

KILLED IN THE RATINGS

Daniel Marcus

First published in Asimov's Science Fiction, January 1997

Abandoned buildings hulked on either side of the darkened street, like rotted teeth in a gaping mouth. Two men trailed a lone female between island pools of light. She looked nervously behind her and began to hurry. The men quickened their pace.

Marco popped up another window to get the SkyCam view, the enhanced infrared casting everything in pearly green phosphorescence. It was a bit jerky; the little blimp was probably trying to tack against a strong headwind. He dragged the window to a corner of the screen.

They were about half a block behind her now, closing fast. She broke into a run. Good. Marco nudged a slider switch on the virtual control panel to crank up the sound a bit. Her light feet slapped against the street, counterpoint to the men's heavy footsteps. He boosted the presence and could just make out her breathing -- shallow, panicky gasps. He could enhance it more later, or overlay something from the sound library.

She ducked into the doorway of a building, her pursuers following close behind. Shit. Marco popped another couple of windows to see if their shoulder cams were picking up, but it was too dark in the building's entrance. Grainy shadows jerking back and forth, sounds of struggle. She screamed and they dragged her into the street.

The resolution still wasn't very good, not nearly enough available light. It was fine for the stalk -- the shadows made everything look menacing. But you needed some serious bit density for the hand-to-hand.

Laurel must have been giving them field directions from the mobile unit, her voice buzzing out of their mastoid speakers like a guilty conscience, because suddenly they dragged the victim from the shadows in front of the building into the bright circle of light cast by a streetlamp.

Four windows open now, tiled across the workstation screen -- the SkyCam, the mobile unit, and the two shoulder cams. Marco felt like God on an electronic throne.

From one of the shoulder cams, a tight, fleeting shot of the woman's face. Her eyes were wide, whites showing all around, like a frightened horse. Outstanding. Marco froze the image and blew it up until her face filled the screen, popped it into another window, and superimposed the streetscape view from the mobile unit.

"Goddamn, I'm good," he muttered.

One of the men had a knife out and was waving it around in the air, leaving a complex pattern of trails on the screen. It was a great effect. Marco boosted the contrast to enhance it.

The woman broke free and almost got away, but the taller of the two tackled her and she went down hard, scraping her face on the pavement. First blood, black in the light.

She was pleading now, her voice a keening monotone. "Don't hurt me, please, please, don't hurt me."

Marco looped it and put a drum patch underneath, his hands alternately flying across the keyboard and caressing the virtual controls onscreen. The sound of their blows, their grunts and heavy breathing, rose now over the hip-hop dub of her whining pleas. Marco

made a note to himself to give Lou in Production a call about marketing a single.

They had her shirt off now. The shorter man was squeezing her breasts while his companion held her with one hand and punched her repeatedly in the face with the other. Her lip was split and one of her eyes was swollen completely shut. She was still struggling, but weakly. The jerky motion of the shoulder cams synched perfectly with the dub's insistent rhythm.

Suddenly, she went limp. Damn. Lost consciousness, maybe even cardiac arrest. That's the trouble with these fucking animals, Marco thought, no sense of timing. They smelled a little blood and went apeshit.

They were still hammering on her, slamming her in the head and jabbing at her naked torso with the knife. The shorter guy started pulling her pants off, exposing pale, white thighs. They would probably fuck her anyway, dead or not.

Marco grimaced. No way he could get that past the Board. Still, he had plenty of good footage, and for gravy, a sweet, little dub.

It was a wrap.

#

Marco watched the pair of killers through the two-way mirror. He had to look closely to distinguish them from the ones he'd seen earlier that morning -- they all had the same feral, vacuous look about them. These two sat at the head of the long, oak table in the conference room, out of place in that chrome-edged, corporate opulence. They didn't seem to mind, though, leaning back in the leather chairs, looking around with an air of relaxed boredom.

The taller one, the one with the hair-net and the gang-scars on his cheeks, pulled out a cigarette and lit up. His companion looked at him and grinned, showing a mouthful of stainless steel, the incisors filed to sharp points.

The door to the observation room slid open with a sigh and Marco turned around. Laurel stood in the doorway, a half-smile on her face.

