Grant Cogswell

Collectors

Now I tell people it was Frank's idea, because he's living in New York and it will probably never get back to him (and may improve his stature there, with what he does, should word find its way out), and because although it has given me the money for an incredible improvement on the way I was living after college, I am still ashamed. No one else is, but I am. And I feel the presence of all those people we have on film and tape, whether as ghosts in actuality or just from watching all the clips a hundred, a thousand times, I don't know.

But I am getting too far ahead here, because the interesting part is the time around when we were making it, the tape. If you haven't seen it, the videotape is Real Life Intensity, and it was our baby, our brainchild. For about six months it was very hot, and then the excitement died down and maybe people were finally disgusted with it, and it disappeared very fast. It's not hard to find, but you may have to try two or three video stores in any town before you can get ahold of a copy, these days.

I came up with the idea three summers ago when I was poor and trying to finish grad school, donating blood and sperm and being an extra for beer commercials and living in the Valley. Frank was in his first job out of UCLA, editing videotape at one of the smaller TV stations on Sunset. I would come visit him nights after class, usually bringing beer, and because neither of us had girlfriends at the time and we were getting towards the middle range of our

twenties and were scared we weren't having enough fun anymore, we would get drunk in the control room and laugh about things, dumb things, anything, until morning.

I woke up at home one afternoon that summer and watched the news on the station where Frank worked. There was a story of a boy in Michigan, ten years old, who had accidentally shot his teenage brother to death with a hunting rifle, while they were getting ready to shoot rabbits. They showed a picture of the boy and his dead brother when they were both quite younger, arms around each other's shoulders, in front of a blue-sky photography studio backdrop. Below that were the graphics of a reel-to-reel tape machine playing, and subtitles. Then they played the tape of the call the boy made to the emergency operator.

At first there is just him, screaming a blur of words and barely able to catch his breath. The operator tells him to slow down several times and to breathe, and then he says, in a voice full of panic and grief and guilt, "I shot my brother." The operator says, "We have an ambulance on the way. Now take a deep breath. Now, try to calm down. Where is he shot?" "In the head (and this is suddenly a scream), I shot him in the head but I didn't mean to. Please don't die. Please, please," and here his voice becomes a long, shrieking litany, half a prayer and invocation against death and half a wish said aloud that the day would start over again, and they would leave the house instead of hunt, and go far away. The operator says, "You have to calm down. Now, is he bleeding?" "Yes. Yes, there's blood everywhere. Oh! He's not breathing! No!" and there are attempts at words but they dissolve and the boy's voice rises into a high howl of a monotone, and the tape ends.

I can remember it all now, I have it memorized, even the sounds where there are no words we can recognize, like you will with a rock and roll song. If you have heard that kind of thing before from somebody else, that absolute, shattering clarity, it will make you clutch your heart. You remember it from another death, one you knew, and you hear it in yourself. It makes you helpless like a child and on the verge of tears. It is never, ever, ever the same, it is always as if it is happening just as you hear it.

From there it was a week of visits to Frank and looking at file

footage until we decided to collect these things and buy the rights where it was necessary, and market the collection as a home video. We put ads in some of the trade journals and got dozens of responses, usually people with the same stuff: The hijackings, the newscaster suicide, the D.C. crash in the river and the man in the water, 911 calls, the Pennsylvania Attorney-General, George Aldiss' last call to ABC from Saigon when the NVA came in, and there's one mysterious shot. Occasionally something rare turned up, but most of what we got was from stations where Frank knew people. The best stuff always made it to the networks, and was well-circulated. One that particularly fascinated me was the sky-diving cameraman who forgot his parachute. The moment where you knew his blood ran backwards, three seconds below the plane when his arms go back to feel for the pack, his glance up at the plane, his kicking, like trying to swim back up in the air, the slow rise of the earth. I watched that many times to feel safe and lucky.

It was hard, slow work editing it all, rooting out what was repetitive, and Frank took on two shifts so he could get through his work quickly and have us use the equipment when everyone was gone, which ended up getting him fired. Finally we had sixty-five minutes, forty-two clips in all and we were ready to wrap it up after five months when Frank got a call on his answering machine that sounded as bizarre and stilted as some of the audio stuff we had collected.

It was an old man's voice, that was certain, and he spoke slowly in an accent that might have been Mexican, after a long time in this country, or Canadian, because it was broad in the vowels and full of odd inflections. He said that he had seen our ad in the Home Video Tech catalog and that he had some audio tapes we might be interested in. He sounded like most of the other calls, like a small-time collector, the kind who monitored for mistakes on "Jeopardy" and recorded them, or had basketball 'bloopers'.

Then he said, and this was what brought us out to him after we had completed the master tape, "I have material I guarantee you will find nowhere else." He said it with no hard sell, like he was doing us a favor, and he didn't care whether we were interested or not. And then he added that he would be home infrequently during the

week but his son was fully able to show what he had and negotiate an agreement, and he gave directions to his house, and said we could come out at our convenience.

