

Top Dog

By Salvatore Buttaci

He thought he heard Melanie's voice calling him out of his daydream. An old habit made Angelo turn his head. That sweetheart voice came back to him after these seven years. It made him cry now to think his mind would play such cruel tricks on him.

From the kitchen he smelled the coffee brewing in the old Mr. Coffee machine he and Melanie had bought back when both had money and weekends were spent racing from store to store buying everything in sight. "Money to burn," she'd say. "We got it, don't we?" and Angelo would squint his eyes. "You bet we got it, and we'll have it for the next hundred years!"

Money to burn? He wished now he had enough green to pay his rent for the past three months. The old broad upstairs had already threatened to boot his ass out or call the police. Angelo stayed clear of her, ducking behind whatever stood between the two of them, out on the street or in the building. Once she yelled to him. He pretended not to hear. Kept walking. No, the money had run out. Forget the next hundred years.

Melanie was gone. He was still here trying to make it one day at a time.

He poured the steaming coffee into the mug that read "Washington, D.C." and he remembered for a fleeting instant one more place the two of them had visited in their wild spree to burn their money. If he had bought a mug in every vacation city they'd visited and made love, where would he have found the room in this tiny dollhouse apartment? It was hard for him — sad too! Not so long ago he and Melanie had lived in a fairy tale. They owned a palatial home. They had it all. He could still imagine her pretending to be lost in one of the twelve rooms. "Angelo, Honey, so where is the entertainment room?" and calling back to her, his projected voice muffled in his cupped hands so his words sounded as if they were coming from far away. "Every room's entertainment, Baby," he'd joked. Then he'd find her, take her in his arms. "Angelo," she'd say, and he'd kiss her again. "Angelo."

Now he'd heard his name again. Her voice. Seven years. Where did they go? He'd spent

all but the last six months of them in a smaller place than this. A one-room cage with cot and sink and toilet. Walls done in Early American Prison. Bars instead of wallpaper. Noise from other cells instead of the painful silence he had to endure now, living alone without her.

“Angelo.” He was certain it was her voice! He sipped his coffee. He tried not to question. He tapped his fingers on the wooden tabletop, then stopped because it was what she would do whenever she was nervous or worried or afraid.

“What goes around, comes around.” How many times had he heard that and laughed. “No karma for this boy.” But the wheel came around and rolled over him like a runaway train. A wonder he survived. Half-survived. The better part of him, the love of his life, the beautiful Melanie had not. And whose fault was that? “Don’t be too harsh on yourself,” said friends, all the while gloating over his misfortune. Oh, he could tell that much. They were glad he toppled. They who had envied his good days now delighted in his fall. It was not his imagination. Who gave a damn whether Angelo Conte lived or died?

“Angelo.” His heart raced. Her voice again. Louder, clearer, no mistaking it was anyone but her. “Angelo.” He poured the half-filled cup into the cluttered sink, listened for her voice again, and heard only the blood pounding through the veins in his forehead.

He looked down and saw his hands trembling. Shaking like palsied hands unable to be stilled. “Angelo.” He covered his ears, but his name would not go away. He pictured her carmine lips, the way she seductively moved them when she spoke. “You’re a lip reader’s dream, Baby,” he’d tell her. “Every deaf guy in the world could fall in love with you!” He wished at this moment he were deaf too; he’d close his eyes and keep Melanie away. The reality of it all gnawed away inside him.

Where did it all start? he wondered. Better yet, how did it all end? Life was good. Angelo, top dog in a world of dog-eat-dog. Money? No problem. He had made the right connections, done a few favors for the right people, and they had not forgotten him. In that very first year he had earned more than he could ever have imagined.

That same year he met Melanie, a cousin of his new boss. He liked her enough to want

to like more and more of her until finally on a wild Vegas night, the star lights in the sky almost as mind-boggling as the blinding marquee lights of all those gambling casinos on the strip, the two of them married. A risk he said he would never take. Marriage was not his style, but Vegas was the place to take risks. Angelo liked women too much; yet, Melanie was the most beautiful of all. She could be enough woman for him to close the black book on all those chapters of wild Casanoving. He remembered thinking to himself over one more martini, I'd better close the book. Melanie's cousin was Mr. Donato. He didn't want to upset Joe "Donuts." He was his winning ticket to la dolce vita. Why screw up. It had taken him years to climb out of hard times; he would not go back. No more have-not days when he either ate dinner or paid the electric bill. Those miserable years. Thanks, but no thanks. Mr. Donato had taken care of everything; he had even introduced him to Melanie. A fool who'd look that gift horse in the mouth deserved to have his teeth kicked in.

