

KNOCK

James D.F. Hannah

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Art shuffled the deck. The cards moved slowly between his stiff, meaty fingers. Goddamn, but getting old was a sucker's bet.

Jimmy reached across the table. "Here, let me..."

Art swatted the younger man's hand away like a child going for a cookie, continued the shuffle. Art guessed him to be early twenties—young enough to be his grandson had he ever had kids to begin with—but inclined to hurt feelings.

"Nothing personal," Art said. "I just don't trust you."

Jimmy shook his head, took a long chug from his bottle of orange Faygo. "We should do some trust-building exercises. I could fall backwards and let you catch me."

“I wouldn't recommend it. Floor'll hurt like a motherfucker when I let you fall.”

Art dealt the cards. They'd been playing like this for a year now. The same time, every Saturday night, here in the bait shop beside the lake.

The shop was Art's, and he opened it every day of the season. He had a guy who worked Mondays and Tuesdays—the slower days— but Art liked the weekends for himself. The season was drawing to a close, but there were still customers for bait, sandwiches, and soda. Art had cheap poles he loaned to the kids and small boats to rent. Even had a station set up across from the card table—a butcher block with fillet knives where he'd help less experienced anglers clean their catch. Enough years had passed, he'd gotten good at it.

Art finished the deal, ten to each, and laid the deck down, flipping over the top card. Six of diamonds.

“Gin rummy?” Jimmy said.

“As always,” Art said.

Jimmy moved the cards around in his hand. “This was what you played in your old neighborhood, right?”

“Yeah,” Art said, trying to sound nonchalant. “We played.”

Nonchalant because Jimmy couldn't understand what the game meant, how it'd changed Art's life. Art turning twelve, and he'd already stopped going to school, realizing there

wasn't much the nuns could teach him he wanted to know. No, Art's true education began at Martell's Barbershop down on 29th Street, and the card games in back.

Martelli's had been a de facto business center for men of the neighborhood. They came for straight razor shaves, to play cards and read Playboy, to take phone calls and do business. The air was always thick with hair tonic, bay rum, and cigar smoke, and it was intoxicating to Art.

In the alley behind the shop, Art and a group of boys about his age hung out, shooting dice, playing dominos, smoking and lying about experiences with girls they didn't understand yet.

They modeled their actions after the men in the shop. Adult haircuts on children's faces. Hardened expressions they hadn't earned. None of that mattered. They were biding their time. Practicing for the future.

Whenever the phone rang and the noise echoed into the street, the boys shot to attention. Phone calls meant business and an errand to run, like delivering messages or betting slips or an envelope thick with winnings, and the runner earned five bucks. Five bucks may as well have been a million to Art back then.

But it was watching these men play gin rummy all day long where things truly changed.

“I thought if that's what they did, I needed to also,” Art said. “Once I taught myself, I got the other guys going, and made extra cash playing for points. John Agosti.”

“Johnny Two-Hat,” Jimmy said.

Art thinned his lips. The kid was an encyclopedia of Art's life, and sometimes it made Art feel unnecessary for his own story.

“Yeah, John,” Art said. “He liked my hustle. He took me into the back room at the shop where they had poker and blackjack. Making book on baseball games or horses.” He sipped his beer. “It was better than standing in the stock exchange. You felt the electricity. I chased that feeling for years.”

Jimmy said, “That why you pulled the Air National heist?”

And there it was: the inevitable nudge. Never subtle. That was how Jimmy was, jumping in feet first, right on top of your head.

Art inspected his cards. He had two melds: an ace-two-three of clubs run and a trio of queens. He'd watched Jimmy's discards, and he could guess the hand the younger man was trying to build.

He knew Jimmy didn't listen; he waited to talk. Jimmy wasn't observant, studying the quiet spaces between words and actions. Not the way Art did, and he thought of that as he tapped a thick finger across the top of his cards.

"There are court transcripts," Art said. "You want details? Read those."

"No one cares what you told the jury, Art. They want the truth." Jimmy set his cards on the table. "No one's coming after you, old man. This long, everyone's dead or rotting in prison, wishing they were dead."

"People got long memories," Art said. "You have men pissed about things that happened to their grandfathers. What you're talking about was only thirty years ago. That's nothing. It's yesterday's lunch."

