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The Murder Artist

John Case

One

Five hours of sleep. I rub my eyes, head out front, and bend down to extract my rolled-up copy of The Washington Post from beneath an azalea bush. I never know where I'm going to find the thing; whoever pitches it never got past T-ball.

"Good morning! Beautiful day in the neighborhood." It's Yasmin Siegel, my eightysomething neighbor from across the street, with her black Lab, Cookie.

"I guess."I slide the paper out from its transparent plastic sleeve.

"Seriously, Alex, a day like this in Washington, D.C." She shakes her head in disbelief. "It's a gift. End of May? You can get some real stinkers." She points her finger at me. "You enjoy it, you and those boys."

"I was hoping for rain," I tell her, looking up at the cloudless blue sky.

"Ri-ight," Yasmin chuckles. "O-kay, Cookie. I get the message." She gives me a jaunty wave and heads toward the park.

Actually, I was hoping for rain. I check the weather map on the back of the Metro section, just in case.

No. No rapidly moving front, no storm pelting toward D.C. from Canada or the Outer Banks.

A beautiful day.

Back in the house, I set up the coffeemaker. While I wait for it to do its thing, I put out bowls and spoons for the boys, pour two glasses of orange juice, tear off a couple of bananas from the bunch, toss them onto the table, get the giant box of Cheerios down from the cabinet.

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The problem with the beautiful day is that I've got work to do, last-minute cuts on a piece scheduled to air tonight. But cuts or no cuts, I promised the boys - my six-year-old twins - that every Saturday they could pick out some kind of excursion. And they're dead set on this Renaissance festival, which naturally enough is all the way to hell and gone, way out past Annapolis. The drive alone will take more than an hour each way. It's going to kill the whole day.

And since this is the boys' first visit since Christmas - and only their second visit since Liz and I separated - this is the first of these excursions. No way I can bail.

I tell myself there's nothing for it. Get on with it. I need to make the cuts in time to drop off the file at the station on our way out of town.

The boys and I are doing great so far - although after only six days, I'm already wiped out and playing catch-up at the station. This would make Liz happy, both the sleep deprivation and the fact that after less than a week, I'm already falling behind at work. She built in the time crunch when she set up the conditions for the visit. She wouldn't let me take the boys on a trip, for instance, not even for part of the month. "How can I compete,"she said, "if every time they're with you, it's a vacation?"(I took the kids skiing in Utah during my allotted four days at Christmas.)

What Liz wants is a month of "regular life," as she puts it. She works full-time at the Children's Museum in Portland. She wants me to experience the reality, 24/7, of having kids and a job, wants me to hassle with car pools, laundry, bedtimes, picky eating habits, friends, the parents of friends. If there's any chance for a reconciliation, I have to see that I can't just phone it in - having a wife and kids. Being a single parent for a month will force me to put family first.

Instead of work. In the station's official bio, I'm the guy who "goes after the toughest stories in the hardest places." This has won me several awards, but it's beginning to look as if it might cost me my marriage. And my family. I was in Moscow when the twins took their first steps, in Kosovo when Kev broke his arm, in Mazar-al-Sharif on their first day of kindergarten.

"Minute for minute," Liz said, "you'll probably see more of the boys this month than you have for the past two years. Maybe you'll even like it."

Coffee's ready. I splash some milk into it and I'm about to leave the plastic bottle on the table for the boys, when I remember that Kev won't touch milk if it's the slightest bit warm. I put it back into the fridge.

The thing is I do like it, having the guys around, even with the hassles. Liz was right about that. I guess it was always easier to let her do most of the "parenting," or whatever you want to call it. Turns out, that routine stuff is when you really get to know your kids. I forgot how much fun they are, their bursts of insight, the earnest concentration they bring to certain tasks. How much I missed them.

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This Renaissance thing, though - I'm not looking forward to that. After a long and traffic-choked drive, I'm guessing it will be a hokey and overpriced tour through what amounts to a faux Elizabethan amusement park. Costumed knights and ladies. Jousts and faked swordplay. Jugglers and magicians. Not my kind of thing. Not at all.

I tried to promote an O's game, a trip to the zoo, a movie and pizza - but the boys wouldn't budge. They've been relentless about the festival ever since they caught the ad on TV.

By now, I've seen it too because the kids taped it and forced me to watch. A knight in shining armor gallops into the foreground. Behind him, a half-timbered facade bristles with wind-whipped pennants. Huge lance in hand, the knight reins in his horse, lifts his faceplate, and in hearty Elizabethan English invites one and all to "Get thyselves to the Maryland Renaissance Faire!"

