



**R.P.M.**

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**Published:** 2007

**Type(s):** Short Fiction, Science Fiction

**Source:** <http://futurismic.com/category/fiction/>

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## R.P.M.

The 1994 Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS hurtles south down Cahuenga after midnight, jury-rigged engine exhaling the throaty rasp of an emphysemic Olympian. Urban interceptor, an abandoned rental reclaimed as instrument of revolution.

Or at least that's what 0z0 said the night before as he drilled holes in the muffler to amplify the effect.

"We're gonna free the monster," he smiled, lighting the welding torch.

The car is flat black, a weathered dullness achieved from three years baking in the vacant lot in Van Nuys where Percy found it during one of her periodic treks mapping the secret involuntary parks of Southern California. A putative low-rider that didn't quite make it, now briefly re-activated for a last mission.

The side mirrors are camera mounts angled to capture the full expanse of the hood. A video camcorder sits on the dashboard, secured by duct tape. A black metal brush guard stolen off a Santa Monica Range Rover enhances the front grill.

On the hood, I've airbrushed a three-dimensional bloodshot reinvention of the CBS "eye" logo.

"This is totally Mad Max," smiles 0z0, punching the accelerator as the rapidly passing street lamps achieve a slow strobe. I ride shotgun, holding the map and a penlight. Percy is between us, nurturing her precious Pathé Super 8 camera in her lap.

"The apocalypse happened and nobody noticed," I say. On the street, white collar twentysomethings revel the night, sedating their ability to hear the gunshots in the distance. Sometimes I think we're the only people who can see the wires.

"Don't forget you have a turn up here," says Percy.

"I'm on it," says 0z0, accelerating. "This beast has its own imaginary sonar."

He pulls a screeching diagonal left through a yellow light onto Yucca, slowing to cruising speed as we pass the club. Café Vladimir, a Russian disco with a gulag theme that's become a hot late night spot among those with hungry publicists.

"There it is," I say, pointing at a blinged out white-and-chrome Lincoln Navigator parked near the main entrance. Its driver stands nearby,

dwarfed by salvaged statues of Lenin and Dzerzhinsky that frame the door. "That's gotta be her car."

0z0 drives around the block, and pulls up to the curb next to a fire hydrant, stopping the car about a half-block down the street from the Navigator.

"Locked and loaded," he says, putting the transmission in park. The engines sputters, hacks, and dies with a wheeze.

"No worries," says 0z0. "Does that every time." He rolls down the window to check the driver's side camera mount. With luck, more than half of the cams will work this time.

Percy spools up her refurbished Pathé, leans forward to hit the "record" button on the dash-mounted camcorder, and talks to herself.

I check the police searchlight mounted on my side, and confirm the Navigator's tags against the message I got on my phone 45 minutes ago from one of our Mob.

"The revolution will be televised," smiles 0z0, tapping out a rhythm on the steering wheel. 0z0 has a tendency for drama. He is an actor, after all, under the stage name Jackson Booth. You may know him better as Derek, the taboo black boyfriend on the ABC daytime soap *Burning Hills*.

Percy is his revolutionary consort, more Tanya than Patty Hearst. A Green raised in the shadows of *Empire*, she's the muse that keeps pushing 0z0 to move from culture jamming whimsy to bandolero-emptying direct action. Prone to wearing fetishized remixes of extreme Islamic fashion, on good days she's the Taliban Batgirl.

If you believe our press packets, we are the Celebrity Liberation Front, a group in which I serve as the Che Guevara to 0z0's Fidel, or maybe the Pancho to his Cisco. We detonate cathode ray information bombs: suicide bombing for the remote control generation. Definitely a bigger charge than my day job as product placement middleman.

Percy flashes her Zeiss binoculars, scrutinizing the scene. Restless 0z0 turns on the radio, replaying tactics in his head while he bops to some metallicized white boy reggaeton. I adjust my necktie, which happens to be the green and orange regimental pattern of the Baluchistan Brigade, and try to fend off stage fright.

"It's important to look corporate when we do our ops," said 0z0 in one of our planning meetings. Easy for him to say, fully outfitted in summer-weight finery, the convenient incidental of a product placement deal I'd

put together for him, his network, and Brooks Brothers. Nothing draws a camera like a tall good-looking black guy sporting a patchwork Madras blazer, lime green trousers, and an AK-47. Barack Obama meets Mikhail Bakunin at the yacht club.

The black lycra ski mask helps, too, I think as I pull on mine and help Percy with hers.

"It's smelling like go time," says 0z0, cranking the starter unsuccessfully. Percy puts her hand on my thigh like we're watching a scary movie.

Through the windshield and across the street, commotion outside the club. The crowd of wannabes rustles behind the red ropes like a pen of anxious calves. One bouncer wrangles the mob while the other clears a path to the Lincoln. A maitre d' dressed in a Guccified NKVD uniform signals the photographers.

"There she is!" yells Percy, pounding her open hand on the dashboard. "It's Jessica! She's coming out."

The doors blow open and Jessica Astart, 21-year-old phenom, basks in the flash bulbs of the paparazzi. Teen Titan, a pop cultural icon manufactured overnight, with a likely half-life measurable in months. Star of the new War-on-Terror dramedy Homeland Insecurity, in which she plays a fashion conscious Valley Girl on a teen crime squad hunting down sleeper cells in America's high schools. A 21st century bubblegum Mata Hari, completely and utterly hot, in a totally manufactured sort of way.