The trial had been all over the news. Not only Chicago. Newspapers and magazines and TV stations around the world. Art had been walking into court one day when someone shoved a mic into his face and spat questions at him in Japanese.

The biggest Mob case in the city's history, and he'd been the star. The entire world had watched. It's why he hadn't believed the Feds when they claimed they could hide him somewhere no one would find him.

Damned if they hadn't been right. Thirty boring years and no one had looked at him twice.

Until Jimmy.

Art finished his beer and got up to grab another. Fishing through the cardboard case, thinking about the cops and men from the neighborhood both who'd still put him in the

ground given half a chance. How if you lived long enough, your friends and your enemies all become the same.

“Mind fetching me another big orange?” Jimmy said.

Art grumbled as he brought the bottle of soda to the table, his beer in his other hand. He locked eyes with Jimmy and gave the bottle several vigorous shakes. The contents foamed wildly, bubbles the color of sunshine pushing for release. Art slammed the bottle hard onto the table.

“There,” he said as he took his seat. “Gets tiring you never paying for shit. You run around like things don't come with a cost.”

Jimmy set his cards down. “You're this way every week.”

Art twisted his face into a scowl. “Because I know what's coming, and the answer never changes.”

“Then change the answer. Tell the whole truth of your life. You know where the bodies are buried because you had the shovel in your trunk. Tell it all. No bullshit. No hedging. No changing names to protect the innocent. We do it, and you can check out with a clean conscience and your sins confessed.”

“You talk like those old priests from the neighborhood, but I don't see you wearing a collar. You offering absolution on the side?”

“This is America, old man. You don't need absolution; you just need an audience.”

It had been the previous summer when Jimmy came into the shop. Hadn't taken him more than thirty seconds before he approached the counter where Art was ringing up bait and spare line and said,

“Aren't you Silvio Gualdoni?”

Art hadn't heard that name spoken aloud in decades. Now that person was a stranger to him. But it hadn't been that way in the beginning, when the Feds gave him a new name and a new home, running this shop. He'd struggled to adjust after an entire life as one person to wake up as someone else who had never existed before.

Art had rushed his customers out the door and closed up the shop and asked this kid who the hell he was and what the hell he wanted.

The kid's name was Jimmy. Visiting family nearby, he said. He was a true crime podcaster, and Art made him explain what that meant; Jimmy called it radio programs you listened to on your phone. Most true crime podcasts dealt with weird murders and unusual deaths—people enjoyed hearing about young blonde girls getting killed, he said—but that wasn't Jimmy's thing. No, he focused on Syndicate action. Drugs. Bank robberies. Smuggling. Crimes run by guys with “the” as a middle name. Old-school stories he recited with the enthusiasm of baseball play-by-play.

One he wanted to tell was the Air National job out of O'Hare—and who wouldn't? It was the stuff of legends. Seven

million dollars stolen. The biggest airport heist in history. Nine dead in the after-math. Money never recovered. And after months of chasing leads and watching security video and listening to wiretaps, the Feds busting through Silvio Gualdoni's front door, six in the morning, and the click of steel around his wrists. The beginning of the end for Chicago's 29th Street Crew.

But there wasn't anyone to talk to, Jimmy said. Dead or in prison, the whole lot. All except Silvio Gualdoni, who was standing in front of him now saying his name was Art.

Art remembered that windowless room that reeked of sweat and vending machine coffee and the Feds playing back the tapes. His voice, admitting his role in the plan. They had him on a dozen other charges—the extortion racket, the bookmaking, some casual blackmail on a few politicians—but Air National was the unmistakable elephant in the room.

The guard killed at the airport raised the stakes to a federal murder beef, they told him. Electric chair or lethal injection, take your pick.

He was so utterly fucked that the only people in his corner were a couple of Federal agents and a prosecutor willing to deal. Which was a fucked feeling indeed.

Art took the witness stand. Sold out the rest of the 29th Street Crew. Men he'd known since they'd waited outside Martelli's barbershop, desperate for attention from the mean

inside. He watched the faces of those men as honor and loyalty were cast aside to save his own ass.

Because the rule was, when you got caught—not if, but when— shut your mouth, you did your time.

Until Art decided fuck the rule. What good was honor if you died with a needle in your arm?