"Don't you think you should remind him that tobacco's illegal?" she asked, stepping into the little room and taking a seat beside him. The door hissed shut.

"I think I'll pass. Jesus Christ, where did you find these two? They're practically Neolithic."

"The usual audition procedure. They showed up for the interview and the guy with the hair-net -- his name's Creature, incidentally -- the guy pulls a cat out of his shoulder bag and rips its head off, right there on the spot. 'I wanna be on T.V.,' he says. I've seen the clip from the security cam -- it's unbelievable. His buddy's name is Seven. I don't think he speaks. At least I've never heard him."

"Creature and Seven?"

"Yeah." She shrugged. "Don't ask, okay?"

Marco sighed. "Well, we're always on the lookout for a few good men. Milo and Winston are getting sloppy, anyway." He stood up.

"Let's go talk to them."

Marco let Laurel precede him out the door of the observation room. She carried herself with the confidence of someone whose star is rising.

Digging up new talent herself, he thought. The little cooze is getting ambitious.

Creature looked up when Marco and Laurel walked in the door. He blew a big, lazy smoke ring and jabbed his index finger through it.

"'S'up?" he said. Seven flashed another metallic grin.

"Creature," Laurel said. "Seven. This is Marco, the show's producer."

Creature looked him up and down. Marco could sense the calculation, trying to scope out influence, level of fear, the power relationship between him and Laurel.

Seven's eyes shone with a dull, animal light. Marco shuddered inwardly. If the eyes are windows to the soul, Seven's looked onto a strip-mall parking lot full of abandoned cars.

"So you want to be on television," Marco said.

Creature nodded. "I love your show, man. Me an' Seven were watchin' the other night when you had a couple of sams take down a QuikStop. Wiped the owner an' the customers an' cut with a bottle of Maddog. I say to Seven, 'We can do that.'" He turned to Seven.

"Right?"

Seven nodded, grinning.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine," Marco said. "You know how the show works, then. We wire you with sound and vid and you go out and --" he paused.

"Romp and stomp," Creature said.

Seven grinned again. That mouthful of metal was beginning to really give Marco the creeps.

"Yes, good." Marco smiled thinly. He looked over at Laurel and nodded.

She produced a smartslate, called up the standard contract, and slid it across the table to Creature.

"Can you read?" she asked.

"Fuck no."

Laurel pressed a corner of the slate; little animated glyphs began sliding across the screen. Two men shaking hands. Sundry acts of cartoon mayhem. One man handing another bags of money.

"Do you understand this contract?" she asked.

"Sure," Creature said. "It says that me an' Seven go out an' fuck 'em up an' you give us money."

"Close enough," Laurel said. "If you'll give me your thumbprints here." She indicated the appropriate regions. "And here." Creature and Seven complied.

Close enough indeed, Marco thought. Actually what the contract said was that Mondo Entertainment practically owned these two chuckleheads, lock, stock, and semi-automatic weapons, that they signed over all rights to everything they said or did, on all media currently known or ever to be devised.

"Very good," he said. "Looking forward to working with you." He slid his chair back and got up. "Laurel will get you set up with shoulder cams and mikes, mastoid speakers, the works." He looked at her. "I want you to handle this personally."

Laurel shot him a dirty look. That was scut, usually reserved for production assistants, not assistant producers.

"You got it, Marco," she said.

He could feel their eyes on him as he walked out of the room. Just as the door slid shut, he thought he heard a bark of laughter from Creature, but it might have been his imagination.

He hoped Laurel wasn't stupid enough to get in an elevator alone with those two.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea.

#

Marco popped the dub he'd made earlier, turned up the volume, and leaned back in his chair.

Don't hurt me, please, please, don't hurt me.

The palindromic symmetry lent itself nicely to looping. It still needed something, maybe a percussive horn section patch hammering the downbeats, but it wasn't half bad.

He looked over his schedule, tapping his fingers on the desk in time with the dub. Lunch at Bibo's with Laurel and a network zek named Spivak. Marco knew the name but had never met her. Laurel set it up; something about it didn't smell quite right. He would love to beg off, but he had to cover his ass. Fortunes rose and fell during lunches like this. Shows were canceled and created, careers sent rocketing skyward or crashing into the ground.

