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THE SACRED ACRE

*Take care of the little things,
and the big things will take care of themselves.*

ED THOMAS

EVERYONE IN PARKERSBURG AND BEYOND REFERRED TO THE home football field of Aplington-Parkersburg High School as “the Sacred Acre”—everyone, that is, except the team’s head coach. Ed Thomas referred to it as “the field where my team plays.” While technically correct, his perspective doesn’t tell the whole story. The A-P Falcons played on the field next to the high school, a field flanked on either side by metal bleachers like those you will find at any small high school anywhere in the country, especially in the Midwest. And *only* the A-P Falcon football team played on the field next to the school. The football field may have been school property, but the school didn’t get to use it. No one but the football team was allowed to set foot on it. Coach Thomas let the band perform their halftime shows on the field, but he did not let them practice on it during the week. Nor did he let A-P’s gym classes play soccer or rugby or even tag on the field. In the spring, when the track team used the track that circled the field, Ed roped off the football playing surface to keep sprinters and distance runners from stretching or warming up inside the white lines where only the football team was allowed to stretch and warm up. Only on the

rarest of occasions did he let his team practice on their home field through the week. Practice was held on the field on the opposite side of Johnson Street, across from the high school.

If Ed seemed a little obsessive about his football field, there was a good reason for it. He was a lot obsessive about his football field. He took better care of it than his own lawn. On the few occasions when his wife, Jan, could talk him into mowing the yard, he shot around it with the mower like a teenage boy listening to heavy metal music surrounded by pretty girls. He missed wide patches of grass on one side of the house and scalped it down to dirt on the other. When he finished, Jan would walk outside and shake her head. “Really, Ed,” she would say, “that’s the best you can do?”

“What?” he said with that little smirk of his that always put a smile on Jan’s face. “It looks good enough to me.”

“If that’s the case, then I better make you an appointment with the eye doctor,” Jan quipped.

“Well, a couple of spots may not look so great, but that’s because the lawn mower blade is dull. I’ll take care of that later.”

“Yeah, right,” Jan said, amused. The thought of her husband sharpening the blade on their lawn mower struck her as absurd. Ed Thomas was many things, but handy was not one of them.

As soon as Ed left the house, Jan went outside and redid the lawn herself to make it less of an eyesore.

The football field was another story entirely. Ed meticulously went over it like Michelangelo putting the finishing touches on the statue of David. From early spring to late fall Ed mowed it twice a week (“to promote growth,” he said), making sure to mow in the same direction between the yard lines. That way the grass had the distinctive contrasting shades of green every five yards, like the college and professional fields. He also watered and fertilized and aerated and overseeded and applied weed killers and bug killers, whether the field needed them or not. When it rained, he drove over to make sure the water drained properly, and in the hot summer months when rain rarely fell, he set out sprinklers and watered it

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himself until the school finally installed an irrigation system. All in all, he babied the field as if it sat in the middle of the University of Iowa's Kinnick Stadium, not between metal bleachers in the middle of a small town in northeast Iowa. Most people said that the field at Kinnick Stadium was the only field in the state of Iowa that compared to A-P's. The university employed a staff of professional groundskeepers; A-P only had Ed Thomas, but that was enough.

Ed's passion for the field where his team played football started at an early age. Long before Parkersburg High School hired him to coach and teach government and economics, back when Ed was in junior high school, he pulled the neighborhood kids together to play pickup football games in the large yard in front of his grandmother's house. This was no ordinary yard. He found a couple of bags of lime that he used to mark off yard lines and end zones. It only seemed natural for him to keep right on caring for his field himself when he became a football coach right out of college.

When Ed arrived in Parkersburg in 1975 after three years at Northeast Hamilton High School in Blairsburg, Iowa, he immediately took ownership of the field. He mowed it during the off-season, and sprayed the weeds that sprung up in the gravel separating the field from the running track. Before long he found himself attacking the weeds that grew up around the forty yard line. That's when he noticed the grass wasn't quite as green as he wanted it to be, which led to a round of fertilizer applied to the field himself. And then he said the yard lines weren't chalked off to his liking, so he started doing that himself, along with putting down the numbers.

Sometime in the late 1970s or 80s, Ed found a secondhand watering system that he bought with his own money—an odd menagerie of copper pipes that had to be manually connected to a fire hydrant on the edge of the high school parking lot. The pipes only covered half of the field, which meant Ed had to come back at a later time and move them from one end to the other. The job was too big for one man to do by himself, so Ed enlisted Jan to help.

When their two sons were big enough to lift and carry the pipes, they took their mother's place.

Ed was the kind of guy who had a schedule for everything connected with his football program, and watering the field was no different. Nothing got in the way of his timetable, not even his own absence. Not long after he purchased the secondhand watering system, he and one of his assistant coaches, Al Kerns, had to go to a coaching clinic in Cedar Falls. Ed called one of his buddies, Jim Graves, and asked him to take care of the field for him. "I'll start the water before I leave," Ed told him, "but I'll need you to come over and turn it off for me at 10:30 p.m. sharp. I'll leave a key to the fire hydrant for you at my house."

"Sure, Ed," Jim said, "I'll take care of it."

A little before 10:30, Jim walked out to his car to head over to the field. He could see the high school parking lot from his house, and he noticed a police car and a city water department truck already there. Jim rushed over, parked his pickup truck, and walked over to the fire hydrant off to the side of the field. "Hey, guys," he said to the policeman and the city worker standing next to the hydrant, "is there a problem?"

The city worker looked up. "The low pressure alarm went off on the water tower. I traced the problem to the field here. I need to shut the sprinklers off, but the hydrant is locked and I don't have a key. Do you know what the coach did with it?"

"I've got the key in my truck," Jim said.

