ran his fingers through his dirty hair. Then he unbolted the door and pulled it open.

In the corridor stood Michael Francone, wearing a tan Armani suit, crisp white shirt, and light blue silk tie. His curly black hair had been recently styled; his fingernails were manicured. The difference in the status of the two men who had, at one time, both stolen money from the church collection plate was stark and obvious even at a distant glance. Francone regarded the inside of the room for a moment as Marino stepped back to let him enter. "Hello, Anton," he said, once he was inside. He extended his right hand to his host.

Marino took the hand and gave it a vigorous shake. "Hey, Mike, thanks for stoppin' by."

Francone glanced around the room once again and frowned. "Not much like the old days, is it?"

Marino flushed. "Geez, I'm sorry about how the place looks," he said. "But I've only been out a month, haven't had time or money to get the place fixed up."

Francone's thin lips curled upward as he measured the room. "Don't worry about it, Anton," he said. "We were sorry to hear about what happened to you. It's good to see you made it out okay."

"Well, it wasn't really as bad as all that," Marino said, as he offered his guest the only chair in the room. "Anyways, not as bad as that two-year stretch me and you did when we was kids."

"I remember that stretch," Francone said as he sat down. "It taught me a lot about sidestepping trouble."

Marino flitted around the room like a butterfly afraid to land. "Hey, do you want anything? I got some beer in the box and a bottle of whiskey."

Francone shook his head. “No thanks, Anton,” he replied, shifting his body in the old wooden chair, an obvious relic. “A little early in the afternoon for me. Now, why don’t we get down to business? It looks you could use some action.”

Anton lowered himself onto the bed. “Hey, Mike, I’m goin’ crazy here. I got no money, no women, no nothin’.”

“What about Ann Lee?” Francone asked, glancing at the picture on the dresser.

Marino frowned, consciously not looking at the picture. “I haven’t heard from her in five years.”

“Why don’t you call her? Does she even know you’re out?”

Marino cast his tired eyes to the dirty linoleum floor. “You know how it was, man. I mean, I really hurt her when I went down. I guess I don’t have the guts to find out what she feels now. And I can’t see her...not like this.”

Francone flashed a warm little smile. “Well, let’s see if we can fix that,” he said. “We have a job coming up and could use your experience. Are you interested?”

Marino had to consciously restrain his excitement. “Damn right I’m interested. Just tell me what it is.”

“It’s tomorrow night. Can you make it?”

“Depends on how early. I can’t risk not goin’ to work. The diner closes at eleven. I can meet you right after that.”

Francone seemed to think for a few seconds. “I guess that will work,” he said. “Someone will pick you up at Freddy’s. Does that work for you?”

“Yeah, man, I guess so,” Marino said. “Hey, what is the job anyway?”

Francone directed his sharp eyes toward his old companion. “You’ll have to trust me when I say I think you can handle it. Someone will give you the details on the way. Does five hundred sound okay for a couple hours work?”

“Man, I would kill my Uncle Alex for five hundred.”

“You can relax...you won’t have to kill anyone. In fact, you won’t need to carry at all.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Marino said. “I wouldn’t want to break parole on a weapons violation.”

Both men laughed. Then Francone stood up and moved to the door. “This is a new crew we’re putting together. We’ve included my cousin, Desmond. But you won’t see me at all.”

Marino slid off the bed and accompanied his guest to the door. “You mean, Dopey Desi? I thought he was still in.”

Francone shook his head as he turned the doorknob. “No, he got out last month too and is just as anxious to work as you are. You two will make a good team, I think.” He opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. “Good luck tomorrow night, Anton.”

Marino grabbed Francone’s right hand and gave it a vigorous shake. “Hey, thanks, man...I mean it.” Then he closed the door, moved back to his bed, and picked up the whiskey bottle. He was about to open it when he heard another knock on the door. This one was a little louder and more persistent than Francone’s had been. He scowled, re-crossed the floor, and yanked open the door, giving little thought to who might be on the other side. The only person he knew who knocked like that was his parole officer.

A tall thin man in a black suit filled the doorway , definitely not his parole officer, who always dressed in polyester pants and a dingy white shirt. “Mr. Marino?” the man asked as Marino tried to look at him but couldn’t keep his eyes focused. “May I come in?” He pushed his way into the room before Marino could answer. He closed the door behind him.

