

PhotoBomb

By Michael Danese

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What follows is based on a true event.

George and his four-year old granddaughter, Melissa, have just returned from a long walk in the surf. The rest of the family is enjoying a perfect beach day with warm sunshine and gentle waves. His daughter, Jessica, in her early twenties, and her husband, Alex, are building a sandcastle with their twin boys, who just turned two. “Pop-Pop!” said Jasper, throwing sand into the air. He has curly blond hair and striking blue eyes, and he’s wearing a Ninja Turtle bathing suit. His carbon-copy brother, Jackie, in a Star Wars bathing suit, catches the sand in his face, but keeps on laughing.

George is always happy when he’s around his family. They come to visit him at the beach as often as they can. Jessica is tall and thin, with long brown hair and brown eyes. Her bikini shows lots of white skin that hasn’t yet been exposed to the sun, as she was wearing a one-piece suit the day before. She’s an attorney and spends too much time at the office, at least according to her dad. Alex, tall, muscular and blond, is now trying to rub suntan lotion on her, to help her avoid a painful time later. He’s a police detective and, because of his hours, he can’t always make it to the beach with Jessica and the kids. They’re always happy to escape the city, and the kids certainly look forward to it.

“OK, Lissy, down you go!” George said as he lifted her off of his shoulders and gently swung her to the ground.

“Here Melissa, I cut up an orange for you,” said her mother as she presented the wedges.

George reached over and snagged one as Melissa tried to push his hand away. “What do you say to mommy for your orange?”

“Thank you mommy!” she said.

“That’s better!” said George.

“Welcome, honey,” replied Jessica.

George sunk into his chair and ate the orange slice. He’s in his late forties, in pretty good shape for his age. His short-cropped gray hair makes him look a bit older. Since his wife, Alice, died three years earlier, he’s been doing his best to cope. Alice finally succumbed after a long, hard battle with breast cancer. Whenever anyone utters the word “cancer” he quickly adds, “*the bitch that ruined my life!*” When Melissa was born, it seemed to give her new life. Alice would always light up whenever her granddaughter was around. They had a special bond that lasted until the very end. That’s probably why George feels the same bond with Melissa. He sees the childlike curiosity of Alice when he gazes into her big blue eyes. He deeply regrets that she never had the chance to meet J squared, as he calls the boys. But he always imagines that Alice sees them through Melissa’s eyes.

George is now enjoying a well-earned retirement after a long career in the Marines. He began with a stint in Desert Storm, then moved into Special Forces in time to invade Iraq. He infiltrated the Taliban in Afghanistan, then spent his last years training the next generation. He was wounded several times, but nothing serious enough to keep him away. Some say it was in his blood to defend his country. But all of that's in his rear view, as he's now focused on his family.

"You look like you can use this!" said Alex as he handed George a cold bottle of beer.

"Right you are!" said George as he pried off the top and took a long drink.

"Pop-Pop was in a picture!" Melissa announced.

"No surprise there!" added Jessica. "Do tell..."

George chuckled as he said, "Look down the beach there a few hundred yards or so, you can see them. That group of middle-eastern people, all fully clothed. The kids were going into water in their clothes, the women are all covered up. I'm guessing they wouldn't approve of your bathing suit, Jess!"

"Hey, too bad, I've been on this beach a lot longer than them!" said Jessica.

"Anyway," George continued, "one of the guys was taking a photo of a bunch of the other guys as we passed behind them. I stood in back of them with a big shit-eating grin!"

"Language Dad!" said Jessica.

"Yeah, Pop-Pop!" added Melissa.

"So," George continues as he laughs, "the guy took a photo and then we just kept on walking. I'd love to see his face when he gets a load of that shot!"

"George strikes again, king of the photo-bombers!" said Alex.

A few weeks later, as autumn began to creep its way into eastern Pennsylvania, George was spending some time getting his hunting cabin in order. He always called it "the cabin" but it is pretty much a full-fledged house. Three bedrooms, two full bathrooms, a large living room, a spacious kitchen and a small dining room. It even has a two car garage. The large deer head over the fireplace is the first deer that his dad ever shot. Alice and Jessica always begged him to take it down, but it was the last link to his dad and childhood. George isn't really much of a hunter, but the cabin was really important to his father, and he grew up spending time there with his family. They would come up year round. Fishing, hiking and boating in the summer, skiing and snowmobiling in the winter.

Jessica was planning on bringing the kids up in a few weeks, so George wanted to get the place cleaned up, since he pretty much spent all summer at the beach. He washed the windows, ran the vacuum in the living room then he swept out the kitchen. "Time for a break," he thought.

He just poured himself a second cup of coffee when his phone chirped. He glanced down and saw it was Jessica calling. "Hi Jess? What's up?"

“Put the TV on right away!” she said frantically. “There’s been a bombing in Philadelphia. It’s horrible! So many people! But somehow they have a picture of you! They say you are wanted as a murderer and a terrorist!”