The policeman and city worker looked at each other and smiled as if to say, "Great. Finally." "So will you shut it off for us?" the policeman asked.

Jim glanced at his watch. "Well, Coach told me not to shut it off until 10:30, and it ain't 10:30 yet."

"OK, we can wait," the policeman said without arguing the point. A few minutes later Jim turned the water off—at precisely 10:30.

Later that night, when Ed returned home, Jim called and said,

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“I want you to know that there were a lot of people in town taking showers tonight who didn’t get rinsed off because your Sacred Acre needed water.” Ed laughed, but for Jim, the name stuck.

Jim and Ed and several other locals got together most mornings to drink coffee at the local feed store. One morning, Ed talked Jim into replacing the lights on the football field. Jim worked for the local power company. When it came to Ed Thomas, it didn’t take much persuasion to talk Jim into it. “Sure,” he told Ed, “whatever you need.”

“Now when you get out there with your equipment and start digging holes for the new poles, make sure you keep them away from the field. That kind of equipment can put ruts in the turf, you know,” Ed said to Jim.

“Yeah, I know.”

“And when you cut the trench between the poles to bury the electrical lines, make sure you keep the trencher off the field. I don’t want anyone trampling down the grass.”

“Don’t worry, Ed. I won’t touch your Sacred Acre.” The rest of the guys in the group howled with laughter.

After that, the name spread. Every morning, someone managed to make some sort of comment about Ed’s Sacred Acre. One day it was Delbert Huisman—everyone called him Stub—who said, “Hey, Eddie. Drove by your Sacred Acre today. I could have sworn I saw a dandelion popping up around the fifty yard line. You better get out there and pull it up. You know how dandelions spread.” Another day it was Willie Vanderholt, who owned the local feed store where they met for coffee, who chimed in, “I heard there were some kids out last night running up and down your Sacred Acre. You better check to make sure the lock is still on the gate.” Everyone laughed and laughed with each comment, including Ed. However, after they finished their coffee, Ed went down to the high school and took a look around his field to make sure no dandelions had invaded and that the lock was still firmly in place on the gate. More than once, he discovered dandelions spread out across the

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field. They hadn't grown up overnight. His coffee-drinking buddies had put them there as a joke.

Ed never minded his friends' razzing because he knew his obsession with the field was not about a 360- by 160-foot plot of grass. His Sacred Acre served as a symbol of a much larger lesson he wanted to convey to the young men who signed up to play football for him. Prior to his arrival, Parkersburg High School had only fielded three winning teams since it started football in 1958. In thirty-four seasons under Ed Thomas, they only had one losing season. Along the way, Ed compiled 292 victories, along with two state championships, four state runners-up, and nineteen play-off appearances. Every season, Ed preached the same life lessons of hard work, focus, commitment, and attention to the smallest detail. "If we do the little things right," he told his teams, "the big things will take care of themselves." One glance over at the football field made it clear that Coach Thomas practiced what he preached.

The A-P football field also showed one of Ed's greatest gifts, a gift that endeared him to people in a way not even he fully understood. Back when Parkersburg High School (before the consolidation with Aplington) was built in 1970, athletic fields were an afterthought. Bulldozers moved dirt from the north side of the building site to level the pad where the school was built, leaving behind a flat spot that consisted of rock and hard clay. Later they brought in some topsoil, spread it on top of that flat spot, and declared it the football field. Getting any kind of grass to grow on the hard clay had never been easy. But Ed was not going to settle for merely getting grass to grow. He wanted an exceptional field, and he saw no reason why this patch of clay and rock couldn't be just that. He saw potential in a throwaway plot of ground that no one else could see. Through the years, he coaxed more out of that ground than anyone ever thought possible. He did the same thing with every player who came out for his team.

After the final home game of the 2007 season, Ed did something that made most people in town think he had lost his mind. He low-

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ered the mowing deck on his riding mower and scalped his football field down to the dirt. Then he covered the field with a thick layer of sand. He spread seed over the sand and covered the entire field with a tarp for the winter. His wife couldn't believe her eyes. "Why would you do that?" she asked several times. "The field looked so nice already." Ed just smiled and told her to trust him. He hadn't lost his mind. An agricultural professor from Iowa State University gave him the idea and told him how to carry it out. What others saw as desecration, Ed saw as a necessary step toward an even better field.

When spring rolled around and he removed the tarp from the field, Ed proved the doubters wrong. Not only did the field look better than ever; it drained water more efficiently and recovered faster from the wear and tear of the football season. Once again, this was about more than a football field. Ed's efforts told his team and the rest of the community never to rest on past successes but to always push themselves to improve every day, no matter what that day might hold. To Ed, bad days said more about a person's character than the good, and to him, nothing mattered more than character.

No, Ed never cared for the name Sacred Acre, but everyone else in town loved it. To Parkersburg and Aplington, the field and the man who gave it such meticulous care were inseparable. Everyone held the field in such esteem because they had such respect for Ed Thomas. For Ed Thomas and the players and their families he touched during his thirty-four years in Parkersburg, the field was about more than a field, and the game was about more than a game.

In *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis wrote, "It is vanity to wish for long life and to care little about a well-spent life." Though unexpectedly cut short, Ed Thomas's life was well spent. When he first arrived in Parkersburg, he saw the school as the next step in his coaching career, not a final destination. Like most young coaches, he dreamed of ascending the ranks to larger schools in

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bigger cities, perhaps even moving on to the college ranks. Somewhere along the way, he figured out that his mission lay not in wins and losses but in making his players more successful in life. For Ed, the best place to do just that was as head football coach of the Aplington-Parkersburg Falcons on a field everyone but he called the Sacred Acre.

