

1860 wds

The Hit Man
By
Ralph Filicchia

The Man moved slowly across the street, avoiding the slush puddles, and headed for Whacky Jackie's Diner. He did not go right inside, but stopped and looked in through the window. The place was about half filled. He looked at his watch. Twelve-fifty on the nose. He glanced quickly up and down the street, and then went inside.

He sat down in the second booth from the end, beside the window. He knew that his target, Big Frank Gardella, would take the first booth at approximately one o'clock as he did every Friday afternoon. Whacky Jackie, a friend of Big Frank, always made sure that booth was available for him.

The waitress came and said to The Man, "What'll it be?"

The Man scanned the menu. The waitress waited. "Gimme the corned beef on rye," The Man said, "and, uhh...how 'bout a coffee?"

"Okay," the waitress said as she spun away.

The Man again looked at his watch. Twelve fifty-five. It was warm in the diner and The Man debated whether or not he should take off his overcoat. He finally decided against it.

He looked out of the window thinking he might see Big Frank, but instead he saw on the opposite corner a street preacher holding a Bible and speaking in earnest to a small group of people.

The Man shook his head. He had seen people like this all his life. They were as much a part of the city as its wailing sirens, marches for various causes, peace demonstrations, and young black kids with baggy pants and baseball hats on backwards. He hated guys white or black who wore baseball hats backwards, and always had an urge to slap them silly. It was an insult to the game.

The Man focused on the preacher. How could these guys get so excited about something no one could really prove? What motivated them? And what difference did it all make anyway? And who really knew if there was a God? If there was, well...he went to church once or twice a year. He wasn't a real atheist like some guys he knew. And he wasn't as bad as some of them either. He remembered hearing about how that wrestler guy Biggie Small had broken an old Korean woman's arm when she wouldn't tell him where her son was hiding out. He wouldn't have done a thing like that. Some guys were worse than animals.

Suddenly the door opened and Big Frank Gardella stepped into the diner. The Man saw this in the large mirror on the back wall. He tensed and automatically felt for the .38

in his shoulder holster. Big Frank turned and walked down to the end booth, passing The Man. He took off his coat and hung it on a peg, then sat down facing The Man.

Big Frank did not know The Man, as The Man had been hired from out of town. But The Man had seen pictures of Big Frank, and had been filled in on his modus operandi. The Man had the advantage.

Then from deep inside it came, like a fist plowing through his innards. The Man grimaced and leaned forward. He was going to reach for his pills, but then decided against it. He had gone over this job a dozen times in his head and thought it best not to change anything.

But this was bad. They had opened him up, taken one look, decided it was hopeless, and had sewn him back up. What had they told him, six months... maybe less? He didn't remember. But he did know the pain was becoming more frequent. Lousy cancer. Why him?

It eased off a bit and The Man began to breathe easier. He then began wondering why he had even taken this job. In six months the big C would have him in his grave. So who needed this?

But then he remembered. The sound of his sister Sheila's voice "...but I don't have the money for David's operation. And those blood-sucking doctors won't do a thing if you don't have medical insurance."

"Look, I'll get the money," he said. "Don't worry."

"You've got enough troubles of your own," she said. "I can't be asking you for money."

"Hey, that kid is important to me too, y'know. I want to see that leg of his straightened out just as much as you do. If he's gonna play Little League next year he's gotta have it done. So don't worry about the bills. I'll take care of them."

With the money from this job, added to some he had saved, he could do it. Fifteen grand to kill Frank Gardella, and who knows, little Davey might someday make the big leagues.

Somebody moved into the booth behind The Man. It was the street preacher, and there was another guy with him. Then the waitress brought the sandwich and coffee he had almost forgotten about. The Man caught himself. He was getting too distracted. Keep your mind on what you're doing, he told himself. This is no time to get careless.

From behind him, "...so I've done some things I shouldn't have done. But I never stole anything big or killed anybody."

"Whatever your sins might be, unless you repent you'll end up in Hell."

"Even though I've led a pretty good life compared to most people?"

"Yes, because a pretty good life doesn't quite make it...."

The Man grunted to himself. How many times had he heard this stuff? Don't these guys ever quit? Why don't they stick with preaching to old ladies at church socials and leave other people alone? If he wasn't on a job he would have turned around and told the guy to shut up.

