

Osama Phone Home

by David Marusek

Our opening story this month is a somewhat grim look at the near future. It was first published in the March/April 2007 issue of MIT's Technology Review magazine and it's still available on their Website, but we thought that most F&SF readers would appreciate seeing it here.

David Marusek has been publishing short fiction since 1993, mostly in Asimov's. His short fiction was recently collected in Getting to Know You, which is currently a finalist for the 2007 Quill Award. His first novel, Counting Heads, came out in 2005 to much acclaim. This information can all be found online at www.marusek.com, along with a bit of information about his days as a Homer "spit rat." A longtime resident of Alaska, Mr. Marusek is currently back in Homer, finishing up his next novel, Mind Over Oship.

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We arrived by rental car and parked next to a delivery van in the lot closest to the freeway on-ramp. The van hid us from the security cam atop a nearby light pole. We were early, traffic being lighter than expected. As we waited, we touched up our disguises.

At 09:55, we left the car singly and proceeded to our target site by separate mall entrances. I rode the escalators to the food court on the third level, while G, C, and B quickly reconned the lower floors, where shops were just opening their grates.

I started at the burger stand and ordered a breakfast sandwich. The girl behind the counter was pretty, mid-twenties, talking on her cell. She snapped it shut and asked, without making eye contact, if I wanted something to drink with that. She looked as if she'd been crying. I said no thanks, and she rang up and assembled my order. As she did so, I ticked off the mental checklist we had memorized: slurring of speech—negative; loss of balance or coordination—negative. About two dozen data points in all.

When my receipt printed out, she tore it off with a deft flick of her wrist and glanced up at me. Apparently that was all it took, because she said, "I'm only working here to kill my mother."

I made no reply, as per instructions, and fresh tears welled in her

eyes. “Oh, it’s true!” she declared. “I’m a spiteful daughter who only lives to torment her mother. I admit it! I have a freakin’ master’s degree in marketing from NYU, and I was a founding owner of Toodle-Do.biz. I practically *ran* Toodle-Do from my bedroom. Sixteen hours a day! But did she care? No! She was all, ‘Why don’t you find a *real* job?’ She couldn’t even comprehend what Toodle-Do was. I mean, I could tie her to a chair and put a fucking laptop in her fucking lap and use her own finger to point at the screen, and *still* she can’t see it. I mean, what do I have to do?”

Once she was rolling, the young woman’s confession built up momentum and volume, and her coworkers glanced nervously at us. “I’ll tell you what I did! I sold my shares in Toodle-Do and took the most demeaning, most mindless ‘real job’ I could find!” She gestured to take in the whole burger stand. “See that?” She pointed at the deep-fat fryers, where a pimply boy was racking baskets of fries. “I stand next to *boiling grease* all day. When I go home, I don’t even have to open my mouth. No way! It’s in my hair. It’s in my clothes. It’s in my *skin*.” She raised both wrists to her nose and inhaled. “I smell like a freakin’ *exhaust fan*, and it *drives her mad!* Oh, it pushes her *right over the edge!* My grandmother died of a stroke when she was only in her *fifties*, and every night I pray to *God* to give my mother one too!”

She went on like this, and the fries boy came over to add masturbatory sins of his own, but I’d heard enough and took my egg sandwich to the seating area. I spied a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit talking on a cell phone. He had a cup of coffee, so I went over to sit near him. He was so engrossed in his conversation that he didn’t notice me eavesdropping.

“Uh-huh ... uh-huh,” he said while pushing doughnut crumbs around the tabletop with his finger. “The reason I called ... uh-huh ... the reason I called ... uh-huh.” He took a final sip of coffee and said, “Listen, Ted, shut up for a minute, will you? I have something important to say. Yeah ... that’s right. You’re my brother, and I love you, but I’ve been holding this back for too long. Uh-huh ... You know Billy? Yeah, your kid, Billy, only he’s”—the man wiped his brow with a paper napkin—“he’s not your son. He’s your *nephew*.”

