The Grief Counselor

by Mark Pritchard

A large van that resembled a bookmobile sat among a small group of similar vehicles, all of them sprouting antennas and wires. This was the command post. It was from here that the negotiator was talking to the guy with the gun.

They brought in the man's sister to try to talk him out. She was an overweight woman with bleached hair and an anxious manner. I asked to sit with them while they briefed her, not that I thought they would ask my opinion, but so when she was finished giving her appeal and the cops had no more use for her, she would have a familiar face around, someone to process with. I was grateful that I could at least start off doing this gig by talking to adults.

The cops told her the situation: her brother was holding a classroom full of fourth graders and their teacher; he had at least one automatic weapon.

At first she kept repeating “I don't know why he's doing this” as if the cops might think she was mixed up in it somehow. When they managed to convince her that all she needed to do was talk to her brother and tell him to give up, she sighed and looked hopeless. “I'll try, but he's awful stubborn.”

The man in charge of the scene, Capt. Stairs, said, “Do you think he's capable of hurting anyone? To your knowledge, has he ever actually shot at somebody or something like that?”

“I don't think so, but I guess there's a first time for everything.” She kept shaking her head. “I guess this doesn't surprise me, if that's what you're asking. I think he likes to blow his stack.”

“Maybe he likes the attention?” I asked.

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Sarris gave me a look. “You'll have your chance later, doc,” and standing up, he guided her over toward the console where the police negotiator was talking in soft tones into a headset.

They handed her a phone and she spoke too softly for me to hear. At first her body leaned forward, giving weight to her words. After a minute she rested her head in her hands and leaned on the communications console. Stairs and another cop, Lt. Sarris, hovered over her, listening through earpieces. It began to look like she was having a hard time getting a word in edgewise. Soon the negotiator signaled for her to wrap it up. She said a few more words, heaved a sigh and put the phone down.

Stairs patted her on the shoulder. “You did your best,” he said. “You probably helped more than it seems.”

I got up and went over. Stairs glanced up at me. “Dr. Carson is our psychologist on call here if you want to talk some.”

She looked up at me as if she'd never seen me before, even though I had just been sitting with her a few minutes ago. “I'm just here as a counselor if you want,” I said. I led her out and over to the gym, which was in another building from the school. This is where the Red Cross had set up, and where I had been hanging out all day while the situation dragged on.

We got some coffee from the Red Cross lady and sat down at a cafeteria table. A priest, who was the clergy person on call just as I was the shrink on call, was sitting at an adjacent table, reading.

I said, “I'm actually here to talk to the kids when they're released -- you know, help them deal with it. But I'll be glad to try to be of help to you.”

She slumped on the bench, looking like she would rather lie down. There was a great big gymnastics mat hanging on the wall, but I just let her sit there.

“How did your brother sound?”

“Mad. He's always mad about something -- the New World Order, Bill Clinton, the Tri-something Committee, you name it. He's like one of these militia guys, like the guy who blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma? Only he's too nuts to join a militia.”

I didn't say anything. She went on, “I was afraid he'd do something like this one of these days, but I thought it would be some political thing. I didn't think it would be something dumb like a school.”

I asked, “Do you think he'll give himself up?”

There was an explosion of derisive laughter from some cops on the other side of the room. They had a TV set up in one corner, and some cops and EMTs were watching Jerry Springer. She stared at them. “Do they have a TV for him to watch?”

“In the classroom? I don't know. Maybe there's a TV.”

“Well, he never misses ‘Seinfeld.' And he's usually in a good mood afterward. He thinks him and Seinfeld are a lot alike.”

“He does?”

“Yeah: everybody's crazy except him.”

When dinnertime came, I stood in line behind the priest, Father Dennis, whom I knew from emergency drills. Lt. Sarris came out of the command post and got in line behind me. Sarris is one of those cops who never let their game face down, who try to project

irritability so you won't mess with them, even if you're just asking how to get to the Golden Gate Bridge.

Father Dennis ignored this. “Hello, John, how goes it?”

