

The Green Country Connection

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The graphics for the Tulsa Race Riots were looking really good. The old ones—pretty much copies of Channel 2's and Channels 6's, I have to admit—were of the old courthouse, circa 1935 (God only knows why when the riots were in 1921) in black and white, with black and white flames superimposed on top of it. The top of the graphic, marquee style, was red, with “Tulsa Race Riots” curved along the dome in white letters. The straight blue bottom read “Legacy of Shame and Neglect” in slightly smaller print. With different center black and white photographs and different headlines, we’ve used the same graphic for the Bush/Gore Florida recount; the Oklahoma City Bombing investigation, trial, and memorial; the New York City terrorist attacks; and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Actually, it’s been used for every school bond issue, rodeo queen pageant, and Tulsa County spelling bee, along with national news stories like Monica Lewinsky and Kirk Douglas’s first stroke, since sometime in the mid-1980’s. I think some network exec dinkered around on the Evening News with Dan Rather—or Jennings, Brokaw, or Donaldson — and it was just easier to reuse it than to think up a new color scheme with the same measure of comfortably bold patriotism.

But the point of Tulsa news is that we are tired of blending into the woodwork. We had an F2 the same night Oklahoma City and Stroud got that F5. We had a Franklin Lloyd Wright building demolished, we have two banks with the same floor plan of the Twin Towers, and Oral Roberts University’s Mabee Center is the basis for Disneyworld’s Epcot dome. But this is all forgotten. The only story to make the statewide news out of Tulsa was our dismal standardized test scores, and that’s only because Sandy Garrett wanted a scapegoat for the state’s overall poor

showing. Of course, ignored, ignominious Tulsa bore the brunt of Oklahoma City's policy failure.

We really should have been the capitol.

The point of this is, the Tulsa Race Riots, in an 80-year late gift, were supposed to change all that. Black Wall Street, racial tensions, rape, murder, and fire—dramatic loss and devastation in a single night. After over 80 years of negligence and denial, the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, with findings to rival Haight-Ashbury, L.A., or Detroit, was supposed to pull us out of unwarranted obscurity.

And it was all going to begin with a new graphic. I could feel the past and its cast of mediocrity cracking and breaking as I typed and cut and pasted and drew. The whole newsroom was abuzz with news of the new graphic. Three ad hoc committees, impromptu of course, but still valuable to the organization, were formed at various times to find an appropriate photograph (once) and to decide on a color scheme (twice officially, once at Pizza Hut). No other newsroom had a new graphic paradigm. No other city had such a dreadfully undeserved race riot. Our time was then.

And I was the man making the graphic that would change everything. I felt like a soldier, a visionary, a revolutionary, and I don't think it's possible to overstate how important this graphic was.

But something went wrong. I was sitting in my chair, thoughtfully sipping my coffee as I studied my work as critically as I could. I had a bagel sitting on a blue napkin. It was slathered with cream cheese on one side and raspberry jam on the other and then repaired like a sandwich. It was 4:37 in the afternoon. The air was taut and excited and haphazardly prepared for the 5:00

news. Normally, bagels are only a breakfast food for me, but I really love them, and an afternoon bagel was the reward for all my efforts.

The news director knocked on the doorframe of my office, leaning through the open door and studying me as I looked up. “Can it.” He left, although he did glance at my untouched bagel. I didn’t as I sat up. I was looking at my graphic.

Knowing Cal, much had already been said, and he wasn’t going to repeat it for my benefit. I rolled back in my chair and snapped on the 13" TV sitting on the dinged metal file cabinet over my left shoulder. I didn’t turn around to see the 4:30 news-you-can-use wrap-up. (Between Mr. Food and this local gynecologist/couples therapist who does a special call-in show on Tuesdays, we’ve managed to salvage two points from the ratings pummeling we were getting from Oprah and Judge Judy.) The images were clearly visible in the reflection off my monitor. I never listen to the perky blonde who “anchors” the women’s news half-hour, but, as the clock crept closer to 4:58, my ears perked up without my concentrating on it, and I began earnestly listening for the “coming up next on…” tease for a hint to what had gone on.

I fiddled some with the shades of the flames engulfing a street of businesses in “Black Wall Street.” The day was pretty well shot anyway, but this graphic was still the symbol of change, of progress, even progress thwarted. I didn’t want it to be shoddy.

“Oklahoma City receives \$260 million in federal aid over the next ten years...We’ll tell you where the money’s going. In a Green Country connection, Ray Wallace, the elderly gentleman we told you about last week, is receiving a special gift, more than 80 years after the fateful night of the Tulsa Race Riots, because of the OKC endowment. And, Mayor Grantwood pulls the plug on the Race Riot Commission. We’ll have details after this.”

I heard about the new Chevy dealership with low, low, low prices, guaranteed, and wet shine lipstick. Maybe she's born with it.

“Oklahoma City received a pledge today from the U.S. Congress, promising them \$260 million dollars over the next ten years. The money is earmarked for urban development in the area of the old Murrah Building and Bombing Memorial. Improvements will include a library dedicated to the bombing, including a 3D interactive video studio about the place and people who were lost, and funds for survivors. The Bombing Memorial has received over 20,000 visitors per month since its grand opening early in 2001, and the added attractions are expected to raise that to over 50,000, with anticipated city revenue increases topping \$10 million a year.”

There was some story about a local girl getting on Jeopardy!’s Teen Tournament, then “Tulsa city’s mayor, Ken Grantwood, officially closed the four-year investigation into the Tulsa Race Riots. More after the break.”

A Meow Mix commercial, two tampon commercials, H&R Block, and a Ford dealership, then seven and a half minutes on a recent study of bed-wetting in seven-year-olds, a high school cheerleaders’ murder trial, and a plea for signatures on a petition for a new missing children’s response system in Broken Arrow. Then more commercials. I had to wonder why anyone would be willing to sit through a bunch of chicks in camo shorty-shorts singing about underarm deodorant.

Then came the twenty-second spot that changed the course of Green Country history. In two ways, if you think about it.

“Tulsa mayor Kenneth Grantwood announced today that he was closing the investigation over the Tulsa Race Riots, after a sobering report from the Tulsa city council and the Race Riot

Commission.” That frigging red-white-and-blue graphic was in the corner above the perky blonde’s left shoulder pad. “He has halted plans for the construction of the memorial, which was expected to begin next spring.” Cut to footage of a scraped-bare field, the beige, stiff grass blustered by a slight wind. “A series of failed bond issues to fund the memorial set back construction dates. Now, with the cancellation of further investigation, there is speculation that all memorial plans will be given up. The mayor’s office declined comment.