There was a long pause, and then the man continued, “What the *hell* do I mean? I’ll tell you what the *hell* I mean.” And he did so, in excruciating detail. I half listened as I checked off my list: muscle twitching—negative; bizarre behavior—negative. Out of the corner of my eye I watched G, C, and B working the other tables, approaching anyone drinking coffee from

one of our vendors.

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We compared notes on the drive back to the motel. Beyond a doubt, True Confessions was a keeper. The early reports on its harmlessness seemed justified. Nevertheless, C's idea of delivering test doses via adulterated coffee was a brilliant precaution, because no children became involved. We're patriots, not monsters.

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M's part in the operation had concluded that morning, and when we arrived at the motel room, she was in the bathroom removing tattoos. We quickly changed our clothes and cleaned the room for final departure, meanwhile logging our test results. M came out of the bathroom a new brunette with scrubbed pink arms, and B and G went in to remove their disguises. M walked around the room gathering up her things and asking how it all went. C looked up from his handset long enough to say, "It's true! No offense is too large or too small for a detailed accounting."

M nodded thoughtfully, then turned to me and said, "And this is a good thing, why?"

I just grinned, and she let it drop, said she had to go get her kid, and left.

G, meanwhile, was in the bathroom brewing up a celebratory pot of coffee. His idea of a joke.

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Six years ago, in March 2002, I happened to attend a barbecue in the backyard of some good friends. As the flesh sizzled on the grill, we attempted small talk to pass the time, as we usually did. But in those early months, feelings were still too raw for small talk.

Fortunately, there was beer.

Someone had read an article—"The Battle of the Organizational Charts"—comparing the relative efficacies of a classical top-down hierarchy like General Motors and a distributed network like al-Qaeda. Apparently, the term "al-Qaeda" means "the database" in Arabic and was coined in the 1980s, when we were fielding freedom fighters in our Afghan proxy war

against the Soviets. Not an operational organization itself, al-Qaeda is a sort of “Ford Foundation for jihadist startups,” as a pundit put it, that provides support in the form of financing, expertise, and coordination. In an “ah-ha moment,” one of us, with a mouth full of pulled pork, bragged that our old college crowd could form such an organization. Even better—because we weren’t limited to box-cutter technology, we could out-qaeda al-Qaeda.

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It was a beer-soaked boast, soon forgotten. But not a week later, the president of the United States held a news conference at the White House. When reporters asked him about Osama bin Laden, who had recently escaped capture by our troops in Afghanistan, he said, “I truly am not that concerned about him.”

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In all honesty, this presidential statement floored me. Not concerned about bin Laden? How could our president not be concerned about him? Was there anything our government could have found to say to the American people that day more knuckleheaded than this?

A few of my friends gathered again, this time stone sober. We played one of bin Laden’s videotaped sermons to the West. This lunatic with a Kalashnikov, wagging his finger at our whole culture, had somehow slipped through our military’s grasp at Tora Bora. We should have had him—but we didn’t. And then—according to the president—he and his whole murderous crew dropped off our radar altogether?

That didn’t sit well with my friends and me, but we weren’t sure what to make of it. The news-conference dismissal might have been nothing more than our president’s sometimes difficult way with words. Or his inability to admit to failure. But we didn’t think so. Most likely it was the president’s way of admitting that the hunt for bin Laden had gotten lost in the shuffle on the road to war in Iraq. It made us wonder if there wasn’t a place for private citizens in the war on terror. Perhaps we could lend a hand.

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An affinity group can form around any mutual interest: tasting Beaujolais wines, singing in a choir, attending a communal sauna. We called our group the American Curling Club. We are a small group of men and women who roomed and/or socialized together in college back in the day. We came from middle-class families and attended a prestigious, but

not Ivy League, school. There wasn't a legacy among us. We pretty much put ourselves through school with student loans, scholarships and grants, parental handouts, and part-time jobs.

