

FAT BOB

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FAT BOB

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THESIS ABSTRACT

FAT BOB

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This is a fiction writing thesis consisting of four short stories. Each short story was originally conceived of by the author during the graduate fiction writing classes taken at Auburn University during the spring and fall 2006 semesters.

In each story, the central character is male, white, and American. The ages of these males range between the early twenties and late thirties and each character comes from what could be considered the American South. Each character struggles with issues of character and personal identity. The first story, "Fat Bob," shows an intelligent, caring, successful, but obese man struggling to find love. "Closing the Door," focuses on the relationship between father and daughter in the midst of a deteriorating marriage. "A Good Coach," looks at how a girl's high school basketball coach is coping with an eradicating personal life and alcoholism. Finally, "A Sniper's Story" observes the protagonist's ability to connect what he does with how he feels.

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Style manual used: *MLA*

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Fat Bob

There were no big and tall stores in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for men like Bob Devane. In fact, only a handful of stores across the country made truly large-sized business attire and no one made clothes designed to make someone of Bob's extreme size look normal. His clothes just hung on him below the back of his waist, and were too tight in the upper back, belly, and thighs. Bob had accepted this years ago and on business trips stuck to wearing slacks, white-collared shirts with a colorful tie, and a jacket that matched the slacks, either dark blue or black. He found that those colors hid his ever-present sweat better. Bob brought two pairs of shoes on these business trips: black leather oxfords in quadruple E width, and Birkenstock sandals he would wear at the hotel. Bob had tried several brands of shoes designed by podiatrists for people with foot problems, which he didn't have, but nothing was as comfortable as the backless Birks after wearing his "job" shoes all day.

On this one particular day he had about two hours to walk from Gate 10 to Gate 37 in Terminal A at Dallas-Forth Worth in his oxfords—mentally, a half-marathon for Bob. He sold his product face to face, which he didn't mind. He hated the traveling, though not as much as he used to. Bob was the best salesman of his company's high-end software product, Executive Integrator; because of that, his company made traveling easier by paying for two side-by-side airplane seats. A few years ago, before Bob's success allowed his expense account to cover the extra seat, he had made fellow travelers' flights miserable if they were unlucky enough to be seated next to him. As much as Bob would try to squeeze his nearly 400 pounds of flesh into his seat, he

couldn't help but maintain physical contact with the person sitting next to him. He or she would twist their bodies into obviously uncomfortable positions to avoid touching him, and, invariably, would move to any empty seat if one were available. Bob used to wish airlines had size restrictions not only on luggage, but on passengers as well. That way, he wouldn't have to cause discomfort in someone else or have to walk miles in oxfords catching connecting flights.

If he sold his product to the hyper-computer literate who preferred faceless meetings—the geeks—Bob could have avoided traveling and conduct business online. But his clients had to be shown in person how the software program worked, how it enabled executives to track manufacturing, sales, purchases, taxes, distribution, and trends all in one program. Bob was the best in his business because he had a great product at a fair price. He was smart, honest, personable and non-judgmental in educating upper-level businessmen on what his program could do for them. Once his name got spread around the contacts within the power-broking club, he became the only person its members would deal with. And that forced him to travel.

Now that Bob had ample space on flights, the connections between flights were the travel times he dreaded. He was just under six feet tall, but looked shorter because he was nearly as big around as he was tall. His mother used to describe him as stocky or big-boned, but by the time he was nine Bob realized that those were code words for obese...corpulent...fat. His wheezing could be heard from 20 feet away and within that radius Bob could see that the terminal denizens marveled at his progress. His labored lumbering was a spectacle, something for people to tell their loved ones about at the end of their trip. “You’ll never believe how big this guy was”... “I don’t know how he even

got on the plane”... “I’ll bet he took up a whole row by himself”... “I don’t know why someone lets themselves get so big”...and on and on.

During these times Bob would hold up his best asset, his head. He had full, black, well-styled hair. His face had boyishly nice features: blue eyes, ruddy cheeks, full lips, rounded chin. He felt lucky that his weight did not show in his face; he imagined that if his face were like the rest of his body he wouldn’t have any physical asset to display. He confidently displayed an engaging smile with his clients because he had learned it showed that he was not embarrassed about his weight and that people around him didn’t have to be either. Bob’s secretary often suggested that when he retired, he should work as a Santa Claus because people liked his face so much.

Bob’s personality was as nice as his pleasing face indicated. Jovial, teasing, self-deprecating, he was unflappable—on the outside. He really didn’t mind what other adults thought of him. But when children would say things like, “Look at the fat man, Mommy,” Bob’s insecurities about his weight arose. “Fat ass, lard butt, heavy belly”—names from his childhood school days would assault him. Bob had learn to combat those insecurities by saying to himself, “Where are you now, Johnny?” Johnny Chingo was Bob’s nemesis in grade school and now his name applied to everyone who tried to destroy Bob’s faith in himself. Five years ago, when Bob went to his tenth high school reunion, he found out that Johnny had gone to prison for armed robbery. “Where are you now, Johnny?” became Bob’s mantra and he would say it over and over to drown out the voices that had hurt him so long ago.

Bob’s mantra was the main reason for his success in business and the extra business seat on flights, but it had not helped his love life. In high school, Johnny had

more girlfriends than most people had pairs of blue jeans. He wasn't enjoying their company now, but at least he knew what it was like to be desired.

Bob had once believed that if he acquired wealth women would overlook his flaw, but that did not seem to be the case. His confidence in business did not carry over to approaching women, so he had tried dating services and had actually gone out on three dates with women he had met through them. The problem was that the women could not get over how large Bob was. One date refused to even talk to him upon seeing him. Another went out with him, established that he wasn't a multi-millionaire, and told him not to call her again. The third went out with him, they seemed to get along, and she admitted she was looking for a long-term relationship. But, during the drive home, she said, "I just keep wondering if any children we might have would be overweight." And with that comment, Bob knew there would be no future in that relationship either.

He had looked at a couple of websites that connected men to eligible Russian women for marriage and contemplated trying that route. He didn't really want a wife who couldn't speak English and didn't understand American culture, but he did want someone to love and the women on the website possessed the looks Bob desired: tall, clear skin, thick hair, a pretty smile, thin—or, at least not overweight. He just couldn't bring himself to submit the necessary paperwork to get the process started. Even if the women selected wanted to live in America and even though Bob believed that the information highway allowed people like him to have greater opportunities in finding that special someone, he felt that in the end he would lose. No matter how grateful a woman might be to be lifted out of poverty, at some point wouldn't she look at Bob and say to herself, "Why do I have to be stuck with that for a husband?" Feeling resentful and

longing for something better, they would look for a way out. Bob might get what he wanted for a short time, but for anything long term, he needed a woman to know who he was from the beginning and the means in life to be able to resist the initial temptation of financial stability. He wasn't ready to submit the paperwork for a mail-order bride, not yet anyway.

Now, today, the large clock above Gate 28 let Bob know that he had an hour and fifteen minutes before having to board his connecting flight to Los Angeles, and the delicious waft flowing through that section of the terminal from the Cinnabon bakery at Gate 29 gave him the perfect excuse to catch his breath. He could sit down for a few minutes and satisfy his desire for a cinnamon roll under the pretense of needing the energy to walk another eight gates in his oxfords.

As Bob stood in line, trying to decide if he wanted just a classic, cream-cheese-frosting-topped roll, or a Caramel Pecanbon, a woman's voice behind him said, "Bob Devane, is that you?" Bob couldn't place the voice, so he began to carefully turn around in the tight café-styled seating area to avoid having small objects get spilled by his mass—he'd done that before and always felt terrible. When he finally made the 180 degree turn, a brown-haired, tight-sweater-wearing, smiling woman gave him a hug and stepped back while holding onto his upper arms. "I knew it! I spotted you passing by my gate and was sure it was you." Her green eyes shined. Maybe it was the hug, maybe it was his hunger—whatever it was, Bob was unusually embarrassed. He couldn't remember the attractive woman's face, much less put a name to it.

“Bob, it’s me, Jennifer Beamer,” the woman claimed. “It’s probably the hair color. A few years ago, I decided that blonde was attracting the wrong kinds. If you know what I mean.” She dropped her arms and simply stood before him, smiling.

Jennifer Beamer, the name of one of Bob’s—one of every boy’s—objects of desire at Tulsa Union High. Bob, by tutoring her after class, was the reason Jennifer passed trigonometry and physics their senior year. He smiled back at her, feeling stupid for not recognizing the smile and eyes through the change of hair color. Jennifer asked, “So, do you have time to have a cup of coffee with an old friend?”

He did. He got her order and got his—he decided on the caramel and pecan topped roll—and brought the items to a small round table Jennifer had chosen. They quickly covered the past fifteen years of each other’s lives. Jennifer was an events coordinator at a Dallas golf course and resort. She was currently on her way to Tampa for a resorts convention. She brought up the subject of attachments first.