Reminiscing hurt. What good did it do? The past was past. He had survived the nightmare of prison, scaring off the rest of them with sticks and what little sanity he had left, but in the end he'd made it. And when they opened the steel gates, he would not turn for one last look. Nightmares were meant to run from, not look back on. He was a free man now. Nowhere near the city he loved and missed, no money, no job, and no — Melanie. Still, he was free.

"Angelo, Angelo." Her voice again. But from where? Melanie was dead. He was alive. It had to be in his head, her voice playing out his name. It would not surprise him if the mind he saved in prison would be lost now in his freedom. From under the sink in the cabinet he pulled out the Seagram's he had hoarded there for months. By rationing half a shot glass each time things got tough, Angelo managed to make the bottle last so far. In the old days a day or two it would've been tossed away. He poured the whiskey, spilled nearly half of it on the fingers of his other hand. He tried to blink the blurriness from his eyes, but when he looked again at the glass, it was two glasses. Maybe he was losing it.

When he heard his name again, he backed into a chair, let himself plop down into it like

an unplugged toy soldier. Soldier. Oh, he knew all about that. He had fought the good fight, not for country and flag, but for Mr. Donato and family. All those years he had done what he could to serve them and in return they had served him well: there was nothing and almost no one he could not buy.

Think back, he told himself. When did the end start? That night the cops got Petrini, then Petrini ratted out Corbesiero, Corbesiero sold Napolitano, and Napolitano told them, "Conte, yeah, Conte." Falling dominoes in a dangerous game.

What else could he do? The walls were already down. The house wouldn't last much longer. What kind of hero was he supposed to be? Donato sent his sharp lawyer. "Take the heat," Huntington ordered him. A house was dropping on top of him and they wanted him to take the heat, die in the rubble of life in prison for murders they ordered him to carry out. Donato expected him to remember favors, remember Melanie, remember how he had changed Angelo's life from hell to paradise. Now, like the devil who buys your soul, the old man was making his appearance and asking for his due.

Instead, Angelo opened his mouth and sang. Quietly. A few calls here and there. A game of "Pin the Crimes on the Donkies," all on the condition he would not have to testify. That much he would not do. Let the names he sang do that. Let them be marked, not him. And when Donato came for a visit, they sat in his cell and the old man, unblinking, stared him down long and hard and deep. He looked for a glint of betrayal, a sign that Angelo had fed his soldiers to the feds.

Then Donato let his mouth bend up into a smile and Angelo took it as a sign he had passed through the fire and had not perished. Finally, the old man stood and embraced him. Angelo held his breath. He felt the hot garlic breath expel against his ear as Donato whispered, "Sit tight. It's all wind. Let it blow over." His heart pounded relief. He heard the metallic clanking of his cell doors, watched the old man walk out clutching his gray fedora and waving like royalty to the punks in the other cells calling out their respect, "Mr. Donato! Mr. Donato!"

Angelo had passed the test. All he needed was to serve time on the inside while out

there, once the wars started, they could all kill each other. He could not be safer anywhere than here. But what he had not counted on was Melanie.

When the news came to his cell, he was on his cot, reading a letter from her. He had read it at least twenty times, as he'd usually done with her letters, as if by memorizing the words, he could somehow imagine her there. But now, her letter on the floor, he was hearing someone on the other side of his cell bringing her death to him no less painfully than had it been news of his own death. She was dead. Last night. A break-in. Who? A burglar? Someone had killed her. Cold-blooded. Multiple stabbings. Burglar? Angelo knew better. More a warning. A thought choked him: They always hurt the one you love. What better way could they best reach me? Please leave a message for Melanie at the sound of the —. Oh, he knew. And they knew. And Melanie was dead.