After graduation, we went our separate ways but kept in touch. We attended each other's weddings, and we are watching each other's kids grow up. We have built comfortable lives. We have climbed to upper-management positions in our chosen fields. We firmly believe in freedom and free markets. We are Christians, or at least most of us are. We're your average janes and joes with no particular axe to grind, except this one—Osama bin Laden must pay *in full measure* for what he has done.

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The American Curling Club formed in order to play a key role in bringing bin Laden to justice: namely, to locate him. It seemed to us to be an important and doable project. If our government couldn't or wouldn't find him, we would. And when we found him, if only his grave, we would forward his coordinates to the relevant agencies. We would do this as a public service, not for the twenty-five-million-dollar State Department bounty on him.

Though our mission was lawful, we realized that pursuing it might require us to bend a few rules and make a few enemies. So we pledged our own lives and liberty to each other and swore an oath of secrecy. We established appropriate security protocols to shield the ACC core group.

Collectively, we had expertise in a number of fields, including telecommunications, biochemistry, the military, civil government, and finance, but our contacts extended far into other areas. Each of us was charged with organizing further assets—networked cells and task groups—behind strong firewalls. Initially we chipped in our own savings to bootstrap our enterprise, but eventually our swifty cells became adept at targeting bank transfers in large offshore money-laundering operations. Soon we were able to finance ourselves by imposing “sin taxes” on drug cartels and playboy dictators. To name a few.

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In the summer and fall of 2002, while we were recruiting our go-to, wizard, swifty, lineman, and expat cells, we met frequently to bat around ideas for achieving mission success. Because truly brilliant ideas can sound crazy at first, and because committees smother ideas, we declared

that during our freewheeling brainstorming sessions no idea was too outrageous to say out loud.

What if we invented a surrender dust, keyed to bin Laden's DNA?

Or what about informer dust storms?

Our powers of imagination were running a bit hot in those days. What with all the news of war and rumors of war. What with the anthrax, Saddam, and the shoe bomber who ruined air travel forever.

What if we embedded artificial memories in people throughout the Middle East so that they were certain they remembered Osama mocking the Prophet in public?

What if we afflicted all adult males taller than six foot three in the tribal regions of Pakistan with the mother of all tooth abscesses, requiring immediate dental surgery in Peshawar, and then watched the dentists?

With righteous fervor, in sessions that lasted through the night, we loosed the dogs of ingenuity upon the Sheikh of Saudi Arabia.

What if we made the mountains of eastern Afghanistan begin to hum? An unrelenting low-frequency thrumming that seemed to rise from the very rocks and that drove people out into open spaces screaming and tearing their hair?

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My own résumé nominated me to form and coordinate our go-to cells, including an elite cell that I headed myself. Among my first recruits were several Desert Storm vets whose toughness and loyalty were known to me. They, in turn, helped me do background checks and interviews to fill out their own cells.

People claim that this nation of ours is too polarized, that we hardly recognize the other half that doesn't think as we do. But I'm here to say there's one issue that all Americans can agree on, no matter where they stand on most everything else: our nation won't rest until Osama bin Laden faces justice. This truth alone was our most effective recruitment tool. We characterized the ACC as an off-the-books government black op with one simple mission. The fact that we paid well, and in cash, helped, too.

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Eventually it was time to tether our brainstorming to reality. Our wizard cells were up and running, and we passed them our favorite ideas for critical feedback. They, in turn, fed us weekly “News-to-Use” summaries of developments across a broad range of fields. Our brilliant ideas became somewhat tempered by scientific reality.

For instance, geneticists are cultivating plants that grow medicines in their leaves and fruit. They already have a potato rabies vaccine and a tomato HIV drug. Transgenic tobacco plants alone produce dozens of “farmaceuticals,” everything from human growth hormone to cancer drugs.

What if we engineered a hybrid tomato or lettuce crop that contained a therapeutic dose of Xanax or Prozac and introduced it to the Middle East? Could that help reduce the bloodshed? Seriously, treat a whole region like a patient.

