

Heads No. 1

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As soon as he entered his living room, Gabe knew the heads were agitated. Johnny was doing laps around the table, and Andy was on the ceiling. Their empty black eye sockets watched him from inside flat, pale faces. Their suction cup necks strained.

"I brought food." Gabe ignored his migraine. The heads hurt him when he made them wait. He dumped four thawing hams on the hard wood floor. They thundered like bowling balls.

The heads went for the ham like dogs off a snapped leash, mouths gaping to reveal pearly white teeth. They were *hungry*. Gabe tuned out the sound of the chewing, the sucking, the snapping of bones. After six months, it was easy.

Gabe flopped down on his fading orange couch. His apartment smelled of garbage and mildew. His mother's ancient analog clock ticked away on the wall, each tick slamming into his forehead. He sank into the ratty cushions and squeezed his eyes shut.

Necks suckled hardwood as the other heads converged on the meat. Gabe opened his eyes to find Jude in the center of the living room table. Jude's face was flat and pale and noseless just like all the others, but his empty black eye sockets were narrower, meaner looking. Jude always waited until the other heads were done, and the others always left Jude his fill.

"I'm sorry," Gabe said. "I had overtime today. Miller called in sick and I needed the hours. How else can I feed you?"

Jude was not appeased. Gabe did not let himself get angry. When he got angry at the heads, they made his migraines worse.

"I'll be home on time tomorrow." Gabe lowered his eyes as the other heads ripped into the thawing hams. He felt Jude's empty eye sockets on him. As Jude's neck rocked back and forth Gabe was reminded, absurdly, of one of

those stupid bobbleheads.

The migraine was fading. The other heads were moving away, necks scooting across the floor like snails as they spread through Gabe's roach-infested one bedroom. Jude swiveled away. He did not roll when he reached the table edge, just scooted around the corner like a leech. He went straight down the leg to the floor. He found the last ham and took a big, juicy bite.

Gabe closed his eyes. The migraine was gone, but it would come again tomorrow. He had eight hours before the heads would hunger again, and he had no car. Just the bus. An hour to the butcher and back. That meant he could get six hours of sleep.

Simone was wailing in the bedroom, a sound like nails on a kitten. Gabe was fine on the couch. He was dead tired, and he would not dream. He never dreamed anymore, unless Jude made him.

It seemed only a moment later he opened his eyes. His toes tickled. Both James were gnawing on his boots. "Stop." He jerked his boots away. "James Junior, James Senior, you stop!"

It was stupid, he knew, calling them names like proper people, but Jude insisted on it. It was already one o'clock in the morning. Jude told Gabe their names, when to feed them, when to sleep and when to wake. Jude told him everything.

Gabe hated his life. He wanted to die but no one would kill him, and if he killed himself he would simply go to Hell. This was bad, but Hell was worse. Gabe's mother told him and he believed her, but a few more years with the heads and he might not care.

Gabe quickly rose when Andy slid up on the ceiling. When he reached the door, Jude was stuck right in the middle of it. His neck bent back as his flat, pale face hung upside down.

"What?" Gabe dared not open the door when Jude was on it. He never touched the heads. Jude had showed him where they would start eating him if he did. Jude's horrible, bloody visions were the only time Gabe dreamed.

Jude swiveled, suction cup neck writhing until he was right side up once more. Gabe understood the warning. "I won't be late again." He glanced down at his hand, at his missing ring finger. He had told Miller he lost it in a bus door.

"I'm going to get you more meat now."

Jude slid down the door. Gabe waited until he was halfway into the bedroom, then bolted. His neck hair stood on end.

Gabe returned with two hams, not four. He had pleaded with Joe, the only 24 hour butcher within an hour of Baltimore, but there were no more in stock and the heads would not eat anything else. It was not enough food and there was nothing to be done about it, so Gabe counted his remaining fingers as he walked up Greenmount. The entire street smelled like urine and old socks.

There was a panhandler on the street, but the bum knew Gabe. He recognized a lost cause. Gabe trudged up the steps of his brown three story rowhouse. He entered its hall and paused at a flimsy, peeling door. Apartment One. Heads Number One.

