

Buono; a mobster's remorse

Donald Patriski hit the snooze button on his alarm and picked up his gun. He put it between his lips and tasted the warm metal on his tongue. The barrel against his teeth, he opened his eyes, still crusty and blurry from sleep. *Today*, he thinks, *today can be the day I put a stop to all this madness*. He lay in bed, gun in his mouth, finger on the trigger, until the alarm goes off again.

With a heavy sigh that is muffled by the barrel, he takes the gun from his mouth and sets it next to the beeping alarm clock. It is six thirty five. The moment he turns off the alarm, Shelby Trolli knocks three times.

“Yeah, yeah.” Donald calls, getting to his feet. His bad knee is worse today. Getting old is a bitch. Shelby comes in, back first, pulling in a cart that has Donald’s breakfast on it.

“Alright, boss?” Shelby asks, finally turning to face Donald. Shelby’s nose was still covered in gauze from the fracture he got last week.

“Right as rain.” Donald replies. He meets Shelby at the table on the other end of the room, both of them ignoring the way his old bones pop, and his bad knee throbs as he sits.

“That’s good, boss.” Shelby says, pulling a napkin from the cart and tucking it into Donald’s shirt like a bib. This is usually when Shelby departs, returning at a quarter to eight to escort him to his office. But today he stands still, arms folded behind his back.

“Well spit it out.” Donald says, stabbing a sausage with his silver fork.

“Tony’s here to see you, boss. Told him not until eight when-”

“Send him in.” Donald says around his sausage. “He’s family, Shelb. You know family comes first here.”

“Sure thing, boss.” But he doesn’t move.

“What?” Donald asks, now cutting his eggs, watching the yolk spread like blood and soak his toast.

“Shot time, boss.” Shelby answers, looking away sheepishly.

Donald sighs. Right. The injection. “Well, let’s get on with it.”

He lifts his shirt over his stomach, still somehow surprised by its mass. Christ, he used to be fit. Used to be able to run with the best of them around the gulch. But now, in his fifties, he was rounder, hairier, and had twice as many moles as he used to.

Shelby takes the needle from the cart and gives Donald his insulin. What would happen to the rest of them if he collapsed from some damn sugar complication? He took a sharp inhale when the needle pierced his skin, but then relaxed and went back to his eggs.

“All good, boss.” Shelby said, placing the needle back on the cart. “I’ll send Tony in.”

Donald nodded, too busy with his breakfast to reply.

No sooner had Shelby shut the doors when Anthony Patriski opened them again and came storming in.

“Yo! You gotta knock first!” Shelby called. Anthony slammed it shut behind him.

Donald was so shocked by this entrance that he didn’t notice the egg yolk was sliding through the prongs of his fork and splattering on his bib. Anthony Patriski, Donald’s nephew was the spitting image of his brother Vincent “Vinnie” Patriski. Anthony looked like Don always pictured his brother - in his mid twenties, black hair greased back and shiny, a tailored suit with a hibiscus in the front pocket.

“Vin-” Don stopped, about to call his nephew Vinnie, whom he so resembled. “Tony. What gives? Can’t an old man eat his breakfast in peace?”

Tony, tucking his hands into his pockets said, “The Ignoch family is meeting at the dock tonight.”

No greeting, no apology. Donald was so amazed to be treated like an equal he didn't know if he wanted to hug the boy or slap him. “Sure. They do that sometimes. What of it?” Don said, chewing the last bit of sausage.

Tony leaned down, over Don and his yolk stained bib. “The Printer will be there,” he whispered. Then he stood straight again and began to pace the room.

At this proclamation, Don dropped his fork. His eyes rounded, and his mouth fell open like all the bolts in his jaw had come loose. “The Printer? You sure Tony? This is a long way away from his shop. Why's he meeting with Niles Ignoch?”

Tony waved a hand dismissively. “Doesn't matter, does it? What matters is he's gonna be here. Today.”

Don took his time retrieving his fork from the carpet. “Something tells me you didn't just bust down my door to tell me the supplier's meeting with the Ignoch family.” He turned in his chair to get a better look at the kid. His knee twisted with pain. “What's on your mind, Tony?”