EF5

*When the wind starts blowing,
don't tell me about the hurricane;
just bring the ship home, fellas.*

ED THOMAS

A LOW RUMBLE OF THUNDER RATTLED THE GLASS IN THE windows of Ed Thomas's classroom. He glanced outside and noticed the sky had grown much darker since he arrived at the school a few minutes earlier. "Looks like the farmers at church this morning were on the money," he said to himself. "They said we were going to get a storm today and, by golly, they're right." He turned back to his desk and pulled a key out of the top drawer. One of his upcoming senior football players had asked for a key to the weight room so he could work out the next day. Any other Monday morning, Ed would have opened the weight room himself, usually by 6:00 a.m. Since tomorrow was Memorial Day, he had other plans. Of course, Ed was more than happy to give a key to any player who wanted to push himself. The very thought of it put a smile on his lips. That was the kind of dedication and leadership he wanted from his seniors.

The loud blast of the tornado siren broke Ed's train of thought. He had never heard it so loud in his second home, Aplington-Parkersburg High School on the south side of Parkersburg, Iowa.

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For years, the only tornado siren in town sat on the north side. The wind had to be just right for people on the south side to hear it. All that had changed two days earlier, when city workers installed a brand-new siren near the high school. They installed it on Friday, tested it on Saturday, and now set it off for the first time at 4:46 p.m., Sunday, May 25, 2008.

Ed grabbed a handful of copies of “2007 Aplington-Parkersburg Football” DVDs, which he gave as gifts to all graduating seniors, and then walked calmly out of his room and down the hall. The siren didn’t add any sense of urgency. Half an hour earlier, while leaving a graduation party at a local restaurant in the nearby town of Aplington, he had talked to a couple of firemen who were on their way out the door as weather spotters. Both seemed more concerned about Ed’s opinion about his team’s prospects for the next football season than they were about the storm clouds growing in the west.

Scattered raindrops hit Ed as he walked outside. It wasn’t much, but from the looks of the western sky, he knew the heavy stuff wasn’t far behind. “I better go get my golf cart before this thing hits,” he said. He’d spent the first part of the afternoon playing golf with his youngest son, Todd, and Todd’s soon to be father-in-law, Mike Brannon. Ed had to take off after nine holes to attend the numerous high school graduation parties going on that afternoon and evening. Rather than use one of the rental carts from the golf course, Ed had his own. It was his most treasured possession. A few years earlier, the community and his players, past and present, presented it to him when he won his two hundredth game as a coach. He even had a special trailer for it, which he pulled behind his pickup truck. Before he left the afternoon golf game, Ed told Todd to leave the cart at the course, and he would pick it up later. This was later enough.

Ed climbed in his car and drove the three blocks from the school to his house on the far south side of Parkersburg. As he walked in the front door, he called out to his wife. “Hey, Jan, where are you?”

"I'm in the basement where more people should be. You need to get down here, NOW!" she said. Ed and Jan put in the basement during the first of the three home additions they had made over the course of ten years. When they bought the house a year after they married, it was quite small, just over eight hundred square feet. As their budget and family grew in size, they added on to it—first another bedroom, then a new kitchen, and finally a new living room and bathroom. They added the basement with the bedroom. Since Iowa is known for tornadoes, it seemed like the thing to do. However, Ed never expected to have to use it. Legend had it that a tornado could not strike Parkersburg because it sat at the fork of a river. Up until Memorial Day weekend, 2008, the legend seemed pretty accurate.

"I need to go get my golf cart first. I'll be right back."

"Forget the golf cart," Jan said. "Channel 7 said this storm is really bad. I heard the fire trucks go by on their way out of town right after the storm sirens went off. That can't be good, not if they're moving fire trucks out of harm's way."

"Oh, it can't be that bad. The television always blows these things way out of proportion. I don't want to leave my golf cart out in the rain. I'll be right back."

"No! There isn't any time."

"I looked around when I came home. I didn't see anything."

"You couldn't see anything because of all the trees. Grab your pillow and get down here fast." A trained emergency medical technician (EMT) and volunteer first responder with the local ambulance service, Jan knew that most injuries in storms come from flying debris. That's why she knew to take her pillow with her to the basement when the storm sirens went off.

"All right, you win," Ed said. Thirty-two years of marriage had taught him that some arguments are best lost. He went into their bedroom, grabbed his pillow off his bed, and walked down into the basement, closing the door behind him.

Ed found Jan under the basement stairs, but he didn't join

her there. He stood in the middle of the basement floor, his arms crossed, with a look on his face that said, "I'm here. Are you happy now?" No sooner had he crossed his arms than they heard a loud rush of wind, like the dry cycle of the car wash on steroids.

"Do you hear that!?" Jan said.

"Yeah," Ed said. He dropped his arms, grabbed his pillow, and jumped under the basement steps with Jan. Both of them barely fit in the space under the stairs. The two curled up into a near-fetal position next to one another, their faces less than an inch apart, their arms holding their pillows tightly against their heads. Above their heads, a freight train plowed into their house. Boards snapped. Glass shattered. A deafening cracking sound started at one end of the house and raced toward the other.

Ed and Jan looked at each other, their eyes wide with fear. They both started praying out loud, their voices drowned out by the wind that grew louder and louder. Dirt dropped down on top of the two of them. Jan peeked out once and saw nothing but absolute black. "Oh, God, please don't let the house collapse on top of us!" she cried out.

"AMEN!" Ed said.

And then, as quickly as it started, the wind stopped. Everything grew still and silent. "I'm going out there," Ed said.

"No, wait just a minute. There could still be more," Jan said.

"I really think it is over. I want to go up and have a look around, make sure everything is OK."

Ed was the optimist of the family, Jan the realist. She looked him in the eye and said, "You know when you open that door that our house is gone, don't you?"

"You think?" Ed said in a doubtful tone.

