

SATIRE

Michael Hollister

(1938-)

Pinchy Ciphering (2009)

Up in the mountains of the reservation Rex Copeland got word that Mark Olmstead wanted to see him right away. Billy Wild Horse and his brothers gave him a ride down the logging road in their pickup, bumping around in the back with his pack between his legs, gazing out over the fields on the high plateau below and trying to imagine how it looked when it was nothing but grassland with huge grazing herds of antelope and hunters in feathers.

They dropped him off outside Morehead Gap.

He crossed the tracks past the three grain silos and soon emerged from the overgrown Appleton garden. Mark let him in through his back screendoor with dark whiskers and bloodshot eyes.

"You look terrible," Rex slipped out of his pack.

"No sleep."

"Where's Sally?"

"She and Jody are staying at the motel."

Rex followed him into the office beside the kitchen. There a tape recorder sat on the desk like a bomb. Mark punched on a voice that sounded military, a message left on his answering machine from the commander of the nearby U.S. Umatilla Nerve Gas Depot ordering an extermination in their storage chambers.

Mark stopped it.

"Did you hear that little sound at the end? It's faint, in the background." He backed it up and replayed it. "There! In the pause before the click." Again he played it, "*There!* Hear that?"

Rex pulled off his old felt cowboy hat with a mountain range of stain around the crown and ran a hand back through his hair shining tawny in the light from the bulb coiled over his head.

"Sounds like a bell in a gas station."

"And those bells just ding, that I know about. They don't go ding-a-ling like that, except at the Rocket Station. Howard hooked his line up to a doorbell. The prankster is right here in town, Rex." He slipped into his green uniform jacket and stuck his handgun into the deep inside pocket. "I just need you to watch my back."

"Did you call the commander?"

"Yeah, he didn't order any extermination."

"So your prankster impersonated a military officer."

"Maybe he can launch missiles."

Morehead Gap lay quiet and still on a hot summer afternoon and most people stayed inside out of the sun. At the Rocket Station on the east end of Main Street, near one of the pumps a dog lay sleeping in the shade. Rex sat back in the van and tipped his hat forward while Mark got into the telephone booth on the corner, his green ballcap visible through sunburst reflections on the glass as he looked up and down the street. He gestured and beckoned. Rex got out of the van and went over and stepped on the line that rang the bell. It went ding-a-ling all right. The dog lifted his head. Rex stepped on the line again, watching Mark.

Then again, ringing the bell.

Howard came squinting out of the garage wiping his hands on a rag with his face all smudged and hair wisping out around his bald spot like his head was smoking.

Rex backed away grinning with his hands outspread.

"Nothing, Howard. Just wanted to check out your ding-a-ling."

Howard frowned at Rex as a pest.

On the way to Computerland at the Morehead Mall, Mark explained what he thought this meant. A prankster who used a pay phone to avoid a trace would not be using his own voice. Yakov Tete could not mimic a military voice without stereotyping and mocking it. The caller had to be someone else.

At the mall he parked near a little sapling in the parking lot. Computerland was cool, the light uniformly bright and the glass cases full of hardware and software reflecting each other into infinity. Mark talked to a freckled girl behind the counter while Rex looked around and watched the door. He leaned on the counter and woo wooed the girl until she turned with a toss of her hair and went into the back. In a minute a pale fat kid came out, a clerk with a curl over his forehead like Superman. Mark leaned toward him on the glass counter and lowered his voice.

"Yeah, I'm looking for the best hacker I can find."

The fat kid adjusted his curl with a finger.

"We don't condone hacking."

"Oh? I heard you're the best."

The kid flushed and shrugged aw shucks, then he recovered his posture, "I uh... I don't condone--"

"--Cut the crap!"

Glancing aside, the fat kid noticed Rex gliding around behind the counter and approaching him.

The exterminator leaned closer.

"You're probably the hacker I'm after."

"After?" the kid glanced aside at Rex.

"You play hacking games, right?"

The kid glanced back and forth, "What are you doing?"

"We're hacking you."

Rex twisted his ear.

He winced and his knees buckled, "*Ow wow wow!*"

"Speak."

"Okay, okay!" The kid rubbed his ear. "There's a hacking game online. Oz and the Flying Monkeys. I'm only at a really low level. I'm just Superman. The guy you want is The Cipher."

