

Shirts and Skins

by Tony Noland

The boys finished their laps and returned to the center of the gym, Hamid shuffling up last, as usual. Amid the T-shirts and shorts, he wore faded blue slacks and a grubby, long sleeved dress shirt. He always dressed that way, even in gym class, as though H. T. Farnell Middle School had a formal uniform requirement. Hamid was 12 years old, and his body odor announced that, even if bathing were a regular practice in the Saustrahaimaini household, soap and deodorant were not in common use.

Having received thorough instruction in the school's anti-bullying policies, as well as a series of two-hour lectures in diversity appreciation, community respectfulness and cultural tolerance, the other boys did not call Hamid a greasy Arab freak where any of the teachers could hear them. It was likely that Hamid's command of English was good enough to understand what the boys said to him and about him, but he never responded. He was clearly an idiot and a coward, besides being a greasy Arab freak.

Assistant Coach Wills had discussed the matter with Coach Carhehan. They both agreed that if Hamid left another gym class with his shirt soaked in sweat, they would both hear no end of it from all of his afternoon teachers. Instructions to the boy, even a meeting with his parents to let them know the school's policy about appropriate gym clothes met with an uncomprehending refusal to let the boy wear a T-shirt. The parents spoke hardly any English, and all Wills could get out of them was that they wanted Hamid to look nice.

It was Coach Carnehan who had suggested the solution.

"Alright, guys, settle down," Wills said. "We're gonna divvy up for basketball. All of you -" he indicated the side without Hamid "- are shirts, the rest, skins. Danny, Nick, Antoine, go get some basketballs

from the locker and come right back. The rest of you, get your shirts off and let's play."

He deliberately turned away to look at his clipboard. Boys at this age were often body shy and it was always easier to get over the first awkward moments quickly. Gym class taught more than basketball and personal health; men needed to be able to take their shirts off among other men. After a moment, Wills turned back. All the skins had thrown their shirts into a pile and were standing bare-chested, more or less self-consciously as they waited for the games to start.

All except for Hamid, who had not removed his shirt. He had an strange, blank look on his face. Wills went over to him. "Hamid," he said, "you're playing skins. Go ahead and take your shirt off."

Hamid looked at the other boys, then said something that Wills didn't catch.

"Come on, Hamid," Wills said, using the gruff coach voice that he always used during difficult moments. "All the other boys are shirtless too, so it's no big deal. It's just part of how we do things in this country."

Hamid stood quietly, then said, "Must I do this? Truly?"

"Yes, Hamid, you must. Get going."

The boy drew a deep breath through his nostrils, and said, "I do not want to do this, Assistant Coach Wills, but if I must do this, then I shall do it like a man." He undid the cuffs of his shirt, then unbuttoned the front. He took the shirt off and revealed a mass of scars that covered his chest, back and arms. Long, wide welts, puckered and shiny and deep pink on his coffee-colored skin, obviously extending down below the line of his belt.

"My God." The gym had gone silent and Wills involuntarily took a step backward. "I... my God."

Hamid looked Wills in the eye. The man flushed and had a terrifying thought that Hamid would accuse him of deliberate humiliation, but the boy did not look humiliated at all. He looked courageous and yet serene.

"What happened to your... I mean..."

"Our neighbors back in my village did not like Christians, Assistant Coach Wills. They knew we would be gathering at Easter to celebrate the rising of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. They found out where we were meeting, and they attacked. Many of us escaped, but I did not."

"They... did that to you?"

"I was whipped with ropes and wire cables, yes. My family moved to this country not long after, to escape persecution." Hamid paused, his face clouding. He continued, "We are able to worship in peace here. Everything else... is not important. This is my new home, and I must fit in if I am to be a success. I am trying to fit in, Assistant Coach Wills. Please believe that."

Hamid turned and crabbed over sideways to pick up a basketball. In the silence of the gym, he dribbled it slowly down the court in his shuffling half-run, the mass of scar tissue flexing and stretching tightly across his shoulders and back as he passed the ball awkwardly from hand to hand.