His door hung slightly open. Gabe's heart beat faster. Robberies happened often in downtown Baltimore, but Gabe had nothing worth stealing. He pushed his way inside. One gunshot, and he would never face the heads again.

A figure turned on him just inside the door. Gabe's prayers were answered. Then he saw who the man was.

Wallace Stuart. The landlord. The old man was fifty years Gabe's senior, hair gray and body hunched. Despite his rough exterior, Gabe actually liked Wallace. He cut his tenants far more slack than any landlord in Baltimore had any right to cut.

"Mister Hall!" Only Wallace called him that, a relic from a younger time. Nobody Gabe knew called him mister. "I see you have money to stock your kitchen, but none to pay your rent."

Gabe was a week behind. He knew Wallace would not evict him, not for at least two months, but he was terrified of what would happen if the heads came out. Gabe did not see them. They liked to gather in the bedroom.

"I'll have it Friday." Gabe eased his way inside. "I get paid Friday." He had to get between Wallace and the bedroom.

"Where are you going to keep those, huh?" Wallace peered at him through his thick old glasses, staring at the hams. "You said the freezer's broke."

"I fixed it," Gabe said, then cursed himself. All Wallace had to do was check and he would know Gabe was lying.

"Fixed it? Without telling me? How?" Wallace was growing more suspicious by the second. "You're hiding something."

"I'm not." Gabe was almost at the bedroom door. "I promise, Mister Stuart, I'll have your money by Friday."

From inside the bedroom, Simone keened. Gabe froze and dropped both hams.

"What was that?" Wallace stepped forward, face grim. "Are you keeping an animal in there?"

They'll eat him. If he opens the door, they'll eat him. Think! "A dog," Gabe said, pressing back against the door and gripping the handle. "I got a dog." *Please Simone, stay quiet!*

"A dog?" Wallace frowned. "Can you pay the deposit? Four hundred dollars by Friday?"

"Friday," Gabe repeated like an idiot. "I'll pay it by Friday." He would not have nearly enough.

"Hmmph." Wallace crossed his arms. "I knew you were hiding something. I'll let it slide this once, but if you don't pay all you owe--"

Simone moaned pitifully. It was the sound of a woman in distress, a woman in great pain. Wallace's eyes went wide.

"That was a woman!"

"It's just a dog!"

"What have you done, Gabriel?" Wallace advanced on him. "Did you kidnap some poor girl?"

"Stop!" Gabe lunged forward.

Wallace's cane snapped into his face with a white hot crack. Gabe hit the floor hard. Wallace had been a Marine, Gabe remembered then. Wallace had killed men in the war. The old man grabbed the knob on the bedroom door and turned it.

"Wallace!" Gabe shouted, but the named was drowned out by the eager cries of the heads.

They were on Wallace in an instant, a pack of pearly white teeth, tearing and chewing. The old man screamed, stumbling backward and waving his cane. Gabe scrambled up, but then he saw Jude on the bed. Jude glared at him. The migraine *hurt*.

Gabe fell and writhed on the floor. Wallace had stopped screaming. There was no sound but the chewing, the licking, the slurp of necks on wood. Bones splintered with the sound of snapping celery sticks. Someone burped. Finally, it was over.

Gabe struggled for breath as the white hot pain faded. He was barely aware of the heads sliding off, content and well fed.

Wallace. Where's Wallace gone?

The last thing Gabe saw was Jude looming over him, missing black eyes staring. Jude was happy. Jude was pleased with him.

Gabe blacked out.

A clattering noise snapped Gabe awake. What was it? Where was he? The phone. It was ringing. It never rang. No one ever called him, not even telemarketers. He had no friends, no woman to come home too. They would never understand about the heads.

What time was it? Were the heads hungry again? Gabe pushed himself

up. Bright light streamed in through his dirty, bare windows. The door to the hallway was cracked.

The clattering was still clattering. Gabe needed to answer it. *God. It was all some stupid nightmare.* He stumbled drunkenly into his tiny kitchen, his hand sliding along the counter. It grazed cans of baked beans and roaches who scattered in every direction. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Gabe." It was his manager. "You're six hours late." There was a short pause. "You're fired."

Gabe stood there with the phone against his ear until the buzzing started. Then, he hung it up. He looked out through the bars onto the street. It was the middle of the afternoon.