Reflexively, Marino backed up. “Who...who the hell are you?” His voice sounded almost like a squeak.

The man looked at Marino, who had continued to back up and was now practically cowering near his bed; he laughed softly. “Who the hell indeed,” he said. “A fair question. Would you like a name?”

Marino wanted to speak, but suddenly found his dry tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He peered at the man through wide eyes and settled for nodding.

The tall man laughed again. “Don’t be so nervous, Mr. Marino. Or may I call you Anton?”

Marino could only hold his position and nod.

“Sit down and have a drink,” the man said. “I only came here to talk...no harm in that.” He eased his long shadow of a body into the chair so recently occupied by Michael Francone. Marino slumped onto the bed. “If you need a name,” the man continued, “You may call me Mr. Smith.”

“You have to be kidding,” Marino muttered, suddenly finding his voice.

Mr. Smith chuckled. “A bit obvious, huh? Well, no matter. Mr. Smith seems to fit the moment. Besides, I really didn’t think you could pronounce Mephistopholes.”

Marino scratched his head. “Mefistofol what?”

“I thought so. Let’s just keep it at Mr. Smith then,” Mr. Smith said. “Now, let’s have a talk. Drink some of that cheap whiskey, if you want.” He gazed at Marino. The look was so penetrating that Marino shrank back against his pillow. “You know he’s setting you up, don’t you?”

Marino shifted his weight on the uncomfortable bed. “What are you talking about?” he asked, trying desperately to mask his fear but failing.

“Oh, come on,” Mr. Smith replied. “Anton, you’re slow, but you’re not entirely stupid. Michael and the others are not fools. They know you hold a grudge. You simply can’t be trusted. They want you dead before you do something dangerous that may threaten their security. The job tomorrow night is an excuse to get you into some dark warehouse where they can put a bullet in your head. Dopey Desi too, I’m afraid.”

Marino fingered the whiskey bottle nervously but didn’t really want a drink. The old street smart part of him knew instinctively he needed to pay sober attention to this strange but compelling visitor. “How...how do you know about this?”

Mr. Smith’s eyes widened so that they now looked completely black. “You know I’m right, don’t you? You hate them for what they did to you. You hate them all.”

Marino fidgeted on the bed; his eyes darted around the room like a mosquito. “All right, all right...I hate them. So what?”

Mr. Smith held out a long index finger and pointed toward the window. “Anton, look out there,” he ordered. “Go ahead and look.”

Marino shifted his gaze to the window with its commanding view of three overflowing dumpsters and a burned out pickup truck. “What am I supposed to be lookin’ at?”

“It’s an ugly world out there, isn’t it?” Mr. Smith said. “And dangerous too.”

“Okay, the world sucks,” Marino said. “So what? Tell me something I don’t know.”

Mr. Smith nodded. “A man has to be ruthless, smart, and a bit lucky to survive out there these days.” He looked at Marino again. “And, Anton, you’re none of those things, are you?”

Marino sprang off the bed and confronted the tall man. “Hey, wait a minute.”



Mr. Smith smiled patiently and waved at Marino to sit back down. “Relax, Anton, I didn’t come here to insult you. You can’t help being the way you are any more than a dog can help being what he is.”

Marino took a deep breath to calm himself and eased back down onto the bed. “What did you come here for?”

“To help you.”

Marino chuckled humorlessly. “Nobody’s ever wanted to help me...not without wanting something in return.”

Mr. Smith pointed to the picture on the dresser. “What about Ann Lee?”

Marino’s jaw dropped, and he could feel his spine tingle. “Who are you...really?”

Mr. Smith sat up straight in the chair. In the dim light, he looked more like a spectral image than a man. “I am the father of you all. I am, at the same time, all that you fear and all that you admire.”

“You’re one crazy dude,” Marino said. “I never heard of anyone like you...certainly not in the joint or on the street.”

The tall man glowered. “I am not of the street. But you know me. You know me every time you look in the mirror, every time you dream about hurting those who hurt you. And you knew me when you left Ann Lee without saying good-bye. Sooner or later, you and all your wretched associates will come to me.”

