

Old Head

Short story / Commercial fiction

Complete story.

Everyone had called him Old Head since the inception of the Wednesday dealer's choice game. This was at once a reference to his card marker (an antebellum Buffalo Head nickel), a term of endearment for geriatrics, and because no one was quite sure what his real name was. He commanded the respect of those who make it a point to respect no one, the hotheads and the up-and-comers trying to make a name for themselves. Les Bones, long-time proprietor of a zero bullshit policy, once kicked a fractious young fellow named Gino out of the game - permanently - for saying that Old Head's waning eyesight impeded his ability to play at a proper pace. Les had allowed Gino to keep his winnings; he even racked the chips up for him. But it was understood that Gino was never to set foot in the 137 Club again, lest the wrath of Bones and those in Bones's employ be brought down on him. Old Head talked softly and deliberately, with a cadence belying his old age and apposite senility, yet still evoking the halcyon days when he was the smoothest cat in New England. Sometimes a newcomer would inquire as to the veracity of the more outlandish stories concerning Old Head's early years, to which Old Head would chuckle and say he couldn't recall, spoken with a hoarse whisper, replete with a wink, and Bones would flash a thirty three degree smile that told the young gun story time was over. When Old Head first consulted Les Bones on a personal matter, Bones was deferential and flummoxed. Lester Bones, in his formative years, had been one of the more feared enforcers for Joey Mays. He had parlayed his eminence on the lonely side of the law into a legitimate business career, culminating in an unsuccessful yet surprisingly close mayoral campaign. It was, in fact, a giant wink at the city of Providence. He bought three Laundromats to clean his money - another wink - and invested well. "No use tempting fate," he'd tell anyone who would listen. "Time was," he told Les over a couple glasses of bourbon before trailing off into a long, slow sip; those two words were an encapsulation that Les understood well. Les listened, he nodded, he commiserated as Old Head laid out his quandary. Both men had been subpoenaed in earlier times, and both knew that the less that was said and the less that was known, the better.

As it happened, the week before that Wednesday game, Old Head had made the trek down to Boston for opening day at Fenway, a decades strong tradition taking precedence over anything else that might have transpired on the day of that first pitch. Back in '79, when Old Head was under house arrest, he had arranged for a doctor's appointment at Longwood Medical, a stone's throw from the Fenway gates. He'd made it over to fold his hat across his chest for the national anthem, ran over to get a cardiogram, and made it back for the seventh inning stretch, catching Jim Rice's walk-off homer before heading back

home. He drove down in his Lincoln, alone, as he always had. He set the cruise control at 58, taking in the pockets of New England that had framed his life, always cognizant that these glimpses might be his last. He had booked a room at the Buckminster the night prior, shucked some oysters and downed a king's ransom of scotch. At dusk, he took a stroll down Yawkey Way as the excitement took form in the striated lights emanating from the field and the commerce surrounding the local eateries. Routine, he had found, was the only proper antidote to age, its efficacy proven on those wistful nights when he missed his old friends, most of whom were under a layer of dirt or wasting away beyond iron bars. Routine was, in an odd way, anathema to nostalgia; at the very least, it kept his mind occupied. He had heard the laments of modernity from others his age, heard them yearn for a simpler time, but he found these times almost unbearably simple. Back then, he lamented, things were complicated. Back then, there were choices.

On opening day, Old Head took his seat in Box 54, Row C, program in one hand, Cracker Jacks in the other. The thunderstorm-stained clouds were giving way to a sliver of sun, the seismic energy of the crowd in full force. Old Head relished anticipation; it was something special, something radiant, something he could be a part of, something that was lacking in his life. And so Old Head, erstwhile gangster, lifelong fan, rose for the singing of the National Anthem as he had so many times, his centennial Red Sox hap a badge of honor resting on his chest. Most memories he avoided; they invariably brought pain and regret. The memories inside this stadium, however, he cherished and they flowed through him like warm water thawing something frozen, something forgotten, and he let them. His seatmates had changed over the years. Dr. and Mrs. Ross Grant, season ticket holders for nearly three decades, had given up their seats when Dr. Grant fell ill back '98. Old Head had attended her funeral in Foxboro. He had invited Mrs. Grant to attend any game she'd like with him, but she had politely declined. To them, he was a kind old man who knew old box scores like grade schoolers know their multiplication tables. Mrs. Grant had passed on herself a few years later. Old Head had sent flowers. On this particular day, his seatmates were a couple in their 30's with a toddler with impossibly blue eyes perched on the mother's lap, an oversized ball cap on his head, mimicking the more benign Fenway cheers when his mother would allow it. Old Head introduced himself to Scott and Theresa Caldwell, a banker and housewife from Brookline and even received a couple reticent smiles from eighteen month-old Scottie, Jr.. Old Head's regard for social situations was impeccably tuned, knowing when to keep to himself, when to engage, when to turn on the charm and when to merely sit and listen. If asked, he'd regale ballpark neighbors with stories, recounting the times his very own father had taken him to the park in the 1940s, the time he'd gotten to meet the 1956 team due to his father's connection to a prominent businessman who'd served as part owner. But mostly, having spent a long life uploading his surroundings and their inhabitants, he'd come to find that people liked to talk about themselves, and was generally best to let them. The Caldwells endeared themselves rather quickly to Old Head and he to them. Scott was an affable fellow, inoffensive in every way, which Old Head surmised might be his downfall. Old Head knew women like Theresa, had grown up with them, had seen friends crumble due to their want, their need for a big life and their spouse's inability to provide it. They invited him to join

