



MY YEAR WITH THE PERFECT FAMILY

By Mark Nutter

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DAY ONE

I gunned down the mother and the daughter in their respective beds. When the son came out of his bedroom I shot him in the hallway. And when the father came home late from work I stabbed him to death at the front door.

DAY TWO

Hm. That may have been a mistake.

My name is Davis Barnes and I'm a documentary filmmaker. I'd already been paid half of my five thousand dollar fee to make "My Year with the Perfect Family," for the Perfect Family Network. I was excited at the prospect of spending a year with a family so unlike my own.

Now the subjects of my documentary were dead, and I had 364 days to go before I got the rest of my money.

I sat down on the living room sofa. I filmed a few seconds of the father, crumpled in a bloody heap at the front door. I didn't need a crew. I was shooting the doc on my phone using the DocumentaryPro app, and while it was a versatile app, it still couldn't make a dead guy who didn't move look interesting.

I put my phone down and thought about my situation.

DAY THREE

Got a call from Norman Spleen, the Executive Director of the Perfect Family Network. He wondered how things were going with the perfect family. I said I murdered them. He laughed. I said, no, I'm serious, I murdered them. He laughed again. I said I really really murdered them. He said, okay, take it easy, and hung up.

I was glad I could brighten his day.

DAY FOUR

Still on the sofa. Still thinking.

As a documentary filmmaker I'd seen my share of ugliness. I reflected on my previous work:

My Year in a War Zone. My first documentary. It was ugly and loud.

My Year Riding to Fires in a Fire Engine. Also ugly, with the burning buildings, and also loud, with the siren.

My Year with Rabid Dogs. Even though the dogs were good-looking, they tried to bite me all the time, which to me made them ugly.

My Year Locked in a Closet with an Ugly Eighty-Nine-Year-Old Woman Suffering from Halitosis. That film won all kinds of awards. People responded to the intimacy. Unfortunately it didn't make a dime.

It was an impressive body of work, but it was all negative. It was time to make a film that captured the best of humanity and affirmed wholesome family values.

I shot a few more seconds of the father's rotting corpse.

DAY FIVE

Still thinking.

This time, instead of being in my film, I wanted to be a fly on the wall. I wanted my subjects to forget I was there, which I guess they did, which was why it was so easy to kill them.

Why did I do it?

The easy answer is, because they were *too* perfect. And you know what? The easy answer is the right answer. I mean, come on.

They said “good morning” and “good night.”

They said “please” and “thank you.”

The son and daughter were straight B students. They could have been straight A students, but they didn’t want to make their classmates feel bad by being too perfect, which was another perfect thing about them, which is why I killed them.

They wiped their feet when they came in the front door. If the father had spent a little less time wiping his feet, he might’ve seen me coming with the knife.

I approached them when I saw them patiently waiting at an intersection for the walk light. They said they’d do the documentary, not so they could be on TV just to be famous, but so they could help people everywhere feel better about themselves.

“Wish I could say I felt better,” I said to the dead dad.

DAY SIX

They flossed three times a day.

DAY SEVEN

I thought I should stare at the other dead family members for a while. But I liked the sofa. It was comfortable. So I dragged it upstairs.

DAY TWENTY-TWO

(I'm skipping the days when I left the house and stayed at a hotel, because, man, that smell. Made me miss the old lady with halitosis.)

So I'm back in the house now, having gotten some nice footage of the breakfast buffet at the Holiday Inn Express.

Norman Spleen left a voice mail message saying that the joke about murdering the family was really good, but now he needs to see some film.

I left him a message saying would he like to see footage of their bloody bodies, hoping to get a wee bit more mileage out of the gag.

Maybe I have a problem with the concept of perfection. What is perfection anyway? Different people have different ideas about perfection. To some people, perfection is a family that's considerate and kind. To others perfection is dead bodies sprawled around a nice house. I need to develop this thought further, for when they catch me.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE

I've wasted enough time pondering perfection. Time to get busy doing what I've been paid to do.

Where to begin? Air freshener.

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN

Bought about five hundred of those little pine tree air fresheners and hung them around the house like I saw in the movie *Seven*.

I need to pose the stiff bodies in domestic scenes and then film them.

Shouldn't be too tough.

I need to move their hands and arms around a little. Tricky, but I can handle it.

Plus I need to do all their voices.

This is impossible. I give up.

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT

Got a call from Norman Spleen, demanding to see footage of the family, and I said, "How about footage of dried blood on the carpet?" and he said, "The time for levity is over."

