

One Shot

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Extract

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ONE

Friday. Five o'clock in the afternoon. Maybe the hardest time to move unobserved through a city. Or, maybe the easiest. Because at five o'clock on a Friday nobody pays attention to anything. Except the road ahead.

The man with the rifle drove north. Not fast, not slow. Not drawing attention. Not standing out. He was in a light-coloured minivan that had seen better days. He was alone behind the wheel. He was wearing a light-coloured raincoat and the kind of shapeless light-coloured beanie hat that old guys wear on the golf course when the sun is out or the rain is falling. The hat had a two-tone red band all round it. It was pulled down low. The coat was buttoned up high. The man was wearing sunglasses, even though the van had dark windows and the sky was cloudy. And he was wearing gloves, even though winter was three months away and the weather wasn't cold.

Traffic slowed to a crawl where First Street started up a hill. Then it stopped completely where two lanes became one because the blacktop was torn up for construction. There was

construction all over town. Driving had been a nightmare for a year. Holes in the road, gravel trucks, concrete trucks, blacktop spreaders. The man with the rifle lifted his hand off the wheel. Pulled back his cuff. Checked his watch.

Eleven minutes.

Be patient.

He took his foot off the brake and crawled ahead. Then he stopped again where the roadway narrowed and the sidewalks widened where the downtown shopping district started. There were big stores to the left and the right, each one set a little higher than the last, because of the hill. The wide sidewalks gave plenty of space for shoppers to stroll. There were cast-iron flag poles and cast-iron lamp posts all lined up like sentries between the people and the cars. The people had more space than the cars. Traffic was very slow. He checked his watch again.

Eight minutes.

Be patient.

A hundred yards later the prosperity faded a little. The congestion eased. First Street opened out and became slightly shabby again. There were bars and dollar stores. Then a parking garage on the left. Then yet more construction, where the parking garage was being extended. Then further ahead the street was blocked by a low wall. Behind it was a windy pedestrian plaza with an ornamental pool and a fountain. On the plaza's left, the old city library. On its right, a new office building. Behind it, a black glass tower. First Street turned an abrupt right angle in front of the plaza's boundary wall and ran away west, past

untidy rear entrances and loading docks and then on under the raised state highway.

But the man in the minivan slowed before he hit the turn in front of the plaza and made a left and entered the parking garage. He drove straight up the ramp. There was no barrier, because each space had its own parking meter. Therefore there was no cashier, no witness, no ticket, no paper trail. The man in the minivan knew all that. He wound round the ramps to the second level and headed for the far back corner of the structure. Left the van idling in the aisle for a moment and slipped out of the seat and moved an orange traffic cone from the space he wanted. It was the last one in the old part of the building, right next to where the new part was being added on.

He drove the van into the space and shut it down. Sat still for a moment. The garage was quiet. It was completely full with silent cars. The space he had protected with the traffic cone had been the last one available. The garage was always packed. He knew that. That was why they were extending it. They were doubling its size. It was used by shoppers. That was why it was quiet. Nobody in their right mind would try to leave at five o'clock. Not into the rush hour traffic. Not with the construction delays. Either they would get out by four or wait until six.

The man in the minivan checked his watch.

Four minutes.

Easy.

He opened the driver's door and slid out. Took a quarter from his pocket and put it in the meter. Twisted the handle hard and heard the coin fall

and saw the clockwork give him an hour in exchange. There was no other sound. Nothing in the air except the smell of parked automobiles. Gasoline, rubber, cold exhaust.

He stood still next to the van. On his feet he had a pair of old desert boots. Khaki suede, single eyelets, white crepe soles, made by Clarks of England, much favoured by Special Forces soldiers. An iconic design, unchanged in maybe sixty years.