Afterwards, a good long stretch of studio time, then a release interview. Marco grimaced. He really hated those. The victim's relatives sat there wringing their hands and whining while Marco dangled larger and larger sums of cash in front of their eyes. He felt like an alchemist, transmuting grief into greed. It could get expensive.

#

He was late for lunch. Laurel and Spivak were already there, at a table in the back, leaning towards each other and laughing.

"Marco," Laurel said. "We wondered if you'd stood us up. We've already ordered." She was wearing a smile, but it was thin as a playing card. Bitch. "This is Julia Spivak," she continued after a calculated pause, "from upstairs at Mondo."

"The Creative Division," Spivak said. "New projects."

She shook his hand with a bonecrushing grip.

"I know you by reputation, of course," Marco said. As a ballbuster, he thought to himself. He was late for lunch because he'd made a few phone calls, trying to get the skinny on her. It didn't sound good -- she'd left a trail of bodies on her way to her current state of grace that made Napoleon look like the Dalai Lama.

A waiter appeared, hovering diffidently until Marco looked up.

"Hello, my name is Hans and -- "

"I don't care what your name is. Get me a green salad, no dressing, balsamic vinegar on the side. And a bottle of distilled water."

Hans nodded and scurried off. Marco looked at Spivak. She had that big-jawed, Katy Hepburn, don't-mess-with-me look about her. He wondered suddenly if she was fucking Laurel, doing the old slip-and-slide. He glanced at Laurel, trying to read the body language, and it was clear. The way they'd been leaning together when he first walked in, the surreptitious, little glances.

He was screwed.

"I saw the raw footage from yesterday," Spivak said.

Footage, Marco thought. She's older than she looks.

"Some nice hand to hand," she continued, "but your actors are a little too enthusiastic."

Marco flushed. "Yeah, the field direction could have been better." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Laurel stiffen.

Bullseye. "I just hired some new talent this morning."

"Yes, I heard about them. Creature and --" She turned to Laurel. " -- Seven? We have high hopes for them."

She paused, taking a sip of wine. "Because something's going to have to pull your ratings out of the shithouse."

"Hey, wait a minute, they're not that bad."

Spivak made a clucking sound. "You've dropped six points since last month, and that's part of a much longer downturn. There's a lot of talk going on upstairs about whether or not reality-based programming has had its day." She looked directly at him. Her eyes were black as a crow's. "Or whether you've had yours."

"The ratings always fluctuate, everybody knows that. Tides, sunspots, who the fuck knows? The share for Killers! is pretty steady if you look at the long-term stats."

She put her hand on his arm. "I'm on your side, Marco. Believe me. Killers! is a great show and we're going to do everything we can to salvage it." She paused. "Laurel has some ideas I think you ought to hear."

Marco struggled to keep his cool. Salvage my ass, he thought.

Laurel cleared her throat. "Well, part of the problem with Killers! is overhead -- the field crew, the SkyCam, the remote hardware." She paused. "Excessive post-production."

A stab at Marco's predilection for special f-x. Fucking cunt. He wanted to jab a fork in her eye.

"And the releases alone suck up nearly a quarter of the show's revenue," Laurel continued. "Focus groups say that what they want is blood -- everything else is padding. So let's give the people what they want."

She took a deep breath and put both hands on the table, palms down. Here it comes, Marco thought.

"Where do you find blood?" she continued. "Hospital emergency rooms, that's where. Especially large, urban hospital emergency rooms. Highland in Oakland, for instance. Gunshots, stabbings, stompings, wife-beating, kiddie torture -- the works. We just modify the security cam that's already in place, so we don't have to fuck around with a mobile unit. We don't have to worry about releases, either -- Mondo owns an insurance consortium and they own half the hospitals in the country, so we've got 'em by the balls. We can call it Crash Cart or something zingy like that. Practically zero overhead, maximal 'B' and 'G.'"

"Blood and guts is fine," Marco said, "but you need some action, too."