"Who's he?"

"V. Ciphering," rubbing his ear.

"His address?"

"49 Paradise Acres."

Mark charged out of the store.

Rex followed him dodging to avoid a lifesize cardboard monster from a video game with bulging eyes, big teeth and its tongue hanging out like a hacker cracking a code. They rocketed toward Morehead Gap and turned into Paradise Acres, the new development of Wes Titus. The deputy kept his landscape barren except for ground cover to deny concealment to eco arsonists. All the houses except one were unfinished or for sale and there were no signs of children or pets. The occupied house was a lizard green two-story built in a style favored by fastbuck California developers, a topheavy interfacing of colonial and polyfab that emphasized the double garage, with an amber plastic window panel by the front door. The mailbox at the curb had a 49 on it but no name.

Mark started to park in front, then he eased on past for a ways and pulled over to the curb. By now he knew almost everybody in town except V. Ciphering. Pop Winesburg told him some kids rang Ciphering's bell for trick or treat last Halloween and he pretended nobody was home. The kids kept ringing until he finally came to the door in a monkey mask and gave them each a pinch of a strange white powdery substance out of a baggie. Parents complained. Wes Titus investigated and the strange white substance turned out to be baking soda. After that the kids called him Pinchy.

They sat looking at the house.

"We don't know anything about the guy," Rex cautioned.

"Well I'm gonna find out."

"First let me go in the back."

Rex got out of the van.

The sun glared hot on the raw wood of unfinished houses in the tract and the air smelled dry of sunbaked earth and dead grass. Rex strolled up to a house for sale like a potential buyer, a cowboy in jeans and a curled hat, then he slipped quickly around the back and over to the house of V. Ciphering. Passing windows of the double garage, he glimpsed a classic from the 1950s in perfect condition sporting rocket tailfins and white dice fuzzy as mice hanging from the rearview mirror.

All the windows of the house were insulated with plastic like the eyes of a recluse with glaucoma. He found a vulnerable basement window behind a dead azalea with a thermometer attached to the frame that read thirty-seven degrees and did not move when he tapped on it. He tugged his gloves tight. Quickly he

jimmied open the window with his hunting knife, peered into the dim underground and then ducked inside without bumping his hat. He extended his foot down until he kicked something. There were steps under the window, leading up to no exit. He stepped down into a stale musky smell of old smokes and vomits and rancid semen in a party room cave with imitation wood paneling and vinyl furniture all in disorder and overturned, cups and bottles and ashtrays scattered around the linoleum floor. Behind the bar two bulging beer taps were pink rubber breasts, and on the wall hung a painting of a gaucho on horseback throwing a bomb in whip strokes of fluorescent orange like the hair of Yakov Tete, fluorescent red and lizard green on black velvet. An entertainment center dominated one wall, including a large television and a library of video tapes, mostly porn and The Three Stooges. One end of the room was covered by marbled mirror tiles that dissolved reflection into a jigsaw puzzle reducing people to parts. The people were inflated plastic figures arranged in front of the mirrors--lifesize and naked, multiracial and multisexual--all of them linked as if by force in any random way from her nipple in his ear to his toe in her mouth, a postmodern orgy transcending all discrimination, a masturbatory craving for union at the center of being glorified by spotlights playing down from both sides and converging in a V upon an intersexion of many wide open legs stuck up in the air like the feelers of a sea anemone.

Up the stairs, Rex found the ground floor of the house completely empty, the dining room and living room without any furniture at all and the kitchen bare except for a partially eaten fast food burger in a wrapper on the drainboard. The place felt as cool and vacant as a crypt. He unlocked and opened the front door and the exterminator burst inside with his handgun! Quickly they searched through empty rooms on the ground level where bare floors gleamed and ceiling light fixtures were sarcophagi for flies. The exterminator crouched forward with the barrel of his handgun tilted upward under a faint strain of sad orchestral music coming down from upstairs. Looking up, he ducked low and climbed the stairway in a hurry with his footsteps absorbed by the fecal brown carpeting. Following along, Rex would not abandon him at a time like this, but he felt in no hurry to catch up. This could only end badly. Upstairs he found him standing outside a room that seemed to be the source of the music with his green ballcap tipped back, holding his pistol erect. Before Mark kicked open the door, Rex pushed it swinging gently inward.

And there he sat.