Spleen said if I didn't send him something in the next forty-eight hours I would never see the rest of my money.

DAY TWENTY-NINE

“For this food we are about to eat, we are grateful,” said Dad with his head bowed and me crouched down behind him, holding his hair. Then I lifted him up, careful not to accidentally snap his head off his body.

I thought saying grace was a nice “perfect” touch. I’d placed Dad at the head of the table, and then applied makeup to everyone, which helped a little bit—although I also planned for everyone to say to each other, “You don’t look well,” because I’m bad at makeup.

In addition to complimenting Mom on her perfect turkey dinner, and Mom blushing (tomato paste), I thought I’d have the kids talk about their day at school, and how they almost got A’s until they remembered to get B’s to make their classmates happy. I wanted them to sing a song in four-part harmony about how important it was to make others happy, but I’m also bad at ventriloquism.

These were my plans. But all I really managed to shoot was Dad saying grace, then falling face first into his mashed potatoes.

I sent twenty-two seconds of film to Norman Spleen.

DAY THIRTY-ONE

I’m in a panic. Norman Spleen and several executives from the Perfect Family Network liked the twenty-two seconds I sent and are going to pay me a visit. They want to meet the family in person.

I said, “Don’t come, the family is sick.”

They said they could see they were sick. But they had to meet a family where the father said grace while the family sat there so quiet and respectful.

What was I going to do?

I know! I will say the family left on a family vacation in the family car to a family destination. A Disney something-or-other park. And they decided to take me with them, once they remembered I was there, since I was doing such a good job being a fly on the wall.

I would put the family in the car and drive it around the corner, out of sight. Then I would fly to some Disney something-or-other park and buy postcards and mail them to Norman Spleen.

“Greetings, Norman. Signed (their names).”

Note to self: find out their names.

Once I'd formed my plan, I no longer felt panicked. I sat on the sofa and reflected one last time on the nature of perfection before I fell asleep.

DAY THIRTY-TWO

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I jumped three feet in the air when I heard pounding outside the house.

Workmen were boarding up the windows!

I ran to the front door and threw it open.

Norman Spleen was standing there with a bunch of guys in suits I didn't recognize.

“Good morning, Davis.”

“Good morning, Mr. Spleen.”

Norman Spleen gestured to the guys behind him.

“I showed your twenty-two seconds of film to them and they were impressed.”

“Are they with the Perfect Family Network?”

“No, they’re with the Ghost Family Network.”

“Ah,” I said, trying to grasp the big picture and failing.

“I’ve sold your project to them. From now on it will be called My Year with the Ghost Family.”

“So I get paid double?”

“No, you don’t get paid anything. You violated our contract when you murdered the family.”

“That must have been in the fine print. And — hey! Who says I murdered them?”

“Come on, Davis. It was obvious from the footage they were dead.”

A toothy young executive stepped forward.

“Hi, Davis. Bart Withers, Ghost Family Network. We’re looking very much forward to working with you. We’re boarding you up in the house with the dead family. You’ll shoot footage of their ghosts. At the end of a year, I’m confident we’ll have a terrific product. I’m very excited.”

The other toothy young executives nodded, indicating that they too were very excited.

“And what if I don’t want to do it?” I said.

“Uh . . .” The Ghost Family Network executives stood there in confused silence.

“I’m pulling your legs,” I said. “Of course I want to do it. I’m very excited too.”

The young toothy executives smiled toothy smiles.

“See you in a little less than a year,” I said as I went back in the house.

DAY TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY-NINE

“For this food we are about to eat, we are grateful,” hissed Ghost Dad.

“Amen,” hissed Ghost Mom, Ghost Son, and Ghost Daughter, raising their heads.

“That’s a keeper,” I said as I filmed the family from the far end of the table. Thankfully, their physical bodies lay rotting and stinking in the basement. Only their ghost bodies remained at the table.

“Unfortunately, the light wasn’t quite right. Can we do one more?”

“Of course,” said Ghost Dad.

“We’d be glad to,” said Ghost Son.

“We’ll do as many as you want, Davis,” said Ghost Daughter.

“We’ll do whatever makes you happy,” said Ghost Mom.

“Guys, all you have to be now are ghosts,” I told them. “You don’t have to be perfect anymore.”

“Okay,” they said, but they couldn’t help it. They couldn’t help being perfect.

I would have killed them again if they weren’t already dead.