"Absolutely. It's gone."



Two houses down the block, Todd Thomas and Candice, his fiancée, were at the home of Mike and Nancy Brannon, Candice's par-

ents. Candice and Nancy spent most of the afternoon working on the wedding invitations, along with Jan. Jan left when the television weatherman warned of an approaching storm. Todd and Mike played golf with Ed. They played only three additional holes after Ed left to head for the graduation parties. A clubhouse attendant came out to the thirteenth tee box and said, "A big storm is heading our way. You need to clear the course." Todd didn't want to leave. He was up by several strokes and hated to waste a good game of golf. But playing in the rain wasn't exactly his idea of a good time, so they did as they were told. The tornado siren went off not long after Todd and Mike made it back to Mike's house. As soon as the siren started blaring, Candice and Nancy darted for the basement. Todd and Mike headed toward the front door.

"Where are you going?" Candice asked.

"To take a look," Todd said.

"A look? At what?" Candice said.

"You know, the storm, to see if anything is headed our way," Todd said in a matter-of-fact "duh, what else do you do when tornado sirens go off?" tone. "We won't be out there a minute. I promise."

Candice rolled her eyes and ran downstairs. Todd and Mike walked out into the front yard. The wind and rain that chased them off the golf course earlier had stopped, replaced by a dead calm. Silence hung in the air. Nothing made a sound. No dogs barked in the distance; no bird sang, and not even an insect buzzed. Parkersburg felt and sounded abandoned.

"Wow, that's weird," Todd said.

"Yeah, I've never felt anything quite like this before," Mike replied.

"Get ready. I've got a feeling something is about to happen," Todd said.

The two of them looked out toward the west. Storms in Iowa always travel west to east. A huge black cloud covered the western sky, and it appeared to be moving closer. A strong breeze suddenly

hit Todd in the face. The cloud climbed over the hill on the far side of town, moving closer to the lumberyard a quarter mile from Mike's home. Suddenly, the lumberyard exploded as the cloud fell on top of it. Sheet metal and two-by-fours and poles flew through the air.*

"Crap, let's get outta here!" Todd shouted. They ran into the house, flew down the stairs of the basement, and dove under the pool table, where Candice and Nancy were huddled. Only then did they hear the proverbial freight train sound. Todd couldn't quite fit his six-foot-five frame under the pool table. His legs stuck out exposed.

Glass crashed overhead, followed by a loud tumbling, rolling sound. "I think that was the couch," Mike said.

Nancy turned on a flashlight and prayed. "It's going to be all right," Todd said to Candice as he held her hand. He felt debris dropping onto his legs. "Please God, don't let anything heavy come down on top of me!" he prayed aloud.

Boards cracked and snapped. The smell of fresh lumber filled the basement. "And there goes the roof," Mike said. Nancy prayed harder.

The moment the noise stopped, Todd jumped up and headed toward the stairs. "I've got to check on my mom and dad," he said.

"Todd, expect the worst," Mike said.

Todd nodded and ran upstairs. Most of the roof and walls of the house were gone. "What the ...?" he said when he looked at the dining room table. It had not moved, and neither had the stack of wedding invitations on top of it. He glanced over to where he had parked his 2006 Nissan Maxima. A tree had sliced the car in half.

Todd ran out into the Brannon's front yard. He could not believe his eyes. Every house, every business, for as far as he could see, had been reduced to piles of rubble.[†] He looked around from side to

*For raw footage of the tornado striking Parkersburg, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAPnbzHvIKs&feature=fvsr.

[†]For on-the-scene news coverage of the aftermath of the tornado, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=lueETqSXcKo&feature=fvw.

side. A few minutes earlier, the town sounded abandoned; now it looked completely deserted. "Where is everybody?" he said. "Oh, my gosh, didn't anyone else survive?"

He had been told to "expect the worst," but this was worse than his mind could imagine. Almost worse. Where were his parents? Were they OK? His mother had called him right before the storm hit, asking if he knew where his father was. If Todd knew his dad, and he did, then he was probably down at the golf course loading up his golf cart right when the tornado blew through town. "And if Dad was there, then ..." Todd pushed those thoughts out of his head. "Mom! Dad! Are you OK?" he shouted as he ran toward his parents' house.

Todd jumped over a set of downed power lines and ran the short distance from the Brannons' home to his parents' home. "Mom! Dad!" he yelled as he ran into their yard. The storm had thrown a flatbed trailer into the side of Ed and Jan's house where the front door had once been. It held up what little of their roof remained. "How am I going to get in?" Todd said before he realized that all of the walls of the house were gone with the lone exception of one interior wall with the door to the basement. "MOM! DAD!" he shouted.

"We're fine. We're down here," he heard his father yell. Todd flung open the basement door and ran down the stairs. He threw his arms around both of them.

"We're OK," his mother said in a matter-of-fact tone. Ed, the rough-and-tumble football coach, choked back tears. Not Jan. Nothing ever seemed to faze her. "Go check on Marian," she said. Marian DeBoer was their retired, widowed neighbor who lived by herself. Jan had tried to get her to come over and join her in the Thomas basement before the storm. She refused, saying she would be fine in her own basement.

Ed followed Todd up the stairs. He glanced back at Jan, who seemed to lag behind. "Are you coming?" he asked.

"Yes, but of all the dumb things to do," she said.

“What?”

“I was so intent on getting down here when the sirens went off that I forgot my shoes. I grabbed my pillow and completely forgot my shoes.”

“Do you want me to help you find some?”

“No, go and check on the neighbors. I’ll be all right.”