“I thought for sure you would have been married by now,” she said. “You were so smart, funny, and nice. I just knew some girl was going to snatch you up.”

Bob thanked her for saying so, but admitted he hadn’t had much luck romantically. He told her that he didn’t remember seeing her at the reunion. He said, “When you didn’t show up, I figured you must have married some tycoon and were busying sunning yourself on the French Riviera or skiing in the Alps.”

“No, I wasn’t so fortunate. I didn’t go to the reunion because my boyfriend at the time nearly died in a car wreck the month before and I thought I should stay with him during his recovery. I thought he was the one, but he turned out like the rest of them, a

jerk. That's one of the reasons why I got so excited when I saw you. It seems like forever since I've talked to a nice man. ”

They chitchatted some more before Bob got the nerve to ask, “Why don't we date now and see where it goes?”

She replied, “It wouldn't work.”

“Why not?”

“Bob,” she said, “one thing I've realized over the past 15 years is that life is too short to live with anything but the truth. So, as your friend, I'm just going to say it...Bob, you're fat. You're pleasant enough to look at, but I can't see myself being with someone so large. It's just not appealing to me. But I would love to renew our friendship. I so need someone good in my life.”

“Then friends it is,” Bob said quietly, forcing a smile.

Before he could say more, the boarding call for Jennifer's flight was announced and she said, “Bob, I've got to go. Here's my number. Please call me when you get back from your trip, okay?” She placed her business card with her hand-written cell phone number on it in the breast pocket of Bob's sport coat. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried off to catch her flight.

Bob watched her blend into the passing crowd, her dark hair seeming to shine more than anyone else's, her blue sweater seeming a prettier color than anything anyone else was wearing. He finally lost sight of her and glanced at the store's clock to see that he had 30 minutes to boarding—not a lot of time, given his size, to walk down to Gate 37. Yet now, that same thirty minutes suddenly seemed too long, too long to go through the emotions he was feeling while rushing to get to his flight. He needed more time to sit

with his thoughts, alone, before having to face anyone who might observe him working out a painfully heard truth. His pain would be on display for thirty minutes and Bob dreaded that.

The truth Jennifer had told him wasn't anything he hadn't already known or heard. But she had said it so outright that he hadn't been able to ready himself for it. Even now, he could feel that the smile he had forced onto his face was fading, and that he couldn't compose the fake mask of indifference he had used for so many years now to try to combat the world's view of him. What he needed was to go someplace where no one else could see him, such as a stall in a nearby restroom, where he could recover and stabilize his emotions. Thirty minutes to walk eight gates wouldn't allow him to do that.

He forced himself up. He hadn't finished his Cinnabon roll or his coffee, but threw them both in the trash and began walking painfully toward Gate 37—painful, not just because of his size but because his shoes, which had never been exactly roomy, pinched more than he realized. He had squeezed himself into them, and into his clothes, for what seemed like his whole life. He had grown used to an almost continual state of discomfort.

He walked steadily, without smiling. He just focused on getting to the gate, and only slowly began to realize the reaction from the oncoming traffic in the terminal. Instead of openly gaping and staring as they passed, they calmly moved out of his way while keeping their eyes averted. What a relief, he thought. But with his mind still on Jennifer's words, he didn't go to the trouble of figuring out exactly how or why that had happened.

Halfway to the gate, however, it occurred to him that he should wear his comfortable Birks on flights. The hell with looking professional during travel he thought. All he really needed to do was to show up to his client's office in appropriate attire. It didn't matter what he looked like on his way there or on his way home. With comfortable footwear he could spend time between flights walking through the terminals instead of struggling through them. Walking, itself—for exercise, even—could become something he could do without a struggle. Perhaps it was possible that struggling, in general, was something he could eventually give up.

He reached Gate 37 five minutes early. He retrieved his boarding pass from the inside pocket of his sports coat, and then found himself checking his breast pocket as well, for the card that Jennifer had placed there. Was it still there? Yes. It was. And he had just enough time to catch his breath before boarding the next stage of his life.

Closing the Door

Mike's two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Gloria, was finally asleep in her Little Princess bed. He had read to her, prayed with her, talked to her, even pretended to sleep himself in order to coax her into closing her eyes. She never wanted to sleep, and Mike knew that it was partly because she so reveled in the attention her mommy and daddy showered on her. The reason for all that attention, Mike also knew, was so that he and Jessica, Gloria's mother, would not have to deal with each other.

Gloria's little room, highlighted by the Winnie-the-Pooh nightlight, reminded Mike of the way he felt two nights ago while sitting in his car at the hospital parking garage after finishing his evening shift in the ER. The soft light highlighting the Austin skyline, made more brilliant due to the rose-colored hue of the springtime setting sun, gave Mike such a sense of peace that he didn't want to leave. Mike enjoyed the room's solace for a few moments, then stood up, tucked the sheets and blankets under the blonde curls of his daughter, and placed *One Fish Two Fish* back into her two-shelved bookcase. The rest of the room didn't need to be straightened; Mike and Gloria started every bedtime with clean-up time. This consisted of Mike and Gloria singing "clean-up, clean-up, everybody clean-up" while little toys, mostly Happy Meal give-aways, were put into the large plastic bucket that served as a toy chest. Clothes were folded and put onto the shelves that served as a dresser; Gloria liked to play dress up at least three times a day, and any clothes that needed laundering were put into the plastic hamper near the door.

After leaning over to give a final kiss to the forehead of his child, Mike inhaled deeply and readied himself to begin studying for his Physics exam, again. He was 25-years-old and a junior at the University of Texas. On paper, Mike did not have time to spend what was often two hours of night-night with Gloria. Getting through his pre-med courses, holding a full-time job for little over minimum wage as an ER Tech at St. David's Hospital, and the continual marital struggles with his wife were enough to keep anyone busy.

Jessica was a stay-at-home mom—in large part because she had trouble keeping a job. But Gloria insisted Daddy put her to bed and Mike couldn't say no. Mike didn't argue with his daughter; he enjoyed the time spent with her. Besides, Mommy got to put her to bed at least a couple of nights a week as Mike's shift at the ER often ran well past Gloria's bedtime.

Opening the door to the living room, Mike stepped into the minefield of marriage.

"A world record," he cheerfully stated, coming into the living room, hoping that some levity could hold back the storm for another day. Receiving just a cold stare, Mike added, "She asked where Jesus got His groceries from tonight. I told her that Jesus probably doesn't need groceries in the same way we need them." Mike sat down on the hand-me-down loveseat across from his brooding wife. "And then she asks, 'Did Jesus have to get groceries when he was alive?' I told her that Jesus is still alive, but when he walked the earth, there weren't really grocery stores, more like open markets. And of course, that took another 15 minutes to explain."

Mike hoped that his one-sided discussions on the important religious topics in their daughter's life could sooth the disposition of the beast he now shared the room with.

During their four years of marriage, he had sometimes been able to change her darker moods, though he was never sure what the right formula was. Those moods, which appeared every couple of weeks, usually brought a fight with them. And if the fight got bad enough, Jessica would threaten divorce. Unable to bear the thought of breaking up his family and potentially losing contact with Gloria, Mike would then surrender his position and beg forgiveness, whether he had culpability or not. It seemed to him that he had no choice. He couldn't even think the word *divorce* without feeling a cramp in his stomach, a sense of wrongness so strong that he might as well have been asked to murder someone. It was mostly because of Gloria that he stayed. But there was something else, too—that when a man made a decision, like marriage, he had to follow through with it—even when he felt crippled by it. Conceding over and over to Jessica's bullying tactics was making him feel as if he had lost part of his masculinity, that he had lost part of himself. Hoping to avoid any more loss, he did all he could to prevent fights from happening.

“So.” Jessica said in a clipped voice, and paused, raising one eyebrow, always, for effect, “you're ready to discuss what happened this afternoon?”

Hell no, Mike thought. He now knew that he had only a slim chance to stave off the upcoming clash Jessica seemed to be building up to. “Jessica,” Mike said, “please let's not go over this right now. I have a Physics final tomorrow morning. I don't have time for this. Besides, I thought we agreed on waiting another day.”

“No, you agreed to wait another day,” Jessica said. Eyes narrowing, seat shifting, she was boiling for a fight. Her voice raised some. “We aren't doing anything else until you admit that you were wrong for not encouraging me go to the doctor.”

So much for trying pleasantness, Mike thought. Wasn't putting Gloria to bed and still needing to study for a class he must not only pass, but do well in, enough to get him a pass for the night? Besides, he hadn't told her not to go to the doctor, he just said she should wait another day. He mustered one last try to hold back her fury. "Look, Jessica," he said, "I know you had a headache this morning. You have headaches lots of mornings. I swear, after the test tomorrow, I'll come home and we'll hash this out." Mike moved from the love seat to the nearby kitchen table, getting the two-inch behemoth, Physics Today, out of his book bag. As he opened the book, he added, "So can we please just call it a night so I can study?" Mike looked into his book, attempting to imitate a student so involved in studying that he didn't have time for anything else.