The house was in the desert, just east of Twentynine Palms on a dirt road that turned off the highway. Out there the land folds and buckles into slanted valleys and groups of hillocks, but the real mountains are far off, and there is the appearance of a distorted flatness to it all. It is cruel, barren country in the winter, which was when this was. At the point where all the roadsigns and houses are gone and the powerlines, and there is nothing to distract the eye from the two poles of opposition present, the road and the desert, (the sky is part of the desert too) there are no other influences. This is where we saw the steeple of rocks by the roadside and turned off.

There is something about the desert that diminishes a person, makes them incidental to their surroundings. Perhaps this is why the best way to escape Hollywood is to drive east. There are freaks of all kinds out here, but none of the poisonous, influence-peddling TV characters that seem to fill L.A. like rats in a bathtub. The sun is too harsh and the silence too big.

Frank wouldn't shut up, like he had to feel at home. He talked about all kinds of things he knew damn well I wasn't interested in without asking me a single question and played bad New Wave on the tape deck until I would have broken the stereo if it had been my car. He was awful, a girl I dated briefly once said, and in a way that was true. He assumed bonds between himself and me that did not exist. They had not been allowed to make themselves. He wanted you to be his closest ally, yet he never gave of his own heart. There was a shallowness there that I guess I always detected but never mentioned, and where I am from (my mother left when I was twelve; my father died three years later) friendship and the love that comes from it are the most precious things, and the hardest earned.

The place was about a mile from where we turned, a low, brown cinder-block house the size of a couple of garages, with a sheltered porch in front and cacti and spider plants all hanging in pots around the front door. We stopped the car and got out. A skinny, black-haired man who looked to be about thirty came out from the

doorway surrounded by plants, and we told him why we had come. He was the son of the man who had called, he said, and his name was Floyd Overland.

"My dad is Marcus Overland, who contacted you," he said. "Would you like something to drink before you listen to what we have?"

He led us inside, where there was a kitchenette on one side of a counter separating it from the living room. On the walls were wooden knick-knack cupboards, made of chipboard, cherry, soda crates, and full of things of all kinds—machine parts, dead animals in jars of alcohol, bundles of old postcards, horseshoes and crucifixes. Floyd Overland got us all beers from the fridge and we drank. The rooms were small, but not poor: there was thick green shag carpeting everywhere, and a polished driftwood coffee table surrounded by arabesque cushions, and a big new TV set and a large, old air conditioner with paper streamers tied to it so you could watch it cooling you off, that hummed loud and had the air icy.

Floyd took us in the next room, where there was a whole wall covered in audio equipment, receivers and amplifiers and tape decks. In the racks above there were records and tapes mostly of sixties rock and folk, and home recorded cassettes that were numbered and dated, without titles. "Our family lived in Central America for several years, in fact all the time I was growing up." He put one tape in a player and adjusted knobs and dials. "Much of what we have here is in Spanish, but it is easy to translate. About ten of them my father confiscated from a Mexican gang lord when he was with the police in the Yucatan, in 1956. This man tape-recorded his hits—he had people killed and he taped their deaths. He was running guns down and cocaine up, from South America. This was before you had the violence there is now. For his time, he was the killer of killers. He had slaves down there, men who were sworn to him for life. They worshipped him like a god."

He played us a tape on a reel-to-reel deck that was evidently old, scratchy but still distinct. Three men were shouting in Spanish, and there was a hollow, fast clunking like someone juggling hatboxes. I don't understand Spanish; Frank spoke a little, but without knowing just what the people were saying, it was impos-

sible to get a bearing on what was happening on the tape. All that was recognizable was that moment— the one that makes all these tapes so interesting and draws you in even though you feel like a voyeur in someone else's life— when the precision of the survival instinct breaks down and the person is left with the irreversibility of death and they break to make their final declaration, a shout or a whisper, or a wordless last breath which seals them into the past for us. There was quiet and the click of a gun and someone turned something metal over and there it was, softly, a long ragged vowel that might have been something mumbled in Spanish, and the shot.

For hours we listened. There were more assassinations than we could handle. Floyd went on to British emergency calls, Eskimo revenge killings, the demands of an African terrorist in broken Portuguese. We were all quiet. These people were what we thought of, these times twenty years ago and more when their lives were being decided, pointed in an irrecoverable direction, like ours were now, and how it was all past, none of it had anything to do with what went on now, couldn't.

Floyd kept bringing us beers all through listening to the tapes. When he had played us everything, the sun was setting and he sat down in the window sill and looked up at us. I looked at Frank.

Frank said, "The 911 with the two Scottish ladies, maybe. I'll give you fifty dollars for that." Floyd's eyes got big. "Hey, I can't do anything with all that foreign audio, we're not fuckin' PBS."

Floyd Overland went outside to the shade behind the kitchen, where we couldn't see him, and it sounded like he was kicking something metal for a long time. After a few minutes of this there was quiet, all the while with Frank and I standing in this dark room with the speakers going hiss.