He glanced back at the parking meter. Fifty-nine minutes. He wouldn't need fifty-nine minutes. He opened the minivan's sliding rear door and leaned inside and unfolded a blanket and revealed the rifle. It was a Springfield M1A Super Match autoloader, American walnut stock, heavy premium barrel, ten shot box magazine, chambered for the .308. It was the exact commercial equivalent of the M14 self-loading sniper rifle that the American military had used during his long-ago years in the service. It was a fine weapon. Maybe not quite as accurate with the first cold shot as a top-of-the-line bolt gun, but it would do. It would do just fine. He wasn't going to be looking at extraordinary distances. It was loaded with Lake City M852s. His favourite custom cartridges. Special Lake City Match brass, Federal powder, Sierra Matchking 168-grain hollow point boat tail bullets. The load was better than the gun, probably. A slight mismatch.

He listened to the silence and lifted the rifle off the rear bench. Carried it away with him to where the old part of the garage finished and the new

part began. There was a half-inch trench between the old concrete and the new. Like a demarcation line. He guessed it was an expansion joint. For the summer heat. He guessed they were going to fill it with soft tar. Directly above it there was yellow and black *Caution Do Not Enter* tape strung between two pillars. He dropped to one knee and slid under it. Stood up again and walked on into the raw new construction.

Parts of the new concrete floor were trowelled smooth and parts were rough, still waiting for a final surface. There were wooden planks laid here and there as walkways. There were haphazard piles of paper cement sacks, some full, some empty. There were more open expansion joints. There were strings of bare light bulbs, turned off. Empty wheelbarrows, crushed soda cans, spools of cable, unexplained lengths of lumber, piles of crushed stone, silent concrete mixers. There was grey cement dust everywhere, as fine as talc, and the smell of damp lime.

The man with the rifle walked on in the darkness until he came close to the new northeast corner. Then he stopped and put his back tight against a raw concrete pillar and stood still. Inched to his right with his head turned until he could see where he was. He was about eight feet from the garage's new perimeter wall. Looking due north. The wall was about waist-high. It was unfinished. It had bolts cast into it to take lengths of metal barrier to stop cars hitting the concrete. There were receptacles cast into the floor to take the new parking meter posts.

The man with the rifle inched forward and

turned a little until he felt the corner of the pillar between his shoulder blades. He turned his head again. Now he was looking north and east. Directly into the public plaza. The ornamental pool was a long narrow rectangle running away from him. It was maybe eighty feet by twenty. It was like a large tank of water, just sitting there. Like a big above-ground lap pool. It was bounded by four waist-high brick walls. The water lapped against their inner faces. His line of sight ran on an exact diagonal from its near front corner to its far back corner. The water looked to be about three feet deep. The fountain splashed right in the centre of the pool. He could hear it, and he could hear slow traffic on the street, and the shuffle of feet below him. The front wall of the pool was about three feet behind the wall that separated the plaza from First Street. The two low walls ran close together and parallel for twenty feet, east to west, with just the width of a narrow walkway between them.

He was on the garage's second level but the way First Street ran uphill meant the plaza was much less than one storey below him. There was a definite downward angle, but it was shallow. On the right of the plaza he could see the new office building's door. It was a shabby place. It had been built and it hadn't rented. He knew that. So to preserve some kind of credibility for the new downtown the state had filled it with government offices. The Department of Motor Vehicles was in there, and a joint Army-Navy-Air Force-Marine Corps recruiting office. Maybe Social Security was in there. Maybe the Internal

Revenue Service. The man with the rifle wasn't really sure. And he didn't really care.

He dropped to his knees and then to his stomach. The low crawl was a sniper's principal mode of movement. In his years in the service he had low crawled a million miles. Knees and elbows and belly. Standard tactical doctrine was for the sniper and his spotter to detach from the company a thousand yards out and crawl into position. In training he had sometimes taken many hours to do it, to avoid the observer's binoculars. But this time he had only eight feet to cover. And as far as he knew there were no binoculars on him.

He reached the base of the wall and lay flat on the ground, pressed up tight against the raw concrete. Then he squirmed up into a sitting position. Then he knelt. He folded his right leg tight underneath him. He planted his left foot flat and his left shin vertical. He propped his left elbow on his left knee. Raised the rifle. Rested the end of the forestock on the top of the low concrete wall. Sawed it gently back and forth until it felt good and solid. *Supported kneeling*, the training manual called it. It was a good position. Second only to lying prone with a bipod, in his experience. He breathed in, breathed out. *One shot, one kill*. That was the sniper's credo. To succeed required control and stillness and calm. He breathed in, breathed out. Felt himself relax. Felt himself come home.