The attempt meant nothing. Jessica got up and followed Mike to the table. "Wake up and smell the coffee." One of her favorite phrases. "We will talk this out right now." The 'you better listen or else' tone.

He didn't respond.

"You son-of-a-bitch. Do you really think you can sit there and ignore me? Well I've got news for you." The building crescendo—her controlled, inside voice—was giving way to her emotional I-don't-care-who-is-listening voice. Mike knew what was going on. He had seen this for what seemed like a thousand times before—Jessica giving into her anger. "You are not the dictator you think you are," she said. "You don't know as much as you think you do. If I say I'm sick, then I'm sick."

Earlier that morning, Jessica had lain in bed complaining about being too sick to get up and saying she needed to see a doctor. Mike, always concerned about spending money they didn't have, had conducted a cursory exam on her—the same exam he

conducted with every patient he saw during his ER shifts. He mentally recounted his findings: no fever; non-elevated, steady and strong pulse; no nausea; no vomiting; eyes clear; respirations normal and full; skin not clammy; no discoloration around the ear, nose, or throat; and mentally capable of answering all questions. He didn't have the experience or knowledge to surmise what he was sure was a psychological ailment, but physically he could find nothing wrong.

They didn't have medical insurance, so a doctor visit was at least \$50.00. That wasn't counting whatever elixir the doctor would have given Jessica just to ease her fears of mortality and get her to leave his clinic. But when Mike had suggested waiting another day or so before seeing a doctor, Jessica had called him a callous SOB for suggesting she suffer longer.

Now she was standing over him, saying, "And if I'm sick, then I want to see a doctor. Not some wanna-be tech with a stethoscope, pretending to be a doctor. You will not talk me into placing my life into jeopardy again!" At that, she stomped off.

Mike didn't care; she had thrown her best punch and he wasn't hit. These days, the money they had saved was more important than placating her and giving into her whims. His mind started focusing on the coefficient of kinetic friction and he was actually beginning to understand the mysteries of the mathematical science called physics.

For the next four hours, Jessica moved from one area of their 800-square-foot-apartment to another like a caged animal looking for something new and never finding it. Whenever she passed Mike, which was often, she would shower him with some unpleasantries. "Fucking asshole." A favorite. "You think you're sooo smart, don't you? Think you've got it all figured out, huh? Well, you don't know shit." Mike only barely

understood that there was someone else in the same residence as he was. He had learned long ago to tune out his betrothed when necessary.

The following afternoon, Mike whistled the entire way home from his Physics Final. Feeling victorious, he decided to extend his winning streak by going home and making amends with Jessica. He let himself into the quiet apartment. Finding no one home, he made himself a sandwich and reflected on his wife.

Jessica did seem to love Gloria and she did do a good job of making their home presentable when company came over—although the rest of the time the place was a mess.

The jobs she was able to get were good jobs, and the reasons she couldn't hold onto them were never, according to her, her fault: the other girls didn't like her, the boss was too harsh on her for being late, or she just didn't believe in the company's product and felt she couldn't, in good conscious, sell it anymore.

She always had an excuse. Mike believed that Jessica, among her other problems, just didn't believe in herself; maybe she didn't believe in anything.

Once he and Jessica had gotten through the first year of marriage, Mike knew he shouldn't have married her. The excitement of starting a life together was replaced by the inescapable fact that they were very different people. Too different.

The biggest difference was that there was no 'holy ground' during their arguments. There was nothing Jessica wouldn't say or do when angry. Winning was more important than any losses sustained or harm caused.

Mike remembered his parents' fights. They eventually got divorced, but their arguments were civil compared to his and Jessica's. No four letter words, no screaming

in front of the kids, certainly none of the slapping or punching that Jessica had sometimes felt necessary to indulge in.

About the time Mike had understood that his marriage was vastly different than what he had expected or wanted it to be, Jessica had informed him that she was pregnant. He knew then that he would have to stick it out. For the sake of his child, he would break the cycle his parents had started and make his marriage work. He redoubled his resolve to outlast any problem he and Jessica had in hopes that she would begin to believe in their marriage enough to stop trying to destroy, during their fights, any good feelings they had toward one another.

Three years, a baby girl, a four-year commitment to the Army, a move back to Austin, Texas—where they first met—and a year of college later, Mike was still married to the brown-eyed girl whose smile had once melted his heart and convinced him that he had to make her his.

Finishing his sandwich, Mike felt at peace when Jessica and Gloria walked into the door. He smiled at the two as they entered the living room; he was eager to continue his day's winning streak.

“Daddy!” Gloria exclaimed and ran into Mike's arms.

Jessica walked rapidly to their bedroom without a word or look.

Gloria, with a little prodding, related how she and Mommy had been to the doctor's office and then went shopping for a new dress for Mommy.

Mike then asked his informant, “Are you hungry?”

“Uh-hun. Peanut butter and jelly, please.”

Mike placed her in the booster seat on the far side of the table and went into the adjacent kitchen. As he prepared his child's favorite delicacy, Mike thought about how he was going to broach the dress-buying with Jessica. He figured a \$100 easy, spent in one day, on things they didn't need, with money they didn't have.

Jessica came back from the bedroom and sat down across from Gloria. Hoping to start pleasantly, maybe work in how good he felt about the exam, and then clear up any ill-feelings left from the day prior, Mike cheerfully asked, "How was your day?"

"Fine," she responded, watching Gloria eat.

Mike came back into the dining room, put Gloria's plate in front of her and sat in between his two girls, his attention on Jessica.

"Thank you, Daddy," Gloria said before going to work on her lunch.

"You're welcome, baby," Mike responded. After waiting a few seconds, Mike said, "Well, what did you buy?" He decided to show how forgiving he was about the dress.

"Just some things we needed."

"Like what?" Mike asked.

Jessica turned her head toward Mike, coolly staring at him and said, "I also went to the university clinic." She then got up from the table and moved into the kitchen. "I went to get an exam." She opened the fridge and peered inside.

Mike didn't want to immediately discuss the doctor visit. He had hoped they could stay away from the previous day's troubles until after he could display his thoughtful understanding about the purchased garment. Resigning himself to her lead, he asked, "So what did the doctor say?"

Jessica closed the refrigerator door, body erect, head straight, shoulders back, eyebrows raised, then turned to Mike and said, “The doctor said I probably had a touch of flu yesterday and somehow had fought off the virus. I should feel better by tomorrow.”

Mike, unable to control his sarcasm, blurted, “Thank God for miracles!”

Jessica’s eyes narrowed and her body seemed to become more tense.

Smiling and discounting her reaction, Mike continued what even he could see as an ill-fated attempt to humor himself. “So, how much did this pro-fess-ion-al piece of information cost us?”

“Does it matter?” she stated, crouching slightly, mood darkening.

Mike pondered his options. Saying yes would bring a fight. Saying no would mean that this act of insanity, and consequent bank account depletion, could happen again. Telling the truth was always best, wasn’t it?

“Yes,” Mike said with confidence.

Jessica sprang into action. Grabbing the butcher knife from the counter-top, she came around the kitchen counter toward the dining room table with the knife held over her head, her eyes crazy-looking. “How dare you!” she yelled.

Gloria, at the other end of the table, out of harm’s way, looked up, scared, and Mike jumped up from the table. I should have said no! his head screamed. Backing up and thinking fast, Mike said, “Jessica, put the knife down. You really don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Fuck you,” she replied as she continued towards him.

Mike realized that he could physically stop her if he really wanted to. This caused him to relax and stand his ground. When she closed within range of a strike, Mike

reached for her right arm with his left hand, preventing the over-hand stab she might have employed. He reached out his right hand, grabbed the front of her shirt, and kept her body a full arm's length from him. The fact that his reach was longer than hers kept her off balance and unable to use the knife in a threatening way.

For a few seconds she struggled, eyes closed, teeth gritted. Once she realized she couldn't do anything, she stopped moving and stared at Mike. She still had hatred in her eyes; she was still dangerous.

Mike calmly stated, "Let go of the knife." Jessica bared her teeth. Gloria began to cry loudly. Slowly, authoritatively, Mike again stated, "Let go of the knife, Jessica."

Jessica let go of the knife and said, "Now let go of me." Her teeth were still bared, but her body was now limp. Once Mike let go, Jessica went to Gloria, picked up the now screaming child, turned to Mike and said in a shaky, hysterical voice, "Gloria and I are leaving and we're not coming back."

Mike looked at his daughter who was reaching out to him and said, "I don't think you should be driving with Gloria right now."

Jessica said, "You don't seem to get it through your thick skull, do you? After all the times I've told you that if you don't start treating me better that you will lose me. Well you've done it this time. I'm divorcing your ass. And because I'm her mother and I'll take her whenever I want to."

