

Time to break the romantic-comedy string

Screenplay by Robert Fyvolent and Mark Brinker

Directed by Gregory Hoblit

Diane Lane ... Agent Jennifer Marsh

Billy Burke ... Detective Eric Box

Colin Hanks ... Agent Griffin Dowd

Joseph Cross ... Owen Reilly

Mary Beth Hurt ... Stella Marsh

Agent Griffin Dowd: What's he into?

Agent Jennifer Marsh: High-end tech and low-end porn.

Agent Griffin Dowd: You sure he's a guy? If it's a woman, she could be my soulmate.

This one I picked up from the Netflix queue mainly because I've always had the hots for Diane Lane—since she played Lori in *Lonesome Dove* (1989). She's one of those attractive women who ages well—speaking of romantic comedies, she played across from John Cusack in the 2005 movie *Must Love Dogs* (well, turns out she was only 40 in that movie and Cusack, whom I thought was quite a bit younger was 39)—and as an actress has continued to improve her craft. In *Untraceable* she plays FBI agent Jennifer Marsh who handles "cyber" crimes out of a Portland, Oregon, office.

Her partner in crime fighting is Agent Griffin Dowd (Colin Hanks). And we are introduced to the pair as they skillfully tag-team their way to tracking down some geek loser who, I forget, but I think has something to do with broadcasting sicko pornography and having illegal guns. What follows from their cyber-apprehension of the "suspect" is frightening to anyone of a libertarian bent: Jennifer makes a call to the Portland FBI SWAT Team and gives them the alleged perp's location—like ordering a pizza, she immediately causes a dozen armed men to break down the doors of the geek loser's residence and haul him away.

How about a warrant? What about due process and knocking on the door? [The geek loser is not an immediate threat to anyone.] Did anyone hear of the presumption of innocence? Nope. None of these time tested, even quaint, legal standards is at all evident from the activity on the screen: the subliminal message is government cops are omniscient, efficient, and perfectly capable by themselves of determining the guilt of any criminal, but especially a criminal doing contraband. Scary. Shouldn't the studio be compelled to also show a clip of something like the FBI raid on the offices of the Liberty Dollar to balance out such police-state fantasies?

But I digress. Clearly, these cybercop guys are good but not omniscient, as the next suspect landing on their computer monitors is maker of a Website "Kill with Me," and they can't find this guy. Or stop him. Apparently, the creep has software that switches from one IP address to another in the event the FBI's Web tools execute the normal shutdown sequence; and some countries don't have agreements with the Feds to cooperate in bringing Web miscreants to justice. As Jennifer and Griffin start working the case, they realize this miscreant isn't your ordinary kiddy porn dipwad: he's a serial killer who has concocted a diabolical method of murder.

He immobilizes his victims, then introduces some poison or environmental threat in proportion to the number of visitors accessing his site. For example, in one case the victim is tied up and placed up to his neck in a tank of water as sulfuric acid is introduced through a nozzle. The more hits on the site, the faster the acid is injected. Another scary thought: what about the copycat syndrome? Is Hollywood sending up an idea that more than a handful of whack jobs are going to find appealing? But on the other hand, I guess real psychos seldom lack imagination of their own so it's not like the moviemakers are revealing state secrets.

In any case, the story makes for a highly suspenseful experience: "Man, we got to find this guy, now!

Naturally, Agent Marsh has a family, lending her even more vulnerability, she's a widow with a small, adorable daughter, and her mother Stella (Mary Beth Hurt) lives with them, too. Enter Portland police

detective Eric Box (Billy Burke) who actually comes on board as member of the FBI special task force that Marsh reluctantly heads. Is there any romantic possibility between the two of them? Whatever, I do find some of his initial conversation with Marsh jarringly unprofessional; could he have something to do with the crimes? Well, I'll let you figure that one out.

I liked the settings and scenes, the action moves quickly and generally believably... though at one point toward the end I'm wondering how in the hell did anyone in management let Marsh wander around without a police escort or at least a body guard. And the message of the movie, I think, is predominantly a good one: mass hysteria kills. The whole concept of unconscious people wanting to see death and destruction—e.g. the alleged auto racing mob-mentality syndrome—is taken to a new height. Realistically, yes, I expect such killings would attract a large crowd of anonymous voyeurs. But is morbid curiosity truly a facilitator of evil?

Naturally, too many folks watching a film like this will conclude "the government's gotta do something" about the Internet. So, sure, it's kind of like the terrorism game: we have a massive crisis, therefore we need a massive government program to solve it. Ignoring the role of the state in creating the crisis (ref. Crisis and Leviathan by Robert Higgs... though the true mechanism for government growth, I feel, lies in a deeper persisting conspiracy of power). But as all Coffee Coasterists and Righteous Beanies know, government is ever the Disease masquerading as the Cure.

Those of us who are genuinely sensitive to the need to fight crime will want government agents who actually fight real crime to have the best tools and capabilities to do so. For example, I don't have a problem with employing technology that would immediately (via a FISA-like court function) shut down a site advocating or otherwise incentivizing capital crimes—the broadcasting of enemies severing peoples' heads is one instance—and promptly track down the perpetrators. Even here, though, I think the biggest tool in the crime fighting toolbox is enabled by a simple government abstinence program: When we end the government's \$trillion/year War on Drugs, its \$trillion/year War for Empire, and its \$trillion/year War on the Poor, then we can expect to see some genuine progress on putting the serious bad guys away where the sun don't shine.

Making that libertarian point is a lot to ask from the Hollywood cybercrime movie genre these days, so if you can ignore that handicap, you may enjoy the brisk and creepy suspense of Untraceable.

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2008 July 11

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