Marino could now feel anger supplant his fear. “Look you. I don’t know who the fuck you are or why you’re here, but I’ve heard enough of your shit. You better get the fuck outta here before I...”

“Before you what?” Mr. Smith asked in his eerily calm voice. “You must know that you can’t scare me. And you certainly can’t hurt me. Go ahead and try.”

The pent up rage inside Anton Marino exploded like a volcanic eruption. He leaped up and lunged at his mysterious visitor. Mr. Smith held out his hand and Marino fell to the floor with a thud. Quickly, he sat up and scooted himself back to his bed.

“Wha...what do you want from me?”

Mr. Smith smiled and lowered his hand. “Good,” he said. “Now, let’s get down to business. As I said before, I want to help you.”

Marino dared to look up. “Why? I mean, why me?”

“Because that’s what I do. And your name came up.”

“Just like that?”

“Well, hardly just like that,” Mr. Smith said. “However, my selection process need hardly concern you. Let me just say that I thought you might be the challenge I was looking for. Hitler was no challenge; Sadaam was no challenge. I could name many others, but even you should get the idea. Now, you need help and I can give it to you. Are you interested or not?”

“Sure I’m interested,” Marino said. “But, hey, I know I’m not the smartest guy in the world, but I’m not stupid enough to sit here and think you’re going to help me in some way without wanting something in return.”

Mr. Smith beamed and clapped his hands in delight. “How very perceptive of you, Anton. But you have nothing I could possibly want, except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

Mr. Smith’s eyes bored through Marino’s once again. “Your soul, my friend, your everlasting and eternal soul...such as it is.”

Marino shuddered, then pinched and shook himself to make sure he wasn’t having some kind of nightmare, the kind of nightmare you have when you’re locked up with a

cellmate who farts and smells like rotten meat. “If...if you want my soul, then you must be the...”

“Yes, I am,” Mr. Smith said. “And now that we have that firmly established, I am here to make you a proposition.”

Marino repositioned himself on the bed, picked up the whiskey bottle, snapped off the lid, and took a long swallow. “Man, this is really fucked up,” he said, clutching the bottle by its neck as though it would fly away from him if released. “What kind of proposition?”

“You believe that forces beyond your control have left you no choice but to follow this path in life. You believe those men you grew up with betrayed you and let you rot in prison and now you want your revenge. Am I right?”

Marino nodded, still only half believing what he was seeing and hearing.

“What if you had another option?” Mr. Smith continued. “What if you could leave this neighborhood forever? Could you, given the right opportunity and sufficient resources, put aside your rage and go back to that girl you said you loved and who loved you?”

Marino thought for a few seconds. “Sure, I guess. But it would have to be something really good to get me out of this shit hole.”

“Okay, then, Anton, now we’re getting somewhere,” Mr. Smith said. “If you look in the top drawer of your dresser, you will find a hundred thousand dollars in cash. I could have made it more, but I didn’t want to give you too much of an advantage, plus it’s not a good idea to carry that much cash around, not in this neighborhood.” He smiled, showing the sharp edges of his front teeth. “In your closet, you will find a nice assortment of new clothes. I think we got the sizes right. In the pocket of those dirty jeans you’re wearing, you will find the key to a new Mercedes parked out front. I hope you like the

color. And in your wallet, you will find a MasterCard and a driver's license with your picture but a different name...uh...Clarence Fitzgerald. Sorry, but it just seemed to fit somehow. All legitimate, I assure you.”

Cautiously, Marino stood up and reached into his pants pocket. He located and extracted a black key with the Mercedes logo on it and smiled. Then he walked over to his dresser and opened the top drawer. His jaw dropped and his eyes widened as he beheld the neat stacks of hundred dollar bills, all lined up with the smiling face of Benjamin Franklin winking at him. He tried to constrain his excitement as he turned toward the tall man still sitting in the chair. “Okay, Mr. Smith. What's the deal?”

Mr. Smith licked his thin lips. “The deal is very simple. You now have the means to set your life straight, to change your pattern, to escape this cycle of poverty, as the do-gooders would call it, to establish a new life with Ann Lee.” He paused as he watched Marino run his dirty fingers over the money. “But I'm betting you won't take advantage of that opportunity.”