George turned on the TV, “Three terrorists were killed at the scene, but four escaped in a black SUV, heading northbound. Police were on their tail until they disappeared in the traffic. They recovered a cellphone from one of the dead men. On it were recent pictures of the group. The FBI is searching for this man, believed to be the mastermind.” George saw his big grin on nationwide TV.

“Christ, Jess. How can this happen? Listen, I need to think...I’m going to hang up and turn off my phone. If the FBI can find me, and they will, these other bastards can too! Get the kids and go someplace safe, like Alex’s sister’s house. When they can’t find me they will look for you!”

“Wait dad! Perhaps we can...”

“I’ll get back to you!” he said as he turned off his phone.

George’s mind raced as he scurried around the cabin quickly pulling supplies together. He also kept an eye out the front window.

“The FBI has already identified me through facial recognition. Terrorists probably already have that intel too. They’ll know that I spent all those years in the Middle East, that’ll help them connect me to the bombing somehow. I’m sure they already went to the condo, the beach, and they’ll be here next. Hopefully Jess gets away, if anything happens to her or the kids...”

He frantically amassed his gear and stuffed it into a backpack. A few bottles of water, a handful of protein bars, binoculars, his knife, handgun, rifle and plenty of rounds.

He caught a glimpse of a reflection from the main road. Sure enough, he saw a black SUV racing up the mountain path to his house. “Damn, that was fast! But who is it?” he said aloud. He played out the two scenarios in his head. “If it is the Feds, they may just shoot me on the spot, since they think I’m the “mastermind” of the attacks. At best it will be beatings and torture until they realize that I really don’t know anything. If it’s the terrorists, well, then I’m just plain dead. I’ll take my chances on the mountain. Hopefully they will just leave, when I’m not here. But, yeah, the warm coffee pot will give me away. They’ll know someone was here.”

He locked the front door, grabbed his gear and lit out the back. He quickly disappeared into the woods and climbed up the hill. From his vantage point he saw four men enter the house. Almost immediately he sees a second black SUV arrive. “Hmm, more terrorists, or maybe the FBI?” he thinks.

He saw two men exit the second vehicle. FBI. They drew their guns and crept towards the house, thinking they found the whole gang. He saw one guy talking into a phone. George was thinking about how he could possibly warn them. Suddenly shots rang out and the two officers were down.

As the terrorists ransacked his house, George made his way higher up the mountain that he knows so well, keeping an eye on the cabin. Soon, he saw the men come out the back door and begin to look up. George quickly hunkered down. He saw them formulating their strategy, just as he thought they would. They split up, two to the west and two to the east. Then they split up again to fan out, taking flanking positions and heading up the paths...just as he thought they would.

Just then, another black SUV arrives. Four more FBI agents spill out. Two of them find their fallen comrades and start to look around. The other two run towards the house and burst in. Then three more SUVs quickly race up the path. On their tail are two TV vans. Several FBI agents swarm the house as TV crews try to get set up and shoot at the same time.

George watched all of this through his binoculars from the safety of his cover high in the hills. He visualized the news broadcasts, he knew that he'd been identified in the media as a murderer and terrorist. He sees them connecting the dots between his years of experience in the Middle East to conclude long lasting ties. He can't see any clear way out. Especially with the terrorists also stalking him!

He saw the FBI quickly go through the terrorists' SUV, then the ransacked house, which somehow he figured would confuse them. Then, they too emerge from the back of the house. George guessed that they assumed that he and the terrorists left through the back after killing the agents.

He hears sirens, then soon he sees two ambulances screaming up the drive. The paramedics try to aid the agents on the ground, then they slow down as they realized that they're too late. They load the bodies into the vehicles while the other concerned agents keep a watchful eye.

George double checks to make sure that his phone is powered off as he starts to conceive his strategy. It's getting dark. Advantage George. The terrorists may be fearless, but they don't know shit about jungle fighting, especially in his own back yard. Advantage George again. He smiles to himself. He's been in much worse spots. He decides that stealth will be his best chance. A single shot will have the full force of the FBI upon him. He certainly wants to avoid that. He goes into commando mode. He rubs dirt on his face and attached sticks and leaves to his dark clothing.

George climbs out and heads to the far east. He knows that path is the shortest, so that guy is moving the quickest. He circles up and around and positions himself at the best place to strike. He finds a particularly thick clump of bushes and melds himself in. As the terrorist crept closer, George sunk in deeper, quickly sizing up his prey like a mountain lion. The terrorist was about five-foot four, and slight in build. George had at least six inches and 75 pounds on him. As the smaller man passed close to him, George pounced. His mind was way faster than his body. "If I grab his head just right, with my palms over each ear, slapping hard as I grab, the noise and the force will temporarily stun him causing his body to go limp for a split second. A quick twist should do the trick!" In a flash, he pounded his head from both sides and quickly twisted it until it snapped. The terrorist never even knew what hit him as he collapsed into a limp heap. "One down!"

From his left George heard terrorist number two calling for his partner. George remained still, then slowly crept towards his prey. As the voice grew closer, he could hear uncertainty in him. He began to call louder. Then he heard one of his mates responding from the western side of the hill. He heard them yell back and forth, presumably talking about the missing man. George knew that he was on a path that would lead right to him. He prepared his ambush, he knew just the spot. He made himself one with the small pine trees where he completely blended in.