“Now's our chance to take him out.” Tony said in a flat tone that made Don's old wrinkled skin erupt in gooseflesh.

“What are you talking about Tony? That's our guy.” But Don thought he did know what Tony was saying. “Giving him the plug would pull the plug on this whole family, you know that.”

“Not if we release our product today.” Tony said.

Again Don finds himself unprepared for being spoken to as an equal. For being talked at about his own secrets. “Don't be a schmuck, you know that's not ready-”

“It is ready.” Tony said, interrupting Don. This gave Don no question as to if he’d rather slap or hug the kid. He wanted to hug him. And yet... their production project was top secret, only he, Tony, and three others knew about it. And none of them knew why he had chosen to start production, or what he planned on doing with the finished product.

But does Tony really know? How?

"Why you springing this news on an old man so early in the morning, huh? Christ, I barely got to eat my eggs. ‘Splain yourself. Why are you in my room yappin’ at me about my product. Disrespectful little...”

Instead of answering, Tony went to the nightstand and picked up Don’s pistol. “You don’t think I knows what this is doing here?” He held the gun up to the blinds. The sun was up now, casting its gold hue into the room, catching the metal of the gun and sending triangles of light onto the ceiling. “You are just as sick of this game as I am, Don. We both know you would've put one of these slugs in your brain if you hadn’t had to put Fat Benny on that will of yours.” He put the gun down and returned his hands to his pockets. “This is our ticket out, Don. We can save-”

“Silence.” Don said. He had begun to sweat under his arms and down his lower back. It was true. If Fat Benny took over this family, there wouldn’t be just war - there would be an apocalypse. Don estimated it would only take three years of Benny’s tyrannical leadership before everyone in the Gulch was dead. He couldn’t let that happen. But he also couldn’t go on being the Don of the Buono Family.

“Who all knows, or suspects this of me?” Don asks.

This is a problem he had not foreseen. Had he been so transparent all along? Everyone in this family of his, all thirty-four people, would die for him. No hesitation. Hell, they’d do it

themselves. Loyalty in this family was the only requirement for adoption. Everyone serves the Don.

But if they knew the Don no longer wanted to be the head of the family? If they knew he put a gun in his mouth every morning, wishing he had the courage to pull the trigger? Chaos.

“No one knows anything.” Tony said, walking back to Don. The glint in his eyes was still there, but dulled by his attempt at comforting an old man. “Charlie said something about you keeping a secret factory up north, but I stopped those rumors real quick.” Tony cracked his knuckles, so his meaning would be understood better. “He and I got into it. Started a small brawl in Lacy Park, but no casualties. Shelbs got the worst of it with his busted nose, but he’s alright.”

“Christ.” Don said, placing his face in his hands and wincing at the throbbing pain in his knee.

“Yo, Don. You need something for that knee of yours?” Tony asked, watching Don massage it with his left hand while his right still covered his face.

“Nah. It’ll be okay. Damn bullet was a straight shot, went right out the back. Happened when I was about your age, you know that? Vinnie, your Pa, he use to try and stick pens and straws in it. That sonofabitch.” Don said laughing.

“Yeah. Pa was an ass, but he always spoke highly of you. Would’ve made him proud to see you the Don. Fucking Ignoch bastard saw to that though, you remember?”

Yes. Of course he did. A shoot-out at the city bank. Montgomery Ignoch had staked the place out. Waited for the Buono family to do the dirty work of snatching the goods before shooting the lot of them. “Lost Uncle Eddie that day too.” Don said.

“We’ve got to release it soon, Don. Before we go after the Printer. If we kill the Printer and this shit don’t sell, we’re done for.” Tony said, helping Don to his feet.

Don was surprised to see the kid was now taller than him. Had he grown a few inches since he'd seen him last? No, that couldn't be. He must be getting smaller, with his back arching down and his age arching up. Getting old is a bitch.

"I have meetings to attend to." Don said, accepting the kid's help towards his closet.