The Man looked up and caught Frank Gardella's eyes after Gardella had given his order to the waitress. Gardella looked at him with no expression. The Man turned his head slightly and glanced out of the window. By now Crazy Leo should have the car

parked in the alley behind the diner. Two shots, one to the head, one to the heart, and the job would be over. Then he bolts for the rear door and out into the alley and into the car, never again to return to this city. He took a bite of his sandwich and a sip of coffee.

“...always thought Hell was a myth.”

“It’s no myth. The ungodly will perish in Hell with the Devil and his angels.”

The Man—surprising himself—suddenly considered this. Would he go to Hell because he killed people...even if some of them were rats and deserved it? He had never seriously thought about this. But maybe the guy behind him didn’t know what he was talking about. Most of those guys were fanatics anyway. But then again...

The pain returned. The Man gave a soft groan and shifted his body weight to one side. He glanced up and saw Big Frank Gardella watching him, probably wondering what was going on.

The waitress brought Big Frank’s order and he began to eat, still watching The Man.

“...I don’t want to die and go to Hell.”

“Then you should repent of your sins and ask the Lord to forgive you...”

The Man clenched his teeth in pain as he listened. If there was a Hell he didn’t want to go there either. Maybe he could find another way to get some money to Sheila. He had a couple of things he could sell that he wouldn’t be needing anymore, and there were a few guys who owed him some dough. Yeah, there had been enough killing. He could give back the half he had already been paid. They could get someone else.

He was beginning to sweat heavily. The inside of his shirt felt clammy...and the pain was still there.

“The Bible says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God...” the preacher was saying. “Whatever a man sows, that he will reap.”

“Maybe I have been living pretty much like a fool. Maybe it’s time I really got straightened out with God.”

Yeah, I don’t need this, The Man said to himself. I don’t want to die with no more blood on my hands. And what if there really is a Hell? Maybe this preacher guy is right after all. Maybe I should talk to him, find out a little bit more about what he’s selling. What have I got to lose? I’m gonna die soon anyway.

The pain began to grow in intensity. The Man knew he would have to take the medicine to get some relief. He looked at Big Frank Gardella. Gardella was eating slowly and watching him. Frank Gardella had been in the mob for over twenty years. He knew his way around, and he knew how to survive.

And he knew trouble when he saw it. There was something in the way The Man was acting that convinced Big Frank that something wasn’t right here. He was now on edge.

The Man finalized his decision. He was through with killing. He wasn’t going to do it. He would take two of his pills and get out of here. The heck with the preacher guy for now. He was probably crazy like all the rest of them anyway. That stuff could wait. Right now he just wanted to get out of here and get home to his bed. He reached inside his coat pocket...

Big Frank Gardella knew nothing about medicine, or about what the Bible said, or about deep pain in his gut. But he did know that hit men carried their piece in a shoulder holster. When he saw The Man reach inside his coat he knew he would have to move fast.

Frank Gardella leaped to his feet and pulled out a small revolver. He pointed it at The Man.

The Man half rose from his seat. “No, wait...” he said, grabbing for his pills.

Gardella, his eyes filled with sudden fear, pulled the trigger. The lead slug pierced The Man’s lungs and sent him sprawling to the floor. People screamed, a few dived under their tables, and someone dropped dishes that crashed to the floor.

Gardella jammed the gun back inside his suit jacket, grabbed for his coat, and ran for the rear door. The street preacher, lifting his head and seeing The Man gasping on the floor, immediately scrambled to his side.

“Hang on,” he said to The Man. “An ambulance will be here soon.”

From the back alley came the sound of two shots. Everyone inside the diner froze. The Man wondered if Crazy Leo had gotten hit. He made a feeble reach for the preacher’s shirt. “I...need...”

“What...what do you need?” the preacher said, bending closer to The Man.

“I...wasn’t...going to....” The Man breathed, blood now seeping from the corner of his mouth. “I...”

“Yes, yes...you weren’t going to what...?” the preacher asked.

The Man struggled to speak again, but could not. Then the preacher saw tears forming in The Man’s eyes. The Man was crying.

And then he died.