Mike could tell that Jessica was trying to regain her composure, though she was still visibly shaking. He said, "I don't think you should be driving at all, though I won't pretend I can stop you. But I'll be damned if I let you take our daughter on a drive in your current condition."

“You can go to hell!” Jessica shouted. “When are you going to realize that you don’t control everything around here?” She began to walk past Mike, toward the living room and the front door. When Jessica was closest to him, Gloria suddenly grabbed Mike, lifting herself out of Jessica’s arms, and held onto him.

Jessica stopped and turned. “Give her back to me,” she said. Hysteria gone, her tone implied a threat.

Mike backed up a few paces. Gloria was holding onto him with her arms and legs, and her head buried in his neck. “No. You go and cool off.” He then offered, “Come back in a couple of hours and we’ll talk this out.”

“Give her back,” Jessica said coldly.

By her new tone, Mike knew that her threat had just increased to the point where she was willing to fight to the death. He turned, with the baby still in his arms, and started for the bathroom, and as he walked through the doorway his eyesight went bright white, accompanied by a sharp pain to the back of his head. He quickly closed and locked the door behind him. Gloria was screaming and he gently put her on the countertop to feel the back of his head. Nausea boiled in his stomach as he felt the thick warmth of his own blood. Staying as calm as he could, he felt for the source of injury. Just a small laceration, no bone felt. Minor injury, he thought.

He knelt down in front of the counter to catch his breath. A moment later he stood up and said, “Daddy’s okay, sugar.” Gloria’s crying began to slow down.

On the other side of the door, a muffled litany of insults was in full swing, but within the small confines of the bathroom Mike tried to project a serene, peaceful mood.

He didn't want Gloria to be further exposed to the turmoil that had just occurred; he stroked her hair and hummed lullabies.

The verbal barrage on the other side of the door lasted only a few more minutes. A knock on the front door brought the University Police Department into the drama and a halt to the yelling. A concerned neighbor had intervened.

After questioning Jessica, the police asked to see Mike. Mike placed Gloria on the floor of the bathroom and went into the living room to answer their questions. Mike went back to the bathroom with Gloria when the police took Jessica to the county jail for domestic violence.

Gloria said, "Daddy's bleeding."

"Yeah, but a little blood never hurt anyone," Mike said. "Remember when you scraped your knee and it was bleeding?" Gloria nodded. "And remember how it quit bleeding and you were okay?" More nods. "Well, that's how it will be with daddy's head. I'll just clean it, leave it alone, and it will get better all by itself. I'll be fine. Okay?"

"Okay." Gloria said, and finally she smiled.

There were no more fights in their house after that. After Mike had bailed Jessica out of jail, brought her home, put Gloria to bed and sat down across from her at the dinner table, she—for the last time in their married life—said she wanted a divorce. He listened to the tense, angry sound of her voice, so grating in the quiet room, so different than the tone he used when putting Gloria to bed. The way she spoke had somehow, for the first time, gained more power than what she said, and he saw suddenly that divorce

was just an action, nothing more. It was a fact with a specific meaning, and everything that he had attached to it he had attached himself.

He didn't feel angry or apologetic. He didn't even ask her if she knew what she was doing. He didn't even say that he would fight for Gloria and probably win. She would find that out soon enough. He just said okay and walked into Gloria's room to watch his daughter sleep while the stresses of the world stayed on the other side of the door.

A Good Coach

Last March, after losing the state championship for the third time in five years and having Joyce leave him two weeks later, began Hammond Mercer's escape from reality. The 33-year-old, once headlined as "Best Girl's High School Basketball Coach in State" by Oklahoma City's Daily Southwestern newspaper, began to heavily drink. He relied on ten years of habit to get him to and from Taylor High School and maintain at least the outer appearance of a respectable teacher. But inside his mind, he lived in a fog of forgetfulness. In early May he passed out while teaching a geography class. Hammond knew that the principal's reason for giving him another chance was based solely on his success as head coach for the Lady Tigers basketball team.

He needed to get away he thought; he needed to get some fresh air. So at the start of the summer he turned in the lease to the apartment he had shared with Joyce and flew to Maine to begin a three month hike of the Appalachian Trail.

His original plan was to hike through New Hampshire, then Vermont, and into Massachusetts by July, but he kept running into many co-eds who were spending their summer camping and partying along the 2,100 mile footpath. He enjoyed flirting with them even though many of them called him "Sir"; even though they knew he was too old for them. But it was a completely different challenge from what he was used to dealing with, keeping the sexually savvy teenagers that he coached and worked with from coming onto him. They were so young that they didn't have sense not to. And there had been a

situation during that drunken spring, after his wife left, when he had not been savvy enough to avoid one of them. But that was in the past, before the summer of hiking began, along with a month of sobriety.

But before he could gain any insight into his life his hike came to an end in Rutland, Vermont, as giardia—a parasite he must have ingested drinking untreated stream water—caused uncontrolled diarrhea and forced him to seek medical attention. The three weeks he spent recovering there allowed him to gain an intimate knowledge of the many breweries in the tourist-rich area, and brought an end to the clarity his hike through New Hampshire had begun.

Hammond returned to Oklahoma in early August and got a one bedroom on Robinson Avenue in a complex at the western edge of Oklahoma City, just outside suburban Taylor. He spent the month he had remaining before the start of school staying in a beer-induced haze. In September, he was confidentially told by a disinterested third party that Carolyn Moxley, the venerated head coach at Southwestern State University, planned on retiring after the season, and that his name had been mentioned as a possible replacement. He knew that his best chance to getting the coveted college job was to win the state championship. With that in mind, he cut back on his drinking, and by the last Monday of October, when the northerly winds and dropping temperatures forced athletics indoors, the alcoholic trance of the past eight months was overcome by Hammond's competitive nature. His mind returned to last season's loss in the state championship and he became Coach Mercer again. As he gathered his team in the Taylor High gymnasium for their first practice session of the basketball season, he was focused on redemption—the team's and his own.

Twelve basketball players stood in a single-file line at mid-court, facing banners that signified the success of previous teams. The banners were hung in the rafters away from the gym's main entrance to intimidate opposing teams as they entered the Lady Tiger's homecourt, locally referred to as the "The Lair." The multiple district and regional banners on either side of the lone state championship banner—won six years ago—proved that Coach Mercer's Lady Tigers were a force to contend with.

Coach Mercer stood in front of his players with his hands clenched together behind his back. He ensured he had their full attention and reinforced his status by briefly casting his light brown eyes upon the eyes of each player before speaking. "Guys," he said—he never referred to them as girls, wanting them to be tough basketball players first—"I want you to look at the banners in front of you." He turned his tall, thin, athletic frame to face the banners for a few seconds and then turned to face the team again.

"For the past ten years," he said, "the Lady Tigers have represented Taylor in every post-season tournament. Every year our goal is to not only win district and region, but to win that large red banner with gold letters in the middle that says State Champions. This year is no different. All you have to do is execute the plays. Coach Summers and I will worry about calling the plays." He motioned to Coach Summers who was standing at the team's far right, the third-year biology teacher at Taylor High who had played for a small women's Christian college up in Kansas somewhere—Hammond could never remember the college's name. "And the managers will take care of the equipment," he added, motioning to the one manager—a junior—standing at the team's far left. He did notice and wonder for a second, but only a second, why there was only one manager

instead of the usual two. But because this was the first practice of the season, Hammond felt that he could not allow anything to get him off-track.

To get himself back to the task on hand he said, “Guys, we are going to work hard on this court. Most of you were here last year and know what to expect,” He didn’t like to waste a lot of time talking prior to practice and would have preferred to begin warm-ups right then, but he didn’t know all of the names of this season’s team members. Embarrassed, but unwilling to admit he didn’t know, he said, “Just so you all know each other, I want you to state the name you want to be called, what your position is, and what grade you’re in. Devon, let’s start with you.” Devon was a senior forward on Coach Mercer’s far right of the lineup—and one of the few players’ whose name he remembered. To her right was Rachael, a junior center, and so on through Martha, the lone junior-year equipment manager.

Coach Mercer stood quietly immobile after the introductions. His oversight of not looking at the player roster prior to practice had forced the question of the missing equipment manager to now take hold of his mind. Every year up to now there had been a returning senior equipment manager in addition to an incoming junior. And even though he didn’t always remember the equipment manager’s names, he did remember Regina—the name of the missing senior. The sudden memory of her face, flush with erotic enthusiasm, locked-up his voice and kept him still until Coach Summers’ cough reminded Hammond that he was expected to continue. He closed his eyes and slightly shook his head to clear the incredibly detailed memory of the young woman’s face. Getting back into the moment and resuming the mantle of coach he said—though not with the confidence he had earlier displayed—“All right guys, let’s start with three laps

around the court to warm up. Then we'll circle mid-court and stretch out." Coach Mercer blew his whistle and the girls began to work up a sweat; their coach had worked up one already.