Ready.

Infiltration successful.

Now wait until the time is right.

* * *

He waited about seven minutes, keeping still, breathing low, clearing his mind. He looked at the library on his left. Above it and behind it a spur of the raised highway curled in on stilts, like it was embracing the big old limestone building, cradling it, protecting it from harm. Then it straightened a little and passed behind the black glass tower. It was about level with the fourth storey back there. The tower itself had the NBC peacock on a monolith near its main entrance, but the man with the rifle was sure that a small network affiliate didn't occupy the whole building. Probably not more than a single floor. The rest of the space was probably one-man law firms or CPAs or real estate offices or insurance brokers or investment managers. Or empty.

People were coming out of the new building on the right. People who had been getting new licences or turning in old plates or joining the army or hassling with federal bureaucracy. There were a lot of people. The government offices were closing. Five o'clock, on a Friday. The people came out the doors and walked right to left directly in front of him, funnelling into single file as they entered the narrow space and passed the short end of the ornamental pool between the two low walls. Like ducks in a shooting gallery. One after the other. *A target-rich environment.* The range was about a hundred feet. Approximately. Certainly less than thirty-five yards. *Very close.*

He waited.

Some of the people trailed their fingers in the

water as they walked. The walls were just the right height for that. The man with the rifle could see bright copper pennies on the black tile under the water. They swam and rippled where the fountain disturbed the surface.

He watched. He waited.

The stream of people thickened up. Now there were so many of them coming all at once that they had to pause and group and shuffle and wait to get into single file to pass between the two low walls. Just like the traffic had snarled at the bottom of First Street. A bottleneck. *After you. No, after you.* It made the people slow. Now they were *slow* ducks in a shooting gallery.

The man with the rifle breathed in, and breathed out, and waited.

Then he stopped waiting.

He pulled the trigger, and kept on pulling.

His first shot hit a man in the head and killed him instantly. The gunshot was loud and there was a supersonic *crack* from the bullet and a puff of pink mist from the head and the guy went straight down like a puppet with the strings cut.

A kill with the first cold shot.

Excellent.

He worked fast, left to right. The second shot hit the next man in the head. Same result as the first, exactly. The third shot hit a woman in the head. Same result. Three shots in maybe two seconds. Three targets down. Absolute surprise. No reaction for a split second. Then chaos broke out. Pandemonium. Panic. There were twelve people caught in the narrow space between the plaza wall and the pool wall. Three were already

down. The remaining nine ran. Four ran forward and five spun away from the corpses and ran back. Those five collided with the press of people still moving their way. There were sudden loud screams. There was a solid stalled mass of panicked humanity, right in front of the man with the rifle. Range, less than thirty-five yards. Very close.

His fourth head shot killed a man in a suit. His fifth missed completely. The Sierra Matchking passed close to a woman's shoulder and hissed straight into the ornamental pool and disappeared. He ignored it and moved the Springfield's muzzle a fraction and his sixth shot caught a guy on the bridge of his nose and blew his head apart.

The man with the rifle stopped firing.

He ducked low behind the garage wall and crawled backwards three feet. He could smell burnt powder and over the ringing in his ears he could hear women screaming and feet pounding and the crunch of panicked fender benders on the street below. *Don't worry, little people,* he thought. *It's over now. I'm out of here.* He lay on his front and swept his spent shell cases into a pile. The bright Lake City brass shone right there in front of him. He scooped five of them into his gloved hands but the sixth rolled away and fell into an unfinished expansion joint. Just dropped right down into the tiny nine-inch-deep, half-inch-wide trench. He heard a quiet metallic sound as it hit bottom.

Decision?

Leave it, surely.

No time.