them for dinner after the game (the Sox won, 4-1) and he accepted, suggesting one of his favorite spots in the North End.

Old Head was paid his respects from the owner upon walking in the door, and a bottle of Galliano was placed at their table shortly after they ordered. They feasted on clams, antipasti, and veal. Scott had Scottie, Jr. try a clam, which he likened to a rolled up rubber band. When the topic of vocations was broached, Old Head said he had been a salesman for some time and was now retired. There had been plenty of long, enjoyable, expensive dinners - birthdays, interfamily meetings, post-baptism celebrations - but as he sat with the Caldwells, these kind, mild-mannered citizens, he couldn't help but feel blessed, somewhat undeserving of their company. He'd long ago resigned himself to karmic retribution, in this life or the next, penance for all his sins, for all the undeserved deaths, but for this time he felt as though God might be watching him, and he wondered if both he and God were, at the very moment, imagining a version of himself that God hadn't bothered to create. Perhaps these final years were his reprieve, though he surely didn't deserve one. Perhaps his twilight could double as a mulligan, a private citizen who stayed out of trouble and engaged the type of honest folks whose company he was in. When the check arrived, Old Head pulled a couple small-faced hundreds from his wallet and stuffed them into the check and handed it to the waiter, much to the chagrin of Scott, who was holding out his AmEx. It was the least he could do for the pleasant company, Old Head told Scott, and meant it. Having overseen the shylock operations for a time, Old Head knew what a sham credit cards were; never owned one and never would. He scoffed at the notion of paying these crooks for the privilege of spending his own money. He did not bring this up to Scott, who likely had a lien and an automobile loan.

When they departed the restaurant, the sun had long since retreated and throngs of college-aged kids were embarking on their evening excursions to the local bars. Old Head walked the Caldwells toward the alley where Scott found his expired meter. He reveled in this walk, likely tedium for the Caldwells, but for himself a stay of execution before returning to his North Shore home, where he would be alone with his thoughts, attempting to fill the hours prior to a restless slumber. Introspection, a curse brought to him in his 60's, had given rise to many sleepless nights, as if making up for the regrets and the second guessing that he should have considered in his formative years. They arrived at Scott's BMW and began to say their goodbyes, exchanging phone numbers (Old Head wrote his home number on the back of his ticket stub) and lazily scheduling a similar outing to another home game. The cocking of the gun was a sound as familiar to Old Head as the the rain drops that had begun peppering the asphalt. Theresa Caldwell, whose lilt ordinarily gave her the look of someone posing for a photo shoot, was frozen where she stood, her arm wrapped around Scottie, Jr. Scott quickly held up his hands in capitulation. Old Head did nothing. The gunmen were in their late twenties, Old Head surmised, and he could see the coke (or maybe it was meth, could never tell with these young'uns) in their eyes, which looked ready to burst and fragment. Their carriage was not that of professionals; they seemed to pirouette around Old Head and the Caldwells, their South Boston tongue giving way to an accretion of lines they'd heard in the movies or read in a Higgins novel. "Keys, motherfucker," implored the better-looking boy, who cast a withering stare in Scott's direction as Scott fumbled in his pockets. The other boy, burly but stolid, stared at the car