"I understand, boss." Tony said. "I can get Paulie and Johnnie-"

"You misunderstand me, kid." Don said, letting go of the kid's arm so he could stand before him and look up into his eyes. "Meetings are over at ten. Release it then. Meet me at the weigh station at noon to go over the plan for tonight." Don narrowed his eyes, feeling like a glint of excitement must be in his own old eyes now too. "I want to kill the Printer myself."

And then Donald promptly slapped the side of the kid's face and pulled him into an embrace.

At a quarter to twelve that afternoon Donald got out of the backseat of his car and told his driver, Shelby, to wait around the block and keep his eyes peeled. He saw Tony across the vacant lot waiting for him. Don was wearing his very best suit, the charcoal grey one with a white rose in the front pocket and pure diamond cufflinks. He'd even brushed his grey hair back like he did in the old days, with a shit ton of grease.

"Love when the moon's out during the day, you know?" Tony said from behind the out of order fuel pumps. This weigh station and fuel stop had been out of commission since the days of Paulie Mistelli, who had bled it dry of both money and fuel. Now it was where they held the business of land and money with the rival families. The Ignoch's and the O'Brien's.

"Sure kid." Donald said, as the two of them went into the old convenience store. The interior had been gutted, all the shelving and light fixtures had been moved to their section of the

docks in large storage containers. Now there were only two loose hanging bulbs and an old card table with mismatched folding chairs around it. The two of them sat.

“How’d moving the product go?” Don asked, back to massaging his bad knee.

“Piece of cake.” Tony said. “Johnnie and his wife Carol got it all loaded up by nine. Got Veronica to help as well.”

Veronica was Tony’s wife. “How is she?” Don asked. “And baby Gabby?”

“Swell, boss. Although baby Gabby ain’t a baby no more. She’s walking around and babbling my damn ears off.”

Don smiled. “Did you guys deposit the product at the locations?”

Here, Tony’s smile faded a little. “All but one. Gulch Deposits doesn’t want anything to do with it, they said. Apparently they’ve got a deal with the Orr family to only do transactions with the Big Guys.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Got my barrel in that old bastards face and he still wouldn’t touch the stuff. Crazy sack of shit. But Veronica said we should just take what was meant for them and give it to City Bank. They do most of the transactions in the Gulch anyways.”

“Wise woman.” Don said, although this did come as somewhat of a blow. But after the Printer was a corpse, six feet in the red dirt, he’d pay a personal visit to Barney Nixx of Gulch Deposits and make him wise up. “Any other news?”

Tony pulled his right hand from his pocket and wiped his lips. “Yeah. They said up at City Bank and Market Collections that they aren’t going to stop their transactions of The Printers product. Said they won’t do it. Too many families have high interest in it there, or something.”

Don waved a hand dismissively. "Once the Printer is out of ink they'll have no choice. And our product is good. Real good, you know? Soon nobody in this Gulch will be trading in the Printer's goods."

"Yeah." Tony says, shoving his hand back in his pocket. "Can I ask you a question Don?"

"Sure thing kid."

"How long have you been planning this? Since your knee, or since Pa?"

This was a personal question, one not usually presented to the Don. And one Don didn't quite know how to answer. Don had wanted to be a Wise Guy even before he was thirteen and both parents gone. When they had passed, he took Vinnie, only nine at the time, straight to Paulie and pledged his loyalty.

From then on, he served his Don with pride. Chased after the rush of robbing banks and beating the shit out of men who didn't pay his family their dues. He and Vinnie were a dynamic duo, true gunslingers and ready to give their lives to their family and their Gulch.

Sure, the bullet in his knee had definitely put a new perspective on being in the family. And when Vinnie was shot dead just two yards from the police station, Don entered a depression so deep it was years before he could resurface. But the real reason? Don was tired of all the fighting. All the dirty deals. In simpler words, he thought being a Wise Guy didn't mean you had to be a Bad Guy.

"Don't quite know how to answer that one kid. But I think you're feeling the same thing in your guts." Don finally said.

Tony nodded. "Yeah, suppose I do." He wiped his lips again. "What's those extra four bags for, Don? The big ones you had us stack?"