She has the intangible glow of celebrity. Atomic embers of demigodhood burning brightly, the soulsucking gift of mass adulation. Trailed by a royal household of stylists, makeup artists, nutritionists and personal shoppers dedicated to making her a productized human fantastic beyond real.

In Jessica's vortices are her boyfriend of the week, pop star Nikki Ruud, and a sharp brunette publicist gesticulating to her cellphone.

The starter hacks like a geezer trying to kick a four-pack a day habit. 0z0 pumps the gas pedal.

"Crap," I say. "I told you we need to use an actual mechanic to fix up these abandoned cars you want to use."

"What can I say," says 0z0. "DIY is more fun y mas seguro." He leans over the wheel and into character, doing his best soap opera bedroom eyes. "Hey, baby," he says, trying to feel his way right into the

sparkplugs as he turns the starter again. The engine gasps, then turns over with a roar. "Oh, yeah."

"Hurry the fuck up!" says Percy. "She's already in the car!"

Cardwheel clicker of Percy's Super-8 as she starts burning her reel. I check my seat belt and adjust the focus on my Nikon.

Jessica waves at her fans through the tinted window as Nikki baby closes the door on her.

0z0 grips the steering wheel with both hands, locks down the brake with his left foot, and floors the gas with his right.

The engine manages to catch its breath, roaring richly as it burns stolen racing slicks against the asphalt.

Jessica's driver pulls the Navigator into traffic, white metal tuna ready for the kill.

"Torpedoes away!" says 0z0, releasing the brake and launching the Monte Carlo like an Estes model rocket with broken fins. The force throws us back into our seats as 0z0 struggles to steer the vehicle to its target.

Seven long seconds across the yellow line, four overpowered bald tires balanced on the edge of totally out of control.

KKKKKKEEEEERRRRUUUUUUUUUUNCHH.

The windshield fills with white as the Monte Carlo punctures the left drivers' side door and rear quarter panel. Elegant forms of sheet metal assembled with attentive precision by North America's most diligent factory robots krush, crumpled like the aluminum foil of the Gods. The busted hymen of new car virginity rended in an act of loving violation.

"To free the world, we must rape the Spectacle," says Avineri in the Prison Blog.

Tinted windows shatter and blow, exposing Jessica as she screams, the secret sphincters of her facial muscles contorting her pampered dermis into a horrifying rictus a hundred times over, once for each of the dilating shutters excitedly popping off in her face—our half-dozen cameras and those of the true paparazzi excitedly seizing upon the sudden scene.

The best of our photos and video clips will be posted on one of 0z0's myriad websites that bounce from host to host as the cybercrime brigades hound the ISPs. The straight paparazzi images will end up in checkout counters and dinnertime television broadcasts. Percy usually manages to sell a few of our choicest illegally procured spots to the same

outlets, financing our future efforts with the fruits of our transgression. The best of the celebrity accident photos will go for a few thousand bucks; clean video can reap five figures.

“Our home invasions are legitimate, virtual, and totally commercial,” says 0z0 in his manifesto-in-progress. “We merely insert a slow-burning virus into the mediascape to hasten its self-immolation. No one makes you watch, right?”

Her diminutive frame jarred by the impact, Percy sucks it up and recovers her Pathé from the dashboard. Just in time to catch a close up of Jessica’s freaked-out face as her boyfriend in his pre-distressed designer jeans and T-shirt pops out of the shotgun seat and comes running toward us, feminized pop star reinventing himself real-time as poseable action hero.

“Awesome,” smiles 0z0, a Marine veteran of Iraq. “Yo, Dutch boy,” he says as he unsnaps his seat belt and opens the door.

“Comin’ at ya’, straight outta Falluja.”

“Love the Ebonics, honey,” says Percy. “Don’t get too dramatic. We need to split, pronto.”

“Be right back,” says 0z0. “Get every second of this.”

Percy aims and shoots through the open window, just as Ruud preemptively shoves 0z0.

“You idiot fucker,” spits Ruud with Eurotrash consonants.

“Don’t you know who you just hit?!”

“Like Gilligan loves the Skipper,” says 0z0, sweeping Ruud’s leg and dropping his ass to the blacktop.

0z0 pounces on Ruud as he struggles, holding his head to the pavement by the ears. “I love your videos,” says 0z0, kissing Ruud with black lips bloodied from the crash impact.

Red and blue pulses intercut with the sizzling white pops of the paparazzi. Synced with a distant siren tone. LAPD police interceptors, approaching from the west like canned tornadoes.

“Grab all the cameras!” yells Percy. “Leave the car! Quick!” She stashes her Pathé in her messenger bag with 0z0’s camcorder and evacuates the cockpit.

The passenger door is stuck from the crash. I climb out the open window and get to work unscrewing the cameras from the roof and wing mounts. Percy yanks 0z0 off Ruud.

“We need to run,” she says. “LAPD. The car’s clean, or will be when Chuck’s done. Hustle, you fucking prima donna!”

Ruud flails as Oz0 abandons him, pulled by Percy in the direction of escape.

“Hold on, you guys!” I say. “Give me just a second to grab this shit.”

A hundred yards away, Oz0 pops open a shadowed manhole in the middle of the street.

“Chuck!” yells Percy.