Deep in a ratty old armchair reading an issue of *Scientific American* sat a skinny darkhaired guy with a limp mustache and receding chin, somehow both adolescent and elderly, in a faded plaid shirt and sneakers. He looked up gaping at them through his glasses in cool amazement.

The exterminator rushed in upon him.

“Are you Ciphering?”

“Wha?”

He grabbed his flannel shirt under the throat and pulled him up out of his chair, “Yeah, you’re the one!”

“One what?”

He gripped him by the back of the neck and pushed him stumbling up against the wall and kicked his feet wide. Ciphering spread his sneakered feet so wide his bare white ankles were exposed and the exterminator frisked him up and down and checked under the seat cushion of his armchair. Then he pushed him into his computer swivel chair with such force his feet went up and his chair bumped swiveling completely around. Ciphering remained docile all the while, a pacifist victim now, enduring this.

While the exterminator questioned the prankster, Rex found a bathroom by the smell of antiseptic. The inner edge of the horseshoe toilet seat was painted with red lips open wide and he felt like a captive pervert urinating into the white porcelain throat, reading graffiti scrawlings inside the toilet lid: *I heard a fly buzz when I died* and *Entro Pee* above an arrow pointing down. Facing him at eye level on the wall above the toilet was an executive portrait, a head shot of an alligator in a pinstriped business suit and necktie, smiling with rapacious eyes.

Rex looked around upstairs.

In the largest room a mattress lay on the floor, purple drapes held out the light and on the mantel of a fireplace that looked never used sat a cup made from a plastic human skull. A pink and blue nursery stacked almost full of cardboard boxes had been converted into a mail-order shipping room with rolls of tape and postage out on a table. The pink bureau in the corner was painted all over with little circus animals and on its top sat a photo of a baby in a gilt frame. Rex stepped over some boxes to get a closer look. The baby was a rat on its back with feet curled up and teeth exposed, shot from above and dressed to resemble a dead human baby in a crib as seen by a parent. Some open cardboard boxes on the table contained odd contraptions and others white plastic rockets the size of a plastic Jesus. He picked up one of the contraptions, a small black box with two pistons coming out of the top attached to a crankshaft and

flywheel. Inside, a partition with a hole in it divided the box in two and it looked as if the hole was meant to accommodate the rocket, but there seemed to be no way for it to get inside the box.

Back in the control room where light through the blind came filtering in as if through air pollution, Rex found Pinchy CIPHERING tapping keys with Mark bending close over his shoulder reading the information on the video display. He stopped the record playing on the stereo, holding it still for a moment with his finger to read the label, a dirge by Vivaldi. Then he let it play. He sat down in an old armchair, set his cowboy hat aside and listened to the dirge. He noticed the bookcase stuffed full of science magazines, German technical manuals, paperback spy thrillers, Baedeker guidebooks, foreign language dictionaries and all kinds of subjects just stuck in any which way. Mark kept glancing at the video display while he explained to Rex what he had been able to learn.

V. CIPHERING and several other hackers had collaborated in producing a video game called *Oz and the Flying Monkeys*, based on the premise that all authority is oppressive. The wicked witch is melting and her flying monkeys are now free to play their own games and do mischief at will. For their own amusement, the merry pranksters of cyberspace released a version of their game on the Web, concealing that it involved the defrauding and harassment of real people, a cabal open to anyone who could decipher and break into the game. In their code, victims were called dorothis and their associates were scarecrows, dropouts were cowardly lions and law enforcers tin men. Toto referred to an informer, somebody who barked. Gamers scored points and moved up or down in a ranking of competitors like golfers in a tournament, by duping people into fake agreements as substantiated by phone, e-mail, bank and credit card records. By now there were thousands of Monkeys all over the world. CIPHERING claimed he was only a level 49 Monkey on the leader board and that he scored points not by pranks but for assists to other gamers by providing intelligence and links.

"I'm just an interface."

Mark leaned closer to the screen.

"Can you tell, is my neighbor a Monkey? His name is Yakov Tete. He's a professor from back east."

Under his limp mustache, CIPHERING let his mouth hang loose, revealing two front teeth with a gap between them and one tooth slightly crossing over the other at the bottom. "Sorry, man. Real Monkeys are anonymous even at authorized Flying Monkey outlets. But yeah, he could be a player. Monkey mayhem is popular now with academics who are into power."

