

LOVE STORY IN THREE ACTS

by David Gerrold

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The author of this story is young enough, to live in the up-to-the-minute modern, electronic world of today. He is also old enough to be concerned about our relationship to the machines that we are manufacturing in ever greater numbers. And he is well acquainted with the gadgetry of flashing lights, glasseyes and twisting wires—one of his television plays was a much-acclaimed episode in the "Star Trek" series—and has no fear of them. With cool craft he takes a long look at some of the possibilities of the future.

Act One

After a while John grunted and rolled off Marsha. He lay there for a bit, listening to the dawn whispering through the apartment, the sound of the air processor whining somewhere, and the occasional rasp of his own breath and that of Marsha's too. Every so often, there was a short sharp inhalation, as if to say, "Yeah, well..."

"Yeah, well..." John muttered and began tugging at the metal reaction-monitor bands on his wrists. He sat on the edge of the bed, still pulling at the clasps, the fastenings coming loose with a soft popping sound. He reached down and unfastened similar bands from his ankles and let those fall carelessly to the floor.

Then he stood and *pad-padded* barefoot across the floor to the typewriter-sized console on the dresser. Behind him he heard the creak of the bed as Marsha levered herself up on one elbow. "What does it say?" she demanded.

"Just a minute, will you," John snapped. "Give me a chance." He ripped the readout from the computer and went through, the motions of studying it. This was the deluxe model which recorded the actual moment-to-moment physical reactions of the band-wearers. The jagged spiky lines sprawled carelessly across the neat ruled graphs meant little to him—they were there for the technicians, not the laymen—but at the top of the sheet was the computer's printed analysis. Even before he looked at it, John knew it would be bad.

"Well...?" Marsha demanded acidly, "did we enjoy ourselves?"

"Yeah..." he muttered, "About thirty-four percent..."

"Hell!" she said, and threw herself back on the bed. She lay there staring at the ceiling, "Hell..."

"I wish you wouldn't swear so much," he muttered, still looking at the readout

"Hell," she said again, just to see him flinch. She reached over to the night stand and thumbed a cigarette out of the pack.

"And I wish you wouldn't smoke so much either. Kissing you is like kissing another man."

She looked back at him, "I've always wondered what your previous experience was. Your technique with women is terrible." She inhaled deeply as the cigarette caught flame.

"Aaaa," said John and padded into the bathroom. As he stood there, he gazed dourly at his hands. He could still see the imprint of the monitor bands on his wrists.

Every time they did it, she had to know, so they used the damned bands; and every time the score was lower than before—and so they both knew. Who needed a machine to tell him when he was enjoying himself in bed? You knew when it was good and you knew when it was bad. So who needed the machine?

He finished and flushed the toilet, then splashed his hands briefly under the faucet—more from a sense of duty than from any of cleanliness. He shook off the excess water, and padded out of the bathroom, not even bothering to turn off the light.

Marsha was sitting up in bed, still puffing on her cigarette. She took it out of her mouth and blew smoke at him, "Thirty-four percent. We've never gone that low before. When are you going to listen to some sense, John, and opt for the other unit?"

"I'm not a puppet—and I'm not going to let anyone make me one either!... Be damned if I'm going to let some damn fool sweaty-handed technician plug wires into me..." He started casting around for his slippers.

"At least talk to them, John—it won't kill you. Find out about it, before you say it's no good. Rose Schwartz and her husband got one and she says it's the greatest. She wouldn't be without it now." Marsha paused, brushed a straggling hair back over her forehead—and accidentally dropped cigarette ash on the sheets. He turned away in disgust while she brushed at it ineffectually, leaving a dim gray smudge.

John found one of his slippers and began pulling it on angrily. "At least go and find out about it...?" she asked. No answer.

"John...?"

He kept tugging at his slipper, "Leave me alone, will you—I don't need any more goddamn machines!"

She threw herself back against the pillow. The hell you don't."

He straightened up momentarily—stopped looking for his other slipper and glared at her, "I don't need a machine to tell me how to screw!"

She returned his stare, "Then why the hell does our score keep dropping? We've never gone *this low* before."

"Maybe, if you'd brush your teeth—"

"Maybe, if you'd admit that—"

"Aaaa," he said, cutting her off, and bent down to look under the bed.

She softened her tone, leaned toward him, 'John...? Will you talk to the man at least? Will you?' He didn't answer; she went shrill again, 'I'm talking to you! Are you going to talk to the man?'

