

Suspension of Disbelief

by Tim Maleeny, -

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Mel Brooks once said, „Tragedy is what happens to me. Comedy is what happens to you.“ This couldn’t be better illustrated than in „Suspension of Disbelief“. Tim is an award-winning author who knows that even in the darkest moments humor can be found. This story takes a sideways glance at the complex relationship between a bestselling writer and his editor. Fortunately most authors’ experiences with editors have not been quite as unusual as those of the fictional mega-author featured in this story, but the familiar tension between art and commerce was clearly the inspiration for this fantastic tale. Tim takes the conventions of a classic thriller and twists them hard, until we are left with a punch line that is simultaneously funny and disturbing.

„Give us the manuscript or we’ll kill your wife.“

Jim Masterson stared at the narrow man threatening him, trying to remember when they'd first met. A long time ago, before Jim was married. At least a year before he was published. A lifetime.

„All we want is the book, Jim.“

„It's not finished.“

„That's why I'm here.“

Jim watched his editor of more than ten years help himself to one of the overstuffed chairs in front of the desk, carefully setting his briefcase on the hardwood floor. Carl Ransom had always dressed immaculately, even in the old days. Today it was a gray suit and cream silk shirt, the half-Windsor tight enough to squeeze any last vestige of humanity from his narrow frame.

Carl leaned forward to slide a computer out of his briefcase, a sleek titanium notebook that opened like a thinly veiled threat.

„Where did we first meet, Carl?“

The question threw the editor for a moment. He blinked a few times before the corners of his mouth turned. „The Four Seasons, breakfast. I was a junior editor at the time and you—“

„Just got my first publishing contract.“

Carl nodded as he busied himself with the laptop. „Feeling nostalgic, Jim?“ He unceremoniously pushed a row of pencils to one side. „Jesus, after all these years, I still can't believe you write with those things.“

„My readers haven't complained.“ Jim scooped the pencils up protectively and arranged them closer to his side of the desk. Ten number two's, each sharpened to a perfect point, arrayed next to ten red Bic pens. Jim evenly spaced the pens and set them next to the neatly stacked pile of manuscript paper.

Carl reached into the briefcase again, then slid a small plastic card into a slot in the laptop. *Tap, tap, tap.* „They have these things called computers now.“

„The Internet's distracting.“

Carl snorted. „Listen to you. For your next book remind me to get you a walker, maybe a hearing aid.“

Jim ignored him, listening to the susurrus of traffic three stories below. His office door was closed, as was his habit when writing. Normally his only company was the classical music from his stereo and the view, but today he'd made a mistake. He'd let someone inside his sanctuary.

„*Voilà!*“ Carl spun the laptop around and slid it forward. „What do you see?“

Jim squinted at the monitor, where a rectangular window on the screen showed a video of a woman in a dress walking across a Manhattan street. He looked closer. The view was from several stories up, maybe four or five.

The woman carried a briefcase in her left hand. The briefcase didn't have a shoulder strap and looked heavy, as if it were overstuffed with anything and everything a busy woman might need over the course of a day. It looked all too familiar.

Jim felt a knot tighten in his gut as his heart stopped. „That's Emily.“

„Bravo.“ Carl brought his hands together with a languid clap, clap. He leaned forward. His right index finger was poised over *Return* on the laptop's keyboard. „And for bonus points, what do you see now?“ The skin under his nail turned white as he mashed the key.

A red circle with two lines intersecting it appeared over the image of the walking woman as she made her way through a throng of pedestrians. Even as she dodged a man with a stack of boxes on a handcart, the animated crosshairs stayed on her.

„A team of snipers is tracking her progress for the next forty-five minutes.“ Carl rubbed his hands together. „We know her routines, her regular appointments.“ He made a theatrical turn of his wrist. „So unless we get the final pages in... forty-four minutes, Emily will be shot in the head.“

„How—“ A trickle of sweat started down Jim’s spine as he looked at his editor’s ascetic face, searching for a smirk, some sign that a punch line was on its way. But Jim had never known Carl to have a taste for practical jokes. As utterly mad as it seemed, he knew this was real.