like an orphan examining a new home. Scott finally found the keys and held them out in his hand. The petitioner grabbed them and, as if he needed to fill out the scene, smacked Scott in the head with the butt of his pistol, eliciting a vesuvian outburst of screams and tears from Theresa. “Bitch, shut up! I’ll cut your damn throat and your boy here, too.” Old Head, unfettered and undeterred, approached the larger, plodding boy. “Don’t! Please! It’s not worth it!” Scott looked helplessly at Old Head, who paid him no mind. Old Head whispered something in the impish youth’s ear, which turned the boy’s face xanthic and elicited a turn of the head to his partner, who had already put his gun to Old Head’s neck, prompting another shriek from Theresa and another threat from the boy with the .38 special. In turn, the larger boy whispered to his comrade, who gave Old Head a glance of incredulity but could tell by Head’s carriage that there was some veracity to what he’d said. “Fuck it. Fuck this. Move the fuck out! You too, old man.” He then opened the car, got in, and started it up. His friend was still staring at Old Head, who eventually had to snap in two the connecting gaze between them. They began to drive off but slammed on the breaks. The driver got out, held out his gun, and demanded wallets and phones from the Caldwells, who complied quickly. He then, as if an afterthought, demanded the same of Old Head, who slowly reached into his back pocket and removed his wallet. He dangled it in front of the boy and leaned over. “Son, last time I’ll tell you. You’re making a mistake.” The kid snatched the wallet and spit on the ground. “Fuck you, old-timer.” With that, the wheels spun and the rear of the car receded down the alley. Old Head leaned over to examine Scott’s head. A trickle of blood cascaded down his cheek, but he appeared to be stable. “I’ll go back to the restaurant, use their phone to call the police.” Old Head gently touched her shoulder and shook his head. “Police won’t be able to do anything. Those two are already at the chop shop. By the time the cops get here, they’ll have gone to see their drug dealer and be home.” Old Head, of course, knew this to be false. They would take the car to a man in Charleston, likely Pete Frank, who would give them cash for it and send them on their way while he waited for the heat to dissipate. A week or so later, he’d instruct the mule who’d driven it out to the Cape to take it to a chop shop somewhere out of state, likely Maryland. If Theresa called the cops, they’d take statements, file a report, and a few months later, if he was lucky, Scott would collect a small sum from his insurance company. Old Head’s father, Ronnie Bardos, a consummate gangster and smart as a whip, had taught his only son that government and all its arms hinder the process of getting what’s right to those who deserve it. And so Old Head would do it his way. “I know a couple guys who own car shops,” he told Theresa, which was true, but irrelevant. “Let me take care of this for you. Trust me.” Old Head patted her on the head, waited for the ambulance to come, and went on his way. On his car ride back to Providence, he let himself remember a similar incident that had occurred when he was just a boy, only a few years older than Scottie, Jr., two weeks after his father had ordered one of the new Cadillacs with the fins. Ronnie and Old Head had just gotten franks and sodas after a little league game and were accosted by two young thugs who’d been waiting in the parking lot. One of them held a knife to Ronnie and looked determined to use it if Ronnie didn’t give up the keys to the Caddy. Ronnie smiled at them, the kind of warm, calm smile that befits a particular kind of sympathy; in this case, the sympathy of knowing that these two punks had had the misfortune of picking Ronnie to stick up. Old Head always found this curious, how his oft-mercurial father could throw a tantrum over a broken radio but remain so stoic when faced with

the prospect of serious harm. Ronnie promptly removed a pistol from his coat pocket and shot both of the kids in the head. One, two, click. He gestured for Old Head to get in the car, and when they were inside and inhaling that new car smell, Ronnie turned on the radio, lit a cigarette, and admonished Old Head on the errors of bringing a knife to a gun fight. Old Head wanted nothing in life more than to be someone totally different from his father. When he'd plead with his father about how the old man just didn't understand, didn't get him, Ronnie would laugh and say "Kid, man hasn't changed in the last thousand years. Everyone wants the same shit; money, power, women. Don't go thinking you've hit some fault line in the twenty six years between us." As a kid desperate to rebel, Old Head had shrugged off the hasty logic, but as he grew older he realized the old man had been right. Still, he wanted nothing to do with the family business. He went off to college, much to his father's chagrin, studied business and economics, grew fascinated with Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations*, promised himself that he'd be a legitimate businessman and make it off his own steam. Ronnie died of lung cancer six months before he graduated. After graduation, he and his college roommate, Patrick Del Nano, decided to start a restaurant. Old Head had found a girlfriend in college, Sue Ellen Brinker, the apple of his eye and the sobering force he'd always dreamt of. They borrowed and borrowed and spent and spent and within six months, they were so far in the red their creditors stopped extending any modicum of leniency. With no play, nothing in his back pocket, Old Head told some of his father's old colleagues about his troubles. Needless to say, the creditors stopped hassling Patty Del Nano and his business partner, but the two were indebted to the capo for life. And so began Old Head's jaunt into organized crime, which, as is the nature of the underworld's particular beast, he was never able to extricate himself from. After so many nights of not being able to tell Sue Ellen where he'd been for fear of making her an accomplice, she folded her hand and went off to grad school in California. Old Head never had a serious relationship after that, nor did he much want to.