Laurel shrugged. "So every now and then we hire a couple of your goons from Killers! to do a guest spot, walk into surgery with an Uzi and open up."

Oh, great, Marco thought. They're my goons now.

"Call it a terrorist attack," Laurel was saying. "Or don't explain it at all. It's not a problem."

She looked from Marco to Spivak, then back at Marco. "So what do you think?"

What a performance, Marco thought. He looked at Spivak. She arched an eyebrow at him. He felt like he was treading water with cement flippers.

"Well," he said, cautiously. "I think it has promise. The concept's different enough from Killers! that Mondo can float both of them."

"Absolutely," Spivak said. "Laurel, set it up with Highland. I want a pilot into the focus groups in three weeks." She turned to Marco. "I'm going to kick you upstairs, Marco. Executive producer. Let Laurel handle the day-to-day business for both shows so we can keep you focused on the big picture. What do you think?"

He felt like he'd been kicked in the head by a horse. "I don't know what to say."

The waiter arrived with their lunch -- Marco's salad, which he dropped on the table with a perceptible clatter. A thick, bloody steak for Spivak. Sashimi for Laurel.

Marco hoped it gave her worms.

#

The rest of the afternoon went fairly well, all things considered. He had a great studio session, massaging the rough edges out of the dub. And he managed to hold the settlement to the bereaved parents of the bimbo who'd bought it for the upcoming show down to fifty kilobucks, which brightened his spirits considerably. By the time he was driving home that evening, his mood was almost philosophical.

Laurel had really pulled an end-run on him, but he could land feet first. He always did. Besides, Crash Cart or whatever the hell they

were going to call it sounded like a fucking bore. In two months they'd be begging him to get back in the trenches.

Meanwhile, life was sweet. Laurel was out of his hair for awhile. With a fancy title and no real duties, he'd have plenty of time for more studio work, which was what he really loved.

He popped the bead he'd been working on into the stereo and cranked up the volume, filling the car with sound. Don't hurt me, please, please, don't hurt me. On the approach to the Bay Bridge, he turned the controls over to the Grid and sat back in the plush leather seat, tapping his fingers on the dash.

The lights of San Francisco receded behind him; the dark mass of Treasure Island loomed ahead. A Free Zone, ever since the Army pulled out back in the Nineties. Squatters and crazies, mostly, total chaos. Marco wouldn't even send a camera crew in there, not without an armed backup.

His dashboard beeped at him and the terminal screen flickered on.

SYSTEM SHUTDOWN MESSAGE

This vehicle's CPU will shut down in 60 seconds.

Please pull over immediately.

Fuck. His car hadn't crashed in months. What the hell was going on? He tapped the controls, trying to call up a diagnostics program.

Another beep.

SYSTEM SHUTDOWN MESSAGE

This vehicle's CPU will shut down in 30 seconds.

Please pull over IMMEDIATELY.

Marco logged off the Grid and pulled over onto the shoulder. He picked up the phone and held it to his ear. Dead.

He looked around. Cars whizzed by to his left. Halogen lights arched high above the roadbed. Beyond, the wooded hills of Treasure Island loomed thick with shadow. In the distance, giant, skeletal structures rose above the Oakland docks like metal dinosaurs, throwing shimmering reflections onto the waters of the Bay.

A battered van pulled over about fifty yards in front of him. Its backup lights came on and it careened toward him, stopping just in front of his bumper. Two men got out.

Marco tensed, reaching into the glove compartment for his Mace. Then he recognized them. Creature and Seven.

He opened the door and got out.

"Man, am I ever glad to --"

"Shut up." Creature slammed a closed fist into the side of his head. Marco staggered back against the side of the car.

For the first time, he noticed the tiny cameras perched on their shoulders, lenses glittering like insect eyes. Creature cocked his head, as if listening to an imaginary voice. He looked at Marco.

"Laurel says to tell you she's givin' you your own special. The ratings'll go through the roof."

He pulled out a knife and waved it in front of Marco's face, back and forth, back and forth. Seven's steel teeth flashed brightly in the halogen light.

Marcus/KILLED IN THE RATINGS/14

ooo000ooo