

Old Man Austin

Austin picked up the receiver to his rotary wall phone and dialed the number to the hospital. He ambled across the linoleum tiles to the old steel table, curlicues of phone cord clattering behind him. His knees were so stiff he didn't bother to sit down.

"Cardiology." It was a female voice with attitude.

He cleared his throat.

"Dr. Meyers, please."

"He's with a patient right now."

"I can wait on the line for him."

"It'll probably be a while."

"How long?"

"Booked solid all afternoon."

"I don't want an appointment."

"I didn't say you did."

She was straining to reach the point where she could take his name and number and free up her line. More time for twirling her gum. He could hear it on her teeth between syllables.

"Could you flag him down for me before he goes to his next patient?"

"I don't know. He's behind schedule."

"It's not going to take long."

"He won't be done for another fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes. With one patient?"

“If you’re wanting to complain, you’re going to have to talk to somebody else.”

“No.”

Austin pressed his tongue hard against the back of his dentures. He didn’t get angry anymore. He dropped anger after his wife died and there was no one else around to be bothered by it.

“Listen, miss, I just want to talk to him this afternoon.”

“And your name?”

“Austin Brooks.”

“Well, Mr. Brooks, give me your number and I’ll have him call you back as soon as he can.”

“Goodbye.”

He knew Dr. Meyers wouldn’t call back with the same certainty he knew the monsignor from the Basilica wouldn’t stop by to chat with him and neither would the precinct’s city councilman or the personal injury lawyer in the late-night commercials. He had resisted the temptation to meet them in person, not because the wait or rejection would bother him, but to see their pupils narrow, go up, and to the side when they tried to remember who he was would be unbearable.

A leaf of notebook paper tacked on the cork bulletin board opposite the phone listed names and numbers scrawled mostly in his wife’s bubbly cursive. Austin could read every one of them, even without his glasses. Dombrowski’s number was on it. Dombrowski had died not two years ago. Austin often dreamt Dombrowski was still alive and occasionally believed the death might have been dreamt and the dream real, so real he feared dementia was settling in. The thought of slipping away

and his inability to do much to halt it brought to mind his wife's limp wet kisses and the contrast to those of their honeymoon.

In two months he would be 81.

He hadn't had a birthday party since he reached 79, when he celebrated it with Dombrowski and Dombrowski's two little granddaughters in his high-rise condo. The party would have been forgettable in every way, if it weren't Austin's last one. The girls sang a song they were rehearsing for their Christmas pageant in a few weeks. There was some cake and ice cream, a handshake from Dombrowski, and then he was trudging home alone through the snow and thinking how lazy Dombrowski was for not giving him a ride. He would have called him the next day to complain, but Dombrowski was rushed to the emergency room that night and didn't live to hear the pageant song sung in the school auditorium.

Austin spent number 80 alone at a bar downtown crowded wall to wall with thirtysomething yuppies who celebrated Friday evenings with shouts and cat calls loud enough to pretend it was his birthday they were celebrating. He looked up at the beautiful men and women squeezing past him until one of them looked back with a suddenness that bent his eyes to his glass, where they stayed until it was empty. If he had had kids he wouldn't have had to scavenge the faces of strangers for a kind gesture, an inquiry into his health. He left after just one gin and tonic, the alcohol enough to abandon his Buick at the meter and circle the block for a taxi.

He called Dombrowski's condo the next day pretending to be a bill collector from Time Warner Cable. He badgered a woman about a half-year's worth of fictitious unpaid bills until she admitted Dombrowski might not have died but

moved and forgot to file a change-of-address form. When he hung up his heart was pounding at the thrill of hearing Dombrowski was alive, no matter if it was coerced.

Austin called the hospital again.

“I’m sorry, he’s with a patient,” the same receptionist droned, ending the ten minutes of Yanni he had endured while waiting on hold.

“When’s he going to be done?”

“He’s got a full schedule today.”

“Can’t you catch him between patients?”

“And you are?”

“Austin Brooks,” he said, gazing down at the floor.

“Oh, you’re the guy who called a half hour ago and wouldn’t leave your number.”

“Right. I...” He caught himself before giving an explanation he didn’t owe.

“How long will it be if I do leave a message?”

“Like I told you. He’s booked all day.”

He buttered up his voice.