“Coming!” I say, as the last of the cameras come loose and I make one last check of the interior of the car. I look south, to see Oz0’s silhouette holding the manhole cover up while Percy drops down into the underworld. Behind him, the police cars pull up.

“Take another route,” yells Oz0. “You know where to meet us. Good luck!”

His shadow melds with the asphalt, the manhole cover gently slips back into place, and he is gone.

I spy a nearby alley, tuck the messenger bag, and launch into a sprint.

I make it about five steps before one of Ruud’s \$500 custom Pumas intersects with my right ankle, sending me hard to the ground. My mouth bites the tarry blacktop, delivering an instant soup of blood, tooth chip and gravel.

I scramble to right myself, restrained by the heft of the camera-laden messenger bag.

Ruud grabs my lapels and helps me up, with aggression.

“Hey, asshole, where do you think you’re going?” he says, eyes glowing.

I throw my hands up between Ruud’s outstretched arms, casting them off and making another break for it.

I reach a stride, only to collide with Jessica as she walks from behind her car. We tumble to the sidewalk in a demolition ballet, outtake from a pro football blooper reel.

You can almost hear the wacky Herb Alpert soundtrack playing on the other side of the Fourth Wall.

Inspecting Jessica’s carefully masked acne scars at a distance of millimeters, I remark to myself that her accidental scent of gasoline, sweat,

blood and movie star perfume would make an interesting product. Making a mental note, I deliberately drag my face mask across her neck.

Up close and injured, she bears all the characteristics of an actual, fragile human being.

“Sorry,” I say to Jessica, feeling momentarily conflicted about our project.

I push away just as a uniformed LAPD officer pulls me up from behind, throws me against the wall, and cuffs me.

“Fuck,” I say, looking for the manhole over my shoulder.

It is a perfect Southern California day. 0z0, Percy and I cruise down the Pacific Coast Highway in a 1970s convertible. The light is unreal, the soul-sedating radiation of material opulence and existential vacuity. The disembodied breeze of life inside the movie wafts through our freshly shampooed hair. A feeling that has slipped away in recent years, as the continuing crisis becomes routine, as the people with money slip out of the city in clandestine convoys of hybrid SUVs, bound for the exurban dachas they have obtained with their hoarded capital.

The vaguely familiar bowdlerized reworking of a 1960s pop song is a sure cue that we are inside a television commercial. It feels absolutely fucking fantastic. A full-on, undiluted intravenous infusion of the elusive satori of having every shiny thing you could ever want and a five-hour work week.

“Priceless.”

I look in another direction, and the aperture shifts to a grainier tone. We are back in the depopulated downtown of the megalopolis, watching the grey clerks shuffle past the private security details. The contract sentinels’ steroid-fueled physiques fill out their khaki vests and stylish cargo pants as they guard the brassy revolving doors of the office towers. Technicolor members of the executive class hurry along before them, wired into the grid. It could be any American city.

We drive through a parking garage, finding another dose of perfect light on the other side. A 1950s suburban lane, gauntlet of green grass and crisp white homes. Sprinklers mist the morning air, synchronized in understated machine rhythm, the nourishing hygienic Water Piks of the landscaped homeland of our dreams.

At the end of the cul de sac, 0z0 pulls up in front of an expansive acre bounded by iron fence. A cinematic simulacrum of the White House, somewhere between Pennsylvania Avenue and Doonesbury.

A familial gathering of smiling Secret Service men, clean-cut blue-suited staffers, and K-9 officers with tail-wagging Belgian guard dogs comes out to greet us. It seems they are all our siblings, and we are just home from school for the Thanksgiving holiday. Colored leaves of a New England autumn float among us like wet butterflies.

I turn my contented gaze to my colleagues, and observe that Percy's lap holds a baby version of the nuclear weapon "Fat Man," ticking away like a cuckoo clock. Her right hand holds a single perfect rose capped with a glowing red button.

She presses the button and light floods the screen. My consciousness finds some purgatory between R.E.M. and the waking world, struggling to envision the more tangible reality of my engagement with 0z0 and Percy. How, my inner Benjamin Franklin asks, does one morph from speakerphone-wielding product placement arbitrageur to underground merry prankster, and call it self-improvement?

"Boredom," 0z0 likes to say, "is counter-revolutionary." He first said that to me after he'd used Percy and her girlfriend to seduce me into placing some of his adbusted pseudo-products on his own show. He sat in my office trying to persuade me to take it to the next level, gambling my career by putting my understanding of the TiVo world's secret marriage of advertising and content to work for his nebulous cause.

"We're the mujahideen of Melrose Avenue," said 0z0 as he showed me his billboard liberation portfolio. "With your inside access, just think of the narrative mutagens we could spread across middle America."

I had friends who knew people in these emerging underground movements, which I guess is how 0z0 knew about me. They were all college-educated middle-class kids, many with day jobs ready to germinate into lifetime passes to the finest gated communities. All united in the search to clear the cultural cobwebs, but devoid of centralized command. An open source revolution.

"The world is going to end tomorrow," says Avineri. "It's time to explode today."

If you open your eyes, changing the channel no longer seems an adequate response to the state of the world. Look closely, and you might

realize the incomprehensible graffiti in the alley behind your apartment is a secret message from the clandestine revolution.

So now my iPod plays a fuzzy Fu Manchu cover of Guantanamero, soundtrack for a world on slow burn. And I start to wonder what 0z0's endgame really looks like.