Or: Does Osama use sunscreen? For decades, sunscreen was whitish and opaque because of the properties of one of its chief ingredients, zinc oxide. In the 1990s, researchers found that if they made the zinc oxide particles really tiny, they could produce a much more pleasing clear sunscreen. It was one of the first commercial successes of nanotechnology, and the source of the first nanotech-related product liability lawsuits.

The problem was that nanoparticles are so small they pass through the skin and enter the bloodstream. They even cross the blood-brain barrier and come to rest, like shells on a beach, in the sun worshiper’s brain.

Researchers wondered if nanoparticles could be designed to collect in other kinds of tissue—feathers, for instance. That’s what one radar ornithology group is attempting to find out in an avian-flu-related study for the DoI. They are sizing and shaping nanoparticles of various materials to pass through the birds’ skin and collect in developing feathers. Their ultimate goal is to nanobrand entire flocks of birds on the wing for precise tracking across the globe by radar.

What if we found nanoparticles that collect in hair and beards instead? Our flocks would be the occupants of jihadist camps, caves, and villages. We could detect and track them remotely.

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While the core group was still wrestling the angels of inspiration, my

go-to cells were employed in preliminary logistical tasks: establishing safe houses, moving cash, rounding up supplies for the wizard cells. In this latter effort, C came to the fore with his experience in corporate R&D. We purchased several whole laboratories' worth of gear and dropped it in self-storage units on both coasts. Because the ACC had rightly ruled out the use of germs or bombs (we're patriots, not terrorists), we weren't trafficking in restricted material per se. But lately our government has taken to quietly monitoring sales of even innocuous gear like beakers and pipettes, and we took great pains to leave no trail.

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We knew from the start that one of the ACC's strengths was its position in the telecom industry, and we soon realized that Uncle Sam had provided us an easy leg up in prosecuting our mission.

Al-Qaeda is notorious for passing communication by hand in order to circumvent electronic surveillance. One reason for this has to do with bin Laden's own personal experience in the 1990s. According to news accounts at the time, Osama bin Laden really liked talking on his Inmarsat satellite phone. He especially enjoyed calling his mother in Saudi Arabia from his Afghan camps. We know this because the NSA was listening in on their conversations from at least 1996. This happy arrangement, along with Osama's charming naïveté, came to an abrupt halt one day in August 1998, when he phoned his mother and told her he wouldn't be able to call "for a while." After hanging up, he turned off his sat phone. The next day, the president of the United States ordered a cruise missile strike on the phone's last known coordinates. We blew up a desert training camp that day, but the Dark Prince had already flown.

Is it any wonder that bin Laden became phone-shy after that? Most reasonable people would. At some point, the NSA decided that if it could no longer tap bin Laden's phone, the next best thing to do was tap everyone else's. This was actually not a bad idea, but it required compliant telecom companies to shunt complex spur lines into secret listening posts, often small rooms inside switching stations, where NSA spooks could sift billions of calls through their voodoo supercomputers. In creating this system, the NSA had done the heavy lifting for us, and our linemen inside the same telecoms tapped their taps. Soon we were channeling the same floodwaters of chatter, and we set our wizards trolling for keywords and casting social nets.

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I made it a point to become acquainted with the members of my go-to cells and their families, usually without anyone's knowledge. I confirmed that we had recruited outstanding individuals. Smart, gutsy, none of your house-in-the-burbs, corporate-treadmill types. These were the cutups in middle school, the teenage pregnancies, the try-everything-once crowd. A little older now, a little more God-fearing and respectful of real realities. Solid.

After the initial flurry of organization, I kept these folks busy every other weekend or so (kinda like it used to be for the National Guard). I kept my own elite group busier, if only with training exercises, several days or nights a week. Before long we were a pretty tight unit.

I had already worked with G, and he introduced me to C. And when I first recruited B, she told me about M, with whom she had served two tours. M was trained to pilot UAV combat drones, but lately she was back at home styling hair and raising a kid.

M had three kids, actually, but the older two had lived with their granny since they were born. Only the baby, a spoiled eight-year-old, lived with M. I found the kid hard to fool, but easy to bribe.

