

# Foliate Oak Literary Magazine



## Smart Bomb

*by Timothy Nunes*

*Every life is priceless... Isn't it?*

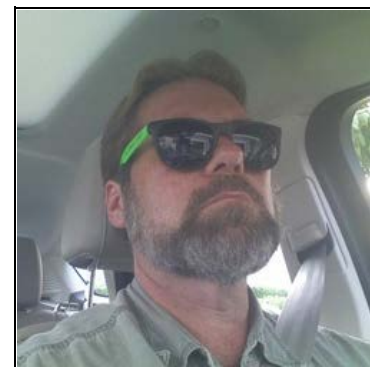
The snow felt especially heavy today, Ed thought, as he struggled to find his rhythm. Scrape, push, scoop, lift... Scrape, push, scoop, lift... Scrape, push, scoop, lift. He paused to catch his breath and wipe away the sweat, only to find that his eyebrows had already frozen into Brillo pads. As he rested on his shovel, he felt a tightening in his chest. He knew it was just muscle pain but, after being out of work for half a year, he couldn't help thinking that maybe he should shovel extra hard this time, put everything he had into it. His life insurance was paid up through the end of the year, and.....

"Hey, take it easy there, buddy! Don't want to give yourself a heart attack," his new neighbor yelled. They'd only met once, at a community meeting... Doug? Dave??... Dan. Yeah, Dan, that was it... Maybe. He seemed like a down to earth guy from the few words they'd shared. Average, nondescript. Supposedly just back from Afghanistan. Some sort of military or government job. Ed continued resting on his shovel as Dan(?) walked towards him across the badly plowed street.

"Dan, from the other night." His neighbor reached out a gloved hand. Ed shook it. Firm handshake, but not crushingly so.

"Yeah, I remember," Ed responded. "How's it going? All moved in?"

"Yep, pretty much. Still have boxes stacked here and there. Hopefully it'll all be put away soon, just in case I'm redeployed again."



A native of Stockton, California for most of his life, Tim is a graduate of Illinois Tech, and his day job for the past 25-odd years has been in Information Technology. Tim currently resides in the Chicagoland area, has blondish hair, brownish eyes, a graying beard, and a penchant for bad poetry writing and even worse bassoon playing. All else is subject to change without notice.

"Yeah, you mentioned that. Um...?"

"Afghanistan."

"Yeah, Afghanistan." Ed straightened up on his shovel, signaling that he was ready to get back to work.

"Well, good luck."

"Say," Dan continued, ignoring the silent cue. "You still looking for work?"

Ed looked down, contemplating his snow boots for a moment. He hated talking about his current circumstances. Though he knew the layoff hadn't been his fault (maybe... who knew?), there was a part of him that still hadn't come to terms with it.

"Still looking."

"Been awhile, right?"

"Yeah, awhile," Ed responded without looking up. "Six months." Six... long... freakin'... months.

"Well, I know a guy who might have something. Come by when you're done, we can talk about it. I'll put a pot on."

"Okay, yeah, sure." Ed looked up, meeting Dan's eyes again. "Thanks."

"And maybe take it easy on the shoveling. Face down in dirty, plowed snow and salt is no way to go."

"Why me?" the congresswoman asked the casually-dressed, nondescript man sitting across the table from her in the busy, beltway coffee shop.

"You're on the Financial Services committee," the man responded. "The decisions your committee makes impact a range of businesses... Banks, investment houses, retailers."

"And...?"

"The Company needs people in key roles like yours, influential people who can contact other influential people. We're at war, as you know. And this particular war requires unconventional thinking, new tactics. In this war, one phone call can have greater impact than a \$70,000.00 Hellfire missile fired from a Predator drone."

The congresswoman lifted her coffee cup while contemplating the man's words, took a sip. It was cold.

"I'm still a little unclear about what you're asking of me."

The man met her eyes and smiled, unassuming and non-threatening.

"Just an occasional phone call. One month the call might be to a bank VP, the next month we might ask you to contact a HR director somewhere. We're interested in influencing hiring decisions related to specific, pre-selected individuals... As part of an innovative new program. It's all very low-key... And top secret, of course. We'd even provide you with an unregistered mobile."