On the wall above his Inverarity computer like a religious icon hung a poster of a round object in space, divided yet perfectly whole, an archetype given cosmic scale by a galactic sense of proportion and a holographic quality of suspension in midair, like an avatar revealed by the dawn--as smooth and cloven as the buttocks of a goddess. The words above it said *Apocheir Yo-yo, Inc.*

As CIPHERING hunched in the light of the terminal, his disheveled hair seemed to be crackling static.

The exterminator menaced him.

"You harassed me for months! You put out a false warrant on me! You threatened my *life!* Are you even listening?"

He swatted his head and CIPHERING ducked away, covering up.

"*Hey!* Not *me*, man! I'm just an interface!"

The exterminator grabbed him and flung him out of his chair. The prankster rolled across the floor.

Rex raised his feet.

"Get up," the exterminator beckoned.

CIPHERING crawled over and picked up his glasses, still intact. He hooked them back on. Then he sat there on the floor, looking up with baleful eyes and mustache drooping.

"I'm not responsible."

"Stop this now or I'll stop *you!*"

"If you drop out now, you'll be reclassified as a cowardly lion. Monkeys will swarm you."

"Then I'll call the cops on you guys."

"They'll reclassify you as a Toto. Then they'll react like any organism to a virus. Anything at odds with the Monkey program gets quarantined, healed or deleted."

"Do something! What are they saying?"

CIPHERING got slowly to his feet, righted his swivel chair and squatted down slowly at his computer, as shifty as a chameleon with his tail rolled inward and his claws tapping keys:

OLMSTEAD, MARK
MOREHEAD GAP, OREGON

DOROTHY IS A TOTO
DELETE

The exterminator felt like he bumped his head on a beam.

"They've got a *hit* out on me!"

"I'm afraid it looks that way. Though Monkeys love to punk around." He tapped keys. "Yeah, the race is on to delete you for a level up. Are you sure you want me to provoke them even more?"

"God in hell, what have I got to lose?"

"They could raise the price on your head to another level."

"Who is *they*?" Rex asked.

"The criminal Monkeys using the game as a front."

"Let me understand this," said Toto. "You're talking about actual literal death, right? They intend to *kill* me."

"Most Monkeys think they're just playing games. But some have stolen identities, transferred funds and raided bank accounts."

"Okay, then delete me."

"Are you sure?"

The exterminator pointed his gun at him.

Ciphering shrugged, then he hunched and tapped a few keys. The record of Olmstead, Mark disappeared from the screen.

"That's all there is to it?"

"No, there *is* an afterlife, I'm afraid. I'll try to exterminate you, but you have to give me time. I'm working on the codes but... The whole configuration is synergistic."

"Afterlife?"

"Most Monkeys don't believe in the existence of Oz. But I figure there might be a rational order to it all. A unified field. Otherwise all we have is chaos and flying Monkeys. There might even be a central host. Like, you know. A prime mover."

He sat laid back again in his swivel chair as if he was tired and, for now, there was nothing more he could do.

Mark slumped into an armchair.

"Now that I'm deleted, they think I'm *dead*, right?"

"No, they think you're trying to hide. You're a virus now."

"But you can tell it I'm dead, can't you?"

Ciphering looked aside at him with the terminal aura turning the nearest lens of his glasses into a blank reflection.

"Try to *fool* them?"

"What if I'm really dead?"

"What do you mean?"

Mark let his gun barrel droop between his knees and dragged off his ballcap, "Just report that I died."

"I'd have to prove it."

Mark bowed his head and covered his face with a hand.

"So uh," Rex gestured with a thumb. "What's with the rockets and that other contraption in your shipping room?"

"The rocket and the box make this possible," Ciphering gestured at the magnitude of his computer system. "My quest. They don't really work, but people buy them anyway."

Mark raised his head and pointed the gun at Ciphering.

"Tell them I'm really dead."

"He's a bug man," said Rex. "He died of fumes."

"If you go on with your business, they'll know it's a lie."

"Then I'll quit."

"Can you give me a death certificate?"

"We'll fake one," said Rex.

"They can check that out and--"

"--Just *do* it!" the exterminator yelled.

"We'll bring you one tomorrow."

Ciphering stared at him with his hair in disarray and his eyes through his glasses appearing to recede, sinking to inanimate resistance. Finally, he swiveled around to his keyboard.

