

David Patterson

The Sniper and The Linebacker

A sniper is out there. I know this—and he waits patiently. He cleans his weapon. He adjusts his sights. He is patiently waiting . . . waiting patiently . . . patiently . . . patient.

I can only make him out vaguely. His features are indistinct, but there are things I do know: It is definitely a man and he wears a tight black knit cap and a long dark green shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He is approximately in his mid 30's—maybe older. Experienced. He has killed before. He is accurate and takes pride in his marksmanship. When the command comes, his rifle is lifted, held steady and aimed straight for the soft meat of my heart.

Somewhere in the near distance, well within firing range, he waits. Maybe he is on a rooftop. Maybe he is in the upper window of a building, like Oswald might have been. Or maybe he is nestled tightly in a tree with his back against a firm branch and his shot clear of foliage. But wherever he is—he is standing with his feet firmly beneath him. Balanced. Steady . . . waiting.

I feel I'm the only one on his hit list—his only assignment. But I could be wrong. We have never met but I think he knows me, something of me, at least. He knows my name, that much I do know, but I don't know his. He is nameless.

I am no gun expert so I know little about his weapon. I know this though; it is a high-powered rifle with a scope attached on top. It is professional piece, which was carefully put together. All the parts fit (probably measured in metric increments). The scope is top of the line. It rests easily against his eye. The crosshairs are centered on me...on my heart—the spot of instant death. The butt of the rifle is firmly placed in the meat of his shoulder. His eye is pure focus— a sphere of unblinking, frozen glass. He is the constant reminder to feel no more, to think no more, to the end of mistakes, to the end of all bad designs. As I said, he knows me. He's been watching me for years.

When I was younger, much, much younger than now—like five or so, I didn't need a sniper. If I was about to be overtaken by pursuers (be it monsters, martians or just plain scary people) all I had to do was blink my eyes and I would immediately be transported into another dream. It worked every time. It was like changing channels on the TV. It did wonders in the dream world but had little to none effect in my waking life. So I developed another weapon against the harsh landscape of reality: daydreaming. My first drug.

Even back then, I found life a bit overwhelming. Too much to feel. Too much to sort out. So in my mind I traveled a lot. My parents found out that you usually had to call my name two or three times before I would respond. Maybe I had ADD (or I was just a typical kid with the usual flights of fancy). I am an escapist, no doubt, and I always have been, which in time, led to drinking and drugs and all other inappropriate coping skills but I quit all that years ago and here I am with a sniper in the trees, watching my every move.

When did the sniper show up? I can't really say. But he's been hanging out for at least 10 years now. I thought maybe the sniper was my father—just waiting for me to make a mistake. We were criticized for small irrelevant tasks growing up. My father would lose his cool if I turned the wrench the wrong way (I still get nervous when someone stands over my shoulder watching me do something mechanical) or not knowing the capital of South Carolina or spending too much time listening to AC/DC or Pink Floyd or The Doors and not watching the news where we really could learn

something. And now that I watch the news, I've learned that there sure are a lot of people dying unnecessarily in the world. But the sniper couldn't be my father. You know why? He's legally blind. He has been since he was 27.

He too was once a marksman. He was in the Navy. He has told us the stories of those seven years over and over again. I think he really wanted all of us to follow in his footsteps and join the service. My older brother became a Marine. He ended his four year stint with the same rank he went in with. Too much drinking. Too much fighting. My younger brother went into the Navy to pursue the same field my father was in before he was forced to resign because of his eyes: Nuclear engineering. Everyone was proud of him until the night he came home from a local bar and wrapped his car around a tree. He came out with only scratches but the Navy frowns upon its elite getting their name in the police blotter in the local newspaper. He was also forced to resign.

But my father shot a rifle. He has the medal to prove it. He grew up hunting in the woods of southern Ohio and knew his way around a gun. So it was in the Navy where he found his path. But at the age of 27, while shooting dice in the back of a pick up truck, he found he had trouble seeing the numbers. The next day he went to the clinic and a few weeks later he was informed that he had a rare bacterial infection in his eyes. Over the period of a few months, he lost 80% of his vision and lost his driver license. And the real blow: involuntarily retired from the Navy—his bread and butter, so to speak. He had two kids and a wife to support. My Mom offered to donate one of her eyes but of course my father refused.