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In late 2002, one of our wizards presented us with a tantalizing what-if. He owned a startup that had developed a gobsmackingly elegant algorithm for creating and identifying pretty good voiceprints from poor-quality audio. It processed voices acoustically with no regard to the language spoken and no use of keyword recognition.

What if we trained all the phones in the world to recognize bin Laden's voice? His and his people's. And whenever a phone anywhere recognized one of these voices speaking into it, it would discreetly send us a text message with its GPS coordinates and call details. And what if phones could be trained to do this remotely by a phone virus? Voiceprint libraries could be updated automatically. It looked as if we had finally found our 21st-century Yankee box cutter.

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Because of the firewalls we had set in place, I learned who was in other cells and groups only on a need-to-know basis. Some of our groups included young people at the beginning of their careers. Like young people everywhere, they sometimes let their issues get in the way of their work. On

occasion, my team was directed to remind individuals of the confidential nature of our mission. One such action involved a young computer genius in the Pacific Northwest. I sent M out there to investigate (Granny taking the kid temporarily). She reported back a few days later that the genius was a fool for pillow talk. To hear him speak, he was practically in charge of a counterterror task force. M also reported that the *real* loves of his life were his two Jack Russell terriers.

So I sent G up there to tutor the kid in the art of discretion. G did a Godfather on the pooches, and genius boy woke up the next morning with two little surprised expressions lying on the pillow next to him. End of bulletproof youth.

When M returned, she was very upset. She asked if that had really been necessary. Couldn't G have simply dognapped them for a few days to make a point? I said I would talk to him about it.

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In early 2003, our weekly "News-to-Use" included three disparate bits of intel that, when put together, made an intriguing picture: (1) Pakistanis in the tribal regions were sneezing; (2) a sixty-year-old DoD skunkworks project had borne fruit; and (3) dandelions can make you high.

(1) *Ambrosia*, commonly known as ragweed and native to North and South America, hitched a ride to Europe in the 19th century. The joy of hay fever has been spreading across Europe ever since. Apparently, the winds of recent wars have carried ragweed farther east, where it has found a suitable niche in the valley ecosystems of northern Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. It's been found in Waziristan province as well, and as far south as Quetta. We requested specimens and seeds from an expat cell, and what we received seemed to be a cross between *A. artemisiifolia*, the most widespread species in North America, and *A. dumosa*, one that thrives in the Sonoran Desert. The Pakistani species was said to be a particularly noxious weed that pumped out clouds of pollen.

(2) Since World War I, the U.S. Army's Edgewood Arsenal and its successor unit have explored the use of chemicals in warfare, conducting open-air nerve-gas tests in Maryland and even dosing unsuspecting soldiers with superhallucinogens. Their perennial hobbyhorse has been a reliable truth serum, or at least one better than the problematic sodium pentothal. In recent decades much of the unit's preliminary work has been outsourced to civilian researchers. In 2003, there was buzz of a

breakthrough: MDMOEP, a phenethylamine compound and kissing cousin of MDMA (or ecstasy). Dubbed True Confessions, it was said to induce a state of abject self-reproach. Subjects were anxious to unburden themselves of their life's misdeeds, and they actively sought out receptive listeners, including parties they might have injured. The drug was tested on volunteers and was said to be safe, with no lasting side effects. What a boon to the war on terror! If only it had been ready in time to avert the Abu Ghraib mess. In any case, the U.S. Army Chemical Corps swooped down on the private lab that had made the discovery, confiscated all records, and reminded all involved of the Patriot Act.

(3) A brilliant young geneticist on the West Coast was doing groundbreaking work in biopharmaceuticals, especially in the mechanics of directing what part of the plant would store the finished drug—leaf, root, seed, or fruit.

Moreover, according to our private sources, this same professor was also conducting a little biopharma project outside the purview of his university department. He was attempting to genetically modify the common dandelion to produce the marijuana cannabinoid THC. According to our report, once his stoner dandelion was perfected, the professor intended to take a sabbatical in order to scatter little parachute seeds of Mellow Yellow along roadways all over the temperate zone.