I wake to the sound of vintage Hall & Oates blasting at me so loudly I can feel the waves pound my flesh, each beat an aural tsunami.

Private Eyes. The synth-drum feels like it's being played on my head with a rubber mallet.

I emit a screaming yawn, squinting my eyes open into the bright lights.

Which lights silhouette a sarcastically dancing policeman. Adding his own voice the chorus.

They're watching you.

I shake my head. The policeman comes into better focus. Fit, uniformed white guy, thirtysomething, with a perfectly groomed 1977-style moustache.

Another cop walks up behind him, hands over his ears, grimacing. Asian guy in a Navy blue suit.

"Jesus, McCord," says the new guy, turning down the volume knob. "This is worse than Barney. These fags don't get any better with age."

"Sorry, Detective Takaguchi," says McCord. "He was starting to fall asleep."

"He had a long night," says Takaguchi, removing his suit coat and rolling up his shirt sleeves. "Captain's on his way down."

Takaguchi walks up to me, grabs me by the chin, and inspects my face with a veterinarian's touch. My arms are tied behind me against the back of the chair.

"Why don't you uncuff him and get him some water," says Takaguchi.

On the wall are framed photos of the President, the Vice President, the Mayor of Los Angeles, and the Chief of Police. Takaguchi begins to add framed headshots of old school television personalities from my adolescence. The door has a dog-eared Ready.gov poster with the current, and increasingly permanent, status of the Homeland Security Advisory System: Threat Condition Red: Severe Risk of Terrorist Attacks.

As McCord snips the plastic zip cuffs binding my wrists, I crane my neck to inspect the wider room, managing only to produce a loud crack and an involuntary groan.

“Careful, there, Doogie,” says Takaguchi. “You had a rough sleep, if you can call it that.”

McCord lifts a used hypodermic syringe off the floor, holds it toward my face for a second, and raises his eyebrows in a big brotherly sort of way.

Nearby, I notice an ominous-looking piece of white and chrome electronic equipment. A supine refrigerator on wheels, embossed with the logo of Somnus Life Sciences.

“fMRI,” says McCord. “Psychiatric neuroimaging goes mobile. Sweet, huh? Cost so much damn money City Council had to do its own separate bond issue. Ready to try it again?”

I mentally inventory my body for physical memory of recent events, finding nothing.

“What is this all about?” I ask.

“You got your ass kicked by a fucking Backstreet Boy, Hoss,” says McCord, eliciting a belly chuckle from Takaguchi. “We’re LAPD. Special Operations. We take care of counterintelligence, psychological operations...”

“X-files,” interjects Takaguchi.

“...specialized counterterrorist services,” continues McCord, “limited political affairs duties, and what Detective Takaguchi here likes to call ‘planning and zoning.’”

Takaguchi looks over his shoulder, smiling.

“This punk been Mirandized?” says a voice in the door. Another suit, older, husky and bald with silver sidewalls shaved to the nibs. He walks in, followed by a guy with a black mop of vintage curls wearing boot cut jeans and a green windbreaker.

“Captain Boon, Inspector Luca,” says McCord. “Yes, they read him his rights before they brought him in. Waived his right to counsel, so I’m told.”

“Whatever,” says Captain Boon, walking toward me. He holds my head back and checks my pupils with thick fingers. Then he sits down in a government-issue chair opposite me. Metal shudders against concrete as he drags the chair across the floor.

"You know," says Boon, "you have kind of a Bruce Dern thing going."

Luca nods; Takaguchi laughs lightly in the background.

"Bruce Dern?" I say.

"You know. Silent Running, Coming Home," says Boon. "The original crazy revolutionary white guy. Big deal when Luca and I were in grade school. Perfectly comfortable middle class dude who wants to fuck the whole deal up. The mad bomber among the hippies, the archetype that broke the love signs."

I scan my foggy brain.

"Bruce Dern would totally be into your shtick here," says Luca, nodding. "Very Black Sunday."

Outside, I hear muffled screaming.

"So," says Boon, giving me the cop school X-ray eyes. "Where's your buddy 0z0?"

Just then, the lights flicker and dim to candlepower. I blink, wondering if it's a brain injury.

"Come on," says Boon, palms upraised to the flaky asbestos ceiling panels and points beyond. "These nightly brownouts are getting to be a real pain in the ass."

"Tell it to your Hummer," says Takaguchi. "We can work in the dark just fine." The lights go black, and he turns on a Mag-Lantern. "Come on, soldier," he says. "Who is 0z0?"

"I have a better question," says Boon. "What's the point?"

"No kidding," says McCord.

"You and your friends," says Boon, "have officially become a real pain in my ass. Do you have any fucking idea how much effort we put into maintaining the veneer of normalcy and public safety that keeps people showing up for work every Monday?"

I massage my abraded wrists.

"I mean, go down the damn list," says Boon. "First, you have your war on terror. We fight harder and harder and it just keeps getting worse. Every time people finally chill out there's another explosion of randomized public mayhem."

"I still can't believe those fuckers torched Disneyland," says McCord. "Decapitated Mickey Mouse on live TV." His moustache crinkles with disgust. "I swear, they are so awful. They hate us for our happiness."

That was a year or two ago. The guy in the Mickey Mouse suit, 20-year-old Orange County college student Glenn Moody, is now the subject of made-for-TV movies and earnest memorial references. The news networks refused to broadcast the footage, but I remember finding it on the Interweb and immediately searing its grainy footage into my brain.