Soon, number two was closer to him, still calling for his friend. He was about the same size as his friend, maybe a bit younger. He was wearing a black jacket and carrying an AK9. George recognized the Russian assault rifle, and decided he sure didn't want to hear it!

George slid his knife from his sheath. His Puma Skinner had a razor-sharp blade that extended about five inches and ended with a dagger point. "I'll let him pass me, which will enable me to get my right arm around his neck and my knee in his back. He'll reach up to struggle and pull my arm away, as I drop my arm, his hands will go too. Then I'll bury the knife in his throat. That should keep him quiet!" George struck like a rattlesnake and wrapped his arm around the man's throat. The yells were quickly muffled as he tried to pull George's arm down. The man fell back as George thrust his knee into his back. George sunk his knife in the man's throat, then he pulled him into the bushes where he could bleed out without attracting attention. "Two down!"

When the bleeding man didn't answer the calls from the other terrorist, he began to hear the yelling getting louder. Soon he heard the voices of both of the other terrorists. George knew that it was only a matter of time before the FBI caught on. He figured that they were already beginning to comb the mountain. He also heard a helicopter getting closer. "Not good!" he thought.

George quickly circled higher and curved to the west, thinking he could get the closest guy. The path he was on crossed right in front of the old rope swing. He was beginning to have second thoughts about this strike. There were too many variables. "I ain't as young as I used to be...the rope hasn't been tested for months, what if it can't handle my weight, or what if the branch gives out? Oh well, in for a dime, in for a dollar!" As the terrorist crossed in front of him, George let loose. He swung down and planted his size 12 boots squarely into the guy's head.

"Awww!" yelled the terrorist in surprise, shock and pain.

The branch holding the rope buckled, causing George to lose his grip. "Not good!" he repeated as both men tumbled down the hill. George's fall was broken by his victim, as he landed on the man's head, which was cracked on a rock that was sticking out of the hill. It didn't go exactly as planned, but the end result was acceptable. However, George had to scramble now.

Number four was quickly moving towards him. George hurriedly pulled himself up and ran back to the perch of the swing. He grabbed his guns and laid down on the ground. Off to the east he heard a voice yell, "Body here!" and he knew it would not be long before the FBI was on him. He also knew that he needed to contain the last guy before he hurt anyone else.

From the west he heard the man quickly drawing closer. George aimed his rifle and waited for the man to cross into his view. From the east he heard a voice say, “George, drop the gun and surrender now!” Out of the corner of his eye he saw two FBI agents, both with guns pointed at him.

All at the same time, in what seemed like slow motion, a shot rang out from the west, and an agent fell. The terrorist crossed in front of George with his gun out. George heard another shot and felt a bullet enter his shoulder, just as he fired, knocking the terrorist down the hill. He heard another shot, then George blanked out.

He hazily opened his eyes to blinding lights. He was in the back of an ambulance with two people hovering over him. He passed out again.

The news media went into a frenzy with headlines like, “FBI Capture Mastermind and Kill Terrorists,” and “Terrorist Mastermind in FBI Custody,” while social media exploded with numerous suggestions on how to torture George.

The next day George opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was Jessica’s smile. She started gushing tears of joy and began to hug him. He tried to hug her back, but his arm was handcuffed to the bed. “He’s awake!” yelled Jessica through the tears.

All at once doctors and nurses flooded the room, they began checking him over. A man in a suit was near the back of the group. “When can I talk to him?” he asked.

“Soon, soon, give us a chance to make sure he’s ok. He isn’t going anywhere!” said the doctor.

The medical staff did several tests and asked George questions to assess his condition. When the doctor was satisfied he announced that George needed rest and then she cleared the room, except for Jessica.

“Oh, dad, it’s horrible, the things that they’re saying about you. I’ve told the FBI so many times that they made a mistake, but they just ignore me...” she said sobbing and hugging him.

“It’s okay honey, just as long as you and the kids are safe...we’ll fix this, I promise!” he said in a strained voice.

In the next several days George got stronger, and with the help of his lawyer, Ken Goldstein, the charges were eventually dropped. The media were split on it. CNN hailed him as a vigilante hero, while Fox still labeled him an enemy, touting that three FBI agents were killed.

In the next months the media were long gone, latching onto the next tragedy. George spent the time recovering at Jessica’s house, where he could be around the kids. He fielded the occasional offer to tell his story. Netflix proposed a docudrama. HBO pitched a big budget movie, going as far as to say that Liam Neeson was interested in portraying him. But George wasn’t interested, he just wanted to move forward and away from the whole thing. He didn’t feel like a hero, since he was acting in self-defense. He didn’t choose the fight, it came to him. And, he still blamed himself for the slain agents, and certainly could not bear to profit from their deaths.

Soon it was summer and life returned to normal for George and his family. He had a nagging ache whenever he lifted his left arm above his head, but other than that he healed pretty well. He realized that he probably won't be raising the kids on his shoulders anytime soon. He also decided that we won't be photobombing strangers anymore!

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