Sarris let out a small, exasperated sigh, more at the priest's greeting than the hostage situation. “Still talking.”

“About seven hours now,” I said.

“Maybe he's getting hungry,” the priest suggested.

Sarris snorted. “He ordered in pizza for himself and all the kids. They're bringing it in the back way to keep it out of sight of the cameras.”

There was a pause. Sarris was probably hoping the conversation was over.

“What kind of pizza?” I asked. He looked at me. “Maybe they could put some kind of tranquilizer on the pizza to put everyone to sleep,” I continued. “Mix it in with the parmesan cheese after the pizza cools off.”

This earned me a raised eyebrow and another snort. “I don't think that's in the game plan.”

We got to the front of the line and were served. It was mid-May and the sun was still high. A San Francisco station showed two syndicated episodes of “Seinfeld” from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. every weekday, so we still had a while to go.

Word had gotten around about this aspect of the suspect's character. Somebody had suggested getting one of the show's actors, who happened to be appearing in a play 50 miles away in San Francisco,

up here to talk to the guy. I thought it was a good idea but Stairs had nixed it. He said it would be too much of a media circus. There were already half a dozen TV trucks parked in a corner of the lot, and their generators raised a soft roar.

Father Dennis and I went back into the gym with our meals. The plate held some kind of ill-defined chicken, some canned green beans, some “Spanish” rice and some salad. In another container there was an enormous piece of chocolate cake, maybe to forestall complaints about the rest.

We sat down at our table. “I think they could have done better by just ordering in some burritos,” I said.

Father didn't reply. I looked up and saw that he had his head bowed. Presently he raised it and immediately launched into the chicken. “It's not so bad,” he smiled.

Humbled, I began eating.

“So what brings you here, Thomas?”

“You mean why did I sign up with the county to do these kinds of gigs? Well, actually, I had to.”

“Oh, how so?”

“It's part of my community service,” I said, smiling. “It's a little embarrassing.”

“You don't have to explain.”

“Drunk driving,” I said anyway, in case he might think it was something worse. “I don't even have a background in child

psychology, so I guess I'm not the best person for this particular gig. But you know, your name comes to the top of the list, and you're on.”

The cops were stirring. Some of them were gesturing toward the TV. They seemed awfully excited. “What happened?” I asked a cop who was hurrying by.

“The ballgame's on.”

“Uh-huh? Somebody hit a home run?”

“It's on channel 2 instead of ‘Seinfeld.' They just realized it's pre-empting ‘Seinfeld.'”

“Oh,” I said. “What inning is it?”

“The fourth.”

The game would last at least another hour. I looked at my watch; it was quarter to seven. “Doesn't look good for ‘Seinfeld,'” I deadpanned.

Father Dennis was frowning. “I can't believe this comes down to what's on TV,” he declared. He got up and carried his empty paper plate and utensils over to the trash, then walked out of the gym. I followed, walking across the parking lot toward the TV trucks. The channel 2 truck had become the temporary center of attention. Newscasters from the other channels were using it as a backdrop for their updates, while technicians inside the truck glumly watched the baseball game on their tiny monitor.

“Whether the suspect will be satisfied with watching the Giants-Rockies game remains to be seen,” one of the reporters said earnestly. The sun was low, and the reporter's makeup glowed

weirdly in the combination of golden sunlight and white-hot TV lights.

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Baseball or not, at 8:01, the suspect gave up.

It turned out the cops had arranged with a local UHF station to show the “Seinfeld” episodes that baseball had pre-empted. The suspect and the kids ate their pizza, watched TV, and then the guy picked up the phone and told the cops he was coming out.

Then we had our only violence of the night. When the hostage-taker, sans hostages, came out the front door with his hands on his head, the cops felt obliged to tackle him and act mad, like he had just led them on a high speed chase. As many cops as possible got in on the tackle. I guess they needed a little excitement.

After they took him away, a bus pulled up to the door and they loaded the kids and the teacher on. I got on with them.