Ed did as he was told, and as he climbed out of the basement, he found himself out in the open, even while inside what had been his living room a couple of minutes earlier. Upended cars littered the streets around him. Shattered boards stood where houses had once been. “It looks like a war zone,” he said to Todd. Ed turned toward his bedroom, or at least where his bedroom was supposed to be. The rest of his house, along with the entire neighborhood, was gone. The large maple trees that lined the streets had all been stripped bare and mangled into deformed skeletons.

He turned and walked in the general direction of where the front door used to be. “What on earth?” he said at the sight of the flatbed trailer wedged into his house. Off to one side he saw his pickup truck. It looked like someone had taken a giant can opener to it. The golf cart trailer was nowhere to be seen.

Looking past his truck, he stared off to the north and east, toward his second home, A-P High School. Even from a half mile away, he could see that the top half of the gym was gone. He couldn’t tell how badly damaged the rest of the buildings might be, but even from this distance he knew it wasn’t good. His head spun as his mind tried to process what his eyes saw. Ed leaned over with his hands on his knees as if he had just been punched in the stomach. In a way, he had.

Jan emerged from the basement and came up behind him. She glanced around quickly. “Wow. I knew it would be bad, but this is worse than I imagined.”

“This is just unbelievable,” Ed said, his voice cracking.

Behind them, a loud scream pierced their ears. Ed and Jan turned and saw one of Ed’s students, a seventeen-year-old girl, in

hysterics. Todd had just returned from helping Marian out of her basement. She had come through the storm unharmed, but her house was gone. “Todd!” Jan yelled.

“I’m on it,” he said and took off running toward the screaming girl. Ed followed behind.

“Where are my shoes?” Jan said as she dug around through the rubble that had been their bedroom five minutes earlier. “Ha, found one,” she said, pulling a soaked canvas tennis shoe out from under a pile of wet Sheetrock. She dug around some more, frustrated. Finally, she found the match. Not only were both shoes soaked; dirt and fiberglass insulation filled the insides. Jan dumped out as much of the crud as she could and slid them on. They were better than no shoes at all.

Todd ran back over. The frantic girl was screaming because her neighbor, an older man who was like a grandfather to her, had been badly injured when his house collapsed into the basement. “Mom, you need to get over here quickly. Chuck is hurt pretty bad.”

“OK,” Jan said. As soon as she reached him, she knew Charles Horan was in trouble. Blood gushed from a gash in his head. Lifting his shirt, she saw severe blunt force trauma injuries across his chest. “I’ve got to get the ambulance. Stay here. I’ll send help,” she said.

Todd and Ed stayed with Chuck as Jan took off running toward the fire station. She hoped the station would still be there when she arrived. As soon as she was gone, Todd looked at his father. “How many others do you think are hurt like this?” he asked.

Ed looked around at what remained of the south side of Parkersburg. It looked like old black-and-white photos of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb had decimated the city, albeit on a much, much smaller scale. He let out a long sigh. “I’m afraid to even guess,” he said.

Rain began to fall again. The rainstorm the farmers predicted had finally arrived.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Never forget where you came from.

ED THOMAS

ED DIDN'T GROW UP IN PARKERSBURG, BUT YOU COULDN'T tell it from talking to him. He spoke of the small town of 1,900 in northeast Iowa as second only to the garden of Eden itself. If you didn't know better, you would have thought he was president of the local Chamber of Commerce rather than the high school football coach. Everywhere he went Ed sang Parkersburg's praises. "Some-day," he often said, "the word is going to get out about this place." He never counted on the word getting out quite like this.

A team of storm chasers working with Des Moines television station KCCI pulled into town at 5:03 p.m., less than five minutes after the tornado moved on to the east. They came in on Highway 57, which passes just to the north of the Thomas home. Immediately, the storm chasers called into their contact at the station. "We have pretty much impassable roads out here, massive damage, houses completely obliterated, leaking gas here," one member of the team said. "I need you to do something for public safety. We have huge gas leaks. I need to have emergency management send everybody they have here. Firefighters. State police. Everyone.

We're talking massive destruction. Large gas leaks. We have possible lots of fatalities. Cars flipped. This is not good." The storm chasers tried to jump into rescue mode, but the air reeked of natural gas, forcing them out of town in fear of sparking a fire.*

KCCI Channel 8 immediately broadcast their report from Parkersburg. Other television and radio stations across the state repeated it. Wire services all over the country soon picked up the story. Details were still sketchy, but one thing seemed clear: some, if not all, of Parkersburg had been destroyed.

Five miles straight west of town, Ellie Thomas sat glued to the television. The birthday party she had attended that afternoon came to a screeching halt due to the storms rolling across northeast Iowa. As soon as she heard the initial reports coming out of Parkersburg, she grabbed her cell phone and called her husband, Aaron, Ed and Jan's oldest son.

"Aaron, where are you right now?" Ellie asked.

"I'm still in Dysart at the graduation party. Why? Is the birthday party at your brother's house over already?"

"Haven't you heard the news?" Ellie's voice broke. Try as she might to project a brave front to her husband, her emotions broke through. "A tornado just hit Parkersburg. They say it's real bad."

"OK, that just means some farmer's barn out in the country blew away. Happens every spring. It's not a big deal," Aaron said. Ellie calls Aaron E.J., as in Ed Junior, because he looks and acts so much like his father. Yet, in times of crisis, his mother comes out in him—calm, practical, to the point. That's why news of a tornado hitting his hometown didn't throw him into a panic. Growing up in Iowa, he had lived through many a storm. A downed barn or a lost mobile home constituted a weather catastrophe in Parkersburg. To Aaron, it wasn't anything to get too worked up over.

"No, you don't understand. They just came on the news and reported that a large part of town is completely destroyed. Aaron, I

*Watch raw, unedited footage at www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLx7Xe6_cxo.

can't get ahold of your folks." Panic filled Ellie's voice. "I'm scared. The people on the news said the storm could be an EF5, the worst there is, and it went right over your parents' house."

