

Thirty-one days after American pilots began dropping bombs on Baghdad, Aunt Jane took the Charlies to a basketball game, the Charlies being: Tommy, Bobby, Chrissy and Pat. The Loudon Raiders were playing the Kearsarge Cougars an hour away at Kearsarge Regional High School, and Bobby was the starting center for Loudon, a bravely cocky team of third- and fourth-graders who had lost all 12 games so far this season. All the way from Loudon to Kearsarge, the Charlies passed around a plastic heart-shaped box of chalky pastel candy hearts, and took turns stumping Aunt Jane with knock-knock jokes from a book -- all except Pat, the youngest, who couldn't read. (He made them up as he went along, happily impromptu: Knock-knock. *Who's there?* A truck. *A truck who?* A chicken truck!)

It was the one hundred and ninety-ninth day after Iraqi soldiers invaded Kuwait, and Aunt Jane and the Charlies were rolling across a 50-mile stretch of New Hampshire highway. Outside it was nine degrees. Sprays of snow whisked across meadows like flocks changing direction. Tiny American flags flapped from the antennae of passing cars. And each town through which they drove was studded, fairly choked, with loops and sashes and bows and knots of yellow ribbon wound around door knockers, telephone poles, trees, park benches. Once, they passed a handful of scrubbed, somber-faced high school students, evoking the air of an official delegation and clutching large,

professionally-tied ribbons as they advanced on a giant fir tree in the traffic circle at the center of their town.

Kearsarge Regional High School turned out to be an ugly modern building, long and low and gray like barracks, in furious contrast with the sloping, powdery mountains that ringed it. Aunt Jane and the Charlies scrambled out of the van and skidded across the brittle, icy parking lot to the gym. Bobby joined his team and the others staked out a row at the very top of the bleachers, watching people arrive in a faltering trickle. The gym seemed ridiculously huge; soon the Charlies, like dogs acclimating themselves to new territory, felt obliged to venture under the bleachers, locate the soda and juice machines, explore the bathrooms and water fountains and the wrestling mats heaped in the far corner. Within minutes, they had established thorough and benevolent relationships with both the foreign gym and the other children they'd met under the bleachers.

The parents entered the gym with cold gusts, smelling of snow and gasoline. Men, beefy in hunting coats and caps, and women, hair crackling with static, took their places in the bleachers: a dozen Loudoners on the right, twice as many Kearsargers on the left. The Loudon coach shed his plaid lumber jacket and, in a t-shirt that said, "Go USA," started putting his team through drills. The first casualty occurred within moments: Number 14 bloodied his nose on a pass and sat with his father in the bleachers, slender neck thrown back and brown paper towel

pinched over his nostrils, until the game started.

While halfway across the earth that day, anti-aircraft gunners shot down two American A-10's, killing their crews and saving the lives of those who would have died from their bombs, the Saturday afternoon basketball game between the Kearsarge Cougars and the Loudon Raiders began. The time clock buzzed; the littlest children flinched; the parents leaned forward and chewed their lips, generating low murmurs, coiling and flexing their fingers.

Children flew up and down the court ethereally, pale arms flailing, sneakers skimming the glossy floor. Number 22, catching a pass that socked him squarely in the middle, was lifted off his feet for a second by the momentum of the ball, which covered him roughly from chest to thigh. By the end of the six-minute quarter, Loudon led four-to-two, with Bobby responsible for 100 percent of his team's baskets. Breaking from an exuberant huddle with his team, he dashed up the bleachers to inform to Aunt Jane, "Guess what? Coach says if we win we can go out to Burger King!" He'd made it halfway back down before cheerfully adding, "But he says we have to pay."

During the second quarter, the parents' rumblings swelled in pitch and tenor. Words became discernible: "Take him out, take him out!...Move, move, move, Move it!...Get in there!...That's cheating!...Hustle, shoot, come on, God damn it!" Across the gym, Tommy and Pat were among the kids playing follow-the-leader.

Chrissy and another girl turned in circles, dizzying themselves on the mats. On the wall above them, a magic-markered sign, made by a Kearsarge high school student, read, "Beatem Beatem Buckem Buckem Lay Them Down and Really Fight."

At halftime, Loudon was down 14-12. Parents on both teams took advantage of the break to chew out the referee, while children, who had been playing on the sidelines, wandered onto the court. A tall, lanky girl with a hot-pink headband and glasses took a few unselfconscious shots from under the basket, missing each one. Little kids tried to dribble, swiftly losing the ball under the bleachers. Chrissy ran over to Aunt Jane, asking if she could accept a piece of gum from her new friend. "Did you see me spinning before?" she panted with a gap-toothed smile.

It was during the third quarter that number 12 fell, sprawled on his belly, prompting a Loudon mother in acid-washed jeans to stand and shout raspily, "He *tripped* him!" Several rows away, a father wearing a Desert Storm baseball cap bellowed in protest. The referee, a spindly man with metal-framed glasses and graying hair, glanced nervously at the stands but let the game continue. Kearsarge racked up points and the parents' shouts grew harsher, reckless. Number 12 went sprawling twice more, eliciting snarls of disgust and rage from the adults. The children continued to work the length of the court, willingly offering their bodies to the game, following the directions of

both coach and referee, but they were no longer oblivious to the friction hissing and spitting like an electrical current among their parents.

While young men and women in the Persian Gulf continued to supply themselves for use in the fighting there, in New Hampshire the time clock blasted a final time, and the score stood at Kearsarge 24, Loudon 12. Aunt Jane gathered the children's coats, their knock-knock book and plastic heart, and took them out to the van. On the way home they stopped for root beers at the 106 Beanstalk Store, whose counter display included Desert Storm t-shirts, sweatshirts, caps and key chains. A notice on the wall announced that Loon Mountain was offering free skiing to immediate relatives of personnel serving in the gulf, as a diversion from stress.

Back outside, the sky was black. A sickle-moon pointed straight up, like a slip of watermelon rind. "Look," said Chrissy, "It's smiling." The Charlies drooped slightly, worn out and silent. As they headed towards the van, Pat slipped and fell on the ice, and then again, and a third time went down, and this time came up in tears, and Aunt Jane was swift to scoop up the four-year-old, who clung to her, and in spite of the bitter cold and dark sky and the other three hopping from foot to foot, waiting to get into the van, she held him a full minute, just like that.