The junior high where the parents had gathered during the day was only a couple of blocks away. As we pulled up, the parents burst out of the doors and surged up to the bus, cheering. The kids got hugged over and over; they got more affection than they'd gotten in a year, probably. The first four or five families took up all the room near the door and the rest of the families pushed in frantically. There were TV lights and camera crews and a lot of confusion; for a second it looked like this would be more dangerous than the hostage-taking. Finally everybody got reunited and calmed down a little and we all headed inside.

After all the speeches and reunions were over, one of the cops came up to me with a kid in tow. “Doc, this is Jason.”

The kid was small for a fourth-grader, so I figured he was the brother of one of the hostages. Lots of the parents had brought their kids in to wait with them. “Hi, Jason.”

“We can't find his parents yet.”

I looked at the cop, then back down at the kid. “You were in Ms. Wienard's class?”

“Uh-huh.”

I gave the cop a what-the-fuck look. He shrugged back. “Can you take care of him, doc, til we find his parents?” The cop walked away.

I looked down at the kid. “I'm Dr. Carson.”

“Hi.” He was wearing a t-shirt and looked a little chilly. It wasn't warm in the gym.

“Why don't we have a seat over there. I need to look after you a little while.”

“Sorry,” he said sarcastically.

“Don't be sorry, it's my job.” We sat down. “Feel tired?”

“I guess so.”

“I heard you had pizza.”

He made a disgusted hiss. “Pizza with no cheese: fucking lame-o.”

“No cheese?”

“He said he was a vegan.”

We were silent for a while. I wished I had something for him to look at. I thought about the stuff in my bag: a Walkman, a novel I had finished reading by 3:00, a DVD I had to return, my paperwork for the county. I searched my memory for vestiges of my training in pediatric psychology.

“Sorry I don't have anything to keep us busy,” I said. “It would be nice if we had a basketball or something.”

“Basketball sucks.”

“Yeah, well...”

“I don't want to be here.”

“I hear you. I'd like to go home, too, okay? We're in the same boat.”

We sat there. I didn't know what to say. I felt like a jailer. The kid had been held captive all day, and here I was holding him, only in a slightly bigger room, and without a gun.

“Fucking David Simpson!” the kid suddenly exploded.

“Who?”

“David Simpson. All he had to do was say something and I wouldn't be here.”

“How's that?”

“I told him, ‘My parents are out of town, so ask your parents to drop me off at my house.' But we got separated and they went straight home when we got off the bus.”

“It's probably better you didn't disappear without telling anybody,” I said.

“I wouldn't disappear, I'd be at home,” he said angrily.

“Yes, but -- The adults need to keep track of you.”

“Yeah, you all did a great job of keeping track of me today.”

I just nodded.

“Well, you're in charge, aren't you? It's not like it's my fault. My parents aren't even in town.”

I was hating this. “You know, you're absolutely right,” I said. “Everything that happened to you today is completely the responsibility of adults.”

“So I'd just like to go home,” he announced. “Just drop me off there. I'll be better off alone than I was in school today.” He stood up.

“Hold on a minute,” I said. The kid began walking away. “Hey!” I said.

He started running toward the door. The gym had cleared out and he had a clear path. I took off after him, feeling panicky. I didn't want to call attention to myself or the situation, but I figured the alternative was worse. “Stop that kid!” I hollered.

Fortunately, there was a cop coming through the door. He reacted instantly, gathering the boy in like a ground ball to second. The kid knew better than to struggle with a cop.

I came up to them. “Sorry. I'm waiting with him for Child Protective Services to get here.”

The cop chuckled. “Hey, don't give your teacher trouble.”

“He's not a teacher.”

The cop looked at me. “I'm the psychologist on call,” I said shamefacedly. “The counselor.”

“Oohhh-kay,” the cop said. He released his grip on the kid and we went back to where we had been sitting.

I wracked my brain for some way to make this better. I couldn't think of anything. Ordinarily, with adults, all I would have to say is, you look tired, and they'd come out with feelings, experiences, promises, bargaining, the whole shot. Finally, CPS came and took the kid away. He didn't look pleased. I felt sorry for him -- probably he was going to spend the night with some stranger, a foster parent, unless his folks were located.

