

# THE ODDS ARE AGAINST US

by Art Taylor

“How about a gimlet?” I asked.  
“Special occasion?” Terry said, sceptical more than suspicious. “Or just a change of pace?”

“Change of pace,” I said, waving it off, and Terry didn’t blink an eye, just reached for a martini glass and tossed some ice in it, then turned toward the shelves of liquor behind him. There was a mirror back there, and I watched him close.

Here was the game I was playing. If he made it with gin, that meant yes, and if he made it with vodka, that meant no.

My heart sank a little when he reached for the Gordon’s, and I told myself that I should’ve bet on

the kind of gin instead: Tanqueray yes, Gordon’s no, or something like that.

Terry was quick to make the drink because business was slow that night. Tuesdays always were. Just me on my side of the bar and him on his, and then some empty tables behind me and three guys playing cutthroat at the pool table near the back. I had something going there too: If one of them left before the others, that was a no, but if they left as a group, that was a yes. I’d made that bet when I caught sight of one of them reaching for his jacket. Then he’d just picked up his cue again and settled back into the game.

Terry stirred the drink, strained it into a glass he’d chilled. Age spots beginning to crop up on the back of his hands. Here I was, saw him a couple of times a week, but I’d never noticed it until tonight.

“Gimlet.” He smiled broadly as he set it down in front of me, ice crystals skimming the surface. “Mixed perfect, you see if it’s not.”

My turn to nod. Perfect, sure, but it was still gonna taste tough going down.

Outside, it was threatening rain. A cold rain coming, it had felt like, hints of a hard winter further on down the line. A Phillies game was on the TV above the bar, and it looked chilly there too, and the scroll along the bottom of the screen listed thunderstorm warnings, the wheres and the whens. A series of

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windows lined the top of the wall behind me, looking up at the street, and as the wind picked up, I could hear it whisper along the edges of the glass. Trouble ahead out there. But inside, the weather was always fine, which is why that pool player putting on his jacket, like it was cold in here—that didn't make sense to me.

The bar was old school—not the slick mahogany and fresh brass and fancy martinis of some of those steakhouses that were cropping up downtown, trying to look like somebody. No, this was the real deal. Black walnut bar top dinged and scratched over the years. Parts of it so sticky from spilt beer and liquor that they could hardly be cleaned, but the whole thing smelling of Murphy's oil—proof that Terry tried. Sometimes when the bar was slow, you could find him moving from one end to the other, limping a little from a bicycle accident back when we were teenagers, wiping everything clean, dusting and polishing the glasses, checking the fittings on the taps. Most of the business was pints, but Terry carried cheap spirits along the rail and high-dollar options on the higher shelves. Twelve stools along the bar, those empty tables behind me, hardwood flooring stretching the length of the room. Some of the boards were a little discolored where they'd been replaced, but not patchwork looking, no. The pool table was old but level, and had fresh green felt on it, at least a year or so before. A coal-burning stove sat over to one side, the kind of thing that might just be decoration in another place, but Terry would sometimes stoop down to throw some coal in it on a winter's night, and those nights it helped give the whole place a glow.

Terry didn't own the bar, but he took pride in it, and it seemed like his. Sometimes we liked to feel we were our own men.

"Remember Derek?" I asked. "From back in high school?" Old times drove our conversations most nights—that and sports and maybe a movie or TV show. Not politics, not ever. Tonight, this seemed like the right story to tell.

"Derek?" Terry said. "Our year? One of our group?"

"No. Couple of years older. Everybody called him Buzzhead."

"Gangly kid with the crew cut?"

"That's him. Reckless. Stole the Camaro from one of the Byerly brothers."

"Oh, yeah," said Terry. "I remember him, and the girl too, the one he stole it for. What was her name?"

"Julia," I said. I wasn't sure about that name, but I said it like I knew, confident. Sometimes that did the trick.

"Yeah, Julia." Terry was wiping down the counter, some spot I hadn't seen. "And we called her Julie, right? Or Jules maybe?"

"Something like that."

"Derek's a little vague, but man, she was a beauty, that Julie. Blond hair down to here, and that smile. New to the school, and just like that, all the guys were in love." He pointed his dishrag my way. "You too."

"She didn't want anything to do with me," I said. "Played hard to get with all of us, seemed like."

"Smart as well as pretty." We both laughed at that.

"She wasn't smart about Buzzhead," I said, trying to keep the story on track. "All of us hanging out that night, shooting the shit, and him pulling up in a new Camaro, asking if she wanted a ride."

"Like Prince Charming coming in to claim his princess," Terry said. "I

remember. And all of us blown away by where he got the money for it. Never crossed my mind he'd have stolen it."