Prison only months behind him now, he was still a prisoner. Donato had told him to sit tight. Wait till the wind blew over. Hadn't he done that? In the interim he had lost his wife, Donato's favorite cousin, and yet, on liberation day, who was there to meet him? Nobody. Later he had let his pride go the way of lesser men by calling the old guys, asking for a little coin, something to tide him over until he could get back into circulation. Finally, he called Mr. Donato himself, who by now had climbed into the underboss seat, second only to Don "Patty" Del Vecchio. And Donato had rewarded Angelo's sacrifice with some cash, some promises of future work, but neither of them had mentioned Melanie.

"Angelo, Angelo," said Melanie. "It's inside my head," he said out loud. But when the voice said, "Angelo, Angelo," again, he knew this time for sure it was somewhere in the apartment. For a fleeting second or two he sighed deeply with the thought that Melanie was alive. A hoax! They had only pretended she had died in hopes he would come clean; with nothing left to lose, he'd blow the whistle on himself. But Angelo Conte knew that dog world out there. He was no fool. He had traded a fifty-to-life sentence for a seven-year stretch, and no one, not even clever Donato, was wise. He had committed the perfect crime. He had lived to go on telling no one about it but himself.

When the knock came, it startled him. "Who is it?" he asked, expecting the landlady at the end of her patience to be standing there, arms folded, on the other side of the door.

"Open the door, Angelo."

He inhaled deeply, then before opening the door, let his breath hiss from between the gap in his front teeth. "Mr. Donato! I was expecting the old lady to bug me for the rent." Then he laughed it off. "I'm up to my eyeballs in debt! What the hell. Takes time to get back on my feet. Come on in."

Giovanni Donato was not an imposing figure, surely not the stereotypical mafia boss on the big screen. Thin and short in stature, he reminded Angelo of the little old Italian man who owned Frederick's Bakery back in his old Brooklyn days. Unassuming. Only those gray eyes squinting sharp as razorblades gave away his killer nature. Now he was standing at the kitchen table, waiting, Angelo thought, for Angelo to invite him to sit.

"Come in, Mr. Donato. Sit down." The old man instead waved away the invitation. He stood, walked to the framed photograph of Angelo and Melanie's wedding, reached behind it and removed the tiny black electronic device and laid it on the table. Then he toyed with it until at first it buzzed some static. Angelo had placed enough bugs in the apartments of the unsuspecting to not know what was up. Then Donato pushed one of the buttons on the black bug and Angelo heard Melanie's voice again, up close, loud, clear. "Angelo, Angelo, Angelo, Angelo," Her voice repeated itself like that of a lost child.

"What?" Angelo managed to say as he stood there stunned, his head putting together the jigsaw pieces, the picture materializing "What?"

"It's that wind blowing every place you look, Kid," said Donato, this time pushing his right hand into the pocket of his overcoat. When that hand came free, it held Donato's revolver aimed towards Angelo's chest. "Who's stupid, huh?" Donato wanted to know now. "Who's got shit for brains, huh? You think maybe me? Hey, I been up and down these freakin' streets too many years for that. Remember Melanie? Why you suppose she's in the dirt, huh? You lookin' at Cupid, right? I brung her to you, scumbag! And what did you do? You sing. You send my guys

Writing Raw

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away for a long long time, but they're still alive and kicking, but my sister's daughter, the apple of my dead sister's eyes, she's in the dirt! She died protecting you. She wouldn't talk. Took her secret with her to the grave meant for you!"

Angelo shook his head; Angelo raised his hand. Donato motioned for him to put it down. Finally, what was left by way of explanation would come from the pistol cocked in Donato's hand. It was too late to plead how much Angelo loved Melanie. He'd have to talk fast, the way he'd been talking all his life, but it would do him no good. Time was on empty. Only the whisper of "I loved her" trembled from his mouth. Donato let the tiny bug reply, "Angelo, Angelo" a few more times, then calmly screwed on the silencer, poked the gun against Angelo's chest and fired.

The End

Salvatore Buttaci bio: Salvatore Buttaci has enjoyed seeing his writings published in The New York Sunday News, Writer's Digest, The Writer, Cats Magazine, USA Today, The New York Times, Chicken Soup for the Soul, Cup of Comfort, and many other publications. He is the author of two short-short story collections Flashing My Shorts and 200 Shorts, both published by All Things That Matter Press, and available at Amazon.com. He lives with his wife Sharon in West Virginia.