It all seemed kind of lame to me, and I made the mistake of saying that to Liz last night on the phone - looking for a little good-natured mutual grumbling about parenthood.

What I got instead was a chilly lecture from my wife. Didn't I get it that what parents enjoy is their kids' enjoyment? What did I think - that Liz was crazy about Barney? Teletubbies? Return of the Clones? "And here I was going to compliment you on finding something that fit in so well with their after-school enrichment program," Liz said. "I should have known."

I didn't have a clue about any after-school program and that, unfortunately, became crystal clear. She explained: the boys have been up to their ears in Arthurian lore.

This had gone right by me; although once Liz mentioned it, I realized the kids had been rattling on about the Round Table and Merlin. And they'd spent hours out in the backyard, dueling with plastic swords. Plastic swords that, yes, they brought in their suitcases.

Okay, so I demonstrated a lack of curiosity about the plastic swords - is that so bad? Or - is Liz right and I'm the most self-absorbed parent on the planet? Unlike their tuned-in mother up in Maine.

Maine. I drop down into the chair in front of the iMac in my study. Could she have moved any farther away? Without expatriating? The answer, of course, is yes: she could have gone to Alaska. Hawaii. L.A. She could have gone lots of places. But . . .

I tap a key and wait for the screen to shimmer out of sleep mode. My segment - "Afghan Wedding" - was all wrapped and ready until nine last night, when I got the word that the addition of some promotional clips meant I had to cut another two minutes. I made the logical cuts last night, but I still need to lose forty-four seconds. The segment's only seven minutes long now, so cutting is harder. Whatever goes at this point will be something I don't want to give up.

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Originally "Afghan Wedding" was part of an hour-long special about Afghanistan, pegged around a Donald Rumsfeld we-haven't-forgotten-you visit to that beleaguered country. I got a nice long interview with the secretary of defense about the state of the postwar recovery. I interviewed Karzai. We got some excellent tape of the crew working on the reconstruction of the Kandahar-Kabul road. And then there was a pastiche of feel-good stuff about life in liberated Kabul and Kandahar. Girls going to school. The opening of a health clinic for women. Exhilarated Afghanis listening to music. Dancing. Capped off with the wedding: Afghan couple celebrates long-postponed nuptials.

The wedding was to take place in a village near Kandahar. A safe zone, or so we were told. The crew and I got there with our equipment, no problem. Even with the cameras, the wedding got started on time. And then the happy occasion turned into a nightmare when the crew of an off-course U.S. F-16 seeking a rumored Taliban conclave misread the wedding tableau on the ground.

Four killed, fifteen wounded.

The segment was removed from the hour-long progress report about Afghanistan. Now the wedding footage was going to be part of an ambitious show about collateral damage: Gulf I (Saddam and the Kurds), Mostar (the bridge), Gaza and Jerusalem (noncombatants killed by both sides), Afghanistan (my wedding piece), Liberia (chopped-off hands and feet), Gulf II (friendly-fire fatalities). The show - Big Dave was angling for an Emmy - would finish with a segment about the mother of all collateral-damage stories: September 11.

I cue up my segment on the iMac. On the monitor, the nightmare has not yet begun. The camera cuts between the glowing faces of the bride and groom, then moves in for a close-up of the tiny American ßags pinned to their nuptial finery.

"Dad, can we eat breakfast in the TV room and watch cartoons?"

I jump. Liz took off with the kids more than six months ago and one week into their visit, I'm still not used to the way they just materialize. "Jeez, I gotta put bells on you guys."

Kevin laughs.

Sean says, "Can we?"

"What?"

"Eat breakfast in the TV room? Please?"

I shrug. "Why not?"

"Great! C'mon, Kev."

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But Kevin doesn't budge. "When are we going to the Renaissance Fair?"

I'm wondering what I can get away with. "I'm thinking . . . noon."

"No way!"Kev complains. "We'll miss the whole thing."

"Kevin,"his brother tells him, "it doesn't even start till eleven. And it goes till seven."Then, because he's just learned to tell time, Sean adds: "p.m."

Kevin gives his brother a look. "No kidding, p.m." He turns to me. "You promise? Noon?"

I pretend to think about it. "Nahhhh, I can't promise."

Sean gives a little gulp of a laugh and then the two of them moan in chorus: "Daaaaad."

At least they know, after a week, when I'm kidding. The first couple of days, worried looks ßashed from one to the other. To say they'd forgotten my sense of humor understates it: they'd forgotten what I'm like - a depressing reminder that five months had been just about long enough to turn me into a stranger to my sons.