“Once again, this shameful part of Tulsa’s past will fade into history books.” Cut to a shot of tiny school children, mainly black, sitting at school desks and looking sad. “The Commission claimed a lack of evidence of the mass graves and widespread vandalism and looting which has long been alleged, and Mayor Grantwood has called an end to the investigation, citing a desire to avoid further tax payer expense. This comes on the heels of sobering economic news, indicating the city of Tulsa is facing serious budget shortfalls and that citizens may be facing lay-offs and pay-cuts as local businesses scale back and shut down. The Race Riot Memorial was expected to bring \$7.5 million into the city through taxes, increased tourism, and historical events.

“This weather we’re having is sure getting ‘historical,’ too, isn’t it Jon?”

Well-practiced laughter from Jon. No joke, I caught Jon chuckling into a tape recorder in the men’s room, checking the creases of his smile and carefully applying extra makeup in the lines. “Absolutely, Jamie. More ice expected, out of season, and looks like the roads and overpasses will be hazardous. More in a minute.”

“Thanks, Jon.”

I flicked the TV off. Jon’s forecast hasn’t been less than five degrees off for any given day in the past two weeks, and the last time he predicted an ice storm, it was sunny and mild for

three days. Didn't stop a flurry of eight year olds calling about school closings.

I closed the file on my graphic and checked the clock on my computer. 5:24:36...37...38
...39...

Cal slapped my door. "Get ready, grab your stuff, we're going to see Grantwood."

It was totally those survivors, in my opinion, who killed the race riots. At first, the whole thing was awful, dreadful. We were looking at all the black people in our office wondering if we might have killed their grandparents. The station was energized with the idea of righting a decades long wrong.

When the first survivors started cropping up (Channel 2 got there fastest, with an elderly couple who had met during the riots), the stories were terrible, and suddenly made the riots so much more human with real faces and tears and real loss. Not like pages of yellow newsprint and red-white-and-blue graphics.

For awhile, they were a ratings goldmine. Ratings and points were pouring in. After that while, though, things started to stagnate. We'd get a bumper crop of shares when we aired a follow-up story or managed to find a riot connection to significant black figures (Ralph Ellison's great-aunt and two third-cousins owned a millinery shop when the riots broke out.) But the thrill was getting gone.

I think we found too many. It made the horror seem pretty diffuse if so many people could survive into their eighties and nineties despite it. We even tried to play that up during sweeps last May, doing a special health hour on tips for longevity from race riot octa- and nonagenarians. We got a lot of mail from the Sunnyside, Hillcrest, St. Martha's, and St. Winifred's nursing homes.

But the point is, we made it seem ordinary. When you see the same story everyday, all the

human interest angles start blending together and it seems normal.

I was fantasizing about my aborted graphic when we stopped in front of City Hall. The race riots were in north Tulsa, which, at that time, had been almost its own city, with financial districts, schools, shopping, apartments, banks, theaters and movie-houses, upscale mansions and slums. After the riots, only the slums were left, and that was the only part that was rebuilt. It was also the spearhead in integrating black north Tulsa into white south Tulsa proper: it became the city-wide slums, the poorest and dirtiest spilling in and cleansing the south section into the pristine jewel it is today.

City Hall was south side. It was red brick with majestic fluted Grecian columns in grayish white concrete. It was a single sprawling story. The interior walls are institutional peach without any effort to cover them with starving artist paintings. A hallway crossed the hall we were in, and two large, healthy potted plants, and I couldn't begin to guess the genus, stood in corners on opposite ends. In the rooms, busy secretaries stood around the coffee urns feet away from long lines of bored citizens in shabby clothes, who clutched yellow or pink cut-off notices with disinterest. It probably wasn't the first time any of them had stood in a non-moving line like that, and I guarantee it won't be the last.

We passed the water department, the sanitation department, city and county tax offices, and a staff lounge. Public records were stored in a prefab building behind the City Hall. It looked like a trailer and had a large, poorly formed gravel parking lot. Interns and secretaries without seniority worked there.

All the departments were buttressed from the world by single glass doors. The halls were empty and everything was eerily silent. Voices hummed behind the windowed doors. The slap of

our dress shoes on the linoleum screeched down the hall like flip-flops in a stairwell, and we got nasty looks for attracting attention.

Grantwood's office was in the back. It had a metal door painted the same industrial-grade peach. Inside, his receptionist had a mahogany desk with a glass cover and brass-fittings, oil paintings, lawyer-style mahogany and leaded glass bookshelves, and moire silk wallpaper. The personal secretary had a shiny wood door behind her and to the left, but Ms. Patti Lombardi, Executive Assistant (scrolled in brass) was out to lunch and her door was closed. Mayor Kenneth G. Grantwood's door was closed as well, but he had left instructions with his Monica-wannabe receptionist that he would see us shortly. She seemed smart enough to read a watch and use the intercom, so Cal and I sat and waited in the plush suede chairs in the corner. Cal switched on a cut-glass art deco reading lamp and thumbed through a *Fortune* magazine.

Grantwood's door opened, and Cal and I filed in without a word. A skinny middle-aged blonde with a Faultless-ly starched, gelled, and set bouffant turned around in her chair and watched us come in. She didn't get up. Mona Levertov was the news director at Channel 6. Ken moved behind his desk. Cal sat in the sofa to the right of Levertov and Grantwood. There was a loveseat to the left against the wall opposite Cal, but I stayed standing near the door, leaning against his bookcase. Grantwood didn't sit.

"Gentlemen," he began. He was talking to us, but he looked at Mona. She already knew what he was going to say. "I have a proposition for the two of you."

"Where's Channel 2?" Cal asked acidly. Channel 2 was top in the ratings, and I could already see Cal trying to come up with a story to beat whatever Lou Abrams at 2 had for the 10:00 news.

“They’re not invited.” Mona bent over and dug in her purse for a cigarette.

“Then why are we here?” Cal asked Mona and watched her take a long drag.

“Ratings.” Grantwood answered. “We need your technical expertise—” this to me “—and in exchange, you get ratings.”