Don waved his hand dismissively. “Part two. You’ll see soon enough kid. How many is Ignoch bringing to the dock?”

“Ignoch always has Ivan and Will with him. But since the Printer will be there, I don’t think he’d travel with less than eight guards.” Tony said.

“Call Willie, Johnnie, Paulie, and a few more. Shelby too of course. Make sure we also have eight, with three on standby just a few miles from the dock. I don’t want to be going in there with too many and making it look like a fucking ambush.”

Tony agreed and stood to help Donald to his feet. His knee was now practically on fire, but it was a dull flame compared to the one in his heart.

“I’ll see you at the docks soon kid.” Don said, opening the front door and waving out to Shelby.

At a quarter past six that evening Don walked with his eight men to the loading station at the dock. The big husks of ships were silhouetted against the raging sun. They were like dinosaurs, massive and very old. Don hated the things, they made his stomach churn with the way they cast their large shadows towards the Gulch. His Gulch. The one he was going to save.

Don saw standing in the middle of the ramp leading down towards one of those massive dinosaurs, Ivan Ignoch, brother to the Don of the Ignoch family. His revolver in his right hand, clutched over his chest in both a defensive and offensive stance. He had a semi-automatic slung over his shoulder with a leather belt.

“Ignoch!” Tony called down to him. Instantly the gun was pointing directly at him, and Ignoch was moving towards them slowly. “Woah woah, man. We’re just here to have words with

Niles and the Printer, okay?” Ivan didn’t slow nor lower his gun. Tony put his hands above his head in the universal “don’t shoot” stance.

“This is our meeting.” Ivan said, now less than five feet from Don and his family, his gun still pointing at Tony’s head. “Leave.”

Don shook his head, he too in the Don’t Shoot position. “Please son. We have a proposition for both the Printer and your Da. We’ll wait right here if you want to ask if they’ll hear it first.”

Ivan seemed to just notice Don, and the implications of himself pointing a gun at the guarding posse of another family’s Don--or as they called it in the Ignoch family, the Da. He lowered his gun quickly, and unclipped a walkie-talkie from his back pocket. “Da. The Don of the Buono family is here. He says he wants to make a deal.”

There was a moment of awkward silence before the crackle of the walkie-talkie went off. “The Printer will be departing soon. Tell Don to meet me back at the ticketing office. I’ll call Margret and let her know he’s coming.”

Don shook his head. “It’s a deal with the Printer too.”

Ivan relayed this message. A moment later the walkie-talkie crackled again. “We’re in cabin nine. If Don is not alone, tell him to only bring two others.”

Don didn’t like this, but was glad he wasn’t going to have to kill Ivan to get past him after all. “Two is good. Tony, Shelby. You’re with me, capiche? The rest of you hang out here. We’ll be back soon.”

Satisfied that Don was complying with the conditions, Ivan stepped back and let the three guys pass down the ramp. The inside of the ship was cold and poorly lit. Damn beast probably cost more than the entire Gulch and the lights were flickering? Don was disgusted by them all

over again. Cabin nine was just a short walk down the small main hall and to the left. Don knocked three times on the large double doors and waited. He was sweating again.

The door was pulled open slowly from the inside by William Gruen, the Ignoch Da's plus one. He was a very large man with a shiny bald head and four piercings in his nose. "Don." William said, smiling to show off his gold plated teeth. "Always a pleasure." His smile was so forced it made it clear to Don that it was not a pleasure. Had never been and never would be.

"Same to you, buckaroo." Don said, putting a large forced smile on his own old wrinkled face. "Where's Niles? And the Printer?"

Will jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards a door beyond the foyer directly behind him. "In the kitchen. But the product is in the bedroom." He jerked his thumb to a door on their left. "One move in that direction and I'm to put a bullet in your knee."

Don's faced heated like a gas stove cranked to high, turning his sagging cheeks a sick red color. "We'll keep that in mind. Come on men..." Don started to lead the way but Tony walked in before him, keeping Don in the middle between himself and Shelby. Kid might want out as bad as Don did, but loyalty was in his blood. They were still family until the sticky end. "You fellas don't say a word unless I give permission, capiche?"