"It won't be easy."

Mark took up a position just behind him and kept his eyes on the terminal. They agreed to watch him in shifts.

Rex drove the van back to Mark's house in heat that made the asphalt shimmer and the bug smears on the windshield glare until he made the turn out of the sun and down the corridor of overarching shade trees. A patrol car was parked along the street with a Umatilla County seal on the side, but he did not see Wes Titus as he passed by. Sally came out onto the front porch in jeans and a blue jersey, always neat and tidy looking. They went into the house and he took off his hat. She was here from the motel just to pick up some things. They sat down in the living room and he explained the Ciphering situation to her as best he could while she listened intently, clenching her small fists in her lap.

He took the cot from the garage and the corned beef sandwiches and coffee that Sally made and drove back to Ciphering's house. Back up in the control room, sunlight through the plastic insulation and a tear in the drawn blind lit a swatch of floor and gleamed on the handgun lying beside the armchair where Mark sprawled asleep, head back and mouth open with data on the video display and nobody there to read it, the empty swivel chair like on the bridge of a ship on automatic pilot, or abandoned at sea. The prankster was gone. Mark twitched around the mouth, his stubbled jaw hung loose and phlegm rattled up in his throat. Then one eye split open and noticed Rex. His mouth closed, he glanced around and then he jumped up frantic scrambling out of the chair!

They searched the house. Floor by floor, they checked all the rooms and closets. They looked everywhere and were just meeting downstairs in the living room when they heard the front door open! Rex sprang to the wall with his knife and Mark dove into the unused open fireplace with his handgun. They heard somebody whistling an old pop tune, then Ciphering walked in holding a cone of ice. He looked over at Mark in the fireplace, then aside at Rex. Mark ducked out and stood up and Rex relaxed off the wall.

The prankster licked his purple slurpy.

"I said I'd help you guys."

They were ready to listen.

With slurpy dripping from his mustache and a dependence on binary grammar, Ciphering explained his latest plan. Grounding all the Monkeys seemed unlikely, but if he had a fake death certificate he would use one of his multiple game personalities to see if he could get Mark reclassified from a monkeypox to a dead link. Mark went home to sleep and Rex stayed to watch. Ciphering worked late at his computer and on his cell phone while Rex dozed in the armchair with his cowboy hat over his face.

After two o'clock Ciphering finally rose, yawned and strolled away scratching himself. Rex jumped awake and followed him into the bedroom. One wall had been knocked out, creating a space enlarged still further by vacancy, with crumbling plaster and sheetrock on the floor evoking a bombed-out war zone. No other decor except the heavy purple drapes, the plastic skull on the mantel and a sampler on the wall as solitary as a crucifix stitched in blues: *Keep cool, but care*. Ciphering sat up on the mattress on the floor with his back to the wall and the collar of his pajamas turned up Elvis Presley fashion. His reading light burst from the end of a robotic arm articulate enough to perform the same function from a multiplicity of angles. As if forever in withdrawal, the prankster's head slid down the wall to a lower profile on his pillow and he stared at Rex through his glasses from a distance that reduced him. There were two doors to this room and Ciphering had shown them he could do whatever he wanted anyway, so Rex just set up the cot at the opposite end of the room and reclined on it with his rolled jeans for a headrest and his hands behind his head. The more he thought about it, the more he felt out of place in a hunt led by a Monkey. He would stay for Mark until he got a death certificate from Skyview Mortuary, then go back to the mountains and hunt with Billy Wild Horse and his brothers.

Opposite from him against the end wall, the urbanite lay pillowed under his robotic light with hair sticking up and mustache limp. Pinchy Ciphering had hair like roadkill, like a magpie run over by a Rocket Oil truck driven by some heartless female who roared away into the distance and left him forever squashed, a transmitter clipped to his wing continuing to beep out signals with a cryptic virtuosity and giggling in the background from a delirious transient gone mad living under a dump with alligators swimming through the urban sewage and he had to eat shit from people ever since he was a kid so he learned to do magic. Finally he reached up and pinched off his light and the room fell into darkness.

Rex dreamed of sunny open space and hunting antelope when all this land was grass, feeling the springs and bounds and long slow motion leaps, the synchronicity and grace.

from *Interface Race* (2009)