He jammed the five cases he had in his raincoat pocket and crawled backwards on his toes and his fingers and his belly. He lay still for a moment and listened to the screaming. Then he came to his knees and stood up. Turned round and walked back the same way he had come, fast but in control, over the rough concrete, along the walkway planks, through the dark and the dust, under the yellow and black tape. Back to his minivan.

The rear door was still open. He rewrapped the warm rifle in its blanket and slid the door shut on it. Got in the front and started the engine. Glanced through the windshield at the parking meter. He had forty-four minutes left on it. He backed out and headed for the exit ramp. Drove down it and out the unmanned exit and made a right and another right into the tangle of streets behind the department stores. He had passed under the raised highway before he heard the first sirens. He breathed out. The sirens were heading east, and he was heading west.

Good work, he thought. Covert infiltration, six shots fired, five targets down, successful exfiltration, as cool as the other side of the pillow.

Then he smiled suddenly. Long-term military records show that a modern army scores one enemy fatality for every fifteen thousand combat rounds expended by its infantry. But for its specialist snipers, the result is better. Way better. Twelve and a half *thousand* times better, as a matter of fact. A modern army scores one enemy fatality for every one-point-two combat rounds expended by a sniper. And one for one-point-two happened to be the same batting average as

five for six. Exactly the same average. Simple arithmetic. So even after all those years a trained military sniper had scored exactly what his old instructors would have expected. They would have been very pleased about that.

But his old instructors had trained snipers for the battlefield, not for urban crime. With urban crime, factors unknown on the battlefield kick in fast. Those factors tend to modify the definition of *successful exfiltration*. In this particular case, the media reacted fastest. Not surprisingly, since the shootings took place right in front of the local NBC affiliate's window. Two things happened even before a dozen panicked bystanders all hit 911 on their cell phones simultaneously. First, every minicam in the NBC office starting rolling. The cameras were grabbed up and switched on and pointed at the windows. Second, a local news anchor called Ann Yanni started rehearsing what she knew would be her very first network breaking-news report. She was sick and scared and badly shaken, but she knew an opportunity when she saw it. So she started drafting, in her head. She knew that words set agendas, and the words that came to her first were *sniper* and *senseless* and *slaying*. The alliteration was purely instinctive. So was the banality. But *slaying* was how she saw it. And *slaying* was a great word. It communicated the randomness, the wantonness, the savagery, the ferocity. It was a motiveless and impersonal word. It was exactly the right word for the story. At the same time she knew it wouldn't work for the caption below the pictures. *Massacre*

would be better there. *Friday Night Massacre?* *Rush Hour Massacre?* She ran for the door and hoped her graphics guy would come up with something along those lines unbidden.

Also not present on the battlefield is urban law enforcement. The dozen simultaneous 911 cell phone calls lit up the emergency switchboard like a Christmas tree and the local police and fire departments were rolling within forty seconds. Everything was despatched, all of them with lights popping and sirens blaring. Every black-and-white, every available detective, every crime scene technician, every fire engine, every paramedic, every ambulance. Initially there was complete mayhem. The 911 calls had been panicked and incoherent. But crimes were plainly involved, and they were clearly serious, so the Serious Crimes Squad's lead detective was given temporary command. He was a high-quality twenty-year PD veteran who had come all the way up from patrolman. His name was Emerson. He was blasting through slow traffic, dodging construction, hopelessly, desperately, with no way of knowing what had happened. Robbery, drugs, gang fight, terrorism, he had no hard information. None at all. But he was calm. Comparatively. His heart rate was holding below a hundred and fifty. He had an open channel with the 911 dispatcher, desperate to hear more as he drove.

'New guy on a cell phone now,' the dispatcher screamed.

'Who?' Emerson screamed back.

'Marine Corps, from the recruiting office.'

‘Was he a witness?’

‘No, he was inside. But he’s outside now.’

Emerson clamped his teeth. He knew he wasn’t going to be first-on-scene. Not even close. He knew he was leading from the rear. So he needed eyes. Now. *A Marine? He’ll do.*

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Patch the Marine through.’