Habit, I thought. Or reflex. The way Terry was going about his cleaning. The counter was spotless, but he touched here and there, seeing things I didn't.

"It was wrong, that," I said.

"Bad boys getting all the breaks?"

"No need to romanticize it," I said. "Almost got his arm broke, and I guess you can't blame 'em really. That was the Byerlys. Gotta look out for what's yours."

I swirled my drink, drank a little again.

We watched the game a little bit, listened to that wind outside. From that TV scroll, I saw that the weatherman had moved up the timing of the storm.

One of the guys from the pool table came over then, holding up his pitcher for a refill. While Terry pulled the tap, the pool player perched half of himself on the stool next to mine.

"How's it hanging?" he asked me.

I just looked straight ahead, didn't answer him. He seemed to take the hint.

A minute or so later, Terry handed him the pitcher, and he went back to his game.

"She moved away, didn't she?" Terry asked then. "A few months later, right? I wonder what happened to her."

"No idea," I said, and I didn't. She wasn't the reason I'd brought the whole thing up.

There were two on base and two out when Howard stepped up to the plate. He made a couple of practice swings, pointed his bat toward the pitcher, settled his stance. I made another bet with myself. He gets a hit, that's a yes. He strikes out, that's a no. A no-brainer, seemed like it to me. Howard had been coasting on his old reputation for a while now, and I said something to that effect to Terry.

"Young, isn't he?" said Terry. "Howard's uneven maybe, but he's still got a lot of life left in him."

"A has-been. Falls apart under pressure."

"A powerhouse. They know he can jack 'em when they need it."

Terry looked straight at me when he said it.

A couple of foul balls later, and Howard was still nonchalant, just going through the motions. His heart wasn't in it.

"He's finished. Nothing left there," I said with a vehemence I didn't feel. Not his fault for being unwilling, unable, I knew, but I was holding up my end.

"You gotta have a little faith in a person," Terry said.

The funny thing was that I did, in my own way.

But instead of the strike-out I was betting on, Howard's bat connected with the next pitch, a hard crack, and that ball just soared, yes, yes, yes.

"She's probably fat now," Terry said. "Popped out a couple of kids, you know how it goes."

"Who?" I asked.

"Judy," he said. "That was her name, not Julia. I remembered it while we were sitting here. And we called her Jude."

"Yeah. That's right." And it was. I remembered now too.

"Yeah, a couple of little rugrats—or maybe bratty teens by now, you add up

all the years. Spends all her time in front of the tube, eating potato chips or something. Waiting for her husband to come home. Maybe Derek. I mean, didn't he head off soon after she moved?"

Terry had made me another gimlet by this point, but I hadn't tasted it. I'd just been watching the ice crystals drift and glisten. I didn't want to bring my mouth to it yet, knowing that would melt them quicker.

"Prison," I said. "Stole another car soon after that, and the owner of that one turned it over to the cops."

"Oh, yeah." He shook his head, then laughed a little, but it was hollow. "Them were some crazy times, weren't they?"

"Simpler times," I said and caught Terry looking at me like that didn't make sense. Not scepticism now, not suspicion, just a little sadness. "Short stint in juvie," I said, covering it up. "That was it for him. Straight and narrow afterward, I heard."

On the TV, the announcer called out the next names in the lineup. At the pool table, the balls clinked, and one or two of them landed in the pockets, and the men mumbled and laughed. I felt like I could hear the coal burning in the stove too, then realized Terry hadn't put any in there.

"Do you really think she's like that?" I asked. Idle curiosity now, killing time. "Snaggleteothed? Spreading out around the middle?"

Terry gave a wry smile, just one half of his lips curved up. "I bet she's still a beauty. A few years on her, sure, but . . ." He picked up a glass, a clean one, and began to wipe the rim of it with a cloth. "Truth is, I don't think people change that much, not most of us, at least."

We aren't old. Weren't. But we've been around. Been around longer than we should've, I sometimes think.

I picked up the gimlet, took a sip.

It was about that time that the three men at the back packed it in. Tossed their cues on the table instead of putting them back in the rack, leaving it all for someone else to clean up. Terry. Whoever. They pulled on their jackets, settled up their tab, and headed past us into the cold night.

All three leaving together, that had meant yes, of course. Yeses everywhere I turned. Like I had much of a choice anyway.

"Another?" Terry asked me. "Or you ready to call it a night too?"

I thought about it, all of it.

"One more for old times," I said. "No rush." Maybe the truest words I'd said the whole night.

But true or not, when he turned away from me to reach for the Gordon's again, I decided I couldn't put it off any longer.

A coward's way of doing things, I know, him with his back to me, but I didn't think I could bear to face him.