What galvanized us about these three items was the observation that both ragweed and dandelion are members of the same Asteraceae family. It made us wonder. It definitely got the wheels turning.

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Development of our Yankee “vox cutter” proceeded quickly. The phone virus was coming along, and we had a SIMM chip in the works. However, we realized that even if we trained a million strategically located phone slaves to call us whenever they heard Osama’s voice, or any voice in our voiceprint library, what good would that do us if Laden & Co. never lifted a receiver? We needed something to drive al-Qaeda to a phone. What we needed was a special friends-and-family calling plan for them, and we wondered if the army’s new guilt serum might do the trick.

Not that we imagined for a moment that bin Laden felt any guilt or remorse over murdering three thousand Americans. But a crime doesn’t have to be an atrocity to stimulate the TC effect: everyday misdemeanors might do, like shorting waiters or telling off-color jokes. Bin Laden is human and not an angel, and he must regret *something* he has done. He does

have four wives, after all. And what about his fifty-three brothers and sisters and innumerable nephews and nieces? Just how many weddings and funerals did he have to miss while hiding in a cave? He inherited \$80 million from his father and quickly turned it into \$250 million. Even if that kind of return was earned honestly, how to explain to his twenty-four children that Daddy blew it all on jihad? And how to explain to them his thing for Whitney Houston?

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We set things in motion. First off was sizing up the deposed skunkworks PI on the True Confessions project. I sent M and C up there to see if he wasn't suffering a case of defense-contractor hangover. He proved to be unapproachable, but one of his researchers had full-blown civil-liberties remorse. She had been caching her lab notes from the start and was trying to decide whether or not to post them anonymously on the Internet (as if that might absolve her). She was only too glad to turn them over to us—Amnesty International.

Before we could proceed any further, we had to test the drug ourselves in a real-world situation. There was no open or ethical way to do this, but at least we could do it in a controlled setting. So our wizards mixed up a test batch of TC, and my team performed our shopping-mall field trial. TC lived up to its billing, and the fact was not lost on us that many of our subjects turned to their cell phones for impromptu confessionals.

Next was enlisting Professor Mellow Yellow. I wanted to soften him up first, so I sent G and C to his university office posing as DEA agents to scare the bejesus out of him. I was waiting for him in his home greenhouse when he showed up an hour later. I was sitting on a stool next to a potting bench that held trays of dandelions. Some of the cheery yellow flowers were sugar-frosted with sticky cannabis resin. I introduced myself as Mr. Homeland Security and told him about all the kinds of trouble he was in. Then, in true TV cop-show fashion, I offered to call off the drug dicks if he volunteered to serve his country in a very important mission. As it turned out, Prof. Mellow was so enthused by our mission and the sheer complexity of his part in it that I almost regretted siccing the DEA crew on him.

I turned Prof. Mellow over to one of our wizard handlers and later learned that we set him up in a special complex of greenhouses, ostensibly doing research on new allergy meds for major pharma.

In order to spread our voiceprint traps, the ACC set up several NGOs to integrate vox-cutter tech into the public-call-office landline systems in

Pakistani villages and to subsidize the extension of cell coverage in remote areas. Back at home, we sent go-tos on shopping trips to stockpile cheap prepaid cell phones. We made cash purchases of handsets at every Wal-Mart and Radio Shack across America. We shipped boxloads of them to linemen who replaced their chips with our own vox-cutter SIMMs and bundled them for distribution with hand-crank chargers.

Our wizards were keeping tabs on the town where we staged our shopping-center test. We were monitoring for any possible fallout or aftereffects, such as a change in homicide, suicide, or domestic-violence rates. The only aftereffect we detected was the lingering spell M seemed to have cast on the coffee wholesaler whose stock we had adulterated. Shortly after the test, he phoned his sister in Texas and told her about a woman he'd met on a recent Sunday after church. They had hit it off in a big way. She had a precocious little girl who after only two days was calling him Uncle Duane. Uncle Duane was perplexed when all of a sudden his two special girls left town without so much as a good-bye, and he wondered if they were in any kind of trouble.