The images of the castle in flames remain a popular bumper sticker theme.

“So my team has a full time job just backing up all the understaffed Homeland Security and FBI people while they ferret out sleeper cells in Los Feliz and WMD-stuffed ship containers in San Pedro,” says Boon. “But that’s just the beginning. We have whole precincts in South Central turning into Temporary Autonomous Zones. The only cops that’ll go there run their own rogue warlord operations—Rampart on steroids. The warehouse district is a branch office of the Chinese underworld. I have student activists that think it’s 1968 again. And now I have you people.”

“The ‘Celebrity Liberation Front,’” says McCord. “What a joke.”

“Well, actually,” I say, “it is. A joke. Supposed to be sort of ironic.”

For some reason it is hard to feel cool with these guys bearing down on you with the cop stares.

“Try getting the people at the Actor’s Guild to laugh about it,” says Boon. “They are all over the Chief’s ass. I even had the Mayor call me the other day. You guys have pulled off like ten known stunts like this, and now you’re getting copycats. Do you have any idea how important these Hollywood people are?”

“Well,” I say. “I mean, that’s kind of the point.”

“Yeah,” says Boon, “but I mean, important to our Homeland Security.”

“Hadn’t considered that, really,” I say.

“These people,” says Boon, “are like minor gods.”

“We dedicate individual neurons to each one of them,” says Takaguchi. “Recognize them better than some of our own family members.

“Their Olympian melodramas, on and off screen, are the primary superstructure that props up our social soundstage,” says Boon. “They fill our waking hours with reasons to think about something other than the likely target of the next bombing. They even visit us in our dreams.”

“This is what happens,” interrupts Luca, “when the police academy recruits out of the UCLA film studies program.”

“Hey,” says Boon, pointing a didactic finger, “somebody upstairs realized where the battles are really won. So they reinvented our unit as the new celebrity wranglers. The keepers of reality. The Swiss Guards of the cathode ray Vatican. You can go back to narcotics whenever you want.”

“Like a bunch of security guards?” I ask.

“Every broadcast of Entertainment Tonight is a psyop we don’t have to program,” says Boon. “And we don’t need any pubeless hackers screwing up our gig. So you are going to help us bring in your mysterious ringleader there.”

“We know about your girlfriend,” says McCord.

“Persephone Jones,” says Boon, sliding a file across the table. “Quite a moniker. Afghan mother, Irish father.”

“Nice temper?” asks Luca, smiling.

Boon opens the file and fans out a half-dozen surveillance photos, including one of me and Percy making out on a concrete pier in San Pedro, trans-oceanic leviathan tankers beached in the background.

“Your friend 0z0 know you’re bonking his girlfriend behind his back?” asks Boon.

I can feel the blood draining from my face.

“Didn’t think so,” says Boon. “So I’ll tell you what. Give us the keys to 0z0, and we won’t render Ms. Jones here back to the burning streets of Kabul. Keep your noses clean and you can both walk free.”

Luca whistles a soporific John Denver melody from 1974.

“Or,” says Boon, “we can kick the living shit out of you until you talk, do the same to her, and lock the three of you up for life.”

“We’re not talking Johnny Cash San Quentin here, bud,” says Luca.

I shake my head in the negative.

“They have ships,” says Luca, pointing at the tankers in the photo of Percy and me. “Almost as big as these ones. Totally secret, always at sea.”

“Mobile Gitmos,” says Boon. “On The Love Boat, no one can hear you scream. We have you rock solid on about ten different federal felony counts under PATRIOT II.”

“Enemy combatant material,” says Luca. “Betcha we can even get your passport revoked.”

All four stare at me for a long minute. I can hear the old government issue clock ticking away the seconds on the wall.

"Fuck off," I say.

"See, Captain," says Luca, "told you this one was a waste of time. We need to bring in the girl."

Boon shoves the table into my chest, knocks over his chair, stands up, and walks away from me.

Takaguchi sets up a small portable generator, using it to power a vintage television near the door. It is tuned to a weird test pattern incorporating a primitive optical illusion. He turns up the volume and the set emits a high tone. The sound of the electronic void between the channels.

"This is a test," says Takaguchi, smiling. "This is only a test."

"Detective Takaguchi invented it," says McCord, fidgeting like an impressed little brother. "These old guys are crazy."

"Rediscovered it," corrects Takaguchi.

"What he figured out," says Boon, "is that some folks here in California, naturally, experimented with the incorporation of subliminal messages into old broadcasts of the Emergency Broadcast System. We're talking back in the Sixties and Seventies. From the same people that brought you Muzak."

"They were all ex-military guys, you know," says McCord.

"Coded it right into the vertical blanking interval," says Takaguchi. "Between the flickers." Fiddling with a dial on the back of the monitor, he demonstrates. The test pattern slides out of frame, revealing alternating expanses of snowy black space. "Same place they put the closed captioning data and stuff."

"Old school homeland security," says Luca. "Civil defense—before we had the chutzpah to call it the 'Homeland.'"

"So it turns out," continues Boon, "that for years little network affiliates all over the country were broadcasting these EBS tapes from the home office. Right up to '97, when they finally replaced EBS with the Emergency Alert System. But a healthy chunk of two generations got pretty well conditioned by these broadcasts."