“Then why is she here?” Ratings are not bargaining points. They are not to be shared. They are not commodities. They are more precious than blood, although, for enough blood, you can buy a few points and shares.

“It was my idea, and I had the contacts.” Mona ground her cigarette out on Grantwood’s nameplate and lit another. “That didn’t pan out.”

Grantwood sat, and Cal eased back. I leaned a little more on the bookcase. There was a sense of history in that room, and I knew then Nixon’s temptation to record everything he did in the Oval Office. It’s so tempting to have proof you’re changing fate.

“As you know, Oklahoma City makes about \$30,000 a day in tax revenue off the Bombing Memorial and memorabilia.” Grantwood steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair. It gave a piercing scream, but he didn’t flinch. “This is on top of the 260 mil from the government grant coming in, plus the 240 mil already from government funds, private donations and tourism. Then there’s the OU Sooner win-streak and the MAPS bond issue and downtown revitalization.

“Tulsa has voted down MAPS three times now. The upcoming election will vote it down again. We got no federal funds to spruce up downtown and, in a lackluster economy, what little tourism we used to get is going down. We have no major sports franchise, no state four-year university, and no major industry to pull in more tax dollars. Not to mention Phillips is shutting

down, and a couple of other major and minor players might close—or at least cut-back—and all of our locally owned businesses have been cussing out the Chamber over our small business and property taxes and lost revenue. And now we have to scrap the whole Race Riot thing because Washington screwed us over. Oklahoma City took the federal funding we were hoping to get.” He scowled at the ashes on his desk.

“Ratings have flatlined, too, and when Ken informed me of his decision—”

“When was this?” Cal interrupted.

“Two weeks ago.” Mona looked at Cal, but Cal looked at me. Grantwood told Mona two weeks ago, and the official press release came out this afternoon. They were sleeping together.

“Anyway, I proposed a solution.” Mona left the sentence dangling and puffed down her cigarette with enough appreciation to make me wonder what else was rolled in it.

Grantwood was already in the know, and Cal would cut out his tongue before he asked a question of his competition, but I still didn’t know what I was doing there, and history or not I was getting bored. “And what was your solution?”

“I have some contacts in the Mid-East.” Cal stiffened, and even I felt a little constipated at that. “I put in my calls to see who they could get over there— Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front, PLO, whatever. No al-Qaida, that’s already been done.” She stubbed out the butt. “I got a couple of names from the PLO.”

“Are we talking about soliciting terrorism?” If anything, Cal sounded envious of the idea. I thought it sounded derivative myself, but what do I care?

“We made some calls,” Grantwood said cautiously.

“And?”

Mona grimaced, the lines in her tan face crevicing. “They never called back. We got a pamphlet on the future state of Palestine and a solicitation for donations.” She shrugged.

Everyone else seemed offended, but I saw the humor in that.

“So what was your next step?” Cal shot me a dirty look, but I’d already opened my mouth once.

Mona was glaring at me, too. “This *is* Plan B.” I almost decided to ignore her because of that tone of voice. I raised my eyebrows and tried to figure out how to look bored when I was already lounging. History was beginning to seem a little passe.

“Could you please define ‘Plan B’ more clearly for those of us who aren’t smoking whatever you are?” Mona glared and lit up. “And why does it involve another news station? What does Channel 8 have that you don’t?”

“In a word, you.” Mona was in charge of this conversation. Grantwood sat back, watching her. He might know what’s going on, but I have a feeling he doesn’t have a part in making it, no matter how great his re-election interests may rest on it. “I need *his* help,” she tossed her head at Grantwood, and I was more convinced than ever of his irrelevance, “on the end of this. I can’t afford to be—” she struggled for some synonym for “caught” that wouldn’t make her sound like a criminal conspirator. I sighed loudly to let her know we were all adults and had moved far past the need for euphemisms. “And I need your technical expertise. I hear you are ambitious, discreet, intelligent.” She eyed me. “And ruthless. And I have heard of this graphic you were designing for the Race Riots. Clever, if it lives up to its reputation.” Cal jerked in his seat. Leak in the office. Heads would roll. That’s always fun, at least.

I would be lying if I said that I didn’t feel a little flattered that my work, even smuggled

out, would attract such notice. That made me more interested in this scheme. “So what is Plan B? You never said.”

“You could call this a brainstorming session.”

“So there is no Plan B.”

“There will be.” This from Cal. Grantwood was stretched out in his leather and brass chair looking important and doing nothing. “Are we still going with an attack?”

“Well does anyone here know how to make anthrax?” Mona asked acidly. They all looked at me, and I shook my head. “Cold, flu, anything?” My head never stopped shaking, and Mona sighed heavily. “That would have been something new, at least. But I didn’t think any one of us would know how to do it, and we need to keep liabilities down.”

“Not even my secretary knows about this,” Grantwood broke in. “I told her this is a meeting about the Race Riot Commission.” Cal snorted. We’d have a package done by tomorrow at 4:30, with an expanded one for triplicate use at 5:00, 6:00, and 10:00, but that was still something that would have been easier if he’d told us from the beginning. Other than that, we ignored him.

“So we need something we can do, or have done without arousing suspicion, ourselves.” Cal stroked his chin and Mona looked at him.

“We don’t have any buildings tall enough to collapse,” Grantwood bemoaned. “I already thought of that one. We have dynamite, TNT, nitro, all kinds of stuff in the city and county DOT stations for blowing up land and hills to make roads, but we just don’t have anything worth it. Not since that Franklin Lloyd Wright building went down in Bartlesville.”

“Suicide bombers are out, too,” Mona added. She flicked ashes on the carpet. “For one

thing, there's not enough of a body count. It'd be unusual in the US, and we'd get some attention—”

“But we'd never get a memorial out of it,” Grantwood finished sadly.

“Actually, I was thinking we wouldn't get anyone willing to do it,” Mona snapped. I'd get frustrated with the increasingly infantile Kenneth G. Grantwood, mayor, too, and I wondered how Mona put up with him. I had a really disturbing picture of the two of them in bed. He has a potbelly, a thick black mustache, and a very shiny bald spot, and I have a feeling that her skin is crinkly and sagging in places only Grantwood sees. I missed a couple of lines of dialogue there. Didn't seem to matter much.

“The problem with the suicide bomber thing is that there isn't really any reason for someone to want to die over this.”