"What if I chose not to make these calls?"

"We're all patriots, Congresswoman," he responded, again with the non-threatening smile. "You'll do the right thing."

Ed sat at his neighbor's kitchen table, spellbound, a half-empty cup of coffee forgotten in his hands. Dan had just recounted the suicide attack that had killed his co-workers and left him bleeding and near death.

"A freakin' doctor," Dan continued, "Someone who'd spent countless years becoming who he was, someone who was supposed to value life over everything else. That's the kind of hatred we're up against. Words fall short... Especially here in suburbia, over a cup of coffee."

"How bad were you hurt?"

"I was one of the lucky ones. Not only did I survive, they even saved the leg. Just three surgeries and five months of physical therapy. It hardly bothers me any more, most days... Except when I'm shoveling snow. I think maybe the cold affects the one piece of shrapnel they couldn't get to."

"Wow." Ed paused, finally remembered his coffee and took a sip. It'd gone cold. "So, you said you might have to go back?"

"Yeah, maybe. Could be anytime. That's why I'm trying to get everything in order. That's also why I wanted to talk to you."

"I'm listening."

"The agency I work for, we're pretty low-key... Operating under the radar, so to speak. Always trying to come up with new ideas to even the playing field. It's extremely important work. If you're interested, we're starting up a new organization, one where you could really make a difference."

"I still have one job-related lead I'm following up on," Ed responded, "But, if that doesn't pan out....." He allowed his voice to trail off as he thought about what Dan had said. "Besides, I work... Or worked, in marketing. What would a low-key, government organization need with an old marketing guy? And how could someone like me ever make a difference?"

"You'd be surprised, Ed. Very surprised."

"Hello, this is Congresswoman Janet Freeman. Is this Bob Harcourt, VP of Business Development at First National?"

"Yes, it is. And it's a pleasure to hear from you, Congresswoman Freeman. What can I do for you today?"

"I need a favor, Bob. A man by the name of Ed Neuman recently applied for a marketing position in your retail banking division. It would be in everyone's best interest if his application was deemed unsuitable. Consider it a personal favor."

"I will take care of it personally, Congresswoman. Thank you for calling."

"Thank you, Bob."

Ed shifted uncomfortably on the old vinyl-covered couch, causing it to squeak. The sound echoed noisily throughout the cold, empty warehouse. He'd driven more than an hour away from his suburban home for this meeting in a distant, mostly abandoned industrial district. The location, the cold and the conversation all added to his discomfort.

"You see, Mr. Neuman," the nondescript man sitting across the battered Formica table from him

continued, "we're losing this war. It's a fact we've been able to keep from the general public, but the reality is that we've found ourselves in a decidedly un-American world."

"You didn't bring me all this way to listen to nationalist rhetoric, did you?" Ed asked, feeling mildly annoyed that, despite his current economic circumstances, his own government would underestimate his intelligence so.

"Allow me to explain. When I say "un-American", I'm not asking you to visualize a Leyendecker-painted recruiting poster of Uncle Sam. I'm talking economics... The world economy, the economies of various countries. In many parts of the world, poverty is increasing, creating fertile ground for the radicalization of entire populations. Poor, uneducated or undereducated people are being taught that America is to blame for their economic circumstances, and that by attacking us, they're helping ensure a better world for their children."

The man continued, "The economics of the current war are also un-American. History has shown time and again that, as a country, we've been able to come together and achieve amazing things. In that respect, we're still the greatest country on earth, in my opinion. Unfortunately, it's difficult to stop an individual suicide bomber with a Hellfire missile. Also, a single suicide bomber costs maybe \$1,000 to train, vs \$70,000 for one Hellfire. I know we like to believe that life is priceless but, unfortunately, the cold reality is that many people no longer share that belief... Including those living in poverty here in our own country, people who are actively being recruited by radical groups as we speak."

Ed shifted again, wincing at the echoes. "What does any of this have to do with the opportunity you brought me here to discuss?"