“I used to know him when he was in grade school.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I always thought he’d become a doctor. Real nice kid. Had a way to put your mind at ease.”

“I can imagine.”

“Can’t you put him on the phone a minute? It would mean a lot to me.”

“When he comes by the desk I’ll do what I can.”

“I’ll just wait on the line, then.”

“Mister.”

“Austin.”

“Austin. Like I told you. It could be a while.”

“I can wait.” He audibly sighed his intention to do so.

“Why won’t you give me your number?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise. You said he won’t be long.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, you said you could catch him when he comes by the desk.”

“I said I *might* be able to.”

“I’ll just stay on the line then. If that’s all right with you, miss?”

Austin heard shuffling on the other end of the line. She didn’t care whether he had to call again after Dr. Meyers didn’t call back. She was probably facing an afternoon full of old men whining for a personal chat with the doctor. There was no reason to help him. But if he stayed on the line, she would flag down Dr. Meyers as soon as she could because of the sheer annoyance of the blinking hold light on her switchboard.

“Sir,” she said, “trust me. I’ll have him call you as soon as he’s available.”

“But—”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m going to have to hang up now. You can give me your number and I’ll have him call you, or not.”

Most people would have left a message, but he wasn’t tying up the line by waiting on hold. It wasn’t like he was making a pass at her or anything.

“You never told me your name.”

“Delores. Now what’s your number, sir?”

“You have any kids, Delores? I bet you’re married at least.”

“Divorced. No kids. What’s your number?”

He finally relented and gave her his number and heard the dial tone again quickly afterwards.

He imagined Delores returning home to an empty apartment, like his, quiet with absent screams and laughter from the kids she never had with her ex. Her voice was gravelly, mid-fortiesish, with a working-class edge. He pictured her as a brunette, not attractive but not unattractive, maybe glasses, slim. He wished she would have talked to him longer.

He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a tupperware bowl of leftover salad he had made the day before. He plopped himself into one of the vinyl-cushioned chairs at the table, but realized he had forgotten a fork and had to stand up on his weak knees to find one from the silverware drawer next to the sink. This was half his day. Forty-five minutes to put his clothes and dentures on and comb his hair. Just shy of an hour to change, shower, shave, clean the dentures, and smooth on some lotion before going to bed. A half hour to brown the toast, fry up some eggs, and heat the instant coffee. Ninety minutes for a turkey sandwich and the National Geographic. Two hours for spaghetti and an evening with Dan Rather.

The iceberg lettuce and carrots crunching between his dentures were the only sounds in his apartment other than the noise of the refrigerator and his breathing after he swallowed. He didn’t swallow well because of a tightness in his throat the doctors told him was only a symptom of old age that he shouldn’t worry about. It distracted him every time he ate, but it kept him from eating too much, and he had gotten used to it, like the coarseness of his skin and the veins, mottled and

serpentine, beneath it. He could hardly taste the food anymore, but he could still hear the sounds. He chewed his food longer than he needed just to listen to them.

He dabbed dish soap on a sponge and rubbed it vigorously against his salad bowl for a minute. He did the same to his fork and the tupperware bowl, and then rinsed everything under the tap. His wife used to wash the dishes in one blowout frenzy while watching the afternoon soaps.

She was the prom queen. The pink silk dress and the graceful lines of her long limbs beneath it during the opening waltz had conjured in him a sentiment he supposed was love, and which really became love years later. The moisture between his fingers and hers caused him to clasp her hand more tightly than he would have otherwise for fear of letting go. He brought her so close their stomachs pressed against each other when he stepped into a pirouette. Their mouths met in a kiss that was so simple and natural none of the nuns from her school, the brothers from his, or the chaperons bothered to intercede against the public display of passion. The heat from her tongue and lips and the firm curve of her lower back seemed stronger in his memories than the pressure of his heart sinking when she breathed her last breath against the brain cancer that had reduced her cherub's cheeks and doe's eyes to shadows.

Austin watched pedestrians and automobiles on the avenue zipping past his living room window. He had moved from a bigger third-floor apartment to the garden level only a few months ago, but the new location already felt as if he had been there for years. His move was justified, he had told himself, because the arthritis in his knees made the stairs difficult to climb and the cheaper rent allowed

him to expand his cable options. But at the heart of it was also his desire to become a more engaged voyeur.