So that Wednesday night in the 137 Club, Les assured Old Head that he'd make the necessary phone calls and keep Old Head apprised of any developments. Old Head thanked him and drove back home. The next night, he got a call at home from Les, requesting his presence at The House on Braker, the longtime residence of Les's uncle, Mikey Sharp, where business was conducted and arrangements were made. Old Head walked into The House on Braker to find Les smoking a cigar and watching the news. Les offered him a drink, which he declined, and they made their way down to the basement, where Old Head saw the two would-be car thieves tied to a couple of wooden chairs, writhing, rivulets of blood slowly making their way to the newspaper-covered ground. "Car's in O'Mara's shop. What do you want me to have him do with it?" Old Head thought for a second and took out the piece of paper with the Caldwells' address on it, handed it to Les. Les nodded, stabbed the cigar in his mouth, pulled a nickel-plated pistol from his hip. Old Head examined it; five in the barrel, one in the chamber, shaved off serial, print-proof grip. He took hold of it, walked over to the two kids in the chair. It smelled like a fraternity basement in there - a miasma of urine from the kids' nerves, blood from their wounds, and the sweet Dominican tobacco from Les's cigar. "I take off that there tape, I hear them Secadas outside, right?" The kids nodded rhythmically. Bones gave a nod to Marcos, his longtime enforcer, burly and

junkyard dog mean, his veinous arms garlanded with tattoos. Marcos ripped the duct tape off the boys' mouths, an accretion of nervous breaths funneled violently from their mouths. The tentative floorboards creaked underneath the reshuffling of their chairs, their taste of freedom ethereal and they knew it. "I told you that night. I told you that you were making a mistake." Old Head's speech was measured and low, but the previous quiet in the room still felt violently ripped open. The boys were looking for a cue that it was okay to speak, which Old Head gave them. "We didn't know. We...look, if we'd known, we'd have never disrespected you. Swear to God, man." "I strike you as a dishonest man?" Old Head looked over at Marcos, holding his gun like a grenade, and he knew everyone else in the room assumed he was flexing. Truth of it was, Old Head wasn't sure what he was going to do. A victim of late onset morality, he wasn't about to ask anyone what the right thing was. What was right, what was deserved, it had all been neatly categorized long ago and he was in no position to make revisions. He had always counted on his instincts and right now his instincts were failing him, his feelings were bleached out. "No. I mean...no, sir. We were high, man. I know that's no excuse, but...we're sorry, man. Never happen again. We'll bounce, man. Wherever you want us to go." So far, it had only been the smaller kid talking, the irascible fellow who had spurned Old Head and smacked Scott. But now the burly one spoke up. "Didn't mean any disrespect." The burly fellow looked resigned to his fate, sad and far away, staring out a window that wasn't there. It was unlikely that he even heard the first shot.

A short while later, having attempted to distance himself from the miraculous reappearance of the BMW, Old Head called the Caldwell residence under the guise of checking on Scott's head and seeing if perhaps they wanted to join him for a game when the Yankees came to town the following week. Theresa Caldwell, born and raised in Quincy to a reformed petty thief, was not unwise to what Old Head was. She was nothing if not polite - Scott's head had healed just fine, and they would have loved to join him but were due for a vacation on the Vineyard - but in a tacit way someone like Old Head would surely understand, she severed the Caldwell's nascent relationship with him.

Thoughts of the Caldwells - remembrance of their strange night together - would now cross paths with more pressing matters in Old Head's mind as he tried to will himself into a slumber, and disappear. Those sleepless nights grew longer and the days grew too long to bear. After that night on Braker Street, he gave up on that fledgling idea he'd entertained, the thought that God might reevaluate his place. If he'd waited for the Lord to take him organically, he might have heard that Scottie, Jr. went into a tailspin after the acrimonious divorce of his parents in the wake of his mother's affair with a prominent local defense attorney. Old Head might have heard the story of how Scottie ran away from home at age fourteen, spending three months on the streets of Portland before coming back to Boston and staging an attack that would reverberate through the city for decades. And if he'd had the choice, Old Head would've gladly passed that up. Man certainly hadn't changed and they likely never will and that was just fine by him.