„Amazing what they can do with computers nowadays, isn’t it? The tech department pulled this together—you should see what they’re doing with our Web site. Virtual chats with authors, interactive short stories. You really need to embrace technology, Jimbo.“

Jim started to rise from his chair.

„Not so fast, cowboy.“ Carl tapped more keys and three additional windows appeared on the screen, each with a different view of lower Manhattan, a shifting crosshair at the center of every one. Emily moved through the upper left screen, oblivious, a duck in a pond.

„Covering the upper left is Bob, my assistant editor. He’s an ex-marine, which comes in handy. Upper right is a buddy of his, I forget his name, but we’ve used him before. An expert marksman. This one here is Steve—he normally handles the romance writers. And this—“ Carl’s finger circled the crosshairs in the lower right quadrant. „That’s the summer intern.“

„You’re full of shit.“

„Am I?“ Carl slammed the top of the laptop down. „You have any idea how many books we sold last year with your name on them?“

„I didn’t write most of those books.“

Spittle almost oozed from the corners of Carl’s mouth. „Take a guess.“

Jim shrugged. „Millions.“

„You’re off by a factor of ten.“ Carl took a deep breath and forced a smile, pried open the laptop. „And you’re correct, you only write one book a year, per your contract. But we put your name on those other books, in much bigger type than your co-writers. Want to know why?“

„Because I’m a writer who’s sold a lot of books.“

„Because you’re a brand.“ Carl blew out his cheeks. „You like being rich?“

Jim looked around the spacious office, visualized the rest of his three-story town house, one of several he owned in cities around the world. He knew it was a rhetorical question.

„Let me put it in perspective.“ Carl pulled a sheet of paper from his briefcase and glanced at a row of numbers. „You are the face of a franchise that generated hundreds of millions of dollars over the past decade.“

„So?“

„So people get killed for a helluva lot less. This isn’t some corner crack deal we’re talking about here. You think I’m happy about this?“

Jim tried to remember the last time he'd seen Carl happy. An image flashed across his mind of a young editor sitting across from him at breakfast, just two guys talking about writing and books until their eggs got cold.

„What the hell happened to you?“

„I moved on.“ Carl worked the muscles in his jaw. „I became the caretaker of the house that Jim built, while you... you stayed behind that damn desk.“

„You're insane.“

„Jim, pick up a pencil and start writing.“ Again the flourish with the watch. „We've pissed away seven minutes.“

„I can't finish the book in half an hour.“

„Bullshit. Two months ago you showed me a rough draft, with only one chapter to go. I know how fast you write, you could bang out the ending with your eyes closed.“

Jim selected one of the pencils and rolled it back and forth, trying not to look at the computer screen. „I don't know how the story is going to end. Call it writer's block if you—“

„Writers get blocked, brands don't.“ Carl steeped his hands together. „Besides, we know how it's going to end. We already discussed it.“

„It doesn't feel right.“ Jim stole a glance at the screen. Emily had moved into the upper right quadrant. Her long brown hair was loose around her shoulders as she hefted the briefcase. „The characters wouldn't—“

„Don't start with that writer crap about the characters telling you what to do.“ Carl looked as if all the acid reflux in the world was holding a convention somewhere deep in his esophagus. „The characters aren't alive, but your wife is—for now.“

„This book will have my name on it,“ Jim said deliberately. „No one else's.“

„This is a thriller.“ Carl's nostrils flared. „Hero saves the day. The guy gets the girl, or the girl gets the guy, whatever. Oh, and the bad guy gets his comeuppance.“