"I'm sure they're OK," Aaron said, trying to calm his wife down. His words were as much a prayer as a statement. "Phone service and electricity are probably out. That's why you can't reach them. I'll leave the graduation party right now and drive over and check everything out."

"Please do. And be careful."

"Don't worry. Stay where you are. I'll call you as soon as I know something."

"OK," Ellie said.

Aaron clicked "end" on his cell phone, then turned to his assistant coach, whose son was celebrating his graduation. Like his father, Aaron always wanted to coach, although he preferred basketball to football. He had been a starter on the Division I basketball team at Drake University and then moved right into coaching as a graduate assistant at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota, after graduating from Drake. One year later, he took over as head basketball coach and athletic director at Union High School in La Porte, Iowa. In his four seasons, he had already started establishing the same reputation as a basketball coach that his father had in football.

"I gotta go," Aaron said to his friend, knowing he had an hour's drive ahead of him. "A tornado just hit Parkersburg. I'm going to drive over and make sure my parents are all right."

"Yeah, uh, OK," his friend said, his mind trying to grasp what he'd just been told. "Let me know what you find out."

"Sure. Not a problem," Aaron said as he headed for the door.

Fifty miles away in Parkersburg, Ed tried to wrap his head around what lay around him. Chuck had been transported to the hospital, but Ed knew he probably wouldn't survive. Ed and Todd had spent what felt like a very long time helping pull neighbors out of basements. Police officers and firefighters converged on the

town, but they were badly undermanned in comparison to the level of destruction.

“I’ve gotta get to the school,” Ed said to Todd once all their neighbors were accounted for.

“I’ll go with you,” Todd said. He was nearly as anxious to get to the school as his father was. Growing up, he had spent nearly as much time at A-P as he had at his home, maybe even more. It was *the* place where he and his father built a special bond. At the age of seven or eight, Todd started out as the ball boy. He and Aaron hung out at practice and ran special errands for their dad. They didn’t just tag along after their father. Ed made them feel like they belonged, as if running out on the field to pick up the kicking tee after the kickoff was one of the most important jobs anyone could have. Todd and Aaron also helped sort through the team equipment with their dad and mark off the lines on the practice field, just the three of them. Whenever Ed mowed the football field, Todd and Aaron took turns riding on the mower with him. When Todd was thirteen, his dad even handed him the keys to the riding mower and said, “Why don’t you mow the field for me today? I think you can handle it.” That was Todd’s coming-of-age moment.

Todd and Aaron also had the unenviable task of helping their dad drag the irrigation pipes from one side of the field to the other—doing so from the time they were just big enough to pick the pipes up. Ed usually rewarded them on hot summer days by letting them run through the sprinklers as they watered the field. However, he always made them take off their shoes first. Todd never knew if his dad did that so they would keep their shoes dry, or to protect the grass on the field. Once he was old enough to think it through, he decided it was the latter. Afterward, Ed took his sons into the teacher’s lounge and bought them a bottle of pop from the soda machine. Todd never forgot how cold that strawberry pop tasted out of a real glass bottle, or how much fun he had sitting out on the grass, drinking it down, talking and joking with his dad.

The day of the tornado, the three blocks from his house to the

high school never seemed longer. Every few steps, Ed and Todd stopped to check on friends and neighbors, and in Parkersburg, everyone was a friend or neighbor to Ed Thomas. In his years as head football coach and history and economics teacher, he had coached or taught at least one member of nearly every family in town. Even with an enrollment that fluctuated between 220 and 250 students from year to year, Ed regularly had 80, 90, even 100 boys come out for football every season. Whenever a local family had a baby boy, Ed sent the parents a certificate that read, "Congratulations! Upon the recommendation of the Aplington-Parkersburg football staff, your newborn son has been officially drafted to become a Falcon football player in the fall of _____. " Former players who moved away after high school moved back to town after they settled down and had sons of their own. They returned for one simple reason: they wanted Coach Thomas to impact their sons in the same way he had impacted them.

Parkersburg hadn't always been so crazy about football. Prior to Ed's arrival, girls' basketball was the biggest game in town. Boys played football only to get in shape for basketball season. No one expected much out of the football team—not even the players. Every year they finished near the bottom of their conference. Few people in 1975 thought a new coach could change that. After all, at that time Ed Thomas and Parkersburg had one thing in common: both had trouble winning football games. Ed's first team at Northeast Hamilton High School lost every game they played. The next year he managed to win two but lost seven. His third team was his first to win more than it lost, finishing the year five and four. That also happened to be the year Ed started dating Jan. She never tired of pointing out to him that he never had a winning record until he met her. Even so, his 7 and 20 overall record didn't elicit great confidence in him as a football coach. Ed, however, never once doubted his abilities.

Twenty boys came out for football in Ed's first season at Parkersburg High School. Halfway through the first practice, senior

captain Dave Becker knew this season would be unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He looked around at the twenty other guys on the team, their heads hanging down, exhausted. Most of them expected Coach Thomas to blow the whistle at any moment and tell them to hit the showers and head home. Practice had already lasted longer than their previous coach's practices. Then Dave looked over at Ed. "OK, fellas," Ed yelled out, "get over here and line up. We've got a lot of work yet to do. Remember, all the hard work we put in out here on the practice field will pay off on Friday nights."

A couple of guys near Dave groaned. Not Dave. He had been waiting for a coach who not only wanted to win but believed this group of twenty farm boys could pull it off. "All right, you guys, you heard the coach. Line up," Dave yelled. The other seniors hit the line first, and the underclassmen followed.

Ed looked over at Dave and gave him a little smile.

"Coach, we're sick of getting our butts handed to us every game," Dave said.