"Triggers," says Takaguchi, eyebrows raised, pointing at the images of old TV stars on the wall.

"Works with about the third of the folks we bring in," says Boon.

"This is so cool," says McCord, holding me against the chair in an improvised full Nelson. "Very Manchurian Candidate."

Takaguchi hits a switch on the set, releasing the screaming blizzard tone of the transmitter carrier having its lines cut, and my eyes connect with the moustached Mona Lisa smile of game show host Alex Trebek.

Takaguchi flicks the switch back. A secret channel opens inside my head, ready to receive.

"Hungry?" asks Percy.

"Sure," I say, sitting at a small wooden table in the alcove of the abandoned roadside gas station where Percy lives. The place is in a neglected little pocket of Rancho Palos Verdes. Built in the 1950s and made over several times since, it has languished for the past three years behind a weedy hurricane fence while litigation involving the property meanders through the courts. Percy started squatting here about a year ago, and managed to persuade the putative owner to let her stay in return for her keeping the vagrants out and the place tidy.

Out front, Percy's idea of tidy is extreme xeriscaping. Rugged flora busts through the concrete. A row of hackberries runs down the north property line. The south fence is overgrown with sunflowers. Under the canopies, thistle flourishes in thick thorny bunches, drawing all manner of exotic flying pollinators. Grasses native and alien sprout in disparate patches. A lush choke cherry bush hides the coin-operated vacuum, while sprigs of fennel, wild onion and hemlock grow under the payphone. The lids to the underground storage tanks give way to a leathery green plant with hairy blood-red flowers, like some kind of extraterrestrial sumac.

"Sous les pavés, la plage," she says, tendering a strange reddish fruit. Beneath the pavement, the beach. Her favorite graffiti from May '68, relic of stories her grandmother told her about forgotten ellipses in the history of the West.

Indeed. Our view from the back window looks south and east toward San Pedro. The industrial abyss of Los Angeles harbor. Fort MacArthur, the Navy Fuel Depot. As dusk approaches, the whole scene dissolves in dirty pastels, a Godzilla set landscape rendered by Monet.

I pick translucent seeds from the fruit. Percy walks behind me and begins to massage my neck and shoulders. My hand involuntarily releases

the fruit onto the table, as my head arches back toward her. She leans over to kiss me.

Her skin is the color of tea, incongruously freckled. Hair black, with covert traces of red in the right light. She has all the lines of beauty from a conventional Western perspective, save her nose, which you have to see to really understand. An antediluvian relic of some forgotten Central Asian steppe. A bridge so high you look for the suspension cables, with a predatory raptor hook you could use to cut sheet metal. On her, it totally works. Maybe it's the attitude. Completely fucking awesome.

"They really messed you up," she says, running a finger across the gash on my lower lip.

"Yes, they did," I say, sitting up straight and looking out the window at the languorous ships trudging through the harbor. I pick up a pocket knife lying open on the table, and absentmindedly start carving a new message into the battered fourth-hand wood top. "Kind of makes you want to take it to the next level," I say.

"I'll remember that for future reference," says Percy. "All it takes to get you to listen to me is a little police torture." She points at the view out the window. "I've been telling you how bad it really is. Just look at this cancer world they've created."

Offshore, the new LNG platform burns off some excess capacity.

"I'm sick of waiting for 0z0's games to make any real difference," says Percy. "We're fiddling around hacking the ghost world while entire species drown in our effluent."

"The system has to reach crisis point for real revolutionary conditions to develop," I say. "You've read Avineri. A smart mob of pop guerillas can hasten that crisis by shattering the media trance. I bet there are a hundred 0z0s in other cities working in common cause. It'll happen."

"You need to bag the theoretical bullshit and rub the sand from your dreamy eyes," says Percy.

"Come on. We've mortally wounded the market in celebrity, hitting Century City right in the bottom line. Those psycho-cops told me as much last night."

"Then why'd they let you go?"

"Good question. Memory's still gummed up, but I think they want me to lead them to 0z0. And you."

"So negotiate," she says. "Give them 0z0 and you keep me."

I stand up, playing with the knife.

"We need to formulate our own program," she says. "Sous les pavés, les flores."

I look out the front glass at the dinosaur angiosperms that have overtaken this toxic corner.

"I definitely wouldn't mind breaking some pavement," I say.

Percy hugs me from behind, reaching her hands across my stomach and under my belt.

"Let's tell Oz0 tonight," she says. "Cancel this latest insanity he's concocted, which is probably going to blow up in his face. He keeps saying he's finally going to give me the blood he thinks I want."

"No," I say. "We have to do this one. Then we're done."

"The terror hostage video," Oz0 says to the camera, "is the only true cinema of this young century. Our mission is to realize its potential to envelop Hollywood and Madison Avenue within its ever-expanding viral powers. Making every celebrity 'appearance' a self-immolating technothriller."

Tied to a chair before a red, white and blue camouflage "Celebrity Liberation Front" banner, iconic leading man Billy Dane grunts through the duct tape covering his mouth. An hour earlier, we abducted Billy from the 11th hole of Hillcrest Country Club as he tried to find his ball in the weeds. Oz0 is in with one of the caddies, whose info was so good that we had Billy bagged in the back of the van before the rest of his foursome even noticed that security at the club does not exactly meet Homeland Security standards.