Occasionally, Art thought about Elaine, how without her, the Feds wouldn't have had a case. She'd been the one who got him on tape.

Elaine had a coke problem and a kid in foster care. Promises were made to place her in rehab and help her get the kid back if she did this one thing. Art had trusted her, confided in her, and when those Feds played his voice back to him...

He understood why Elaine did what she did. He'd grown up without his own mother. But it didn't change what had to be done, and the cops never Elaine's body. Art figured he was okay, and Elaine's kid would be okay as well.

Art considered his cards. "A thing I learned a long time ago was this game, it's like life."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "You having a stroke?"

"Think about every hand of cards. I can't see yours, and you can't see mine. Those are our secrets, and we want them hidden. You're pulling groups together. Melds. Those are your friends. You keep your friends, and you keep them close. The cards you can't use are deadwood. You get rid of

that. Have as little deadwood as possible before you—” He tapped his knuckles on the tabletop, placed a four of diamonds into the discard, and laid out the rest in a spread. “Go out. That’s when we show everyone what we’ve been hiding all along.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Your metaphor doesn’t work.” He waved a finger toward Art’s cards. “What I see is your friends and your secrets blurred together, and no one’ll say that’s healthy. Besides, my mother always told me to never trust someone with too much to hide.”

Art smiled. “I was a crook, Jimmy. She probably would have told you not to trust me, anyway.”

“You saying I shouldn’t trust you?”

“It’d be your second mistake.”

“What’s my first?”

Before Art could answer, he heard the boards along the front entrance of the shop creak. A silhouette flashed across the dirt-crusted window and then disappeared.

Jimmy glanced back, trying to find what had the old man’s attention. He couldn’t, though, so he gathered the cards together and started a shuffle. “Nothing out there. Relax, and let’s play this damn game.”

Art ran a thumb slowly through the condensation across the beer can. “Someone’s out there.”

That stiffened Jimmy’s spine. The nearby town had possessed a homeless problem until the chamber of

commerce and the tourism board convinced the powers that be that panhandlers were dragging down the economy. The homeless were pushed out to the lake and the surrounding hills—public lands—where they roamed campsite to campsite, looking for food, begging for spare change. They came into the shop and bought cheap beer and expired sandwiches, paying with singles and handfuls of quarters.

Art knew Jimmy thought of him as a harmless old man now, nothing but a declawed cat on a windowsill. The potential of a homeless person outside, an unknown threat, was different. That felt visceral and terrifying. Art saw Jimmy's fear in the tremble of his hands and how he tried to steady them by setting them flat across the table.

Jimmy might not have noticed thing, but Art did. Senses sharpened by a life spent studying the small actions of others. Hand gestures and eye movements. Glances toward doorways and checking for witnesses. The fit of a jacket and the size of a purse.

Those had been the things that kept you alive in the world of Silvio Gualdoni. And unlike a name that seemed to mean nothing now, it wasn't something Art had forgotten.

Art still had his eyes on Jimmy's hands as a man burst through the door and raised a pistol into the air.

"Where's your fucking money?" Spittle flung from the man's lips. Stringy hair slicked back with sweat. Tattoos like

children's scrawls crept up the length of arms exposed by a faded black tank top.

Jimmy turned and watched the man. Saw the gun. Heard his words but couldn't process what was happening. Like a faulty car ignition.

Click. Click. Click.

Nothing.

Then.

“Oh fuck.”

He whispered the words like a secret. Sucked in one long breath and held it in his lungs as if it could protect him.

The man looked familiar to Art. He'd seen him earlier that day. Checking the shop out. Noticing the lack of security cameras, the “Cash Only” sign prominent on the door, no doubt.

Art watched how the pistol shook in the junkie's hand. It was a cheap six-shot revolver. A junkie gun. Passed hand to hand like an offering plate at church, serving a purpose and shuffled along to someone else.

The junkie swung the gun inches from Art's face to Jimmy's, back and forth like a pendulum. Finger on the trigger.

“I said, where's your fucking money?” he said.

Art jerked his chin toward the front of the shop.

“Register's right there, but there's not much.”

The junkie wiped his free hand across his forehead and then along the leg of his blue jeans, leaving wet streaks on the denim.

“You're nothin' but cash, right?”