No one was left in the gym who might conceivably need counseling. I hurriedly filled in the rest of the paperwork and stuffed it in my bag and went home.

The next day was Friday and all I had on my schedule was my group at Napa State Hospital. It takes an hour and a half to drive there, each way, so I don't schedule anything else for the day. I kept thinking of the kids from the classroom, and whether or not I had done my job, and what I would do the next time. School had been called off for the day but a squadron of grief counselors had been called in to deal with everybody; but because I had done my gig the day before, I was off the hook.

As I drove back into town I passed St. Kevin's church and there was Father Dennis standing on the side, wearing a straw fedora and an undershirt, pruning some shrubs. I pulled into the driveway.

“Hello there,” he said when I walked up to him.

“Dr. Carson from last night,” I explained, in case he had forgotten who I was.

“Of course, Tom. How goes it?”

“You do the gardening here too?”

“I insist,” he said, wiping his brow. “Don't have to answer the phone. Don't have to sit in my office and listen to my computer's hard disk going around and around. It's the only chance I get to think about my Sunday sermon.” He resumed his clipping.

“If you've got another pair of clippers I can give you a hand with that.”

“Just those little hand clippers there -- don't worry about it. What's on your mind?”

“Well… I'm not a Catholic or anything.”

“Uh huh.”

I stood there for a minute, not knowing what to say. As a therapist I have a sort of supervisor whom I check in with regularly and who is supposed to serve as a sounding board -- a nice lady named Ann in a nearby town, a former psychology professor -- but she was exactly the person whom I didn't want to tell what was on my mind.

“I feel like a phony most of the time,” I said. “I listen to people and I say things in response, or I say almost nothing; I give them advice or I don't; I show up at disasters or crime scenes and I feel ridiculous. I don't have anything to say to these people, because I'm just like

them -- I haven't figured anything out. I don't know what they should do. And if I was in their shoes -- if my husband was cheating on me and I had a three-year-old with asthma, or if I was a high school teacher with a crush on my prettiest student, or if I was a man whose wife had died of cancer and I can hardly make myself get out of bed -- if I was in their shoes I would do no better. In fact I can hardly believe they get out of bed at all. If I was in their shoes I would just cry and cry all day long. After they leave my office I do cry, sometimes, but then I wonder if I'm not just over-identified with them, or if I'm just feeling sorry for myself because I'm a phony and I can't help them, and…”

The priest kept clipping the shrubs. Fortunately there were a lot of shrubs, all around the church. When I stopped talking the noise of the shears became distinct over the noise of traffic passing. A kid on a bicycle passed by, chanting lyrics to a hip-hop tune. After he passed there was a lull in the traffic and it seemed to become even quieter.

“So, just as a reality check, you are fully accredited and all, right? You've got your certification and all your hours and so on?”

“Sure. I mean, I'm not literally an imposter. Not according to the state, that is. And I'm probably no worse a therapist than a lot of them, if it comes to that. I just wonder -- does anyone really get helped?”

Father Dennis paused and lowered the shears. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face with it.

“I envy you,” he said.

I gaped at him.

He went on, “I wish I had your patients. You're fortunate -- your patients have real problems. You know what I hear in confession every week? The most petty concerns. A woman is jealous of her neighbor. A teenager smokes. An old woman is bored with life and wishes she were dead -- but she's been saying that for the last fifteen years.

“I'd give anything for a real adulterer. Not that I don't have them,” he added, taking off his hat and fanning himself. “But they're not the ones who come to me. They think they're fooling everybody, but they aren't. At least your people talk. It's something.”

I said I guessed so.

“Still, that's not my main job. You know what the difference between you and me is?” he went on. “You're a listener; I'm a priest. You know what a priest is? A sacrificer. I stand at the altar and sacrifice.”

Sacrifice what, I asked.

He leaned close to me. “A God! No less. Day after day I sacrifice a God. What do you have to complain about?”