He had slept eleven hours last night. He could not remember the last time he had slept more than six. He had lost his job because of his sleeping. How was he going to feed the heads?

Gabe's eyes turned to the bedroom door. It was closed. There was no blood there, no body. No trace of anything. Only Wallace's thick glasses, peeking out from under the ratty couch.

Gabe sat right down and started sobbing.

Eleven hours, and the heads were not even hungry again. His mind felt clearer than it had in six months, since the heads had first come to live with him. Gabe knew why this was different. Ham was dead. Wallace had been alive.

He finally had a way to escape the never ending days of naps, bus trips, work and solitude. Six months had passed since his last full night's sleep, the night before the heads found him, the day after his poor, half insane mother died.

Jude slid in from the bedroom. He stopped at the edge of the kitchen tile. His empty black eye sockets stared.

Gabe dried his eyes. "You want me to get another."

Jude slid away. Gabe frowned.

"No." *Wallace let me go a month without paying rent.* "Nothing but ham for you. Never again." Gabe could not believe the old man was gone.

It was almost a month before the heads hungered. The police showed up on the first week, but the heads remained well hidden and Gabe could not tell them anything. Gabe found a job as a bag boy, and he arrived on time every day. He thought about Wallace every night. Gabe could not forget the old man's face.

When the month was up and the heads finally hungered again, Gabe brought them hams. Jude woke him far too soon. His mother's ancient clock stretched its hands accusingly.

"It's only been three hours." Gabe wanted to scream at them. A migraine came, searing hot pokers between his eyes. Gabe whined and gritted his teeth. Sometime later, it stopped.

"I'm going." He rose, knowing not to look at Jude when he was angry. "I'll be back with more."

He came back. Three hours later, the heads woke him again, and so it went for four days. Gabe did not show up for work. They fired him, again, and then he had no money to buy ham.

Gabe did not even look up at the shadow walking toward him on Greenmount, predatory and sure of itself. It was past three in the morning. When the shadow pushed him against a rowhouse and pressed cold metal into his gut, he grinned.

"Give me your wallet." The mugger smelled of liquor and sweat and piss. "Give me all you got."

Gabe could not stop grinning. "Sorry. I'm fresh out."

The man slammed his fist into Gabe's stomach. He gasped for breath. His knees hit concrete as the mugger stepped back. *That was for you, old man.*

"Give me your wallet, you stupid shit." The mugger's gun was close. The empty hole in its end was a tunnel to the light.

"No wallet," Gabe managed to wheeze out between breaths. "Go ahead

and shoot me."

The mugger turned and spit. "Crazy shit."

"You chicken?" Gabe was getting his breath back. "Shoot me. Shoot me in the head." He rose.

The mugger took a step back. The gun shook in his hand. "Don't you try it." His eyes were wide. "I'll end you!"

"It's okay." Gabe stepped closer. "I'm tired of the heads, the howling, the meat and that old man's face. It's not suicide if you pull the trigger."

Gabe wanted death. His mother had looked so relieved.

"Just do it. Just pull the trigger."

"You stupid son of a bitch." The mugger waved his hands. "Get out of here!"

Gabe snorted. "I'll do it if you don't."

"Get out!" the mugger screamed.

Gabe lunged for the gun. His ears popped as it went off. A fist hit just above his right eye.

His own fist slammed right into the mugger's chin. The man tripped over a curb and fell backward. The back of his head cracked against the corner of the lowest stair of a rowhouse.

No bullet touched him. He had not been shot. The mugger wasn't moving.

"Shit." Gabe dashed forward. "No, no God no!" He dropped beside the stairs and pressed his fingers to the man's neck. He let out a tiny cry. A faint pulse still beat.

Gabe sat back, knees against his chest. He wrapped his arms around them and rocked. *He's trash. He's nothing. He was going to shoot me. He could buy me a whole other month.*

Gabe stared at the gun. It had fallen among dead brown stalks of grass. What use was it to either of them now, with one of them gone mad and the other dying on the concrete steps?

Gabe looked up. He almost laughed. The idiot had cracked his head open on the steps of 2201 Greenmount. His rowhouse. His prison. Heads Number One.