We grew up living off the assistance of the Navy and my Mom's job at the nursing home. My Dad never really worked again. He helped out a few days in a friend's lumber yard but if the Navy knew he worked, we would have been cut off from all benefits. So he stayed at home. He mopped the kitchen floor and read the paper cover to cover. He is now 67. He is most likely sitting at the local VFW sipping on a whiskey and telling his nearest stool mate about some story he read in the paper today.

One more thing about my father: he owns a handgun. I've seen it. A stocky looking piece in green metal. He has the permit for it. It used to be in the drawer in the nightstand near his bed. I guess he wanted to be prepared if we were ever attacked in the middle of the night. I never held it. I was too scared of it. But I often thought, in those last years I spent living with my parents, of using the gun. In those late hangover mornings, as I recapped the previous nights escapades, I would think how quickly it all could be over if I just got out of bed and got the gun and pushed the barrel into my temple and pull the trigger. But I could never do that to my family—even though they pissed me off sometimes.

There was this one dream I used to have that I knew was my father. I was in a bowling alley with many open lanes. The place was empty and yet it was noisy. It was at night and I was the only one bowling. There was a spotlight on me as I took the ball and approached the lane. But my lane became slanted and I was confused on how to roll the ball. I hesitated. A booming voice came over the loudspeaker; reprimanding me, shaming me, paralyzing me in my indecisiveness. It went on and on like the rumble of a heavy thunderstorm. There was nowhere for me to hide. It always ended in the same strange manner. A group of construction workers in yellow helmets were now getting off work, like in those old “Miller Time” commercials, and they would put their arms around my shoulders as if to say—“It’s all right kid.”

Funny thing: I was quite the little athlete growing up. I could play all sports well, except for two—roller skating and bowling. The first time I bowled I shot a 9! No lie. I was so bent on doing it right that I threw gutter ball after gutter ball.

Could the sniper be my mother? Dressed up to hide her identity? She wouldn't know what to do with a gun if someone showed her. My mom doesn't kill. But...but...she wounds. And then she fixes up wounds and pretends they are not there. She is a good nurse. No pain for her children. It's not allowed. Our medicine cabinet is full of band-aids, gauze, ointments and pills. All ails are quickly administered to. No blood. No scrapes left open to heal in the wind. Everything covered and wrapped and cooled with oozing gels. And bed rest and warm broth and comforting cups of Ginger Ale. The same ginger ale, that I would mix with whiskey and drink, years later, when I watched TV with the family.

Maybe the sniper is just society itself. I always feel behind, confused. I am 38 and still waiting tables and still trying to figure out what I should do when I grow up. However, I now have a six-month old son and a wife to support. I feel like I'm running out of valuable time. I feel like the sniper is saying, "See, I told you so! I knew you wouldn't pull it off. Let's just take you out now. Why postpone the inevitable?" But the sniper wouldn't use words like "postpone" and "inevitable". As a matter of fact, I don't think he has an opinion of my life in one-way or the other. He is only an order taker, like a good soldier has to be. And it is I who gives the orders.

Every time it goes bad (or I feel it is about to go bad) or whenever I do anything foolish, he is there. Like when I used to blow a day's pay on 15 minutes at the Massage parlor. Or when I would say something stupid to a girl or worse—when I would say nothing at all. Or when I think how poorly I did in school—not because I was incapable but because I didn't try. I imagine him pulling the trigger. Professionally. Steadily. There is no noise. There is no smoke. Only the effect of the bullet as it penetrates through to my heart and all noise stops. Darkness. A soft warm bath of nothingness.

I have never been shot with a bullet. We had BB guns growing up and I was once shot in the ass by a not-so close friend of my brother. It felt like the sting of 20 bees. Tears came to my eyes but all I did was hop around and swear. I should have shot back but I didn't. I have killed with the BB gun. I watched as small chickadees fell from snowy pine trees in my backyard with the trickle of blood at their breast. I fell squirrels from high branches and I've killed hundreds of frogs out by the reservoir where we used to fish and swim. I once imagined a giant frog (the size of a rhinoceros), waiting in the trail for me. I ran all the way home. If there is a God who reigns over all beasts, I'll have much explaining to do. (I did, however, make atonement. When I was in my early 30's and visiting my family, I went out to the reservoir and knelt in the mud and made an open apology to all frogs and asked for their forgiveness.)