He had desperately tried to bury last April's tawdry incident with Regina, never to resurface, and had succeeded...for a while. Now, the gymnasium, normally the one place he felt most secure, seemed full of shadows and outcroppings where enemies could hide. Hammond felt exposed and began looking around to see who could be watching him. His gaze fell on the middle-aged tall figure of Samantha Dash sitting in the stands with paper and pen in hand. Hammond figured that she must have entered the gym unnoticed during his banner speech. Seeing her reminded him that he had another issue to deal with that day, which helped him regain some of his lost composure. She smiled warmly at him. He smiled back and nodded.

Samantha, the beat writer for Oklahoma City's local high school sports scene for The Daily Southwestern, the largest circulated paper in the state, wanted to run a story that signified the start of a new season and was going to highlight Hammond's team. He normally did not allow interruptions during his practices, but a favorable interview would push his name to the front of anyone's mind as the best successor for the State job. Besides, he was pretty sure that Samantha had been the disinterested party who had confidentially told him of Coach Moxley's impending retirement. He felt that he owed her a favor.

But as he watched the team complete their first lap, he regretted his agreement to the interview. With the resurrection of his buried mistake so fresh on his mind, that day's practice was going to be difficult enough for him to regain his composure and represent

himself as a confident, clear-headed coach. He felt that having the veteran reporter on hand to witness that practice before an interview was akin to dropping some blood along the Great Barrier Reef to see if any sharks might come around.

He walked over to the sideline where his assistant, Gale Summers, was standing. He told her to lead the team in stretching once they completed their laps so that he could excuse himself to visit the restroom. He then walked to his office, located behind the right-hand stands of the gym to try to gather his thoughts before reappearing on the court.

This was the same office Hammond had slept in for a week last March while Joyce packed her things and moved out of their apartment. At four in the afternoon on his third day of sleeping in his office, Hammond had been in there dressed in a t-shirt, shorts and flip flops. He had masochistically reviewed the state final's loss for the third time while drinking seven or eight beers. It was around then that Regina opened his door and asked if they could talk.

Hammond liked helping his students out with their problems and felt that talking to Regina would keep his mind off of his own problems; he waved her in. She sat down in the chair next to him and told him that because she kept some of her personal items in the basketball equipment storage room she had realized that he was staying in his office. She said she was concerned about him and wanted him to know that he could talk to her. She appeared so mature, relaxed, and concerned. He needed to talk to someone, so he told her that he felt he had lost his ability to win the big game. Seeing that she accepted his honesty without comment, he opened himself a little more by telling her that Joyce was leaving him because he accused her of being so needy that he couldn't adequately focus on of the state championship. Though, in reality he told Regina, he was afraid of

agreeing to the commitment of the baby she wanted to have, and he had used the state championship loss as an excuse to push her away. He ended his confession by saying that now, because he didn't think he could win state again, he would probably be stuck in Taylor, Oklahoma, forever, and wouldn't even have a family to show for it.

Having told the complete truth, half-drunk, and feeling vulnerable, he buried his head in his folded arms. He felt Regina encircle his head with her arms and kiss the top of his head. He lifted his face and kissed her on the mouth; she kissed back. She was warm and soft and her lovemaking was as mature as her ability to listen to his problems. And she did, temporarily, make Hammond forget about his problems.

Afterwards, as he lay on the couch emotionally and physically drained, Regina dressed and said, "Coach, I've got to go now, or I'll be late for supper."

As she left the office, Hammond broke into a cold sweat. What the hell had he just done? He drained the rest of his beer, worrying that his one afternoon of not resisting what realistically speaking, he felt would have been nearly impossible for anyone to resist would destroy the one good thing he had left in his life, his status as coach of the Lady Tigers. All he could do at that point was to forget the stupid mistake, hope the incident got buried forever, and under no circumstances ever let his guard down again.

He also had to make sure Regina did not think she had a special relationship with him. Otherwise, like a stray dog that has just been fed, she would continue to come back for more. He knew that no amount of logic or letting her down easy would have worked. He simply had to make it seem as if he really never wanted to see her again and hope that she was so ashamed that she never brought the incident up; otherwise he would have to

vehemently deny it, probably hurting her more. So when she came by his office the next afternoon he rudely told her to leave. He had to.

She never did come back; in fact, Hammond didn't run into her again. As the weeks went by, Hammond's memory of the incident diminished to the point that by the time he nearly got fired in May, he barely thought of it. By the time he was seen in the Regional Medical Center in Rutland, Vermont, in early July, he had totally forgotten about the incident, or so he told himself.

After mentally reliving the incident in his office Hammond knew he could not allow his actions to display his weakness around Samantha or she would dig until she found the treasure of dirt he was trying to hide. A stew of deception, he knew, was easier to consume when served with a little truth for flavoring; he needed to have Regina's name brought up without looking like he instigated it. Then he would act surprised after being told that she wasn't part of the team this year. That would lead to him "trying" to refocus his attention on his current team. If he was able to pull off his plan, any difference Samantha might notice in his demeanor could be explained by his concern for a former member of the team—the kind of concern any good coach would have.

He thought of himself as a good coach. It was all he cared about, maybe a little too much. The moment reminded him of the clarity he had had when he was hiking in the White National Forrest of New Hampshire, admiring the natural scenery and thinking that there must be something more in life to put his faith in than just his coaching. His subsequent reentry into an alcohol-induced, semi-coma put that thought on hold. Now he went further and pondered whether he should try making a deal with God to keep his

secret hidden so that he could go back to being a good coach. He didn't believe that he would ever give into a moment of lust with a student again, so that wouldn't be an honest deal with the Almighty. Maybe in exchange for keeping his liaison secret he would agree to have a baby with Joyce—if she would take him back. Didn't the Bible say something about be fruitful and multiply? Only he felt it would be disingenuous to do so now after so many years of relying solely on himself. After all, his prayers had not been answered when, at the age of twelve, his mother had died of cancer, leaving Hammond alone with his alcoholic, controlling father. He had quit asking for help since then. And as he left his office he whispered, "Good luck," to himself in pulling off the upcoming slight of hand.

Coach Mercer walked back onto the court and saw Martha dragging two large nylon bags of basketballs onto the court from the adjacent basketball locker room. Hammond knew that because this was her first practice with the varsity team, her desire to perform well would make the first step of his plan easier—to manipulate someone else into bringing up Regina's name. "Martha," he called to her. When she walked over to where he was standing he asked, "Where's the senior equipment manager?"

"Regina? She left school after last year, Coach," the girl said.

Phase one complete, Hammond thought. He said, "She did? Oh, I had forgotten that...so, are you the only equipment manager we have this year?" This question caused her to look worried and she answered with only a nod. Hammond thought that she was probably embarrassed, thinking that he was questioning her performance. He helped her by asking if she needed him to get a second equipment manager.

Martha confidently brightened and said, “No. I’ll be okay, Coach. I won’t let you down.” He assured her that if she needed help to just let him know. “Sure thing, Coach,” she said.

She looked like she was searching for the right words to say something else, but Hammond, having successfully pulled off his plan in front of Samantha didn’t want to get into a prolonged conversation about anything else. So when Martha opened her mouth to speak again, Coach Mercer said, “We’ll talk later, okay?” He didn’t give her the opportunity to respond. Instead he turned and hurried toward the players who were just finishing their stretching exercises. He needed to begin showering attention upon his team.

“All right. Now that you’re warmed up, let’s get down to business,” he said and commenced to adroitly leading his team through a fast-paced and grueling workout. He noted that Gale Summers was a valuable asset to the team; she tolerated no loafing and after three years of being the assistant, she understood all aspects of the practice he led. He felt like she would make a great replacement for him—regardless of how he might end up leaving the team.

An hour and a half later, Coach Mercer blew the final whistle and the team huddled at center court for his final talk before ending practice. The 12 girls were profusely sweating. “Guys, good work today,” he said. “I see so much potential in this team. Keep up the effort through the season and we’ll hang another red and gold banner in The Lair!” The team broke into a cheer. “Now hit the showers,” he added and the girls headed off to the locker room. He told Coach Summers good job and that he would see her tomorrow.

Hammond, emboldened by the unity and desire of his team, put on a winning smile and walked over to the stands where the reporter had been watching practice. “So, what did you think, Sam?” he asked, shortening her name without meaning to, but knowing just the same that the middle-aged, attractive-but-not-overly-so reporter liked the flirtation his familiarity with her brought.

“Hammond, do you mind if we conduct the interview in your office?”

“Sure,” he said, and escorted her to the rear of the stands into his neat, organized office.

Samantha sat down in the chair facing Coach Mercer’s desk. When Hammond sat down behind his desk, she got straight to the point, “I noticed that you were a little distraught after your banner speech,” she said, “and I wondered what would have been the cause of that, and I think I figured it out. Would you like to hear what I think?”