He smiled at a woman with flowing blond hair and perky breasts, but she didn't smile back. No one looked up high enough to see him when he was on the third floor, but on the ground floor people had to look away not to see him. Certainly she had seen him. So did the boy walking his dog and the droopy-eyed Hispanic cabbie who waited with both fists on the steering wheel for someone to let him reenter traffic. There was the siren of an ambulance, and Austin closed his eyes. The wail grew loud, then faded into the distance. It would return for him someday. He looked forward to the paramedics' urgent questions and the buzz of onlookers, their concern like pins and needles against his eyelids. He had spoken to no one today, not counting Delores.

There was still fourteen minutes before "Oprah." After her came the half-hour newscasts, and he could cruise from "Friends" and "Frazier" reruns straight into primetime. The afternoon was overcast, and although dusk was still a few hours away, the neon sign of the Vietnamese restaurant across the street glowed as if night had already come. A wet chill breeze heralded the end of shirtsleeve weather, long sunny days, and the summer laziness that softens walkers' strides and the hum of automobile engines. The leaves were turning color. The World Series would start in a couple weeks.

The phone rang.

Austin winced at the crack of his knees, and he leaned his hand on the couch for support, its woolen fibers rough against the soft spot between the calluses and the heel of his hand. He pushed off hurriedly, shuffling across the worn carpeting

and back to the kitchen, panting. Even a month ago he could have crossed the rooms without difficulty. But his bones sensed winter with a ferocity that locked his knees if he moved too fast. He hadn't known such frustration since the horseshoe pattern began to appear in his hairline nearly half a lifetime ago and with it the awareness that he was never going to leave the job he started at the Post Office when he was 19 and newly married.

"I don't have your file on hand," spoke a deep voice that had identified itself as Dr. Meyers when Austin answered. "When was the last time I saw you?"

"Maybe 40 years ago."

"What?"

"You used to play for St. Michael's little league, Chuck. Remember the year we almost took city?"

Dr. Meyers paused.

"Not even my wife calls me Chuck anymore."

"I don't suppose a doctor would have a reason to be called Chuck."

"You're right."

"You did well."

"Thanks, I guess."

"I might've thought you'd become a doctor."

Austin shook his head at the wall. He wished he were in an office or a living room with him so he could know whether his bluff would be called. He didn't remember Chuck very well, and didn't trust the few memories he had of him.

"You were too afraid to slide because you didn't want to get your uniform dirty."

“That was a long time ago.”

“Not that long ago.”

“Why did you call, Mr. Brooks?”

Austin knew he should have expected the question, but the familiarity he tried to inflect in his voice had preoccupied him. He thought of the baseball games and how his dark hair had been thick enough to become messy underneath his cap back in the day when Chuck was on the team. Austin’s deep blue eyes had remained aloof through the horseplay on the bench in the early season and the tears when they lost the city championship game. His jaw had been firm then, and the wrinkles in his forehead didn’t sag. He quit coaching five years later, telling himself he was tired of putting up with the sass, the overbearing parents, the lost evenings.

He had forgotten about his coaching days until one morning in August when he was passing the old ball field while taking the 18 downtown to cash his social security check. The grass infield had been replaced by dirt and the outfield fence was gone, but some little kids were playing a pickup game with the same smiles he remembered on the kids he had coached decades ago.

There were only four kids on each team, and when someone hit the ball it wasn’t fielded until the hitter reached second. They all wore baggy jeans and t-shirts; one had a cuss word printed in large font on his back. But they were running, sliding, jumping. The kids’ shouts rang high over the bus’ engine as it idled at a stoplight. He thought of getting off to sit down on a bench to watch, but the light was green before he could make up his mind, and he had to settle for a parting glimpse of a big kid hitting a deep fly ball that sailed over the lone outfielder’s head.

The next day Austin rode the bus again as an excuse to check out the field, but it had been empty.

“I mean,” said Chuck, his voice squirming in the absence of an immediate response from Austin, “it’s nice to hear from you, but I think the last time we saw each other I was in high school and stopped by the park to see Tommy play.”

The words brought back memories of a little tow-headed kid with big feet.

“Oh, Tommy. He was a couple years younger than you.”