They nodded as Don knocked three times on the door to the kitchen.

"Come on in," said the raspy voice of the Printer from beyond the door. Don pushed it open and saw Nile Ignoch sitting at the table next to Carpenter O'Brien and the Printer himself. Don didn't know what was more alarming--his two rivals having a formal meeting with his supplier, or the supplier himself.

The Printer was a very fat, very old man. Older than Don by at least ten years. His bald brown head was shiny under the crystal chandelier above him.

“Donald Patriski.” The Printer said, beaming up at him with a toothy smile and watery eyes. “The don Don. Been some time, hasn’t it? You’re looking mighty well, my friend.”

“Hey big P. How’re you doing, old sport?” Don said, taking the last available seat at the table. Shelby and Tony split up, Shelby staying by the door next to Gregory from the Ignoch family and Tony going to stand next to Stefan from the O’Brien family.

“Mighty fine.” The Printer said.

This was followed by the longest, stillest silence of Don’s long life. And then the guns were drawn. All at once Don had his gun pointed directly between the eyes of the Printer, and Ignoch had his gun pointed at Don. O’Brien also had his gun pointed at Don. Shelby had his gun pointed at Ignoch. Gregory had his gun pointed at Shelby. Stefan also had his pointed at Shelby. And Tony, bless him, had one gun against Stefan’s temple and the other pointed at Gregory.

The Printer laughed. “Sure wasn’t expecting this, that’s for sure.” He was going slightly cross eyed trying to see down the barrel of Don’s gun. “I reckon Ignoch got himself a spy and told you I would be supplying him with more than what I’ve been giving you.”

This wasn’t the case, but it made Don’s desire to kill the bastard even more pronounced. “Why’re you stabbing my family in the back, eh? We’ve been good to you Print, you know we have.” Don had started to sweat again. Christ he had sweated so much today.

“Well.” The Printer said, now trying to focus his eyes on Don rather than the pistol in his face. “Those rubies we’ve been trading in aren’t doing so hot back on my land. One rube barely covers the cost of a pack of smokes now, I’m afraid to say. These boys,” he gestured to Ignoch and O’Brien, “they got what my folks are looking for.”

“Yeah,” Don said angrily. “What’s that?” But he knew.

“Well, they produce the drugs of course. The Kytro has gotten very popular over where I’m at. The kiddies love it. Selling like hotcakes.”

Don pulled the hammer back on his pistol, the same six shooter that had been between his teeth that very morning. He was going to shoot the bastard before he said his piece if he didn’t keep his temper under control.

“You’re selling drugs to babies now, huh? Can’t just pawn our rocks and appreciate the wealth that brings you? You’ve got to fuck up the lives of others in order to buy your smokes and eat your trash you filthy pig?”

All the hammers and slides were pulled back now.

“How many times have you been up here without us knowing? Getting your dirty drugs and giving these bastards extra product for it, huh? How many times have you stabbed my family in the fucking back, eh? And you assholes,” Don said, his voice rising, looking at Ignoch and O’Brien, “you’re just letting him take these drugs back to his town and fucking up the lives of young men and women? Christ. Have none of you have any shame?”

“You know we have to find a way to keep our families fed and watered.” O’Brien said, his accent so thick it was hard to tell if his voice was full of shame or indignation. Probably both, Don assumed. “The Gulch needs its families to do their part to keep the money coming in.”

And now the moment of truth has come. Time for Part Two. “Yo, Shelbs. Give me the product in your pocket. No one shoot! He just reaching into his pocket for our salvation.”

No one but Shelby moved. Still keeping his gun on Ignoch, he pulled out a thin purple sheet of paper from his front coat pocket.

“The hell is that?” The Printer said, and the same time Ignoch said, “You’ve got to be shitting me, Don.”

“That right there.” Don said, a serenity falling upon him as he watched his foes look at the printed piece of paper with wide amazed eyes. “Is the Gulch’s new money. I’ve been bringing in ships loaded piece by piece of a true, genuine printing press.”

