

Excerpt from BUST

People with opinions just go around bothering one another.

The Buddha

In the back of Famiglia Pizza on Fiftieth and Broadway, Max Fisher was dabbing his plain slice with a napkin, trying to soak up as much grease as he could, when a man sat down diagonally across from him with a large cupful of ice. The guy looked nothing like the big, strong-looking hit man Max was expecting—he looked more like a starving greyhound. He couldn't have weighed more than 130 pounds, had a medium build, startling blue eyes, a thin scar down his right cheek, and a blur of long gray hair. And something was very weird about his mouth. It looked like someone had put broken glass in there and mangled his lips.

The guy smiled, said, "You're wondering what happened to me mouth."

Max knew the guy would be Irish, but he didn't think he'd be *so* Irish, that talking to him would be like talking to one of those Irish bartenders at that place uptown who could never understand a fucking word he was saying. He'd ask for a Bud Light and they'd stare back at him with a dumb look, like something was wrong with the way *he* was talking, and he'd think, Who's the potato eater just off the boat, pal? Me or you?

Max was about to answer then thought, Fuck that, I'm the boss, and asked, "Are you...?"

The man put a finger to his messed-up lips, made the sound "Sh...sh," then added, "No names." He sucked on the ice, made a big production out of it, pushing his lips out with the cube so Max had to see them. Then, finally, he stuck the cube in his cheek like a chipmunk and asked, "You'll be Max?"

Max wondered what had happened to no names. He was going to say something about it, but then figured this guy was just trying to play head games with him so he just nodded.

The guy leaned over, whispered, "You can call me Popeye."

Before Max could say, You mean like the cartoon character? the guy laughed, startling Max, and then said, "Fook, call me anything except early in the morning." Popeye smiled again, then said, "I need the money up front."

Max felt better—negotiating was *his* thing—and asked, "It's eight, right? I mean, isn't that what Angela...?"

The guy's eyes widened and Max thought, Fuck, the no-name rule, and was about to say sorry when Popeye shot out his hand and grabbed Max's wrist. For such a bone-thin guy he had a grip like steel.

"Ten, it's ten," he hissed.

Max was still scared shitless but he was angry about the money too. He tried to free his wrist, couldn't, but managed to say, "Hey, a deal's a deal, you can't just change the terms."

He liked that, putting the skinny little mick in his place.

Finally Popeye let go, sat back and stared at Max, sucking on the ice some more, then in a very low voice he said, "You want me to kill your wife, I can do whatever the fook I want, I own your arse you suited prick."

Max felt a jolt in his chest, thought, Shit, the heart attack his fucking cardiologist told him could "happen at any time." He took a sip of his Diet Pepsi, wiped his forehead, then said, "Yeah, okay, whatever, I guess we can renegotiate. Five before and five after. How's that?"

Bottom line, he wanted Deirdre gone. It wasn't like he could hold interviews for hit men, tell each candidate, *Thank you for coming in, we'll get back to you.*

Then Popeye reached into his leather jacket—it had a hole in the shoulder and Max wondered, Bullet hole?—and took out a funny-looking green packet of cigarettes, with "Major" on the front, and placed a brass Zippo on top. Max thought that the guy had to know he couldn't actually light up in a restaurant, even if it was just a shitty pizzeria. Popeye took out a cigarette; it was small and stumpy, and he ran it along his bottom lip, like he was putting on lipstick.

Man, this guy was weird.

"Listen closely yah bollix," he said, "I'm the best there is and that means I don't come cheap, it also means I get the whole shebang up front and that's, lemme see, tomorrow."

Max didn't like that idea, but he wanted to get the deal done so he just nodded. Popeye put the cigarette behind his ear, sighed, then said,

"Righty ho, I want small bills and noon Thursday, you bring them to Modell's on Forty-second Street. I'll be the one trying on tennis sneakers."

"I have a question," Max said. "How will you do it? I mean, I don't want her to suffer. I mean, will it be quick?"

Popeye stood up, used both hands to massage his right leg, as if he was ironing a kink out of it, then said, "Tomorrow...I'll need the code for the alarm and all the instructions and the keys to the flat. You make sure you're with somebody at six, don't go home till eight. If you come home early I'm gonna pop you too." He paused then said, "You think you can follow that, fellah?"

Suddenly Popeye sounded familiar. Max racked his brain, then it came to him—Robert Shaw in *The Sting*.

Then Popeye said, "And me mouth, a gobshite tried to ram a broken bottle in me face, his aim was a little off, happened on The Falls Road, not a place you'd like to visit."

Max never could remember if the Falls were the Protestants or the Catholics, but he didn't feel it was the time to ask. He looked again at the hole in Popeye's leather jacket.

Popeye touched the jacket with his finger, said, "Caught it on a hook on me wardrobe. You think I should get it fixed?"

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