“Three. Sometimes I’d get off my shift at the burger stand before the game ended and catch the last inning or two.”

“Yeah, your brother was a darn good pitcher, wasn’t he?”

“Better than me.” Chuck’s voice loosened up. “Did you know he played some minor league ball?”

Austin pretended he remembered. “Right.”

“He gave up after a few years. He didn’t throw hard enough fastballs to make pro.”

“Is that what he said?”

“It’s what he told me and dad.”

“Tommy threw a good curve, though.” Austin was winging it. “He didn’t need a fastball.”

“He’s selling insurance now.”

“It’s too bad I never got to see him pitch in a stadium.”

“That was a long time ago.”

Austin remembered driving the kids down to the park in the bed of a big pickup truck one of the fathers let him use. They would get there a couple of hours

before game time and do stretches and sprints, pepper and catch. He would listen to the pop of the ball in the kids' gloves as he sat on the bench with a scorecard on his knee, scribbling the batting order and deciding who would start. He would peek up from time to time and tell a kid to bend his knees a little more or the grounder was going to go through his legs. Tommy might have been on the team that made it to the city championship game, not Chuck. No matter. He could generalize a fondness from his memories.

"Austin?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I help you with anything?"

"I don't know."

"I have a lot of patients this afternoon."

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't be. We haven't talked for 40 years, right?"

"I haven't seen anyone from the team for 23 years."

"You miss coaching?"

"I didn't coach for very long."

"You seemed like you'd been a coach forever."

"How's that?"

"You didn't speak much, but you were Mr. Baseball, as far as we were concerned."

"Any coach seems that way to a kid." Chuck's questions had stolen him away from his nostalgia, and he didn't feel like answering any more of them.

“I have to confess, though,” Chuck continued, “I don’t remember a whole lot.”

“That’s okay.”

“Stern. You looked stern, not angry but private. Disciplined.”

“I liked to run a tight ship.”

“Weren’t you in the military or something?”

“No. I was a mail carrier.”

“You didn’t have any kids on the team.”

“That’s right.”

“You were married?”

“Yeah, but now I’m alone.”

“Oh.”

Austin attended Sunday high mass on the anniversary of his wife’s death just after Labor Day. The priest announced an opening for a coach of the school’s seventh-grade boys’ basketball team, and the memories of his years as a coach reminded him of the helpless weeks at his wife’s bedside and his inability to do anything but watch. The guilt had smothered his sorrow, and when the day of the funeral came there had been no tears, just empty sobs like dry heaves.

The same feeling of smothered sorrow was with him after the priest finished the announcement and moved on to others. Austin exited the sanctuary’s big walnut doors after the final hymn, his steps dragging as he walked through the vestibule, his eyes focused on the stairs to ignore the husband and wife at the fold-out table who solicited parishioners to buy World’s Greatest Chocolate bars for two dollars each, serve at Wednesday’s soup kitchen, and coach ball teams. Their gaze bore through

his neck as he passed them and limped down the stairs to the tiny side exit. He thought of explaining he was too old, his joints ached; his wife had been barren and he couldn't bear being around kids any longer.

Austin tried to think of a way to get off the phone without seeming impolite. But the concern in Chuck's voice seemed genuine.

"My wife died three years ago," Austin said.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's long enough ago that I hardly remember who she was. I can look at pictures, but she may as well be a stranger."

Chuck didn't say anything.

"We were married 58 years, and I can't remember what her salads tasted like or how her voice sounded. She used to complain about my coaching."

"Is that why you didn't keep on?"

"I didn't think I'd miss it. It took up so much time in the evenings."

"I wouldn't have thought you'd remember me."

"To tell you the truth, I took out a few of my old rosters and went down the line looking up people and calling them."

They both laughed.

"You were the first one to call back," Austin said.

Chuck laughed again. "Are you going to call any of the others, Austin?"

Austin considered it for a moment.

"I don't know."

"I hope you do."

"It was good talking to you, Chuck."

“You, too, Austin.”

Austin hung up and made his way back to the living room couch. A wedding photo of his wife was on a bookshelf next to the window. He looked at her curly sandy hair, over-rouged lips and white teeth, the thin eyebrows that became more angular over the years as she surrendered her youth. He folded his arms and stared at her until the light grew too dark to see.