„That doesn't seem very thrilling.“

„You give the people what they want. That's your fucking job.“

„Maybe they want something different. Something unexpected.“

„You've become a fantasy writer now? What world do you live in?“

„You write the damn ending.“

„Believe me, I would.“ Carl pushed his wire-frame glasses up on his nose. „But like you said, this book will have your name on it. The one book a year that gets scrutiny from the critics, the one that sets the standard for all the books to come. And that book, my friend, that book needs your voice.“ Carl said the last word as if it tasted bad, his own voice bitter around the edges. „Those jarring juxtapositions, those evocative metaphors that you're known for.“

Jim felt sweat on his upper lip and looked at the computer screen. Emily was in quadrant three. As she walked, she brought her hands up and pulled her hair back away from her face, so Jim could clearly see her profile. He forced himself to breathe.

Carl sighed. „I'm not a writer, we both know that. I handle continuity, eliminate redundant phrases. Clean up the mess you leave on the page.“

Jim watched Emily step off a curb into traffic, her heels just visible beneath her slacks. He always wondered how women could walk in those things. He took a deep breath and turned his gaze back to Carl.

„I need a week.“

Carl shook his head. „We’re on deadline. And this time the emphasis is on the first half of that word.“ He picked up a pencil and held it between his thumb and forefinger. „Finish the damn book.“

„It’ll feel forced.“

„Every month this book is delayed costs us—“ Carl waved his arm around the room, a gesture that encompassed the known universe. „You, me, the publishing house, the chain stores. You think I’m ruthless, try negotiating with the chains. What’s the value of a human life when you’re operating on that scale? Every month costs us millions, Jim.“

„Millions.“

„This is the entertainment business, partner. Timing is everything.“

Jim kept his eyes on Carl’s fighting the urge to track Emily’s progress.

„You’re bluffing.“

„Excuse me.“ Carl spun the computer around and tapped a few keys, then turned it back toward Jim. The four live screens had been replaced with an article from one of the daily newspapers, lifted off their Web site.

Despite himself, Jim began to read the headline out loud. „*Local author kills himself after murdering—*“

„—*his family.*“ Carl shook his head. „Tragic. He was one of ours. Paranormal, gothic romance. We made a fortune during the vampire years.“

„Kill me—or Emily—and there’s no more books.“

„Actually, there’s one more.“ Carl hit another key and an image of a book cover popped onto the screen. „I had the boys in the art department work this up. Whattaya think?“

Jim blinked at his own face, a publicity photo from last year. An easy smile next to lurid type, his name across the top in bloodred letters.

„It’s true crime, of course.“ Carl shrugged. „Not as big a market, but it’ll cover our investment. After that, we turn someone else into a franchise.“

„Franchise.“

„You think you’re the only thriller writer in the world?“ Carl tapped another key and the book cover disappeared. „Give ‘em the shelf space, plenty of guys could sell a ton of books.“

Jim almost started laughing but the sweat on his palms made him stop. „How long have you been planning this?“

„Remember a few months ago, when we sent you with two other writers to that police firing range?“

„Research for the next book.“

„Exactly. How many rifles did you fire that day? Wasn’t there a hunting rifle with a scope, a sniper rifle, a couple of others. How many?“

Jim looked at the quadrants on the computer screen and felt his blood congeal.

„Four.“

„With your fingerprints all over them.“

„It’ll never hold up.“

Carl smiled, an expression that looked like it hurt. „Famous author of serial-killer novels. Writer known for gruesome torture scenes. Don't you think a jury would agree that you fit the profile?“

„I'll tell them the truth.“

„We're talking about the law, here. The truth is irrelevant. Face it, Jim, you're fucked. Finish the book, live happily ever after. You can't seriously be thinking that if we don't pull the trigger today, there won't be tomorrow? Or the next day.“

„Have you read the book lately, Carl?“

The question momentarily disarmed the editor. „What do you mean?“

„The ending we talked about, it just won't work. People will see it coming.“

„You haven't changed in over ten years. People want to see it coming.“

„It won't be believable.“

„Since when does that matter? Suspension of disbelief is the cornerstone of a thriller, buddy. You should know that better than anyone. You think James Bond can really survive all those explosions without messing up his tuxedo?“