A year later he continued to wonder, in rambling weekly calls to his sister. And I was unhappy with M about involving her kid in an operation.

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Time passed, and Project Phone Home burbled along. Prof. Mellow was making great strides in realizing two of our requirements for *Ambrosia osamum*. First, the drug was to accumulate not in the ragweed leaf or flower but on the surface of its pollen, where it could be readily absorbed by the mucous membranes of the eyes and nose. Second, the TC genes were to be expressed only in the first generation of ragweed plants. After that they turned themselves off. The last thing we wanted was for this guiltweed to get away from us and spread to wild plants. Unlike Prof. Mellow with his pet dandelions, the ACC is opposed to letting GM Frankensteins loose. We're patriots, not God.

When the time came for human trials, the prof rounded up volunteers among the greenhouse workers. The results were positive: red, runny noses; itchy eyes; and inflamed consciences.

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Then some bad news arrived to spoil the mood. The civilian researchers from the army TC project were being called in for lengthy interviews. We felt pretty confident about our contact, since her neck was

on the same block as ours. But there was the possibility the army might interview her with the help of the drug itself. M and C had become compromised.

On top of that, Uncle Duane was still obsessing about M. By now she and the kid were the lost loves of his life, and he posted photos of them on Flickr and on sites for missing and exploited children. Worse, his sister in Texas had persuaded him to hire a detective, for his own peace of mind.

It was only a matter of time before Duane and the army bumped into each other, so in accordance with ACC firewall protocol, the core group ordered me to contain the damage. With prejudice, if necessary. I thought long and hard about how best to accomplish this. We could hardly strong-arm Uncle Duane at that point, and we sure couldn't stop the army. Seeing no alternative, with or without prejudice, I called my go-to team together and broke the bad news. M was off the team, permanently. She should never have involved the kid. I told them that at the conclusion of the meeting, I would be escorting M and daughter to a safe house, where a relocation specialist would pick them up. M was to have cosmetic surgery and, just as important, a voice change. The ACC would cover all costs, including a monthly stipend. And a cash bonus when the bastard was captured or killed. But there would be no further contact between her and any of us, ever. B took it the worst, but the whole team was troubled. M said she knew she had screwed up royal but didn't want to put her daughter through a life on the run and asked if she could leave her with Granny. I said that was probably not such a hot idea, since the kid could ID us all. Besides, if she left her kid she would be miserable, and the kid would be miserable. In the end, my reasoning prevailed, and M and the team made their last farewells. M's parting words were "I'm gonna watch the news every night, and when we win, I'm going to raise a glass to all of you. God bless and good-bye."

I drove M to pick up the kid, then to their place to pack, and then on to the first leg of their brave new life.

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During the next two years, work on Project Phone Home proceeded smoothly. There were no further signs of the army or anyone else on our tail. Meanwhile, the ACC developed several backup plans for locating bin Laden, and my go-tos were engaged in implementing them.

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Seed day. We made final prep for handing off the GM ragweed to an expat in time for spring sowing in the lush valleys of northwest Pakistan. Six hundred hermetically sealed bags, fifty pounds each, of washed seed. I had sent C to the greenhouses to guarantee a pollen-free shipment. Some deluded soul over there, possibly Prof. Mellow high on dandelions, had plastered the shipping pallets with “Hillary in ‘08” stickers.

Our immediate task was to double-bag the shipment in USAID-imprinted gunnysacks and transship it to a dummy agri-coöp in Peshawar as high-yield rye seed, which it resembled. Taking no chances, I had linemen rig up an industrial HEPA-filtered ventilation hood in the warehouse for us to work under. And I made my crew wear full hazmat gear. It was heavy work, and despite the January night and unheated warehouse, we fogged up our face masks with the effort.

We finished at dawn, and after cleaning up and disposing of used filters, I sent the crew home. B and G waited with me for the freight company to pick up the seeds and a final pallet of phones, and then we went to an IHOP for breakfast.