Billy is a lot shorter in person, and his chiseled cinema face actually looks kind of alien. But that trademark Mr. Intense comic book hero face he does comes through even better in the flesh. Especially under the stress of kidnapping—almost looks genuine.

Oz0 stands behind Billy, wearing a purple and yellow Lucha Libre mask that clashes nicely with his golf clothes. The banner frames him, our nom de guerre ringed with the abstracted logos of the Fortune 100—Oz0's worthy substitute for the Koranic verse more commonly seen in this oeuvre. Oz0 holds a microphone and gesticulates like a mutant pitchman.

Percy holds a networked steadycam on the scene. Outside, two vets from 0z0's South Central cell are in the KCBS satellite uplink van they stole a week ago, streaming live to a dozen network affiliates that think they are receiving a feed of the Mayor's press conference. I watch the doors, holding a weapon I do not know how to use, and nervously ponder ways to avert this imminent disaster.

From my vantage point, I can see the broadcast underway on a monitor near Percy. A second set is positioned where Billy can't help but watch it.

"Like Noh drama or situation comedy," says 0z0, "the hostage video has its ritual forms."

The monitor cuts to tape as 0z0 continues to talk. A video montage of clips from well-known examples of the genre, dubbed over with a looped splice of the cherubic whistling from Barry Manilow's *Can't Smile Without You*.

"There is the putatively private version, a message from the hostage to family, made available to a wider audience to maximize publicity with base melodrama. This form's classic period was the 1970s of Aldo Moro, J. Paul Getty III, Baader-Meinhof and the SLA; its medium the audiocassette recorder."

The monitor plays the vacant California trust fund commando voice of Patty Hearst: "Mom, Dad. I'm OK. I'm with a combat unit that's armed with automatic weapons."

"There is the classic militarized version," continues 0z0. A young John McCain holds a Vietnamese newspaper for the camera. Private Jessica Lynch blinks like Bambi from an Iraqi hospital bed.

"And there is the 21st Century global culture war, which has brought the form to new heights of fetishization. War, media, technology, body, desire. Our animal libido, alienated by material infantilization, needs war to liberate its ancestral instincts. Bring on the Warporn. Detonate the Information Bomb. Viva Warpunk."

Grainy splices of orange jumpsuit jihadi beheadings intercut with Abu Ghraib's greatest hits and American hardcore porn videos.

"Billy," asks 0z0, "do you like to watch?"

Framed within the screen like a member of *The Brady Bunch*, Billy casts his gaze in different directions around him as other frames pop up in a 3x3 matrix. Billy Dane as Lt. Zack Malko of SEAL Team 6: *Raid on Pyongyang* blows away 21st Century gooks in the DMZ. The girls of

summer wax the chrome of an SUV in the wet T-shirt bliss of a burrito ad. A hurtling DC-10 punctures the hull of WTC 2. Porn film money shots burst on the face of a degraded starlet that never was. A new Cadillac chases the vanishing point down an empty prairie blacktop. Billy Dane strolls with attitude through a postindustrial harbor, advertising single-malt Scotch to a Japanese audience. Dazed burn victims and fresh amputees emerge from their underground tubeways like gassed rats. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, viewed through a ceiling mounted security camera, clean the high school cafeteria with 9mm machine pistols.

“Prime-time Götterdämmerung,” says 0z0, “has its own product placement. And you can use it to seize the reins from the horsemen.”

0z0 produces an ornately engraved sword. A freshly sharpened prop: the magical blade wielded by Billy’s character in last year’s fantasy blockbuster *Winds of the Necromancer*, a reinvention of the LOTR franchise in which the Mordor analogs are the good guys. I look at my watch, and begin to wonder whether I will need to intervene.

“We are all Billy Dane,” says 0z0. “Poseable action figures deployed in the lingering death dreams of the last century. Naked apes yearning to leap from the treetops.”

Cut to liberated floor traders flying through the Manhattan smog, the grey glass edifice of the tower smoldering behind them.

“The time has come to hack the images and repossess the mind of the mob. The street finds its own uses for things, and the dream finds its own uses for memes.”

0z0 drops his handheld mike to the floor with an amplified thud, and takes two-handed possession of the blade.

I check the safety on my Uzi. 0z0 is doing some real-time script-doctoring. This was supposed to be the mother of all media pranks, not an actual execution. Time slows, adrenaline diluted with the fog of indecision and repressed memories. What would Alex Trebek do?

Stage left, behind the fire door, the muffled sound of yelling and gunfire.

0z0 raises his sword. I shakily aim my weapon at him, and impulsively fire a burst.

On cue, Billy Dane breaks free of his bindings and leaps at his assailant and right into my crosshairs. Billy tumbles into the war banner of the Front, taking it down as he falls. Caught up in the moment, Percy walks the camera in to follow the action.

The fire door blows open behind me with the force of a battering ram, knocking my body to the ground and the air from my lungs. I turn to catch a worm's eye view of Boon, Luca and McCord sweeping the room.

"Not on my watch," says Boon, emptying his clip into 0z0 cowboy style and moving in for the kill.

McCord plants a patent leather cop shoe on my neck and aims his sidearm at my head.

Through the monitor, the camera eye watches Billy rise from the floor. Wrapped in the banner, he eclipses the aperture in its enveloping shadow and tackles Percy.

Luca retrieves the camera and trains it on Boon. Boon holds 0z0 in a headlock and peels off his mask. The face of gentrified negritude from a hundred forgotten commercials is recalled as assassin of the infomercial.