“That's what the sign says.”

The junkie inched closer with the gun. “You being a smart ass?” Jimmy made a small gulping sound like a floating toy being pulled underwater.

“Don't, Art,” he said. “Please.”

Art wondered if Jimmy had ever seen a gun up close. He'd sure as hell never had one pointed at him. What he talked about on his show—violence and murders—was nothing but anecdotes. When death isn't your experience, it can be your entertainment.

Art remembered Sister Beatrice telling him how God grants free will and yet knows every choice you'll ever make. Years later Art decided your life isn't really your own if everything's eventual, and maybe a loving God shouldn't have let someone like him loose in the world.

“You stand up,” the junkie said to Jimmy. Then, to Art, “Open the fucking register.”

Art heard the words like an echo in the distance. Mostly there was the steady thrum of blood in his ears. Hardened breaths and the soft scuff of his shoes across the floor as he walked. Noises understood when there's a gun pointed at

your head. It made his heart rush in a way he didn't find uncomfortable.

The register was ancient—no credit cards, no need for anything fancy—and he only had to push a few buttons and the drawer popped with a loud ring. The junkie elbowed past him and started stuffing cash into his pockets.

“Where's the rest?” the junkie said when he was done. “There's gotta be more. You got people coming out of here all goddamn day.”

Art pivoted on the heels of his boots and rested his shoulder blades against the shelves where he kept cigarettes. A whiff of the junkie floated by. The guy was sour, like something rotting in the sun so foul even the flies won't bother.

“That's what there is,” he said.

The junkie ran his tongue over pale, cracked lips. Eyes fluttered, doing mental calculations, raging internal debates.

“What about an office?” he said. “You got cash, you got a safe, right? Show me.”

Art pursed his lips and blew short huffs of air. Rolled back onto the flats of his feet.

“Come on,” he said. They headed toward the rear of the shop.

Jimmy's eyes locked onto the junkie as he took blind steps backward and watched the gun in the man's hand. His feet swiped one behind the other, and the toe of his right caught

the heel of his left, and he stumbled into the card table. The orange soda bottle rattled across the surface. The sound made Jimmy gasp, and a humorless smile flickered on the junkie's face. Pulled the corners of his mouth up into taut cheekbones, dusty with stubble, stamped with pus-filled sores. He jerked toward Jimmy and screamed, "BOO!"

Jimmy screamed and his feet jumbled harder against one another. His balance gone, he fell onto the table. The soda bottle jumped and fell to the floor. There was a loud pop as the cap flew off like a cannon shot, and an orange-colored geyser spewed.

The junkie looked down to watch the soda spray across his ankles. He didn't notice Art spin around and snap the gun from him until the weight of the weapon was gone from his hand. When he did, a slow-dawning defeat splayed across his face like spilled paint.

Art turned the pistol toward the junkie. The air seemed to shift in the room when Jimmy saw Art holding the gun. He released the breath he'd been clutching to like a life preserver and stepped toward the old man, placed a hand on his shoulder, had words in his throat when Art jerked away, grabbed the fillet knife from the butcher block, and slipped the blade between the junkie's ribs.

The junkie gasped as the knife pierced his skin, and the tip punctured his lungs. Art leveraged his weight to push it

further, angling it upward, cracking a rib and slicing the man open. He twisted the blade and moved it around.

Like the name he knew but didn't recognize, the sensation felt both foreign and familiar. A knife offered intimacy. He was there for the junkie's last gulps for air, his eyes swimming to meet Art's. The junkie struggled to make one last human connection with the old man, but turned his head away when he realized there was nothing there.

The knife slipped out cleanly. Art stepped back to dodge a spurt of blood from the wound. The junkie grabbed at where the blade had been, tugged at his shirt and at folds of skin, trying to hold back a flow so red it was almost black.

Jimmy choked out soft sobs as the man's form folded against the butcher block and slipped downward inch by inch, blood running down his jeans and pooling on the floor. Art turned off the front light, flipped the door sign to "Closed," and pulled the blinds.

Pink foam frothed from the corners of the junkie's mouth. Art brought a handkerchief from his pocket, crouched and pinched the man's nostrils shut with one hand, then held the cloth over his mouth. The junkie heaved a few hard breaths and gave a last shake before his head went slack and lazed against his shoulder. Jimmy muttered curses and called out to Jesus Christ a few times. When no one responded, he dropped into his chair and stared at the dead man.