"I'll tell you what, Becker, if you fellas will work hard and work together, I guarantee you that the sky is the limit on what we can accomplish here. We may not be as talented as some of the teams we're going to play this season, but, by golly, we're going to beat them by outworking them."

"I'm with you," Dave said. "Let's do this."

Ed slapped him on the back. "All right, get down in your stance. Fire off the line on the whistle."

Parkersburg won their first game of the season, followed by another three wins in a row. When they finally lost a game, Ed didn't yell at the players for their mistakes. In the locker room he told them how proud he was of their effort and asked them one question: "What did you learn from the mistakes we made out there tonight?" The team finished the year with six wins and only three losses. It was Parkersburg's first winning season in over twenty years. Ed bought shirts for every young man on the team,

with “6–3” across the front, and the words “A Tradition Is Born” on the back.

Ed didn’t set out to simply change the culture within the team; he set out to change the culture throughout the school and the entire community. Joan Prohaska decided to go out for the cheerleading squad during Ed’s second season, her senior year. She assumed all she had to do was to make it through the tryouts. Then Ed called all the prospective cheerleaders into his classroom for a meeting. “Please have a seat, ladies,” he said. He then passed out a test they had to pass before they were allowed on the sidelines of Ed’s football field—a test of their basic knowledge of the game of football. He didn’t want anyone leading cheers for his team if they didn’t know the difference between a first down and an incomplete pass.

Dave Becker and Joan started dating and later got married after she graduated from high school. They moved away from Parkersburg, but not for long. They moved back to town after starting a family of their own. Dave wanted his children to be around Ed in the hope that some of Coach would rub off on them and influence their lives in the same way he had influenced his. Eventually, all three of their sons played for Ed. During the parents’ meeting at the start of each season, Ed always pointed to Dave and said, “He was the captain of my first team here. We had a pretty good year that year, didn’t we, Dave?” Dave would smile and say something like, “We sure did, Coach, a great year. And this year is going to be even better.” The longer Ed was in Parkersburg, and the more success his teams had, the more pride Dave felt in being the captain of the team that got everything started.

Dave’s response was exactly what Ed hoped to accomplish as a coach. From the start, his goals went beyond the game of football. He set out to create a winning tradition, but he didn’t measure success in wins and losses. “If all I ever teach you is how to block and tackle, then I have failed you as a coach.” Most coaches on all levels say something like this to their teams, but Ed lived it. He cared for his players and students as people, and that did not change after

they graduated. Once someone played for him, they were a part of his team for life. On any given day, when he ran into his former players, he immediately greeted them with a hearty, “Boy, it’s good to see you. How’s your family? Tell me what’s going on in your life right now.” These weren’t rhetorical questions. Ed truly wanted to know what was going on in his players’ lives. If things weren’t going well, he stopped what he was doing and talked with them about how they could move forward. That may be why people all over town thought of “Coach” as their best friend.

Now as Ed and Todd walked down the streets of Parkersburg on their way to the high school, his “team” was in the worst crisis he’d ever seen. Hundreds of his friends had lost everything they owned. “This is just unbelievable, pal,” he said to Todd as they walked along. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think something like this could happen here.”

“Yeah, me either,” Todd said. “And to think that I went outside to take a look when the sirens went off instead of going into the basement with Candice. I thought the storm would turn out to be nothing. Now look at this.”

Ed laughed for the first time since the tornado hit. “I tried to do the same thing, but your mother insisted I go down in the basement instead. I guess it’s a good thing she did.”

“Uh, yeah, Dad.”



Aaron made the drive from Dysart to Parkersburg in record time. Once or twice he glanced down at the speedometer in his truck. When he did, he let off the gas pedal just enough to keep his speed under ninety. Even then, police cars flew past him on their way to Parkersburg.

About a mile south of town, Aaron topped a hill on Highway 14 and slammed on his brakes. The road just ahead was closed to everything but emergency traffic. He noticed a gravel road to his left and took off down it. He kept looking north. Off in the dis-

tance he saw the Parkersburg water tower, but he could not see anything else. Eventually the gravel road turned north toward town. His truck fishtailed around the ninety-degree curve as he pressed hard on the gas pedal. He sped north up a road that eventually becomes Johnson Street in Parkersburg. Any other day, Johnson Street would have taken him within a half block of his parents' house. This wasn't any other day.

Aaron came up over a rise that gave him his first view of the place he had always taken for granted as home. He slammed on the brakes and threw his truck into park. Tossing the door open, he jumped out and took off toward his parents' house, or at least where he thought his parents' house should be. Even though he was sure he was within a block, maybe two, of their house, nothing looked familiar. "Oh, my gosh," Aaron said, "it's gone. Everything is gone."

Somewhere around the spot where he stood was the yard his dad had turned into the family football stadium on Sunday afternoons for a game they called "touchdown" when Aaron was little. The object of the game was simple enough. Ed played quarterback. Aaron and Todd were the receivers. And Jan was the lone defensive back. Aaron and Todd ran pass patterns around Mom while Dad motioned them to go further. If Aaron and Todd could score a touchdown in four downs, they won. Their mother rarely won the game.

Whenever it was too cold or wet to play football in the yard, Ed put a Nerf ball basketball hoop above one door for a full family game of basketball. Aaron teamed with one parent, Todd with the other, and they went at it. Ed and Jan played on their knees. The games lasted all afternoon, or until Mom and Dad were too exhausted to keep going. The living room also doubled as a football field when Ed came home from work. The moment he walked in the door, Aaron and Todd came running up and tried to tackle him. That game ended once they were big enough not only to tackle him but to hurt him in the process. When the boys were very little, Ed

THE SACRED ACRE

ran practice drills with them right before bedtime. Aaron could still remember doing footfire drills in his footie pajamas when he was maybe four years old.