We were in a celebratory mood; this marked the completion of our part in the vox-cutter project. From then on its success was up to strangers. We wolfed down a breakfast of cakes, eggs, and sausages. We proposed toasts with orange juice and coffee. G toasted to Operation Ragweed for Ragheads. B toasted to M and her kid, wherever they were and whoever they had become.

When the waitress came over with more coffee, she said, “I know it’s petty of me and wrong, but I resent happy people like you.” She spoke calmly, refilled our cups, and went away.

We gaped at each other. I stood up to peer over the booth partitions and saw patrons crying into their phones. We left immediately. The woman at the register told us how sometimes she pilfered from the tip jar. Her eyes and nose were not inflamed, so whatever vector was involved in dispersing the TC, it wasn’t our pollen. On the sidewalk outside, a guy on a mountain bike and a woman with a shopping cart were trying to unburden themselves to each other. So it probably wasn’t the coffee or restaurant food either. In fact, all up and down the street we saw penitents fessing up to one another.

G craned his neck and peered into the sky. “Aerial spraying?” he said. “An area-wide dragnet?” We wondered if we were the target. But we didn’t stick around to find out.

A woman was slumped against the bumper of our car. She looked at us and said, "Is this all I get?" I helped her to her feet. "I mean, I know I'm ugly. I've known that since I was a child, but does it mean my life has to be so small and empty and meaningless?"

I turned her toward the intersection and told her to find a taxi and go home. And if she had a phone, to use it.

We jumped into the car, G behind the wheel. "Where to?" he yelled, pulling into traffic.

I told him to drive back to the warehouse. No matter how the TC was being dispersed, our hazmat gear there had protected us. My plan was for us to suit up before evacuating the area. Then my phone rang, a call from C. I asked him where he was.

He said, "I feel like telling you that ten years ago I acquired a complete microfiche set of engineering plans for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline."

"I don't care about that. Where are you?"

"At the warehouse. Listen, I sold the plans for a shitload of money. You want to know who to?"

I ordered him to destroy his phone and stay put till someone came for him. Then I hung up and told G to forget the warehouse and head for the bridge instead. He made a sharp U-turn and nearly hit an SUV. He had to brake so hard he stalled the engine. But instead of restarting it, he just sat there staring out the windshield. In the back seat, B said, "They showed us color photos of aborted fetuses. They said a baby as old as mine already had perfect little fingernails."

I ordered her to shut up and Gus to drive, but he turned around in his seat and said, "I saw my father kill my mother, and I lied to the police about it."

"Drive! Drive!"

"I was only five years old. He made it out to look like an accident, but he never fooled me."

I ordered them to hand over their cell phones, but Bella dialed a number, and as it rang she told us, "And perfect little eyelashes." When her

party answered, she began to weep.

“Stop crying!” I barked at her. But she didn’t stop, and Gus joined her. A sight to behold—Gus Ostermann pressing the heels of his hands against his temples. “All the poor dogs!” he cried. “And all the poor cats.”

We sat there for a long time, traffic piling up and passing around us as we talked to the people we loved. Before army intelligence arrived, I received a text message from the ACC. A single word, backed by the authority of the core group—”JUG.” Short for jugulate, which was what they were directing me to do in order to protect the ACC. I couldn’t allow us to be taken alive, that much was clear. I have sworn an oath to lay down my life for the group, and I will, only not right now. Right now I actually feel like answering a few questions.

My name is William B. Boothtipple. My number is 973-555-0979. If it’s busy, leave voice mail or keep trying; no doubt I’m on the other line spilling my guts.

And now some shout-outs:

—To Melody and her awesome kid, Kimmie, wherever you are and whoever you’ve become. Duane wasn’t the only one you bewitched; I think of you guys all the time. If I had known how much I’d miss you, I would never have let you go.

—To Osama. Hey, man, seriously, phone home. It’s been years since they’ve heard your voice, and everyone’s worried sick.