“It can’t be.” Ignoch said. “Where the hell did you get paper?”

A wide smile spread Don’s sagging old cheeks and cleared the wrinkles around his chin. “Been using all my commission to hire this kiddo,” he nodded towards Tony, “to ship out and bring it back. Turns out, big P here has been lying about the cost of paper. Where he’s at, a piece of paper costs about a penny. Sure, it takes more than a pretty penny to get the shit up here, but it’s cheaper than losing family members in the mines or in chemical explosions in that warehouse you’ve been making the drugs in.”

Ignoch gave an impatient twitch with his gun “Still. I cannot allow your family to have a monopoly over the money. I won’t have it.”

“You’re right. Of course you are.” Don said. “And I don’t plan on having one. We’ve got five million a pop for each top five families to start with. And it’ll be up to you all to see that it gets across this Gulch as well as maintaining your families’ lifestyles.”

Ignoch lowered his gun, as did Greg, Stefan, and O’Brien. Tony, Shelby, and Don did not.

“How dare you!” The Printer roared. “You can’t just print your own damn money and force me out! I’ll never stop bringing in my dough and the banks will never stop circulating it. There are other families in this Gulch, Don. Plenty of them more than willing to produce what I need.”

“Not anymore.” Don said. Then he pulled the trigger on the gun that he had placed in his mouth every morning for the past sixteen years. The white wall behind the Printer was splattered

with bright red blood and globs of grey. The Printer's eyes were wide and vacant as he tumbled out of his chair and landed with a loud thud that shook both the table and chandelier. The sound was deafening, making everyone's ears ring. But they were mobsters, and use to the sound of a close range gunshot.

Don expected Ignoch and O'Brien to pick their guns back up, but they didn't. They looked at each other in surprise but then nodded to each other. Don was overwhelmed by that simple gesture among his enemies. It meant they would work with Don. Saw the truth and loyalty in his plans for their Gluch.

"Aw, shit." Ignoch said finally. "He was right about the banks, Don."

"Already taken care of." Don said, getting to his feet, only slightly surprised to find his knee wasn't giving him any pain. "I want you guys and the rest of the Top Five to meets me in Bay Fourteen tomorrow. I'll show you the press, and we can talk business about how we're going to run it, and how often."

O'Brien picked his gun up and stood with Ignoch. "Aye. We'll be there." He said, and he and Gregory left the cabin.

"Think we should tell the captain about this?" Ignoch asked, pointing at the Printer.

"Nah. He's not our problem anymore." Don said, as he and Ignosh and their bodyguards left the ship.

"This ship is about head out. Wanna watch it?" Ignoch asked as they got off the ramp and stood in the open loading area. Their guns were holstered, and Ignoch had his arms folded. It wasn't a truce offering, there was no olive branch in that stance. But it was a hesitant confirmation that he believed in what the Don had offered and was willing to see how it worked out.

“Sure. Why not?” Don said.

The two enemies stood next to each other as the rocket’s engine roared to life. It took only four seconds to rise into the setting sun, and within a few more seconds it was out into the deep darkness of space.

“Paper only a cent to buy.” Ignoch said in disbelief, as the two men left the airship docks and made their way back.

“Yeah.” Don said. “Still plenty of trees back on Earth. They’re just throwing paper away like it ain’t nothing.”

“Trees.” Ignoch said with wonder. “Damn. Well.” He nodded stiffly to Don. “Tomorrow, Bay Fourteen.”

Don nodded, and Ignoch and his men drove off into the dark night, the two moons above them bright and glowing. “Take the long ways, Shelb.” Don said, climbing into the back seat.

Don watched the Gulch pass him with tears in his eyes and his heart full. He loved this small western town. So, so much. He pulled out the small piece of purple paper from his pocket and looked down at the new currency. Fare del bene was printed on one side, and on the back was La famiglia è per sempre. Fare del bene. Do good. La famiglia è per sempre. Family is forever.

He kissed the paper and held on to it tightly, knowing tomorrow he would wake up and have no urge to put the gun in his mouth.

END