Didn't matter. He caught sight of me there in the mirror as I pulled the gun.

Heck, maybe he knew it was coming all along.

I called it in a few minutes later from down the street. Dutiful like that.

"It's done," I said.

"About time," came the voice on the other end. "Fella like that can't learn to keep his mouth shut, past time we shut it for him."

"You don't know Terry was the one who talked," I said, despite myself. Not dutiful now, probably should've kept my own mouth shut. I felt my teeth grinding, heard that long pause on the other end of the line.

"Sometimes," he said finally, "you just know. You know what's happening. You know what you gotta do. There's no two ways about it. No room for second-guessing." He was saying *you* but he meant *him*, of course. Or maybe just everybody. *You* as a general thing. All of us. Another long pause, heavier breathing on the other end of the line. "*I* know," he said, and I could hear the impatience in his voice, maybe something stronger. "That's all that should matter to you." I could picture him wiping his forehead the way he did. Sweat that was never there. "Either way, it'll send a message."

I nodded. Like he could see me. Then I hung up without saying anything else.

Disrespect now, that's how he probably took it, and I was sure I'd pay later, one way or another. But disrespect wasn't it.

Just nothing more to say.

I started walking then, not headed anywhere in particular, not sure where I wanted to go or even where I was part of the time. My balance was unsteady. The drinks, I told myself. And then I wandered further into the darkness.

I could've done it all night, I guess—not the walking but that second-guessing back in the bar, that betting with myself. Whether Terry was gonna shake a drink or stir it, or how many glasses he might polish to a shine in the course of ten minutes or a half-hour or an hour. Which of those guys in the back was gonna win at pool, or any number of things about that Phillies game: hits and runs, fouls and strikes and outs. Or betting on when that rain was gonna finally fall, if the weatherman was gonna get it right or miss it by a mile, if we'd get a trickle or a flood.

Sheet lightning lit up the sky in little bursts as I walked, letting me see everything clear as day, but just for a second. And then other lightning zigzagged and split, like fingers reaching down from the heavens. Watching it, listening to the rumble of thunder, feeling those clouds bunching overhead, the storm crowding all around me . . . well, I felt like I could pinpoint when everything was gonna break and come down hard on top of me. It wasn't just the weather now, of course, that was the least of my worries, but I turned up my collar against the wind like that made a difference, then just kept walking. No use looking for shelter, either. It wouldn't do any good.

That story I was telling, it had gotten away from me. The Camaro, that's all I was trying to talk about. Wrongs and retribution. Betrayal and loss. A sense of responsibility. The price you pay. That was where it had started, why I'd brought it up. Trying to tell him something without telling him. But along the way, it had changed into something else, and now that something else kept following me, more of it coming out than I'd remembered before, things I wished had been left forgotten.

Like me and Terry one night that same summer, that was the memory dogging me now.

Sheet lightning that night too, I could picture it, and the two of us sitting out at the high-school football field, splitting a six-pack Terry had pilfered from the mini-fridge his dad kept in the garage. We'd been watching the sky, talking about girls—or I had, at least. Judy in particular. What I'd glimpsed when she

bent over one time, what I felt like she was trying to show me. What I was gonna do to her when we finally got together, what she was gonna do to me. The things boys say, thinking it makes them sound like men. The things some men say too, I guess.

Terry just shook his head. "You know, I'd just be happy to hold her hand."

I'd laughed at him for that. Hold her hand? I'd probably called him a pansy, something worse, something like that.

"Yeah," he'd said. "Take her to a movie. Hold her hand. Take her out for ice cream, and just sit there, looking into those blue eyes of hers."

"Her eyes are blue?"

"Yeah," he said. "And then there's that way her nose turns up just a little, just at the tip, and those freckles." And something about the way he said it . . . Well, this was right after the bike accident, and his limp was even worse back then before he'd gotten used to it. But even before the accident, he'd never seemed like the kind of guy girls went for, the kind who had any sort of a chance with them. None of us had thought that way about him.

"You should ask her out," I said, and felt bad as soon as I'd said it. An easy offer, I'd thought. Terry was no competition. He was sure to get rejected. Even more than ever, I thought he was weak, and that's what made it bad, what I'd said.

But he'd shaken his head again. "Nah, she's yours, gonna be. Already staked your claim, right?"—echoing one of the things I'd said, emphasizing that word *staked*. "And anyway, that's not how a fella treats his friend, stepping in like that on something that's his, something he wants. I just wouldn't feel good about that." He'd lifted his beer and taken a swig. "That's not the man I am."

It had made me happy then, what he said about Jude being mine, about him and me being friends, how funny it was him calling himself a man. All of it.

But again, those were simpler times. ●