„But this character—he's different. He doesn't always do the right thing.“

„Your books have a moral compass,“ said Carl. „That's what we're selling. Reassurance. Faith in the outcome. So have a little faith and start writing, or we'll kill your fucking wife.“

„Okay.“ Jim lifted the manuscript and removed the bottom page, glancing nervously at the clock. „But I don't think I can finish in time.“

„Show me something and I'll go away. Just get a few words on the page and maybe I can buy you some time. We can always kill your wife—or someone else close to you—another day.“

„Let me show you what I'm talking about.“ Jim turned the page around so it was facing his editor. He carefully selected one of his red pens and took the cap off, circled a paragraph near the top of the page. „Read that.“

Carl slid the laptop to one side, just as the image of Emily jumped to the lower right quadrant. Jim took a deep breath and held it, wondering if he loved his wife more than his characters. Thinking about all the things that had changed since he first sat down in his chair behind this scarred desk and started writing so many years ago.

He thought about continuity and the suspension of disbelief, and he wondered whether any of that mattered in the end as long as you told a good story.

„So what's your point?“ Carl adjusted his glasses as he looked up from the page. „I read it, it's great. So what happens next?“

„This.“

The pen shattered the lens before puncturing the right eye. Jim shoved it forward with an underhand motion, rising out of his seat as he forced it deeper into Carl's brain. The overstuffed chair flipped backward and Carl's head hit the wood floor like an overcooked egg. His legs kicked once, twice, and then he was dead.

Jim came around the desk and knelt next to his editor. There was surprisingly little blood, and he made a mental note to get that right the next time he wrote a murder scene.

He stood and ran his hands through his hair, willing his heart to slow down. Took a deep breath, then another, opened the door to his study and prayed he hadn't written himself into a corner.

The town house was quiet. But there, almost beyond hearing, tiny voices from downstairs. Jim felt a surge of adrenaline and bounded down the stairs two at a time.

Emily was sitting on the couch, watching television. She smiled when he cleared the threshold and Jim felt his heart explode. Before she could say anything he was across the room with his arms around her. He kissed her and let it linger until she gave him a squeeze and stepped back to look at him.

„It's nice to see you, too.“

„I didn't hear you come in.“

„I knew you were writing, silly. I never disturb you when your door is closed.“

„You look nice.“ Jim let his eyes wander across his wife from head to toe, her simple cream blouse and brown skirt a nice complement to her hair. He thought about how she'd been wearing a dress in the upper left quadrant on the computer and then slacks in the third one. How she'd been lugging a heavy briefcase in one frame and then running her hands through her hair in the next. They must have shot the video on different days, or perhaps it was some other technical wizardry.

Amazing what they can do with computers nowadays.

Continuity and attention to detail did matter, but not as much as knowing your characters. He'd known his editor for a long time and could tell when he was lying. When to suspend disbelief.

Emily never came into his study. He'd wait until she went to sleep, then move the body into the garage. A cop he'd interviewed for a story last year told him about a pier on the west side where the mob guys liked to dump bodies. Something about the currents pulled the body under, then took it out to sea.

He'd keep Carl's cell phone and make random calls to restaurants and airlines over the next couple of days, make it seem like Carl was still alive, then break the phone into pieces and throw them in the trash.

„Did you cut yourself?“

Jim glanced down at the red smear across his right hand. He forced a smile and wiped it across his jeans. „Just ink.“

„You and your pens.“ Emily stepped over to an end table where an answering machine sat, its light blinking. „Your editor called and said he might be coming over. Want me to play the message?“

„No, thanks. I already talked to him.“

„What did he want?“

„The usual. Deadlines.“

„You finally get that ending figured out?“

Jim rubbed his fingers together, where after years of writing, ink the color of blood had left its mark.

„Yeah,“ he said. „I think I'm happy with how the story is going to end.“