Marino snapped his head around and glared directly at the devil. “You're crazy...” he exclaimed, his voice dropping toward the end.

Mr. Smith laughed. “Am I? If you look in the second drawer, you will find a handgun and several clips, hollow points, I think. So the deal is this: You take everything I've left for you and get out of this neighborhood forever...find Ann Lee. She really is waiting for you, although I can't imagine why. Marry her and settle into a productive crime-free life. If you do all that, I lose the bet and you get to keep your wretched soul, at least for now.”

“And if I don't, then what?”

“Again, very simple. If you do what I'm betting you'll do, then I find a place for you in my organization...forever, I might add.”

Marino scowled. "Not much of a choice, is it?"

Mr. Smith sighed. "Really, Anton...Hell, as you would call it, isn't such a bad place. No leaping flames, no ugly demons prodding you with absurd tridents. And I think you'll find the company pretty much what you're used to. Plus, there's always plenty of work and advancement potential."

"Let me get this straight. I leave here now and start a new life with Ann Lee or I go to Hell...right?"

Mr. Smith nodded. "That's probably not the way I would have put it, but you have the idea."

"And do I have to sign some sort of contract... in blood maybe?"

Mr. Smith laughed. "I think you've been watching too many bad movies," he said. "Your word is good enough for me."

"All right, Mr. Smith. We have a deal," Marino said, turning back to the drawer full of money. "When do we start?"

"Right now. In fact, you must pack up your largesse and leave immediately."

Marino hesitated for a few seconds while his brain attempted to process the word largesse. Finally, he smiled. "Good. There's nothing for me here anyway."

"I should tell you," Mr. Smith said, as Marino stripped out of his old clothes and started to put on a new blue cotton suit that he found hanging in the closet. "That Michael and some of your other former associates are meeting later on this afternoon at Freddy's. I believe they are planning your demise. Of course, that doesn't interest you now, does it?"

Marino shook his head vigorously as he finished dressing. "Why would it?" he answered. "They don't mean nothin' to me now."

“But they are your enemies, aren’t they? The bastards that set you up, that left you to rot for five years while they continued to prosper, laughing every time your name came up.”

Marino sniffed incredulously. “Look, I know what you’re trying to do,” he said with a flourish in his voice. “And it won’t work.”

Mr. Smith sighed again. “All right, Anton...you got me. Maybe I was wrong about you.”

“You’re damn right you’re wrong,” Marino said. But he wasn’t really angry, not anymore. He stuffed the money and the rest of his new clothes into a gigantic leather suitcase he found on the closet floor. He started for the door, pulling the heavy suitcase behind him.

Mr. Smith stood up and put a warm hand on Marino’s shoulder. “Don’t forget the gun,” he said. “You can’t leave it here for some kid to find.”

Marino reluctantly took the gun and the clips from the second dresser drawer and placed it in an outside pocket of the suitcase. “All right...but I won’t use it.”

“Sure, Anton,” Mr. Smith said. “You may surprise me. Don’t you want to take the picture with you?”

Marino shifted his eyes from the face of Satan to the face of the woman who had loved him, still smiling out at the world with deceptive innocence. “What for? I know what she looks like.” Then he opened the door and took a step into the dimly lit hallway. “You say the Mercedes is out front?”

“I parked it there myself. The title is in the glove box. I even staked you to a full tank of gas,” Mr. Smith replied. “I just hope the meter hasn’t expired. I would hate for you to get a parking ticket.”

They both laughed. Then Marino gripped the handle of the suitcase, fingered the key to his new car, and moved expeditiously toward the stairway, feeling jubilation for the first time in a long time.

Mr. Smith watched him for a few seconds, then closed the door. He took a swallow from the open bottle of whiskey and grimaced. "God, that's bad whiskey," he exclaimed out loud. He put the bottle down and looked at the picture on the dresser. "You won't surprise me, Mr. Marino," he said to the picture. "Men like you never do. I don't know what she ever saw in you, must be her silly bleeding heart. Never trust a liberal to show good judgment. But, nevertheless, she deserves better."

He opened the window, took off his black suit jacket, and loosened his tie. Then he walked over to the dresser and turned on the television. "Hmm. I wonder if the Springer show is on."