Cal suddenly looked guilty, then, just as suddenly, he sat up straight and looked excited. “Wait. Maybe that's it. Maybe we need to find some people or place or something that would *benefit* from this kind of attention as much as we are. Then we'd be helping them. And it'd be something worth somebody dying over.”

“Kinda giving back to the community, huh, Cal?” I said it sarcastically, but, again, nobody caught the humor in it. It seemed to make them feel better, even better than good ratings and tax revenues and memorials, to think that this could be used for a higher purpose. I knew what was going on, of course, but when it all comes down to it, what do I really care?

“But, wait, wait, wait.” Mona held up a hand. “Hang on a minute here. We're missing body count here. We need something high profile but also high numbers. That makes it work.”

“Let's face it people.” I was the youngest by probably twenty years, easy, in this room,

and yet I seemed to be the lone voice of reason. “New York City screwed us. We could drop a bomb in Jenks and not get that kind of death count. We need to be more us-minded here. Let’s quit trying to compete internationally. We’ll never do it. Let’s just have the best *Tulsa*-sized whatever going on.”

That seemed to take away a lot of the fun that Cal’s charitable idea had made, but it just needed to be said.

Everyone was quiet for a long time. Grantwood’s short attention span kicked in and he began doodling on his ink blotter, leaning way back and not looking at his hand, like none of us would notice that way. “We have trolleys,” he said suddenly. He stared at his blotter, enthralled. “We could run a trolley into something. And put explosives on it,” he added, in a sudden flash of brilliance. “The ones the city has in all those DOT buildings I have to sign funding for. Remember?” The rest of us remembered.

“Who would do this?” We all looked around at each other.

“I could figure out the wiring,” I said carefully. “That’s not too hard.” And that is definitely something that I wouldn’t trust to any of them. They’d give the whole thing away. On the other hand (which I would still have, and they would blow off), I didn’t want them to think I was volunteering for a suicide mission for them. There is no glory in death. Unless it’s somebody else’s, but the important point is that the *dead* person gets no glory.

“Who would do it?” Grantwood jumped at Mona’s suggestion and cut his gaze toward me. I was glad to see that Cal and Mona were smart enough to figure out I wasn’t going to die for this. I have no desire to be murdered, and if they tried to use me, this whole thing would go from being a practical plan to a common killing.

“Actually, that’s not as hard as you think,” I said. “We don’t actually need to use a real person.” They looked at me, confused. “I mean, we need a real person to do it, but the profile and the evidence that is found doesn’t have to be real.” I shrugged. “We could mock a lot of that up in the newsroom. Just pick a person you want to do it, and, in five seconds, I can make that the perp.”

“But wouldn’t somebody catch on?” Grantwood wrinkled his forehead. “I mean, wouldn’t the guy who *really* does it leave behind some—some—some evidence that *he* was here that we would have to cover up? Wouldn’t that be hard?” He looked to Mona for confirmation. She looked to me.

Inwardly, I sighed. It was becoming more and more clear that it may be more efficient to do this on my own; although, some kudos do belong to Mona for the concept. I’m more of an implementation person than an idea person, myself. “Not really,” I said, trying for patience. I looked for small words to explain a big-person idea. “We just need to find a person who normally uses public transit, convince them to run into the thing we want run into, and then, *when we broadcast*, we broadcast that the terrorist is whatever we want him to be.” He still looked blank, and I bit the inside of my cheek and stayed lounged against the bookcase to keep from showing how really irritating I thought he was. My boss was watching, and we’d need news releases out of this guy’s office for another fifteen months, at least until he lost reelection, God willing. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of the technical end.” Cal gave me an approving look. Diane, the stupid red head with no lashes, had seniority, but, when Chris leaves in two months, I’ll have the graphic and now this on my side. Technical expertise. Better than a resume. I could smell a \$550 a month raise, and I was already anticipating my celebratory bagel.

“I already have a plan for that, Ken,” Cal said placatingly. I shot him a grateful look. “In fact,” he glanced at me, and I could tell he was as p.o.’ed as I was, “why don’t we head back to the news station. We’ll get started on the story for today,” Cal rolled his eyes and Grantwood looked confused, “and then we’ll hammer out the details on this other — project. Mona, we’ll call you when we’re ready.” She nodded and ignored Grantwood, who told us to make an appointment with his secretary for a future conference. Like he’d ever hear from us again. This guy screamed “paper trail.”

We left quickly, told the secretary that we wanted to hear about his next press conference on the Race Riots and prayed Grantwood would forget about asking for a meeting. Cal left me and headed back to the station. I waited for public transit for almost forty-five minutes and went home.

The first thing I had to do the next morning was help edit a package on the “Green Country Connection” of a sex scandal of a Vermont senator. His aide’s step-mother had lived in Bartlesville during her teen years. We got reactions from various Bartlesvillians who remembered her (or claimed to; we didn’t check that closely, and we edited out the grosser errors), and got a few good comments on how they were such a quiet, helpful family, and the cute li’l girl was jus’ so smart. They never would have believed it if “we hadn’t uh-saw it on Channel 8, ‘first at five.’” That was my favorite quote, and it was also the lead-in for the story.

After a couple of weeks, things settled into a routine. As good as my predictions, Grantwood was totally out of the loop. Somewhat to my surprise, so were Mona and Cal.

That didn’t really upset me. I don’t do group things. I don’t play well with others. I’ve always been more of the “rugged individualist,” only literate and sans weekend fishing trips.

This was why dictatorships tend to be so effective. There is power in a single idea, a single vision. But what two people on earth—much less a quartet of competing interests—ever have a single anything? Such was almost the fate of our little Tulsa-First conspiracy.

But like I said, we lost Grantwood's attention before all the coffee was gone. As for Mona and Cal—must have just been the cares of the world. Stations are busy things, with timetables and commitments and dead air to show up every lag. Just the cares of life, they got in the way and Mona and Cal fell by the wayside. I thought of that old Sunday School illustration of people receiving salvation with joy, but scorching in the sun because they didn't have any root in themselves. I don't want to talk badly about my boss, but it's the only reason he could have neglected Tulsa's salvation.

I mean, I had a lot on my plate, too. Not as much, admittedly, since Grantwood pulled the plug on the unfunded memorial, but I had the sex scandal thing. There was a tire manufacturer in Stidham that made the tires that were on a plane that crashed in Virginia. And then there was that cheerleader's murder trial, which had more than a little Jerry Springer appeal when it came out that she had had an affair with an assistant coach who was in no way implicated in her death.