“You fucking killed him.” He said it over and over, as though Art was somehow unaware of what had happened.

Art used the butcher block to raise himself to his feet. He had tarps and cleaning products in the back. Cinder blocks left from renovation work at the shop a few summers back. Those would get the job done.

“We gotta call the police,” Jimmy said in a voice wet with potential tears. “We gotta—”

“No, we don't.”

“But-

“He's deadwood, Jimmy. Something you get rid of. But you and me, we're melds. We're in this together.” Art looked at the knife still in his hand. He ran the blade along the leg of his pants, blood staining the fabric, and dropped it onto the butcher block.

Jimmy's breaths came fast and heavy, a struggle to control them.

“You had the gun. You didn't have to do this.”

“He had a fucking gun, Jimmy. Someone comes at you with a gun and they don't shoot you, you don't give 'em a chance to try again. That's how the world works.”

“What world are you talking about?” Jimmy gestured around the bait shop. “Look at where you are. This is your world.”

Art knew goddamn good and well what his world was. He'd spent the past year talking about it to Jimmy, remembering a life like another man's memories.

The idea had struck him a few months ago as he'd watched the way campers looked at the homeless when they were in the shop at the same time. The hesitation on the faces of people in designer cargo shorts and unscarred hiking boots around someone in thrift store clothing. The contrast of those looking to escape versus those with nowhere else to go. Art could see the eagerness to be locked safely away in their Range Rovers and Escalades, and the anger they felt for the real world intruding on them.

This had been Art's world for so long he had forgotten how regular people—civilians—perceived danger versus its reality. Men like Art and the rest of the 27th Street Crew had spoken violence as a language. When he'd been Silvio Gualdoni, he had understood what it communicated. Those who weren't really aware of its meaning handled it like a blunt object—a cheap pistol perhaps, conveniently loaded and left somewhere easy to find—instead of how Art welded it. Like a honed blade.

The “Cash Only” signs. The pistol. Easily overheard conversations about late-night card games in the shop. Art had counted on someone desperate and hungry putting those pieces together, trying to score. He wasn't sure who it'd be, though. But everything's eventual, right?

He'd loaded the gun with blanks, though. He was an old man, after all, and if time had taught him nothing else, he knew to always measure your risks.

Art jerked a finger at Jimmy.

"You wanted a murder story; here's one of your own," he said. "You don't understand it until you've been there, and you'll never feel more alive than you do at this moment. Not until you have to do this again." He rested his weight against the butcher block. "The question now is what you wanna do with that feeling. Because you can choose if you're telling someone else's stories, and do you want to be the one they tell stories about?"

An owl called out a long hoot that shook Jimmy from the moment, and he looked toward the sound. When he turned back, he seemed almost surprised that Art was still there. The two men stared at one another as the owl continued to cry out into the darkness.

"I'm an old man," Art said. "But I will not go out dying like an old man, so fuck your little podcast. You and me are going to do some real business. I still got action in my bones, and you've got the youth to make it work. Between the two of us, we should be able to make money the right way." He looked over to the dead junkie. "But first things first; we gotta get rid of this chunk of garbage. We put him in the lake, and then we start making plans."

Jimmy tried to swallow, but he couldn't. He stared at the junkie, this dead man's own gaze directed into a blank void, as acid churned in his stomach and bile burned at his throat. His mouth moved, but no sounds came out. Eventually, he stood and walked into the back of the bait shop with Art, and they started to work.

They finished cleaning, and Jimmy dragged the tarp-wrapped body toward the dock to load into a boat. Art stood in the pale moonlight and watched, because he was an old man who didn't move dead bodies anymore. That was for the Jimmies of the world.

“By the way—” he said.

Jimmy paused, sweat beading across his brow.

Art turned to face the lake.

“Don't call me 'Art' no more,” he said. “It's Silvio from now on.”

Jimmy didn't say anything and kept on working.

The kid was scared, but scared was okay. He'd be good for the long drive back to Chicago, Art thought. But then what?

This whole year, Jimmy had pushed Art to relive his past. Tell him where the bodies were buried. But he could do better than that. Now he could show him.