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Science Fiction: Osama Phone Home

What happens when an ideological, technologically adept, highly determined group of conspirators are American?

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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-20s, 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 *50s*, 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