But after a few days, I really had the time to focus on this project, and the focus became mine.

I surfed the net, as a starting point. There really aren't as many sites about murder and mayhem as Dateline led me to believe. Stone Phillips let me down.

I got what I needed (eventually): schematics, supply lists, step-by-step instructions, the whole bit. I compared and rated bus schedules—oops, I mean *trolley* schedules. Is my face red. Doesn't the word "trolley" sound so much better than "bus"? *Trolley*. It makes me think of

shining, happy, clanging things, like that old Judy Garland musical only not as gay, and just saying “trolley schedule” makes me smile. I even found myself doodling “trolley schedule” on the margins of my agendas during some of my more boring meetings (which would be all of them).

I have to admit, the challenge caught my fancy. Why else would I do this? I was more meticulous than I needed to be, perhaps, but that was part of the fun. What was the minimal amount of explosive per grade necessary to blow off the side of a trolley? What kind of preparation was necessary? What kind of detonator was most dependable, and what thickness was needed for the wires? Did you know that ammonium nitrate is white when it’s anhydrous but turns to a light blue or turquoise when it gets wet? I found that out.

Then, when I was actually buying stuff, I spent half an hour at Radio Shack, debating between orange and purple rubber insulation on the wires. I chose purple. A lot of it was nostalgia. In elementary school, my first warm-up jacket for basketball was green like the trolley with purple sleeves. It also made sense as a coordinating color, because as soon as I saw the purple, I began planning my new graphic. The orange was too much like the Race Riots graphic, and, for my own personal growth, I need to learn to let go of the past more. Getting a new color scheme was a good beginning.

Then, one day at work, I actually had an epiphany, so obvious that it was almost embarrassing. As I mentioned, I was having a little trouble with a detonator. I could find a way to get the stuff to explode on contact. That was actually pretty easy. But I couldn’t figure out a way to keep it from exploding at a big bump in the road. And I certainly couldn’t figure out how to get someone to drive the bus willingly into a large object. If I attached smaller charges to the

brakes and the ignition, that would work on losing control, but there was no way to do that without being nearby, probably on the trolley itself, and that would defeat the purpose of trying to stay alive to make a graphic for fame and progress.

But I was watching the 4:30 chick-news broadcast, and I had the volume on for once. There was some twelve year old on who dog-fought with model airplanes, including some rudimentary machine guns. He used a standard remote control, just wired the mapping a little differently. That's when it struck. I could use a remote control! It would still require someone being on the trolley, but I could activate (and deactivate) the RC from a greater distance, like my car or even the station, depending on my target, and it would be a totally suspicion-free device that I could give to almost anybody. I would just show them how to use the controls like I wanted them to, then activate it when the trolley was near where I wanted, and wait for the brakes to go out and the throttle to rev up. Then, the contact detonators would kick in when the trolley hit anything.

It was brilliance! And it solved all my problems. For once, that stupid broadcast actually did have some news I could use.

Anyway, I got things done on my own, that's the point. Mona and Cal didn't mention the scheme to me again, and, in my more melancholy or stressful moments, it reminded me of that time when I was growing up and I had to decorate the Christmas tree all by myself. Then or now, it was a good learning experience overall.

But when, according to my carefully planned timetable, the time came for me to actually implement this little idea, that forgetfulness was less of a life lesson and more annoying. I waited until the mayor had a major press conference to call about the explosives. The first time, his

secretary hung up on me. The second time, she patched me through, but he couldn't remember who I was (or who Mona was or who Cal was or who he was, the brain-dead son of a), and I didn't want to risk explaining too much over the phone, so I hung up. I waited fifteen minutes, called again, and said I was one of the contractors for the city an' I was havin' some trouble gittin' a-hold of m' own explosives fer that job. He totally didn't remember the call I'd made less time before than the attention span of most small dogs, and he said no problem, I'd have all I need delivered within two days. (I may have mentioned something about campaign funding and union PAC's. Oopsie. Me and my big mouth.) I gave him the address of an elementary school playground about five blocks from my house and asked for ten times the amount of TNT I'd actually need. I sneaked over the next night and stole what I could use and left the rest. It was gone within three days, and I don't know if it was taken for future purposes good or ill.

With that done, the last part of my plan was ready to be put in motion. I just needed to find someone to pass the remote to, someone, preferably, too trusting to think it was strange and too dumb to figure anything out. And with a short enough attention span for me to depend on his (or her—this is a time for everybody) playing with the thing on the bus. I immediately thought of Grantwood, but I don't think Mona or Cal could have kept a straight face during the news reports, and that would blow everything (pardon the pun).

It is a little known—and by that, I mean unknown—fact to my associates that I have a handicapped brother. Handicapped is kind. The kid's dumber than most rocks. But he's sweet and good-natured, and he always adored me. My parents died when he was seventeen, and I put him in Sunnyside Rest Home in south Tulsa. It's a pretty place, around 110th Street and Lewis, out in the country with trees and fields and creeks and frogs and cows and whatever else seeps

into Bobby's brain as interesting. I live in a trailer park at 81st and Lewis, right across from ORU. Shabby, but what do I care?

I realized I would have to plan this myself, and, as previously stated, it would be easiest to find a martyr if we could find a cause worth dying for. Sunnyside is worth it to me, and this is my plan so I can do what I damn well please.

Sunnyside has an agreement with St. Adrian's Episcopal Hospital, one of those pretty brownstone buildings, over a hundred years old, that has concrete slab and dull red brick additions spinning out from it like wheel spokes. St. Adrian's is at 10th and Sheridan, south-side and downtown, for all intents and purposes. A bus runs from Sunnyside to St. Adrian's four times a day, in the morning, twice book-ending the lunch-hour, and at night. With some state transportation dollars, and to mollify the city after the state screwing us out of MAPS (after the T-town voters did), Tulsa bought six of those shiny green buses that look like the trolleys on Rice-A-Roni commercials. The lunchtime bus runs, which also happen to be on the busiest hours in Tulsa, have those fancy-pretty buses.

Approximately half of the residents who are able to, work at St. Adrian's, either the hospital or the church a half mile away. The elderly residents work as greeters at the Super-Wal-Mart at 71st and Lewis. The handicapped residents tend to be janitors, grounds keepers, that kind of thing. Some of the smarter ones can be go-fers, but, let's face it, there aren't that many smarter ones.