"It's that TV guy," says Luca, sounding like he's reading cue cards. "Derek from Burning Hills."

Boon holds his pistol to 0z0's head and clicks an empty chamber, miming the South Vietnamese general's famous execution of the apprehended guerilla.

"Just kidding," says Boon.

"That's a wrap, people," says Luca, powering off the camera. "Nice work."

0z0 sits up, admires the Rohrshach of stage blood on his shirt, and laughs.

"Luca," says Boon. "Get back to the uplink van and make sure the network connection's secure."

0z0 stands and helps Billy and Percy up from the tangle of banner and wires. Billy flashes his million dollar incisors from ear to ear and slaps 0z0 a high five.

"What a rush, dude!" says Billy, pumping fists. "I told my agent this would work. You're a rock star. The buzzbomb. Let's do it again soon. Maybe I'll do a Most Wanted cameo while you're underground."

"Right on," nods 0z0, producing a pistol from the small of his back. He aims it at Percy, smiles, and shoots. She twitches, wounds strictly psychic.

"Told you those movie blanks are amazing," says Boon.

Percy takes in the set, absentmindedly fingering a narrow gash across her cheek as anger begins to overtake shock. I try to wriggle free from

McCord like a trapped mammal, but am stopped by a wind-busting cop fist to the sternum.

“What gives?” says Percy. “You staged this whole jam? In collaboration with the pigs?”

“Don’t you get it?” says 0z0. “You are so rigid and dense. You run around dropping those French Situationist slogans like Hollywood names, but you keep missing the point. We’ve done it, baby. Our movement is part of the official narrative. Our revolution is the Situation.”

Boon’s cellphone rings a bar of the Dragnet theme.

“Boon,” he answers, as 0z0 and Luca watch for nonverbal cues of approval. “Hey, Dick.”

“The Network?” says 0z0. Boon nods in the affirmative.

“So?” says Boon. “You like? Sweet. I told you not to worry. Can’t believe we covered the time zone that well. Cable pickup following already, I presume? What? Yeah, he’s a natural. Let me put him on.”

Boon hands the phone to 0z0.

“Fucking asshole,” says Percy, spitting at Boon. “You made our revolution into a reality show?!”

“Lighten up sweetie,” says Boon, “or we may have to rethink our plan to let you and Hamlet here escape for the next episode.”

“To be or not to be,” says McCord, nudging my gums with a well-polished leather toe.

“Thanks, Dick,” says 0z0. “Hasta.” He hands the phone back to Boon, and Boon hands him a fat stack of minty fresh bills.

“Network loves it,” says Boon. “Your car’s outside.”

“Sorry, sugar,” says 0z0 to Percy. “Everything fell into place pretty quick and there wasn’t time to explain. I thought you’d understand. Guess I was wrong.”

“Knock-knock,” says Boon, pounding the still-on mike against the concrete floor like a door knocker. “Let me try. Mr. Madison & Vine over there,” pointing at me, “thought he was going to shut the deal down. Told us the name of his first pet, the address of this warehouse, and everything in between.”

McCord twists his rubber sole on my ear.

“Armed with that info, we intervened with 0z0 and cut a better deal,” says Boon. “One of mutual convenience—together with our friends at the Network.”

“Their particular LAPD squad,” interjects 0z0, “is heavily subsidized by the Network.”

“Nice,” says Luca, flashing a bling sign.

“Billy there owes me one for some chits we cashed with the vice squad last year, and his publicist thought it would be a novel headline grabber,” says Boon. “Jackson/Derek/0z0 let us unmask him on live television, guaranteeing him the most culture-searing coverage he could ever dream of. Instant platinum face-time.”

“They’ll be investigating my invented underground exile for a year while I prank away,” says 0z0. “What better way to promote the movement than make it primetime entertainment?”

I imagine a mass viewing audience hungry for stolen glimpses of 0z0’s face. Before long he’ll be back, pardoned and ready to go on the talk shows.

“The Network gets a ratings bonanza,” says Boon. “The government gets to save the star and ignite a saga of narrative misdirection far more entertaining than the real war that eludes all efforts to impose a Hollywood ending.”

“And of course,” says Luca, tossing a wad of hundreds at Percy, “we all get some serious walking around money.”

“We are going to the newspapers with this,” says Percy, batting away the cash. “Bastards!”

“Whatever,” says Boon. “Don’t you get it? This is America. There’s a revolution every minute. That’s what fuels the machine—the human energy we burn faster than all the oil in ANWR. Every time a guy starts a company, launches a product, forms a band, breaks the speed limit, lies to his boss, places a fresh TV ad, criticizes the government. And as fast as they sprout, the system absorbs them like a gargantuan amoeba, putting their creative energy toward the greater good. Rebel rock n’ roll always realizes its inner commercial.”

“I’m not an actual revolutionary,” says 0z0, “but I play one on TV. Which one do you think will get more eyeballs?”

McCord finally lets me up. I walk to Percy, retrieve the loose bills she’s waved to the floor, and begin to examine her minor wounds.

Boon points at an open window.

“The tribe has spoken. Now it’s time for your escape. Just try to have fun, and give us an Oscar clip.”

Luca picks up the camera and pops in a fresh tape. I pull Percy’s baby Glock from under her arm, and wonder if it can change the channel.

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