Hammond’s optimistic belief that his ruse had worked was fading. She had sniffed blood, he thought, and was circling him, looking for an opening. Prepared to throw her off with his premeditated half-truth, he said, “Okay, go ahead.”

“Hammond, I’m not sure this team can win the state championship with the post presence you have this year,” she said. “And that’s going to jeopardize you taking over State after Carolyn Moxley leaves. I think you realized that and might have been a little concerned about how you’re going to pull it off. However, by the end of practice, you were your old confident self again. So, you’ve come up with a plan on getting around the fact that you have a smaller line-up, and I want to know what it is.”

Hammond could not believe his luck. Samantha had covered him for years and must have attributed any noticeable change in him to the fact that all he cared about was

finding ways to win basketball games. He could talk basketball all day long without worrying about a slip that might lead her to a very different subject. With a renewed sense of energy, he enthusiastically discussed his plans with her for making up for the lack of height his frontline players had.

Thirty minutes later, Samantha Dash left his office with her story. Hammond kicked his feet up on his desk and marveled at how he had escaped certain professional death. Even though he hadn't actually asked God for divine intervention, he felt he must have gotten some help. So, feeling that he owed a debt, he decided that he should call Joyce and try to begin mending their relationship. That would at least go halfway toward acknowledging the miracle that had just taken place.

He was staring at the phone, before dialing, thinking about what he would say when there was a knock at his door. Not expecting visitors, especially at 6 pm, he nonetheless called out, "Come in," and Martha stepped into his office.

She closed the door behind her and said, "Coach, when you asked earlier about Regina, I wanted to tell you something else but you said 'we'll talk later.'" Coach Mercer said he remembered. "You were right," she said. "What I was trying to say was too personal and should be told in private, so I waited until the reporter-lady left to finish talking with you. Anyway, what I was going to say was that Regina got pregnant and had to go to Columbia." Columbia, Hammond knew, was the alternative school where pregnancies and other problems were shipped to.

Hammond was stunned for the second time that day. He stared at Martha, not believing how badly he had misjudged his luck. A pregnancy—the very thing that he had lost Joyce over—would end up being the product of his one indiscretion. Hammond

knew that he was right in not seeking God's help; to do so would have only increased the levity of the joke being played on him. He also knew that he would escape back into a fog of intoxication, staying on as coach and teacher so he could continue to get a paycheck to pay for the trip. At some point, though, the truth about his actions would come out and the principal would finally be forced to fire him. But by then, Hammond planned on being so far away from reality that he wouldn't care.

“Coach,” Martha said. He refocused his gaze. “Coach, there's something else.”

Hammond nodded, exhausted.

“Regina and I talked a lot over the summer about what you expected of the equipment manager. She thought you were mad at her, so she asked me to tell you that the baby's not yours.” While Hammond thought his heart had stopped beating, he noticed Martha give him a smile. Then she said, “See you at practice tomorrow, Coach,” and she left.

Hammond was able to move a few minutes later. He got up from his desk, walked over to his door and locked it. He then turned off the lights, turned off the phone ringer, and sat down on the couch where he quietly stayed for a long time—for hours—without drinking, despite the Jim Beam in his desk drawer. He was frozen from the extreme swings of deceptions and truths the day had brought. He could do little but allow himself to thaw out.

Around midnight he became acutely aware that he had lost control over his own life—if he ever had it to begin with. Even if Regina and Martha didn't seem eager, for the time being, to force him to publicly declare his guilt, there were questions that he

didn't have answers to. Who else now knew about this incident? How long would his indiscretion remain private? How would his reputation be effected?

Hammond knew that at some point the truth would come out; no matter how well-meaning teenage girls were, they could never keep gossip, let alone factual gossip, secret. Maybe God had really intervened on his behalf after all, if He was the same God that Hammond remembered from his childhood Sunday school his mother insisted on bringing him to. God could see you no matter what, you couldn't hide from Him, and you were going to have to answer to Him for your sins.

And what were those sins? Hammond wondered. He had let himself go too far, maybe, but that was all. Beyond that, he really didn't know.

A Sniper's Story

A little after midnight on the cold, star-filled morning of November 27, 2003, two members of a company-sized foot patrol that wound its way through the western edge of Samarra, Iraq, vanished into an open doorway of the war-torn Baath Party National Bank. The silent procession of the eighty armed men staggered on both sides of the unlit street moved on in a snake-like rhythm as if nothing had happened.

Once inside the building, the disappeared apparitions moved to either side of the entrance and slunk against the wall. Their head-to-toe camouflage concealed Sniper's white skin and Smitty's black skin, blending them into the gray concrete behind them. For five minutes they looked, listened, and smelled for any signs of human existence in the former center of commerce that overlooked the southeastern corner of Samarra's main open market.

Private First Class James "Sniper" Remington and Corporal Cornelius "Smitty" Smith, had been given their mission the day before. Their commander had told the sniper team to occupy a position on the second floor of the building in order to eliminate Al-Rawi, the King of Spades, who was expected to appear in the market on the morning of the 28th. Because the city's residents congregated in the market daily to purchase their food and household items, and to discuss politics—the current topic being how the American occupation had usurped them as the ruling class of Iraqi citizens—it was an

ideal location for Al-Rawi to meet with local leaders and discuss the displaced Baath party's plans for fighting the Americans.

But Sniper wasn't happy with this mission. He and Smitty had said that to each other earlier. They felt the mission was leaving them too isolated; it was too dangerous. Their commander, whom they referred to as "Higher," not only because of his rank but because he was the person they answered to directly, had told them that eliminating Al-Rawi was important to maintaining stability in the region. Higher also said that he had to leave the sniper team isolated, where they would have a better chance of being undetected; Al-Rawi would not enter the market if he thought there was an American presence nearby. Higher admitted to being worried about leaving them so isolated, "But," he had said, "it's a risk that I am willing to take." Twenty-year-old James, and Smitty, two years his senior, the only sniper team left in their company, were used to their commanders taking ownership of their deeds and risks, both.

After a still and silent five minutes, the two soldiers stood up. They had worked together for the past two years and didn't need to speak as they walked slowly around what was left of the bank's main lobby, with their rifles at the ready and their night vision goggles turned on. No furniture was left intact and even the main counter, where business was conducted only a few months ago, had gaping holes in it. There were still irregular walls and pillars that a person could be hiding behind, and before moving up to the second floor to establish a hide site—a location where they would be hidden but from which they could fire upon the chosen target—they had to ensure no one else was on the first floor. Nobody was, so the two began a stealthy ascent up the marble steps to the second floor. Smitty led; Sniper followed four steps behind.

As soon as he reached the top step, Smitty crouched down. Sniper did the same and turned sideways so that he could keep an eye on where they had come from as well as on the lead man. Smitty began backing down the stairs and as he did, Sniper moved down, staying four steps ahead of him. Once they got back to the first floor, they moved to the side of the stairs, inside the cashier's area, behind the damaged service counter.

“Did you notice the gap between the ceiling of the first floor and the floor of the second?” Smitty asked. James shook his head. “Well, there's about a two-foot difference. So what I'm thinking is that instead of clearing the entire second floor, let's find a way to get inside the crawl space between the floors.”

The two men looked up at the ceiling of the first floor that hovered twelve feet above them. Even if they found an access point into the crawl space, getting themselves and their gear into it was going to be a problem. But Sniper had learned long ago to trust Smitty's intuition. Smitty was the team's spotter and radioman, and had become Sniper's best friend during their two years together. Smitty had grown up in the rough neighborhoods of south Atlanta and had a lot of friends and relatives who had lost either their lives or their freedom. He had once told Sniper that the Army had saved him from the black-on-black violence that still plagued the community he came from. He described himself as lucky enough to have left.

But Sniper knew he was smart, not lucky—street smart, intuitive, as well as politically smart. Whenever Higher hatched some hair-brained scheme, such as leaving the two men alone in a city that was a hotbed of Iraqi resistance, Sniper let Smitty do the talking. Smitty had a way of voicing his opinion without sounding disrespectful—a skill he said he had learned while dealing with southern white cops.

Sniper had grown up in Cusseta, Georgia, where he was encouraged by his rural, white upbringing to freely speak his mind without negative consequences. If Sniper had told Higher what he thought of the mission he and Smitty might have found themselves on “the line” with the other Infantrymen within the company, no matter how valuable an asset they might be for him to risk. Sniper had once seen the Sniper Competition held at Fort Benning, adjacent to Cusseta, and, watching, he had known somehow that he was meant to do that job. Being on the line would have separated him from Smitty, and forced him to perform mundane, dangerous tasks under the direct supervision of Higher himself. The current mission was dangerous, but it wasn’t mundane. Higher’s supervision was via radio, which Smitty skillfully handled, and that left Sniper with the job that he had chosen to perform, and he excelled in it.