That makes for a problem. See, I can load the explosives—I'll have to check the internet to find out how—on the bus in such a way as to create a big ka-boom. I can pick a target—the new ugly wings of St. Adrian's—and do all of this without raising suspicion, since my brother is

an inmate there at Sunnyside. Obviously, I don't want to die, and, therefore, I can't be the one to steer the bus into the hospital. But, it would be hard to find someone of even average intelligence dumb enough to talk into suicide so the rest home and hospital can get a few extra mil (and the city can get national news coverage and a memorial of its own, but keep those under your hat). One of the residents would be ideal, but most of them would be too dumb to remember my instructions unless I pinned 'em to their shirt, which would defeat the purpose of all this secrecy.

My brother, bless his pointed little head, came to my rescue, when I met his mean friend Danny.

And that was the last of everything. It had all fallen into place.

The longest struggle I had—even longer than the orange/purple wire thing—was whether or not to tip Cal off so that he could have some crews in the general vicinity when the big event happened. I finally decided against it. Any whiff of forehand knowledge could take Cal down, and he would definitely take me down with him. I could count on his silence *ex-post facto*, though, for the same reason. Mona, too. Grantwood—he'd probably forgotten the whole thing as soon as he and Mona broke up. (I've noticed a lot fewer "mayor's office" exclusives on channel 6 lately.)

So I decided to risk it, risk missing the exclusive, that is, and marched ahead unannounced, as quiet as the Second Coming.

I chose the date carefully (June 6), so there would be no anniversary conflicts, like April (OKC) or September (NYC). The weather's generally good then, too, mild winds, sunny, and mid-80's, which would make the one-year anniversary's dedication of the memorial a lovely photo-op.

Now, this is not set in stone, pardon the pun, but by then, I did have a few sketches of a memorial already done. A tiered rose garden with brass nameplates of victims (not just deaths; injuries are painful and costly in human tolls as well) on every bush. My mother's favorite flowers were roses. And a massive topiary of a trolley. Life-sized, naturally, and maybe a fountain.

And, as a family member of a lucky survivor (I will see to it that Bobby is not on the bus that day), I could start a charitable organization for families and victims. I even have a name: The Tulsa-First Union of Survivors and Families of the Great Trolley-Bus Tragedy. We'll offer a yearly scholarship to TU for a special-needs kid called "The Danny Bonner Scholarship for Leadership and Community Service," in honor of my brother's dearly departed friend and heroic victim.

I don't actually care about the whole charity/ group counseling thing, in case you couldn't tell. Seems a little sick, like a common death really means that these people had anything in common in life. Whatever. It keeps one really horrible, inhuman, disturbing moment alive perpetually. This is the major problem with broadcasts out of Oklahoma City ever since April 19. They never move on. They never got a new graphic. They never appreciated that there is a time and a place for everything, and then you are supposed to move on. Of course, I'm counting on that obsessiveness for attention to my graphic, for long-term national attention on Tulsa, and for tourism and memorials for the next fifty years, but that doesn't mean I approve. And, then again, look at how long we've been beating the way dead horse of the Race Riots, but still.

But it will be really interesting to see how many people join.

It was sunny on Thursday, and the weather had taken a dramatic and inexplicable turn to

warmness. It was really beginning to feel like summer, finally. It was about 11:30. I didn't have to be back at work until 1:30, so I had plenty of time. I loaded three backpacks in each luggage compartment lining the trolley's chassis. Cost of thirteen backpacks, wire, and detonator: \$1,132.78. Cost of the bus driver knocking back some Irish coffee with the nurses in their station and having no other witnesses around: Priceless.

Anyway, I visited my brother as usual and then stopped off to see Danny. Bobby must have been bragging that I worked with computers and other clanky machines because Danny really admired me. It would have been pathetic if he weren't so disgusting. And, despite his handicap, he really wasn't a very nice person just in general.

I suffered through endless shoving matches as Danny and Bobby both tried to impress me with balancing a spoon on their noses during lunch, then through a contest to see whose mashed potatoes would last longest if they turned a spoon upside down and held it. I carefully steered the conversation to RC cars. I had bought Bobby a pack of Hot Wheels, but I remembered that he was ultra-sensitive to sounds. He hated the screeching, rubbery-metallic sound of the tiny gears in RC cars. I can't say I blame him for that. Danny, of course, decided he loved RC cars.

As I began trying to leave, with Bobby wrapped around one of my arms, I handed Danny a backpack with a little red hand held toy, a race car, in it. (I was cautious enough to have a timer, as well, so that the thing couldn't possibly go off without an outside signal at 12:35. After that...it sounds too modest, but, to a certain extent, it was in the hands of God after that. I had done as much as I was able.) Bobby got mad and stomped into one of the front living rooms and refused to budge from the couch. I was relieved and really tried to bully him into going to work. He never does anything I try to force him to do, especially in one of those moods, and I didn't want

him on that death-trolley for anything.

Walking out with him, practically standing still to keep from out-stripping his lumbering stride, I meticulously showed Danny just how to work the controls to get the car to do backflips and 360's. He practiced and practiced and I knew he was going to drive the bus driver nuts, or would have, if the guy weren't already toasted.

Danny shuffled his way to the shiny green trolley, his eyes lit up with joy and greed at my gift. He'd already smacked my younger brother once when I first gave it to him and Bobby tried to yank it away, and, needless to say, I felt less than sorry for what was going to happen the closer we got to the hydraulic doors. You have to admit, his attitude more than justified anything that I could do (or have him do). After I was convinced Danny would remember and practice my instructions, I was trying to leave, too, but Danny kept shuffling right on my heels. The nurses, trying to help more of the physically old and mentally young to seat themselves, whispered among each other and looked in my direction with pity.

"So you'll really be my friend?" He looked at me eagerly, pausing on the step of the trolley-bus as I tried to get away to my car.

"Yeah, Danny, whatever you say." I shifted impatiently. The nurses smiled at me sympathetically as they finished loading the elderly and infirm into the bus seats and carefully strapping them in. One of them pointed at Danny and rolled her eyes conspiratorily at me. Danny-boy had a quite a reputation.