"No." Gabe could not do this, but was it really murder if he just brought this man inside and placed him on the floor? Was it murder if he just opened the bedroom door?

The man who had mugged him was dying. What if he never woke up? Even if he did, what kind of life would he have with his head split open? A vegetable on a respirator.

"You need to stop this." Gabe picked up the gun. It was heavier than he expected. He tucked it into the pocket of his thick jacket, then slid his arms under the other man's shoulders.

"He's still alive," Gabe said. "Put him down and call 911."

The mugger was stupidly heavy. His legs dragged as Gabe stumbled up the stairs.

"He tried to kill you." Gabe struggled through the rowhouse door. "He shot at you. He punched you in the gut."

Gabe got them into the hall. "You're not a good person." The man's dark boots slid on the cracked tile, leaving a tiny trail of blood. "You're not a good man."

He reached Heads Number One. The door was unlocked. There was nothing inside to steal.

Gabe dropped the mugger on the hard wood floor and closed the door. From inside the bedroom, Simone keened hopefully. *One month.* Gabe walked forward like a drunken man. *Wallace was better than this piece of shit, and I killed him.* Gabe reached into his pocket. The gun was heavier than he expected.

Gabe heard necks suckling wood. He heard them pushing at the door. He opened the door, raised the gun, and squeezed the trigger. He squeezed it over and over and over, ears ringing.

The first bullet caught Jude. Another caught James the Younger. James

Senior bit his toe. Gabe kicked him, hard, and the head hit the wall with a crack like a ripe watermelon. Then Johnny and Andy were on him, chewing away.

Gabe couldn't hear anything over the ringing, but Simone was still alive. She rolled toward him bleeding from one ear. Gabe stomped down hard. Pete leapt and tore Gabe's finger off. Gabe caught him by the scruff of the neck and tossed him at the wall, and then it was done.

It was over. The heads were dead. Blood was everywhere. Gabe realized his boot was missing, as were his toes. He slipped on blood, likely his own, and thumped into the floor. Somewhere far away, sirens wailed.

His would-be mugger moaned softly from the next room. Gabe wondered what he would say to Wallace when they met. He wondered if the old man could ever forgive him.

"He's awake."

"Is he stable?"

"You can talk to him, yes."

"Open your eyes, Mister Hall."

Wallace called me that. Gabe opened his eyes. Everything was blurry. He did not know where he was. Then he felt something sticky on his wrist, a cold draft creeping in from behind his legs. A woman in white disappeared behind a curtain.

Oh. Gabe tried to focus on the rotund young man sitting across from him. *So they saved me.* The policeman standing behind the young man at his bedside had hard eyes, brown hair, and a large divot in the middle of his left cheek.

"My name is Bob Humphries, Mister Hall." The young, round man said that. "I need you to listen." Bob Humphries could not be older than twenty-five. His thin blond hair was slicked back with too much gel, and his face was pale and sickly looking.

"I killed Wallace Stuart," Gabe said.

Bob Humphries frowned. "Mister Hall, as your court appointed attorney, I must advise you to be quiet."

"I killed him," Gabe said. "I killed them all. All the heads you saw in there. I'm not a good person."

"Twisted piece of shit," the policeman grumbled. Gabe's court-appointed lawyer turned on him.

"My client is still suffering from the effects of his painkillers. Nothing he says now is admissible in court."

"I'm sane," Gabe insisted. "And I killed them." *I'll never have to feed them ever again.*

The policeman shook his head. "Insanity defense, Bob?"

Bob Humphries rose, shooing the officer. "I need to speak to my client alone. I'll see you in court."

"You sure will." The officer spit on the floor and glared at Gabe. "Sicko." He left to stand outside the room.

Bob Humphries started talking again, and he said a great many things. Gabe did not listen to any of it. He could sleep now. The heads would never wake him up again.

For most of his life, Gabe had wondered about his mother. Every few months she disappeared for a few days, leaving him alone. He finally understood why she had never married, why she had moved him from town to town so many times. He hoped she had killed only bad people, but there was no way to be sure of that.

It didn't matter. Gabe forgave her. He knew why she was so eager to die at the end. Even if she was burning in Hell right now, Gabe hoped he had managed to make her proud.

THE END