Sniper located an air vent above a structurally sound teller’s counter, and Smitty pulled guard while he got up on the counter and went to work opening the vent. Even at six feet and three inches, the rangy Sniper had a difficult time lifting himself up through the vent opening. Once inside, he had to lay flat; the space between the building’s two floors was 18 inches in height.

He scanned the space. Both men knew that the separation between floors was a normal occurrence in the important buildings that American contractors had built back in the 70’s and early 80’s, before Iraq lost its ally status. The separation allowed for telephone lines, water pipes, and air vents to run through the building without being eyesores. The amount of dust told him that no one had been inside the space for a long time, maybe since it was built. He then reached down through the vent opening to haul in the team’s gear and to assist the shorter and stockier Smitty into the hole.

As soon as Sniper closed the vent, the powder and grime along the crawlspace floor watered his eyes and caused him to suppress sneezes and gags. Both men pulled up the gray-green handkerchiefs they wore around their necks before beginning their belly-crawl westward toward the bank's front entrance. Thirty minutes later, James located an opening in the wall—caused by stray rounds of gun fire, most likely from the many battles the city had participated in over the past few months—through which he thought he could see the market. Not having to manufacture a hole was a stroke of good luck for the team. Samarran residents looking at the bank from the outside would have, by now, accepted the opening as a natural part of their surroundings. Sniper and Smitty would have to wait until daylight to confirm that the opening did, in fact, overlook what they needed it to. Meanwhile, they made use of their time by using wet wipes to clear the dust that had settled along the concrete ceiling ten feet to the opening so that any shots they took would not spew-out a dark cloud.

Smitty radioed Higher at 0130 hours to confirm that they were in position inside Building 33. He left out that their hide spot was not in the 2nd-story corner office that Higher expected them to be in. Higher was generally a good officer, Sniper thought, and meant well, but his problem was that he not only told the experienced team which egg to suck but how to suck it. They had learned within the first month of Operation Iraqi Freedom that as long as they sucked the right egg, he never asked how they did it.

As they settled into their hide site to wait until daylight Sniper thought about how he had gotten his nickname. Last June, three months into the invasion, his company commander had been bragging to his boss, the battalion commander, about the amount of “sponsors of terrorism” his company had forever “neutralized.” The battalion

commander—Higher’s higher—said, “Hell, it’s that sniper you have who’s doing all the neutralizing.” The witnesses to that exchange immediately started calling James, “The Sniper,” and Smitty, who would playfully tease James at every opportunity, simply started calling him Sniper. The nickname stuck.

Sniper hated it, mostly. He was good; he knew that. But he also felt that he had the easiest job on the battlefield. Not only did he get to spend most of his time with Smitty without a supervisor watching their every move, his only real thinking task was to confirm a visual identification of the target; he didn’t have to establish who the target was. Higher did that.

Having the nickname did put added pressure on James to perform. He didn’t want anyone else to rely on him outside of Higher and Smitty; two people dependent on him were enough. The nickname, he thought, made everyone expect him to routinely take out the prime targets. He worried about what they would think if he failed. He also worried that his reputation had gotten too big, the kind of big where people would instinctually want to cut him back down to size.

But the nickname had perks, too. It gave James a sense of pride; he could do something no one else could. “Take this target out” sounded simple, but you had to be able to perform the four fundamentals of marksmanship during extreme stress; and, you had to see a human being die, quite clearly. Many soldiers rescinded their sniper status after successfully performing one or two missions; they couldn’t take that kind of intimacy with death. Normally, Sniper didn’t have those problems. As soon as an enemy was designated a target, he—the target—ceased being a living person to Sniper. But there were times, like now, enveloped by darkness, his mind would flash pictures of the

faces he had seen through his rifle scope right before he pulled the trigger. And he would feel empty inside, as if he had taken something precious—precious to someone, anyhow—away not only from the people who loved him but from himself, the person he possibly could have been in another place in another time. He'd try to combat these feelings by telling himself that they were all enemies; smoke 'em and let God—or in their case, Allah—sort 'em out. He had once heard a sergeant in the company say that the U.S. should just nuke the whole place, turn all that sand into glass. Sniper was pretty sure not all of them deserved that kind of treatment, but the ones he had shot were enemies; they would have killed him if given the chance. But that rationale didn't make the pictures in his mind go away.

At least Sniper had Smitty at his side during these times, and having him there to talk about normal things was always a good way to calm his nerves. “So have you gotten a letter from Vanessa?” Sniper whispered, now, as they waited in the darkness. Vanessa was Smitty's wife and mother of his two-year-old daughter. Smitty said yes and told him what the letter contained. There was nothing special going on in Vanessa's life; there never was. Sniper had heard all of the stories about how Brittany—Smitty and Vanessa's little girl—had learned to walk before she was one, how she was talking in sentences before she was 18 months, how she was potty trained by the age of two. He knew how well Vanessa was doing in the nursing classes she was taking while she and Brittany lived with her parents in Atlanta. When Smitty talked about how much Vanessa missed him and loved him, he would begin to get choked up. Sniper could recite the stories nearly word-for-word. They soothed him, reminding him that a normal life existed far away from the sandy, death-filled box that he currently lived in.

Sniper had had a girlfriend back home when he arrived in Iraq, but she was no longer his to come home to. When he got the Dear John letter three months ago that said he had changed and that she would no longer wait for him, he knew she was right. He had changed. Taking someone else's life—a lot of people's lives—had changed him. He had made himself off-limits to everyone but Smitty, who had seen both the virtuosity and the heartlessness of his work. Sniper knew that Smitty understood the cost their missions had taken on him; he could see the concern in Smitty's eyes. He knew that Smitty wouldn't judge him, but how could anyone else, he thought, not? So he cut himself off from people, almost as if he were a criminal. Knowing all of that didn't make losing Becky any easier, but at least he understood why she had to break up with him. Smitty had helped him get through that loss as well, mainly by telling him that there was some lucky girl out there who would love his "country-ass" just the way he was.

Sniper would smile when he thought of that phrase; and sometimes he would believe it. He'd remind himself that as a sniper he was simply an extension of Higher's power; he didn't make the decision to end lives, Higher did. Sniper was just performing a need that his talents, alone, could meet; he wasn't special. His nickname was a way for his company to honor him and he felt that he should have been proud to have it—no matter what it was costing him. And when he got out of the Army he hoped he would simply be James again, the kid from Cusseta who could shoot—the kid who had seen things he now wished he hadn't.

In the early, crisp dawn, Sniper and Smitty confirmed that their position gave them visual access to the majority of the market. They had one more day to wait, and the

dim grayness of the morning rays that seeped into the crawlspace allowed them to refine their hide site. Sniper placed a see-through mesh screen, which acted like a darkened car window, two feet in front of his bolt-action M107 sniper rifle that would stay pointed at the market until the time he fired it. Smitty put into place his tripod-mounted, high-resolution M68 spotting scope. It would allow him to see not only the target Sniper was expected to fire on, but the bullet's trace as it flew from the rifle to the target; the Army demanded two sets of eyes as confirmation.

Hungry, they snacked on their Meal's Ready to Eat, evacuated their urinary waste into the empty Gatorade bottles they had brought, and placed those, as well as almost everything else they had brought, into their packs. Leaving, if they could not go back through the vent, they would use their handguns to shoot through the wooden floor above them, and they would exit the building through a second-story window in the back of the building. That wasn't an option they wanted to try, but the opening Sniper had his rifle pointed at was only the size of a deflated basketball. Only a small child could squeeze through it.

They took turns watching the local Samarrans fill the market with wares, and then the shoppers coming in. The sight was something they had witnessed from numerous hide sites during the past nine months of operating "in country." Maintaining "eyes on" the kill zone had become monotonous; they switched every 15 to 30 minutes to ensure they didn't get eyestrain. Smitty checked in with Higher every hour.

Toward midmorning, the team heard a group of men enter the deserted bank lobby below them. The small group—footsteps and voices indicated three to four men—were talking excitedly to one another. Their footsteps stopped near the bank counter

where Sniper and Smitty had accessed the crawlspace and their loud talking died down to a low murmur. Sniper worried that the group might have seen their boot prints in the dust along the counter. Smitty, he could see, was thinking the same thing; he turned his body sideways so that he could fire his rifle toward the vent should anyone decide to poke his head through.

The tension lasted until the smell of strong Persian coffee wafted its way up to them. Sniper knew then that that was why the men were there—to boil coffee in a place that was sheltered from the wind. He was as relieved as Smitty felt, who shifted his body back around.

Thirty minutes later, the men's discussions became loud again, and an authoritative-sounding voice called into the bank's lobby from the front door. From the little bit of the language he had picked up, Sniper could tell that the man had asked "who," and the coffee cookers answered back—probably with their names, Sniper thought. Then the voice said something else and Sniper and Smitty heard boot steps entering the bank followed by another four or five booted men. Military, Sniper knew, and though they couldn't tell exactly what the man had said, the fact that they came rushing into the bank was an alarm.