"You will be my friend," he insisted stubbornly. His thick lower lip drooled out in a pout. "You will be my very best friend." He had an imperiously blank look in his eyes that reminded me of Grantwood. I snickered and he took that for confirmation. "We will play together." He

cuddled the car to his chest and sneered at my brother, who was looking at us jealously, his nose squished against the front windows of the rest home in a big, wet, smeary circle. Bobby stuck out his tongue. I think. He could have been licking the window for all I know, but Danny stuck his tongue out again in spite and thumped up the stairs of the bus. The doors hissed closed and I got out of there.

I didn't feel anything special in my gut as I drove past my trailer park on Lewis or onto the interstate to get to the station in Brookside, but, later, sitting at my desk, I recaptured the sense of history that I'd had when I first began planning this thing. It's a shame, really, how quickly I lost the thrill in the drudgery and work of planning this and supplying it and then the stuff at the station....

But it was back, the beginning of an epic. It was like it charged the very air. I watched my coworkers as I got my coffee, and I marveled at their calm. It was like the day I got my SAT scores, or when I first got the idea for my Race Riot graphic. In fact, inspiration blew in the breeze, and, as the minute hand crept closer to 12:35, my gaze drifted more and more to the little remote control I had in the third drawer of my file cabinet. I have a lot of gizmos in my file cabinet, and I love them all, but this one has a special place in my heart to this day.

I got myself a blueberry cream cheese bagel and an extra large coffee, and I sat down to work.

It was like I was outside my body. I could see the image so clearly, the bloodstained faces, cheeks black with grime and streaked with tears, the chiseled jaws of the firemen and rescue workers as they stood nobly, tattered but proud, in front of the wreckage. I was moved almost to the point of tears. I worked, I drew, I mastered that page, and I was so engrossed that I nearly

forgot, when 12:35 actually rolled around, to activate Danny's RC. The craziness. I'm blushing right now to admit that.

At 1:07, the first sirens started peeling away from the station down the street. I froze, my hands suspended over the keys, and I just listened for a moment before wheeling back, slowly, and flicking on my TV. I could see the screen flicker on the glass of my monitor, and I felt an eerie kinship with the me from months ago that had seen a similar scene. That day had ended in tragedy and loss, the death of my aspirations up to that time. Today was about success and rebirth.

Ghostly images appeared, faces of perky blond reporters floating in seas of gray smoke, mouthing things frantically, but, without the volume, all the gestures were pretty much meaningless. I smiled as I put the finishing touches on my graphic. Cal would be so proud.

"Have you heard the news?" Cal pounded into my office. The door was cracked open, anyway, otherwise he would have hurt himself with the force he had behind him.

I reigned in a smirk. "What? The volume's off." He glanced at the footage and forgot to answer me for a moment, enthralled with the beauty of it.

"St. Adrian's hospital," he said softly, distracted. He was still riveted to the TV. I finally swivelled around in my chair to see, firsthand, what was so attention grabbing.

Flames shot up thirty feet above rubble of what had been the south wing of the hospital. Piles of red bricks, broken and scorched, stacked the entire length of the TV screen on the right side. In the middle and left, an open parking lot would be visible, after the smoke cleared, but, right then, the fire and ash billowed around, mixed with a fine powder from the cut-rate cement that the building inspector had let slide by as a community service. A strong wind, probably from

the blast, swirled through it all and whipped the reporter's hair into her eyes. She was teary from the grit and appropriately grim, considering the story, but her bright red lipstick was drawn up in an artificial smile and a pointy cupid's bow. I could sympathize with that hidden grin. I had to bite the inside of my cheek, myself, to remind myself to look surprised. All in all, judging by the initial footage, I couldn't have asked for a better result if I'd prayed for it every night for a month.

"Do you want me down there manning a van?" I looked back at him.

"Nah," he shook his head, still not looking at me. "Just get a graphic in twenty minutes or so. Man," he started swinging his head from side to side in an astonished kind of way, the same way people talk about the unexpected football riots at the Union-Jenks games every single October. "It never ceases to amaze me what mankind will do to each other on a daily basis. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" He began to walk away. "Really makes you wonder what this world is coming to."

I couldn't tell if he was playing dumb or if he really didn't realize what was going on. Either way, I was a little miffed. I will admit it.

I finished my bagel and sipped my coffee. About twenty minutes later, give or take, I saved the final adjustments to my graphic. I saved it to floppy to get a hard copy to the tech people in the booth, and I made another copy to get to Cal. Before I could get up, though, I had to stop and look at it. In itself, apart from its media and event significance, apart from the incident that created it even, this was a thing of beauty. It was a graceful arrangement of form and color, taste and boldness, melancholy and power. It was genius, it was art, it was mine. It was the highest expression of my soul, and I had to appreciate it. It was almost an act of worship, gazing there, when no one else knew what was before me, something that would change their lives. The

only imperfection was that irritating blond's reflection, chattering away in pantomime as something else fell or exploded or smoked or whatever was getting her hot under the collar. The broadcast was blasphemy. My graphic was praise.

I gathered my disks and dropped them off. I walked extra slowly to Cal's office. Partly, this was because he deserved punishment for not acknowledging our conspiracy, at least in private. Partly—I felt a little sad parting with my graphic, now that the time had really come.

I made my way slowly down the halls. I hadn't expected this sense of loss, almost grief. The carpet was beige, with tawny marks from years of unwashed coffee stains and footsteps. After all, this building had just been finished in 2000. The station was a flurry with activity, even more than normal. My earlier frenzy of creativity seemed to have waxed in my co-workers even as it had ebbed in me. Chris, the broad-shouldered chick in news who was angling for my promotion, was running around with a phone pressed to her ear, desperately jotting down something on a pad with crumpled paper and looking confused. I smiled a little. The sight almost cheered me out of my lethargy. Take that, Chris. I walked on further, and dropped off my disk in the control room. They were grateful, and by the time I reached Cal's office, it was already over the shoulder of the respectable, graying anchor they'd called up to sooth our frantic audience.

"There are no suspects at the moment, isn't that right, Amy?" he nodded gravely at the blue screen to his right. In the little TV monitors in the booth, I could see perky blond Amy nod back fearfully.