Then a big motorcycle pulled up out in front of the house. Through the doorways, we could see the rider get off the bike and walk over to Frank's car, and look inside. He was tall, and muscular, but I could tell by his shape and the way he moved he was old, maybe sixty. He wore blue jeans and a red polo shirt, and his long black hair was cut in a mohawk, but combed back flat, not standing up, and his skin and the skin on the sides of his head was brown like an Indian tans, like leather. He turned away from the car

and came into the house, and looked at us in the doorway of the room with the tapes.

I said, "Mister Overland?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"We're the people you called about your recordings," I said. "Your son let us in. He's out back."

"I didn't call anybody. I don't have a telephone." He moved through the kitchen and went out the back door. Frank went back into the stereo room and put in the tape of the women in Scotland.

A woman's voice came out of the speakers with an accent so strong it was only possible to distinguish a few words of what she said. The operator's voice was quiet and clear, English. She asked the Scottish woman several times to slow down and speak clearly. The Scottish woman said, "I must know, how does one use one's hands to pump the heart?" The operator said, "Are you having a medical emergency, madam?" And then, loudly, "No. But how does one use one's hands to pump the heart?" "I'm going to send an ambulance, I think there's something you aren't telling me." From the other line, "No, no," and then banging and cursing.

I went into the room with the sound equipment and pulled open the curtains just an inch so I could see outside. Floyd Overland was standing on the garden hose where it was coiled, with his head down, leaning up against the building on the ball of his neck. His father was standing over him, not too close but a foot taller and his big head curled over the space where his son was. Right then I saw that Floyd was younger than I'd thought, I saw the hair on his neck, fine, that you could see through like a kid's crewcut, and the way he just kept his head down while his old man talked, and he was ashamed.

Frank was playing with an equalizer, turning up the volume of one voice on the tape, then the other. "I want this one," he said.

On the tape the Scottish woman said, "There was nothing I could do. I'm at my wits' end." and then a loud thunk, and someone else, a man picked up the phone, and then you knew the other woman had passed out. The first thing the man said was "Fuck," and then it sounded like the receiver was being knocked around a bit. The operator said, "Is this two-one-seven? Hello?" The man

said, "Yes, we've got one woman here who's been stabbed in the chest. The gurney men are taking her. Okay, we've got this in our hands, now."

Marcus Overland came in the kitchen door and walked up to us. He said, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, my son misled you. These are my tapes, and I'm not selling them. I'm sorry. He has an expensive habit, and no ethics. Cars, not drugs, thank God. He was raised by his mother, not me. We make ourselves when we're young, don't we? And then there's no changing anything, not very much."

"I want this one," Frank held up the tape. "Just a copy."

"I'm sorry," He took it from Frank's hand. "These are sacred objects. My son told me what it is you're doing. Maybe you should do some thinking about it. It's not for me to judge. I was in Hollywood once, in the forties. I know how things can turn on you and you lose track of what's right, what's real."

Frank said, "I don't have any trouble with my conscience. I live in Sherman Oaks." We all laughed a little, nervously, but I knew there was something more to what Marcus was talking about but he was being polite and now Frank was going to piss him off and make him say it. "Besides, you're a collector," Frank said.

"Have you ever been a witness to tragedy, real tragedy?" Marcus asked proudly, and I felt a twinge of resentment. I had. I saw my mother leave and my father die and these things are important to me, I never forgot them, but I didn't wear them like a badge. He said, "There is that moment when we feel so strongly our tenuousness and our humanity that we are lifted up into another level of consciousness. We couldn't live like that all the time. We wouldn't be able to function. It is our survival instinct not to feel things so strongly." And then, "I am a collector, not an exhibitor." Frank looked like he wanted to leave. "Do you know the difference between sympathy and empathy? Sympathy is when you feel sorry for someone. Empathy is when you recognize them and feel their pain yourself." He looked at Frank. "Is empathy or sympathy your strong suit?"

Frank said to me, "We gotta go now." I looked out the window and there was just moon and star-light, but I could see Floyd kicking stones around in the yard, with his head still hanging down. Way

out past him, miles probably, were lights from another town. The lights in Marcus Overland's house were not on yet, so the darkness of the room we were in was even darker, murky dark where you couldn't really see the outlines of things, and the rest of the house was blue and soft-looking, in pale twilight.

Frank said, "Let's go."

"I'd offer you boys a drink," Marcus offered, "but I can see how you might want to get home. You've been here a long time." I did want to stay, but Frank was already walking out to the car, and he was upset and I didn't want him to leave without me. Marcus Overland seemed to be someone who could show me important things, and my father once said to take instruction wherever you can find it.

I looked at him in the doorway, in the yellowy headlights of Frank's car and he looked genuinely friendly and vulnerable, smiling there, and I raised my hand.

I turned around and nearly ran into Floyd, who was sitting on the big motorcycle in the drive, and he didn't say a word, and I could see that he was crying. Right then and there I felt pinned down to the very spot I was standing in, and like I could have no expression on my face but one of idiot numbness, as if I was in a physical landscape completely alien to me and my body was not mine to control or touch things with, like a person dreaming while they walk in their sleep.