Now Aaron could not even find the place where the house had once been. Everything he had used as a landmark to find his way around the south side of town as a boy had been rendered unrecognizable.



Police cruisers and fire trucks from surrounding towns filled the high school parking lot as Ed and Todd walked up to the school. Ed headed straight to the football field. The school had named it after him a few years earlier. He never called it Ed Thomas Field, just as he never called it the Sacred Acre. From his house he could tell the school had been hit by the tornado, but he wasn't prepared for what he saw as he looked down on the field where his team played ball. Portions of the home grandstands were upended and mangled. The press box lay shattered on the ground. The goalpost in the west end zone looked like a pretzel.

As for the field itself, it looked like a pincushion. Debris from the storm didn't just cover the grass. Two-by-fours and sheets of plywood and glass and lawn mower decks and anything else the EF5 tornado could rip from the houses south of town appeared to have been driven down into the turf with a jackhammer. Tears welled up in Ed's eyes. Todd put his arm around his father, fighting back tears of his own. "It'll be OK, Dad."

Ed took a deep breath. "I know." He stood there for a moment, staring out at the place where he had invested so much of himself. Letting out a long sigh, he said, "I need to get to my classroom."

They turned toward the building. "Dad, we can't go in there. It looks worse than the field," Todd said.*

*For glimpses of the damage to the high school and the surrounding area, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9VPPBa1bY0.

"I have to at least try," Ed said. Todd didn't try to talk him out of it. If there was one thing he had learned about his father, it was that he never let any obstacle, large or small, get in his way. Once he set his mind to something, he found a way to get it done.

The two of them pushed through a door near what remained of the gym and walked down the main hallway. Portions of the hall itself were clear, but the wall on the left-hand side had collapsed into a classroom. "That room was one of our safe rooms," Ed said, "the place where the kids were supposed to go when the tornado sirens go off."

"Whoa," Todd said. The roof and walls had caved down onto the desks below. "I hate to think what might have happened if the storm had hit when school was in session."

Ed and Todd picked their way through the rubble. They finally made it to the hallway near Ed's classroom. Steel girders that had once supported the roof hung down, blocking their path.

"Hey," a voice called out to them, "it's not safe in there. You need to get out." Ed turned and saw a sheriff's deputy pointing at them.

"Come on, Dad, let's get out of here," Todd said. "You can't do anything in here right now anyway."

Ed sighed and wiped his eyes. "OK, pal. Let's go."

Ed and Todd arrived back at what remained of the Thomases' home. Aaron was wandering around, trying to get his bearings. After hugs and stories of what had just happened, Ed said to his sons, "I really need to go back and try to get into my classroom."

"Dad, we already tried once. That place isn't safe. What's so important that it can't wait?" Todd asked.

"All the booster club money is locked up in my office, along with money for the summer football T-shirts the boys ordered, ticket money, and the cash I set aside for the football program through the year from my speaking engagements," Ed said.

"So are we talking about a thousand dollars?" Todd asked. "That's not worth taking a chance of having a wall fall on you."

Ed lowered his voice. "Closer to forty thousand."

Aaron jumped in. "Why on earth would you have that kind of money in your classroom, Dad?"

Ed just smiled. "That's how I've always done it. I can keep an eye on it that way. Never seemed to present a problem until now."

Aaron and Todd looked at one another and shook their heads. "Yeah, all right, I'll go with you," Aaron said.

The number of emergency vehicles in the school parking lot had increased exponentially since Ed's first foray there an hour or so earlier. He and Aaron walked up to the same entrance he had gone into with Todd. An emergency management official in a bright yellow shirt with an ID badge dangling off the front stepped in front of them. "I'm sorry. This site is restricted. No one is allowed inside," he said.

"Sure, I understand," Ed said, "but I just need to get inside for a minute. I'm Ed Thomas, the football coach ..."

"Yes, sir, I know who you are, but you still aren't going inside the school building. A couple of the walls could collapse at any moment. I cannot allow you to go inside."

"I don't plan on moving in. I have a few things in my room that I absolutely must get out of there," Ed said.

"If anything is left in your room, I can assure you that nobody else will be allowed to get in there and take it. Your things that survived the storm will be fine."

"You don't understand. I have to get in there."

"No, *you* don't understand, Coach Thomas. No one, and I mean no one, can enter this school building. No exceptions. The last thing I'm going to do is let you or anyone else go waltzing in there and have a wall come down on top of you. Case closed."

Ed opened his mouth to say something else, but Aaron cut him off. "Come on, Dad. You're not going to win this argument."

Reluctantly, Ed gave in. He allowed Aaron to pull him by the arm away from the gym entrance. The two of them walked just out of earshot of the emergency management official. "OK, follow me,"

Ed said. "I think we can get in back by the shop." They rounded a corner, and Ed stopped. "Well, will you look at that." He was right about being able to get in through the shop. The shop, along with the entire back side of the school building, was completely gone.

Once inside, they crawled around, under and over rubble, until they reached Ed's classroom. Desks were upended. Steel girders hung down, twisted. Ceiling tiles and roofing material covered the floor.

Ed walked over to a pile that sat where his desk was supposed to be. "Can you give me a hand?" he said. Aaron helped his father lift a board of broken Sheetrock off the side of the desk so they could get to the drawers. He had never seen his father so shaken, so in shock.

Ed dug around through a couple of the drawers. "This is unbelievable, you know it? Just unbelievable." He let out a long sigh. "OK, here they are," he said, pulling out the money boxes.

"OK, Dad, can we get out of here?" Aaron said.

"Yeah. I'm done," Ed said. On the way out he also grabbed his playbooks, along with some of the framed photographs of former players that still hung on the walls.

"Dad," Aaron said.

"OK, really, I'm done now."