"It's complete pandemonium here, Dan," she said quickly. She had on a pair of thick plastic glasses, her face lined with tears through soot and dust. Undoubtedly, most of our audience would assume that she wore contacts and was sacrificing her personal comfort for their

peace of mind. In the five years Amy's been at the station, I have never seen those glasses. In fact, they still had a small designer sticker on the lenses. She'd probably picked them up at Woodland Hills Mall on her way to the incident. *A la* Ashleigh Banfield at the WTC attack, she'd probably have a prime time network slot by the end of the month and blow the chance by the next. Good tidings all around. God, my doing this aside, some people are so quick to take advantage of someone else's misfortune.

"Apparently, most of the injured and dead are from an assisted living center on the south-side of town, as well as patients at the Sunnyside Hospital, but we haven't been able to determine yet whether this was a tragic accident or something more sinister." The graphic, now at the bottom of the screen, read proudly "Tulsa's Tragedy: Terror on June 6."

"Is there any death toll yet?"

"Not really, Bob, this happened less than an hour ago, but police and fire officials are already speculating that the body count could be in the thousands."

"How many people were in the bus?"

"Less than a hundred."

"And that wing of the hospital?"

"Since it was under construction, it was mostly cleared out, so early estimates are about fifty."

Bob swung his head sorrowfully. "Such a tragedy. Is there any chance those death numbers could come down?"

"There's no way of confirming that until they sort through all this rubble, Bob." Amy stepped back from the camera to the right and swung her arm around in a wide gesture. It was a

terrible sight.

“Okay, thanks, Amy. Okay, folks, we have breaking news, now, from the mayor’s office that they may already have a suspect in this terrible accident. Let’s go now to James Matheson at...”

I felt my blood run cold. I could kick myself a thousand times. Grantwood’s knuckle-headed questions leapt up at me. *How are we going to pin the blame on anybody? Won’t there be evidence?* I was too technically minded, too focused on the actual event, I hadn’t planned enough for the aftermath.

Then I saw a rough sketch of an Arab-looking person replace Matheson’s chiseled manliness (or is that Ken-doll plasticness?). Like Susan Smith’s mysterious black attacker, no one would doubt the guilt of anyone with dark skin. Not in the South, not in the twenty-first century. I didn’t stick around after that, I just made my way to Cal’s office.

He was standing at a fax machine, feeding papers through, his back to his door. I didn’t knock, but he looked up when I shut the door. On a pile at his feet was the rough sketch I’d just seen on TV. “Shred that, would you?” He looked back at the papers in his hand. I set my disk on his desk and picked up the papers. “Graphic looks good.” He didn’t turn around, and I didn’t answer.

There was a shredder in the hallway near my office, and, like in the Sunnyside parking lot, no one noticed me shred the stack of papers and dump the confetti in the recycle bin. Just doing my part for the world.

I had to work with the ad guys for a couple of hours, trying to figure out how to sell higher priced advertizing for our non-stop news coverage and then sneak the commercials in

tastefully and subtly. Ironically enough, the first commercial we got through was that one with the army chicks and underarm deodorant. It's still enough to make me turn off my TV, even with really great, bloody footage like what we had coming in.

Then, due to an influx of calls from unimpressed house-fraus, I had to watch every soap opera we show *and* go to every soap's individual webpage to find out what had happened that day so I could have a detailed stream beneath the live footage summarizing the day's plots. (You would have thought it was a whole other disaster when I accidentally typed that Star and Austin were having an affair instead of Starr and Astin. I ruined that whole love triangle. We got more calls from women over that than we did women looking for their husbands.) We finally buckled at 10:35 and showed our normal rerun of *Frasier* in a little box in the corner, picture in picture and subtitled so that the witty repartee of a TV sitcom wouldn't intrude on Meghan Holland's painstakingly awkward pronunciation of the names of victims, "St. Adrian's," "hospital," and "fireman."

It was a busy day. I fielded a lot of calls with the receptionist, anxious people calling about friends and loved ones that might have possibly been within ten miles of St. Adrian's, they're really afraid. (And then the soap people.) There was news copy to write, footage to edit, and I had to dig through twenty-five years' worth of archives to find anything I could about St. Adrian's, Sunnyside Living Center, or previous crimes committed by, against, or because of the mentally disabled.

One of the guys I was working with had a brilliant discovery when he discovered that both Matilda Henderson, the former Oklahoma first lady, and the niece of a senator from New York both had relatives that had, at one time or another, had relatives at Sunnyside. Matilda

Henderson's mother had gone there about five years ago after her last stroke and before her death, and the senator's niece's cousin had gone there in the late '70's, when it had a rehab wing back when it was still a mental institution. It was a good find. Not graphic good, but still a worthy effort.

As we were approaching the 10:00 newscast, which just meant we were going to toss in a five minute weather report in the midst of our round the clock coverage of the carnage in south Tulsa, I was back in my office, hunched over my computer again. My bagel was long gone, but the napkin remained, and most of the restaurants in town were open all hours. They always are after some major news maker, like a tornado or a semi jack-knifing on the interstate. Greasy food and strong coffee at a Denny's are like the Oklahoma version of a community water-cooler.

I was putting the finishing touches on the background for an interview with the husband of a missing nurse at St. Adrian's when Cal tapped lightly on my doorjamb and leaned in without entering. It was disturbingly reminiscent of the last time I'd designed an earth-shattering graphic, and I unconsciously checked the reflection of the breaking news feed in my monitor to reassure myself that my graphic was already on air, already in the public eye and sinking into their psyches. I turned down the volume on my TV.

"The network called. They've seen your graphic." Cal gave me an approving look. "Pick up line two." He smiled and left. I picked up line two, and I listened in silence. They were going to use my graphic nationally, and they wanted me to know the network heads had noticed my effort. The network president himself was going to send me a bonus check. I had started a whole new paradigm on graphics art at the studio in New York. Receiver dangling half-heartedly between my shoulder and my ear, I rose slowly and turned toward the silent TV. Very slowly,

almost tenderly, I reached out and stroked my graphic in the right hand corner, the only steady emblem against the chaos in the field and the confused, huddled anchors.

It was all because of me, my brainchild, my vision, a glimpse of what the future could be. I hung up, still in shock, unable to accept everything that had happened that day. Nothing would be the same again. For some reason, “Like a Virgin” began playing in my head.

The station switched then from local to national feed. My graphic was over the shoulder of Sam Donaldson. My headline was at the bottom, in a font I’d designed. The colors were — pretty. The graphic paradigm had shifted, and I had done it. Our time had come again.

I have to admit, at that, I choked up a little.