But my biggest secret is this: I killed a possum with my Dad's 22 caliber rifle. For some strange reason, the gun was in the hall closet. He usually put the guns behind lock and key. My younger brother was into hunting then and maybe it was

for his use. Nevertheless, I knew it was there. So one fine day as I'm watching TV in the living room I see something move outside by the garbage cans. I go to the sliding glass door and look out and see a possum all white breasted beneath and his whip-coiled tail. It was the first time I ever saw a possum and my first instinct was to grab the gun. My heart beat as if I had just done a line of speed. My father was at home but he didn't know I had the gun. So I aimed the 22 at the possum. He was in my sights, rooting around by the trash and doing what possums do. I only wanted to touch the trigger, to pretend to shoot, but the gun went off and I saw the possum stagger back and stumble off into the woods. I panicked. I immediately put the gun back and went to see if my father heard the shot but he was still napping on the upstairs couch. I ran outside. A puddle of blood lay near the garbage cans. I followed the trail of blood back through the grove behind our storage shed. A bunch of wooden pallets leaned against the back wall. I pulled a few off and there he was: hissing at me but his lower jaw was shredded flesh. His eyes were bubbled out and he backed up with his teeth ready to gnash. I put the pallets back. Leave him alone, I thought, I've done enough. But when I got back inside I thought of his suffering. He wouldn't be able to eat. He would die a slow bleeding death. I went and got the gun again. I went behind the shed and pulled the pallets back and he hissed at me again. I put the gun close and killed him with two shots. I ran back and put the gun away, checked on Dad and came out with a garbage bag. I slid him into the trash bag with a stick and put the bag in the garbage can. The next day at the bus stop a friend said, " Hey did you see the neighborhood pet yet?" And I knew what he would say so I quickly purged my soul of my doings. We had a good laugh. The neighborhood pet was now disposed of in the garbage cans that sat by the road as we waited for the bus. But it was nervous laughter because I think we both felt sick inside. I know I did. And yet today, as a somewhat adult, I cannot even kill a spider who crawls unexpectedly into my bathtub. I open the window and set him free.

But I feel like I know what a bullet will feel like. The tearing of the skin, the hot burn, the escape of blood. I feel like it is the way I will die. Or maybe it is the way I have died. I always have such strong reactions to the Vietnam mess. Was I

there? Or was I killed in the Civil War, where I left a grieving family behind? I really believe that at one time I laid on a battlefield, mortally wounded and mad at God. I died with the taste of dirt in my mouth.

But my future death—one bullet—shot from afar. It won't be close range where I see a face and hear the crack of the gun and a big mess is made. No...just one clean, accurate bullet straight in the chest and a trickle of blood like the dead chickadees.

When difficulties arise the sniper is always there. And there is comfort in that. If it all goes horribly wrong he will remove me instantly and the situation will rectify itself, or not, but why will I care?

There were days when he was constantly there. I always felt his presence. I could always count on him. But something has changed as of late. It hit me last night when I woke up on the couch at 3:00 am. My wife and son slept in the bed in the other room. I was hot. I couldn't get the blanket right. The pillow wouldn't lay flat. I got up and opened the door and stood there in my boxers feeling the fog and the night breeze. There were only a few cars going by now and then. The sprinkler was still on from the apartment next to us. A cat walked confidently along the footpath in the park across the street. Jets flew in and out of LAX.

I shut the door and got back on the couch and tried to clear my head of those wakeful thoughts. My wife was not mad at me. My son was fast asleep. Money was in the bank. I hadn't done anything foolish in awhile. But then, that incessant thought of what I was supposed to do with my life came awake. The sniper appeared. But he was there only to deliver a message. He felt neglected, I felt him trying to say. There was someone now to replace him and I realized it's been going on for a while now. The sniper was being shoved into the background, by The Linebacker.

But the linebacker is myself. And I am bigger in the vision, fully-padded, with taped hands. The play is always the same. The running back on the opposing team gets the handoff and is about to explode through the open hole and make a charge into the secondary when I appear. It is a solid clean hit. I lift him off the ground and dump him in his own backfield. He

groans. I know there will be cheers. I know my teammates will congratulate me. But it never gets that far. There is only the clean hit.

Am I coming to “tackle my problems”? Is that the message? I don’t know. I never looked at it until now. But I’ll tell you this: As I put these words to paper the sniper is only a mist, an outline, a vapor. I feel him growing lighter and lighter like a dying leaf on the branch that will fall to the ground, joining the pile to be raked away and bagged and set out by the edge of the road and hauled away.