The authoritative man barking out something to do with "search" was followed by rapid boot falls of the other men moving through the whole first floor, then there were sounds of three or four men on the second story, just above where Sniper and Smitty lay. Had they followed Higher's orders, Sniper thought, they would probably be in a firefight right now, without any hopes of reinforcement. Sniper looked at Smitty's face in the

dusty, half-light of the crawlspace, and Smitty nodded, letting him know that he was thinking the same thing.

The rapid movements of the Iraqis slowed to casual and routine perimeter checks, and now Sniper could hear voices other than the authoritative one, talking to each other in friendly, relaxed tones. But Sniper and Smitty's level of danger had increased dramatically. Even though Sniper's rifle was silenced to the point of mimicking a pellet gun, James knew they had to get in touch with Higher for assistance in getting the Iraqis out of the bank or they would be forced to allow the target to enter and leave the designated kill zone still intact. But Smitty wouldn't risk talking into his radio until noise within or outside of the bank became loud enough to drown out his whispers.

The two men stayed immobile for hours. It was hot, hotter in the afternoon, and Sniper could see that Smitty was sweating as profusely as he was, and that his eyelids were heavy. Sniper, himself, lay in a pool of sweat. He could hear the muted calls from Higher into Spotter's ear piece—like a cat, Sniper thought, scratching at the front door, wanting to be let in. Sniper knew that in time Higher would get worried—maybe worried enough to send a patrol to the bank to find out why they weren't answering. And if he sent in a patrol there would be no King of Spades entering the market. Sniper hadn't liked this mission to start with, but he dreaded not being successful even more. What they needed was to wait for some kind of noise, some kind of commotion, so that Smitty could radio Higher and tell him that they needed a diversion tomorrow morning, in or near the market, so that the mission could be completed.

The opportunity came in the late afternoon: the wailing call to afternoon prayers. The men above and below them stopped moving and talking. They were in their

“submission position,” Sniper knew, quietly chanting their prayers on their knees, with their heads down and arms stretched out, while from outside the prayer leader’s chants reverberated through the building. Smitty relayed their requirements to Higher, and the call to prayer ended shortly after Smitty received an okay.

The night was uneventful. At one point, around midnight, they got so cold they lay side-by-side, but generally, they remained motionless, listening to the movements of the militia above and below them.

Soon after dawn the brightness of the sun broke through the vents and holes in the walls. Sniper woke hungry, but knew that to eat anything now would be to needlessly risk exposure. The Iraqis were still above and below them. Sniper wasn’t sure what time the King of Spades would make his entrance, but the market vendors were already setting up and he began to intensely observe their movements and locations through his rifle scope. Yesterday, he had scanned the crowds to make sure that no one looked at the hide spot; sometimes a reflection of a rifle barrel could give away a sniper’s location. Sometimes it was the spotting scope; sometimes the sniper himself could be seen. All of these possibilities were mitigated by the small, dark screen he had placed in front of his rifle. He was confident that no one suspected his and Smitty’s location.

These were the times he watched people. He wouldn’t watch them long; to do so would be to focus too long on one area and that was dangerous. What he did, though, was to look at a man or woman’s face and then see what they were doing. Were they talking to a friend? Were they haggling with a vendor? Were they looking for something or someone? Were they just passing through? Sometimes they seemed happy,

sometimes sad or angry or grieving or tired or worried. He liked watching happy people best because they represented the good in humanity. He didn't like the fact that anyone had to witness so much violence, let alone become part of it; the elimination of a target could cause a temporary stampede. But Sniper was not a politician who worried about what the media would say about him. He was a trigger puller, not a front man, and he believed that the average Iraqi had a choice to make: either throw in with the Americans or support America's enemies, and he reasoned that not staying away from America's enemies was a form of support.

When two black SUVs entered the market from the main western road, Sniper stopped being the philosopher. SUVs were the vehicular symbol of dominion in the Arab world, and the crowds parted for them. Close to the center of the market, four men in greenish fatigues of the once-thought-to-be demolished Iraqi Republican Guard stepped out of the lead vehicle carrying AK-47 machine guns. They opened the hatchback door and pulled out a platform, microphone, and two speakers. Three other men, similarly dressed, exited the rear vehicle and established a perimeter that extended two yards in circumference around the platform. Shortly after the speaking platform and perimeter were established another three SUVs—two black and one white—entered the market from the north.

Sniper looked over at Smitty to make sure he was seeing the transpiring scene as well. Smitty had an odd look on his face and Sniper knew what he was thinking: why was the King of Spades using transportation that was so easy to identify? Maybe Al-Rawi felt that the Baaths were still in control of Samarra. Sniper suspected that many of the buildings bordering the marketplace were occupied by militias just as the bank was,

giving Al-Rawi an added sense of security. Regardless, the display of strength worried Sniper. He began to wonder if he and Smitty would actually be able to get out of the area without being fired on by what was beginning to look like a much larger force than he had thought just hours ago.

He scanned the crowd. In the past 15 minutes the crowd had tripled. He estimated around 2,000, and he imagined the crowd being worked into a frenzy by the speaker and what would happen when their speaker was shot dead. He looked over to Smitty, who was whispering into the radio. The noise of the burgeoning crowd was more than sufficient to mask his voice, so loud that Sniper could not hear Higher's responses in Smitty's earpiece. He didn't need to. He heard Smitty say, "Roger," and then, to Sniper, "It's on."

Sniper nodded. The platform was a mere 175 yards away, and he wished that he and Smitty had been able to secure a hide spot further away from where the target would be. One hundred and seventy five yards was not a long distance for even a poorly fired bullet to go off course. The concrete walls of the bank would provide as good a protection as they could expect to get if a firefight ensued, and hopefully the guards would be less apt to fire on a building that contained members of their own forces—though Sniper had seen Iraqi troops knowingly fire on their own forces before.

When he saw the King of Spades emerge from the white SUV he knew that his and Smitty's chances of survival afterward depended solely on the distraction Higher would initiate. Sniper had no idea of what that would be, and doubted if Smitty did either.

As the target stepped onto the platform Sniper said, "Sniper ready."

“Spotter ready,” Smitty said, and whispered into his mouthpiece, “Sniper team ready.”

Al-Rawi began to speak to the rapt audience. While Sniper’s eyes stayed glued on the crosshairs of his scope he listened for the order to fire, keeping his mind occupied by reciting the four marksmanship fundamentals in his head: steady position, aim, breathing, trigger squeeze. The recitation had a natural rhythm to Sniper. He had learned long ago to block out anything in his mind except his basic function—to place a bullet exactly where he aimed.

“Four, three, two, one, fire,” Sniper heard from the radio. While he waited for Smitty to say, “fire” he heard the explosive start of machine gun fire three blocks to his west—the beginning of a diversion—and he watched the target turn his head, the SUV guards running towards him. It reminded Sniper of the video of Secret Service agents pressing in on President Reagan when he was shot, and like the Secret Service then, the SUV guards were too late.

Smitty said, “Fire,” and a split-second later the target crumpled. In silence, the sniper team watched the chaos they had caused, watched guards pick up the limb body and drag it to the white SUV. “Target eliminated,” Smitty whispered in his mouthpiece.

Smitty removed the small screen; Sniper removed the barrel of his rifle, placed the pieces of his weapon in his pack, and pulled out the assault rifle that he had entered the building with. Smitty folded the tripod and placed it and the scope in his pack.

As they were crawling back to the vent opening they became aware of the shouting and running of the militia that had occupied the bank the day before, and they waited at the vent for a full five minutes before opening it to see if the lobby was clear.

As Sniper peered downward, he could tell that most of the market had been cleared as well. Now and then he spotted a civilian running past the front entrance, but saw no signs of an armed enemy threat. He lowered himself down and pulled guard while Smitty lowered himself down. They walked to the side entrance of the bank, but there were too many people around for them to get out of the area without being seen. There was still small arms fire to the west that had apparently drawn the attention of the militia. Hopefully, any other remnants of the Iraqi forces were headed that way as well.

It was as they left the bank heading east towards Camp Pacesetter that Sniper saw the young Iraqi boy standing at the side of the street, watching them. Shoot him, Sniper told himself. Instead, he stopped, threw the boy a candy bar he had been saving in his pant's pocket, and ran past him. The boy would tell his parents that he had gotten the candy bar from two Americans, Sniper knew, and his parents would notify the local Iraqi militias. That made him dangerous, and even though he was an innocent bystander Sniper would have been justified in killing him. But he didn't kill him, or couldn't kill him, and wasn't sure anymore if there was a difference. The fact was that the boy didn't deserve to die for seeing something he shouldn't have, no matter what the mission dictated.

It wasn't until Sniper and Smitty reached the American patrol outside of Samarra that it occurred to Sniper that he had saved somebody. And the boy's face, full of surprise and happiness, stayed in his mind.