"The organization I've been tasked with forming will be dedicated to training and equipping intelligent people such as yourself to become anti-terrorists. Recruits will only be required to serve for one year, including training time. After one year of service, a full Federal retirement package will be awarded to each recruit. Should a recruit be required to prevent a security threat, their family will receive the full retirement package plus a \$100,000 bonus."

"Wait." Something the man said didn't make sense. "When you talk about a bonus to the family..." Ed paused, gathering his thoughts. "Don't you expect your recruits to survive these "security threats"?"

"The organizations we're fighting, Mr. Neuman, are well funded, their leaders are experienced and their recruits receive months of expert training. The full resources of this country –our vast arsenal, our intelligence community –all are falling short of effectively combating this threat... The threat of individual, intelligent weapons... Weapons that can deviate from course or change tactics in a microsecond. The Japanese kamikaze pilot was by far the most effective tactical weapon of the last century. In the 21st century, it's weaponized individuals. And to win this war, in this century, we need to fight fire with fire."

"You're not saying..." Ed stumbled on the words. "You can't possibly mean.....?"

"We've developed new, state-of-the-art technology that will better enable our recruits to detect and neutralize threats, allowing us to save numerous lives. We're also being extremely selective about who we recruit, requiring that each candidate be older, well educated, immediately available, and most able to benefit from the financial security we're offering. In other words, Mr. Neuman, we're looking for people just – like – you."

Ed just stared back at the man in disbelief.

"Think about it, Mr. Neuman. The safety and security of this county is at stake, as is your own family's security... Now and into the future. Just think about it."

The coat really was a miraculous invention, Ed thought as he casually strolled through the crowded shopping mall. Synthetic 'fabric' capable of containing up to 20 lbs of hyper-accelerated shrapnel, a deployment mechanism designed to securely enclose and restrain two people. All the operator need do was embrace the target. Best case, where the target's device failed to detonate, both the operator and

target would then remain safely immobilized until the proper authorities arrived. Worst case scenario, any blast would be up to 90% contained... Meaning most of the potential victims would be saved.

The other technology he carried was more of a mixed bag. The CloQEDS (Close Quarters Explosive Detection System) was very effective at detecting most explosives (e.g. TNT, C4, Ammonal, even TATP) and notifying the operator via a hidden earpiece. Unfortunately, temperature, humidity and other environmental factors often limited it's effective range from its 100' ideal to a less than 50' reality. The CloQDPS (Close Quarters Detonation Prevention System) was even more problematic, with detonation design variations limiting it's effectiveness to just 50%.

Memories of the equipment test videos he'd watched in training passed through his mind as he navigated towards the hot pretzel counter (a location he frequented due to the long lines of potential targets). The coat almost always contained the explosive force of any detonation to the two test subjects (the tests had used adult pigs), the CloQEDS usually detected all device variations within 70' to 100', and the CloQDPS prevented detonation as many times as it didn't. Was the tech perfect? No, it wasn't. If it helped save 9 out of 10 people though, or even 18 out of 20... And also helped prevent the kind of panic such public attacks inspired, well... That would be considered a victory.

Regardless, it had been the right decision, he thought, as he navigated toward the mall's center and its packed merry-go-round full of children. Since his recruitment nine months ago, he'd received a regular pay check, the bills were being paid, and his family's current and future financial security were ensured. His wife had raised her eyebrows when he told her about his new "Security Analyst" position, and had no idea of the risks. He'd tell her when his year was up... Or The Company would. Either way, she'd be looked after.

When the alarm went off in his ear, he reacted reflexively, the product of months of intense training. Scan the area, find someone wearing bulky clothing. He slowly approached two possibles, a young man wearing a thick winter coat and a [seemingly]pregnant woman. As the audio alarm guided him towards the young man and away from the [now likely]pregnant woman, he breathed a quick sigh of relief. Then he focused on the Chinese food counter slightly to the right of the young man, allowing him to pass by within inches. The alarm's volume was almost deafening by the time he made his pass, turned, deployed his coat and activated the CloQDPS.

His final thought as searing pain enveloped his brain was that he was glad he hadn't ended up face down in dirty, plowed snow and salt.



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