When the kids are gone, I cue up the bits of footage I picked out last night for possible cuts. I mute the audio and lean back to watch. I take some time checking out how various cuts will affect the transitions.

And I decide that maybe the dark-man sequence has to go. It's thirty-eight seconds long and if I can live without it, I'm just about home free.

One last look.

The dark man is one of the bride's brothers. The ceremony is over and he's holding his weapon - it's an AK - in one outstretched hand. With a loopy grin on his face, he squeezes off a few rounds in sheer jubilation. I like this, the irony of gunfire as celebration in a country where the sounds of war never seem to stop. Just as the camera closes on the man's gleeful face, the whole screen jumps.

That jolt was, in fact, the impact of the first bomb from the F-16.

The dark man's grin collapses into slack-jawed astonishment, then turns into a puzzled contemplation of his weapon, as if it might somehow be responsible for what's happening. He's still connecting the dots when the second bomb detonates, this one so close the screen instantly fills with dust and debris. Visible only in silhouette, the dark man goes airborne, body hurtling through the air. Then he's propped up against a rock, powdered in dust, eyes dazed, blood seeping from an ear.

The camera shifts to me. I'm coated in dust, too, standing in front of a rocky outcrop and talking into a microphone. Then we see a group of women,

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wailing and pointing toward the sky. Me again. Then the bewildered bride staring at the face of her fatally wounded groom.

I roll it back, check the frame counter. The sequence is good, but it's peripheral. I tap a few keys and it's . . . gone.

I tinker with a cut I made last night and shave off the remaining few seconds I need, then roll it through. I stop when I hit the image of the dark man - somehow a few frames survived my edit. I delete them and roll forward, just to make sure the transitions are clean. I freeze it when the kids come in - for what must be the tenth time now - to remind me that it's time to go. "Past time to go,"Kev says. "Almost twelve-thirty."

"Let's go-ohhhh!"

"Let's be off,"Kevin says in a funny, stilted voice - a knightly voice, I realize.

"Yes! Your loyal servants Sean and Kevin beg thee!"

Suddenly, I'm engulfed by the two of them: the towheaded Lord Kevin and his mirror image, Sir Sean. They tug at my sleeves and rock from foot to foot, as if they have to pee.

"Just let me-"

"Pleee-eeeeeeze!"

With a sigh, I reach for the mouse. "Okay."

"Who's that?" Sean asks, pointing at the monitor.

I paused on a frame that shows the groom's face, his eyes wild, his face obscured by a skein of blood.

"Just a guy," I tell him.

"What's the matter with him?" Kevin asks as the haunted and battered face of the wounded groom disappears from the screen. What the boys couldn't see was that his legs had been blown off. What they did see was the terror on his face.

I click through the shutdown procedure to close out the application, then pop out the disk. "He was scared," I say.

"Why?"

"Because he was in a war, and he was hurt and that's . . . that's scary."

"I want to see it," Sean insists.

"No."

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"Why not?"

"Because we have to go,"I tell them, pushing back from the desk.

Sean bursts for the door, but Kevin stays where he is, big blue eyes locked on me. "Is that man going to die?"

I hesitate. finally, I say, "Yeah."

I put my arm on Kevin's shoulder and try to steer my son toward the door, but Kev doesn't budge. "Dad?"

"What?"

"Were you there . . . with that man?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't you help him?"

I take a breath. "No. No one could help him."

While this is true - the man died less than three minutes after the footage was shot - Kev's question makes me uncomfortable. The groom was beyond assistance, yes. And I was able to help some of the others. Still, we kept filming.

Kevin nods, but after a moment, he says, "Daddy?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think the man wanted someone to take his picture."

I get down on my haunches, so I'm at my son's level. "Sometimes if you show a terrible thing - like war - then people all over the world can see how terrible it is and that can help stop it. I think the man-"

"What are you guys doin', anyway?" Sean blasts into the room with an impatient look, then shoots back through the doorway. "Come on!"

"Yeah," Kevin says, hurling himself into his brother's wake. "Let's go!"

I'm grateful for the interruption, not at all sure I buy my own rap. It's a fine line. What's hard-hitting, unblinking coverage? And what's exploitation?

In Kandahar, the camera crew freaked. I was the one that kept the film rolling. It still gets to me. Sometimes I can't help feeling guilty. The deal is that I make a living from suffering and death; hell, I even win awards for it.

"Daaaaaad!" the boys yell from the front room as I slide the disk into a plastic sleeve. "Let's go!"

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"Tears are good," Jerry Tumolo, the first producer I ever worked for used to say. "Tears are good, but blood is better. A little blood really gets their attention."

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