There were loud clicks and electronic sounds and then Emerson heard a new acoustic. Outdoors, distant screaming, the splash of water. *The fountain*, he thought.

‘Who is this?’ he asked.

A voice came back, calm but rushed, loud and breathy, pressed close to a cell phone mouth-piece.

‘This is Kelly,’ it said. ‘First Sergeant, United States Marine Corps. Who am I speaking with?’

‘Emerson, PD. I’m in traffic, about ten minutes out. What have we got?’

‘Five KIA,’ the Marine said.

‘Five dead?’

‘Affirmative.’

Shit. ‘Injured?’

‘None that I can see.’

‘Five dead and no injured?’

‘Affirmative,’ the Marine said again.

Emerson said nothing. He had seen shootings in public places. He had seen dead people. But he had never seen *only* dead people. Public-place shootings always produced injured along with the dead. Usually in a one-to-one ratio, at least.

‘You sure about no injured?’ he said.

‘That’s definitive, sir,’ the Marine said.

‘Who are the DOAs?’

‘Civilians. Four males, one female.’

‘Shit.’

‘Roger that, sir,’ the Marine said.

‘Where were you?’

‘In the recruiting office.’

‘What did you see?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What did you hear?’

‘Incoming gunfire, six rounds.’

‘Handguns?’

‘Long gun, I think. Just one of them.’

‘A rifle?’

‘An autoloader, I think. It fired fast, but it wasn’t on full automatic. The KIAs are all hit in the head.’

A sniper, Emerson thought. Shit. A crazy man with an assault weapon.

‘Has he gone now?’ he said.

‘No further firing, sir.’

‘He might still be there.’

‘It’s a possibility, sir. People have taken cover. Most of them are in the library now.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Head down behind the plaza wall, sir. I’ve got a few people with me.’

‘Where was *he*?’

‘Can’t say for sure. Maybe in the parking garage. The new part. People were pointing at it. There may have been some muzzle flash. And that’s the only major structure directly facing the KIAs.’

A warren, Emerson thought. A damn rat’s nest.

‘The TV people are here,’ the Marine said.

Shit, Emerson thought.

‘Are you in uniform?’ he asked.

‘Full dress, sir. For the recruiting office.’

‘OK, do your best to keep order until my guys get there.’

‘Roger that, sir.’

Then the line went dead and Emerson heard his despatcher’s breathing again. *TV people and a crazy man with a rifle*, he thought. *Shit, shit, shit. Pressure and scrutiny and second-guessing, like every other place that ever had TV people and a crazy man with a rifle.* He hit the switch that gave him the all-cars radio net.

‘All units, listen up,’ he said. ‘This was a lone nutcase with a long gun. Probably an automatic weapon. Indiscriminate firing in a public place. Possibly from the new part of the parking garage. So either he’s still in there, or he’s already in the wind. If he left, it was either on foot or in a vehicle. So all units that are more than ten blocks out, stop now and lock down a perimeter. Nobody enters or exits, OK? No vehicles, no pedestrians, nobody under any circumstances. All units that are closer than ten blocks, proceed inward with extreme caution. But do not let him get away. *Do not* miss him. This is a must-win, people. We need this guy *today*, before CNN gets all over us.’

The man in the minivan thumbed the button on the remote on the visor and the garage door rumbled upward. He drove inside and thumbed the button again and the door came down after him. He shut the engine off and sat still for a moment. Then he got out of the van and walked

through the mud room and on into the kitchen. He patted the dog and turned on the television.

Paramedics in full body armour went in through the back of the library. Two of them stayed inside to check for injuries among the sheltering crowd. Four of them came out the front and ran crouched through the plaza and ducked behind the wall. They crawled towards the bodies and confirmed they were all DOA. Then they stayed right there. Flat on the ground and immobile next to the corpses. *No unnecessary exposure until the garage has been searched*, Emerson had said.

Emerson double-parked two blocks from the plaza and told a uniformed sergeant to direct the search of the parking garage, from the top down, from the southwest corner. The uniforms cleared the fourth level, and then the third. Then the second. Then the first. The old part was problematical. It was badly lit and full of parked cars, and every car represented a potential hiding place. A guy could be inside one, or under one, or behind one. But they didn't find anybody. They had no real problem with the new construction. It wasn't lit at all, but there were no parked cars in that part. The patrolmen simply came down the stairwell and swept each level in turn with flash-light beams.

Nobody there.

The sergeant relaxed and called it in.

'Good work,' Emerson said.

And it was good work. The fact that they searched from the southwest corner outward left

the northeast corner entirely untouched. Nothing was disturbed. So by good luck or good judgement the PD had turned in an immaculate performance in the first phase of what would eventually be seen as an immaculate investigation from beginning to end.

By seven o'clock in the evening it was going dark and Ann Yanni had been on the air eleven times. Three of them network, eight of them local. Personally she was a little disappointed with that ratio. She was sensitive to a little scepticism coming her way from the network editorial offices. *If it bleeds, it leads*, was any news organization's credo, but this bleeding was way out there, far from New York or LA. It wasn't happening in some manicured suburb of Washington D.C. It had a tinge of weirdo-from-the-heartland about it. There was no real possibility that anyone *important* would walk through this guy's cross hairs. So it was not really prime time stuff. And in truth Ann didn't have much to offer. None of the victims was identified yet. None of the *slain*. The local PD was holding its cards close to its chest until families had been notified individually. So she had no heartwarming background stories to share. She wasn't sure which of the male victims had been family men. Or churchgoers. She didn't know if the woman had been a mother or a wife. She didn't have much to offer in the way of visuals, either. Just a gathering crowd held five blocks back by police barricades, and a static long shot down the greyness of First Street, and occasional close-ups of the parking garage, which

was where everyone seemed to assume the sniper had been.

By eight o'clock Emerson had made a lot of progress. His guys had taken hundreds of statements. Marine Corps First Sergeant Kelly was still sure he had heard six shots. Emerson was inclined to believe him. Marines could be trusted on stuff like that, presumably. Then some other guy mentioned his cell phone must have been open the whole time, connected to another guy's voice mail. The cellular company retrieved the recording and six gunshots were faintly audible on it. But the medical examiners had counted only five entry wounds in the five DOAs. Therefore there was a bullet missing. Three other witnesses were vague, but they all reported seeing a small plume of water kick out of the ornamental pool.

Emerson ordered the pool to be drained.

The fire department handled it. They set up floodlights and switched off the fountain and used a pumping engine to dump the water into the city storm drains. They figured there were maybe eighty thousand gallons of water to move, and that the job would be complete in an hour.

Meanwhile crime scene technicians had used drinking straws and laser pointers to estimate the fatal trajectories. They figured the most reliable evidence would come from the first victim. Presumably he was walking purposefully right to left across the plaza when the first shot came in. After that, it was possible the subsequent victims were twisting or turning or moving in other

unpredictable ways. So they based their conclusions solely on the first guy. His head was a mess, but it seemed pretty clear the bullet had travelled slightly high to low and left to right as it passed through. One tech stood upright on the spot and another held a drinking straw against the side of his head at the correct angle and held it steady. Then the first guy ducked out of the way and a third fired a laser pointer through the straw. It put a tiny red spot on the northeast corner of the parking garage extension, second level. Witnesses had claimed they had seen muzzle flashes up there. Now science had confirmed their statements.

Emerson sent his crime scene people into the garage and told them they had all the time they needed. But he told them not to come back with nothing.

Ann Yanni left the black glass tower at eight thirty and took a camera crew down to the barricades five blocks away. She figured she might be able to identify some of the victims by a process of elimination. People whose relatives hadn't come home for dinner might be gathering there, desperate for information. She shot twenty minutes of tape. She got no specific information at all. Instead she got twenty minutes of crying and wailing and sheer stunned incredulity. The whole city was in pain and in shock. She started out secretly proud that she was in the middle of everything, and she ended up with tears in her eyes and sick to her stomach.

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