John found his other slipper and straightened up, 'No, dammit! I'm not going to talk to the man—and I'm not going to talk to you either, unless you start talking about something else. Besides, we can't afford it. Now, are you going to fix me my breakfast?'

She heaved herself out of the bed, pausing only to stub out her cigarette. 'I'll get you your breakfast—but we can *too* afford it.' She snatched her robe from where it hung on the door and stamped from the room.

John glared after her, too angry to think of an answer. 'Aaaa,' he said, and began looking for his undershorts.

Act Two

When he got back from lunch, there was a man waiting in his reception room, a neat-looking man with a moustache and slicked-back hair. He rose, 'Mr. Russell...?'

John paused, 'Yes...?'

'I believe you wished to see me...?'

'Do I? Who're you?'

With a significant look at the receptionist, 'Ah, may I come in?'

John half-shrugged, stepped aside to let the man enter. He could always ask him to leave. Once inside, he said, 'Now then, Mr. uh...?'

'Wolfe,' said the man, as he sat down. He produced a gold-foil business card, 'Lawrence Wolfe, of Inter-Bern.'

'Uh—' said John, still standing, 'I'm afraid there's been some misunderstanding.' He started to hand the card back, 'I never—'

Wolfe smiled genially at him, 'You must have, or I wouldn't be here.' He rummaged through his briefcase, found a form,

'Oh, here it is. Your wife was the one who called us.' He looked up, 'You knew about it, of course?'

'No, I—'

'Well, no matter. I have all the information already. All I need is your signature.'

'Now look, Mr. Wolfe. You're the one who's made a mistake. I don't need—'

'Mr. Russell,' he said calmly. 'If you didn't need our services, your wife would not have called our office. Now, please sit down—you're making me nervous.'

John stepped around behind his desk, but did not sit.

Wolfe looked at him patiently, 'You'll be more comfortable.'

John sat.

Wolfe said gently, 'I understand your reluctance to accept the possibility that you might need a monitor-guidance system. It's not a very pleasant thing to realize that your capabilities are down—but by the same token, you can't begin to correct a fault until you admit that it exists. It is precisely that type of person, Mr. Russell—your type of person—who needs our services the most'

'Now, look,' said John, 'I haven't got time for a sales pitch. If you've got any literature, leave it and I'll look at it later. Right now—'

Wolfe cut him off, "Are you enjoying your sex life?"

"What?" The suddenness of the question startled him.

"I said, are you enjoying your sex life? And don't tell me you are, because I've got the figures right here in front of me. The only time thirty-four percent is something to brag about is when your median is thirty."

John glowered, but he didn't say anything.

Wolfe continued, "All right, I'll concede that you might be enjoying yourself. It's not unusual for a man to have a lower threshold than normal—but I can tell you that your wife is not enjoying her sex life—else she wouldn't have called us. People only call us when they're unhappy." Wolfe paused, then asked suddenly, "You're not cheating on her, are you?"

"Hell, no."

"Have you recently become a homosexual?"

John sneered, "Of course not."

"Do you use the fornixator?"

"You mean the mechanical masturbator?"

Wolfe was impassive, "It's been called that."

"No, I don't use it"

"I see," said Wolfe.

"You see what?"

"I see that if you were cheating on her, or using the fornixator, you'd have found your own particular choice of sexual outlet. If you were, I'd get up and walk out of here right now. It'd be obvious why she isn't enjoying sex with you—you're not enjoying it with her. You'd be getting your satisfaction elsewhere, and there'd be nothing that I—or anyone—could do about it. But, if you still love her—and if she's still your only sexual outlet... well, there is something I can do about that. You do love her, don't you?"

John hesitated. After a bit, "Well... yes, of course—"

"You want her to have the best, don't you?"

"Sure, but—"

"Then why don't you want her to be sexually satisfied?"

"I do, but—"

"Mr. Russell," Wolfe said slowly, patiently as if explaining it to a child, "this is not the Victorian era. Women enjoy sex too." He leaned forward, became very serious, "Look, man, if you're sick, you go to a doctor and he makes you well again, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Sure, he does. Well, that's why I'm here. If you've got a sick sex life, you want to make it better again, don't you?" John nodded.

Wolfe smiled, pleased at this concession, "You've got a monitor-reaction system now, don't you? Well, that's just for the diagnosis.

But diagnosis isn't enough—now you need the treatment." Wolfe paused, noted the negative reaction on John's face. He changed his tone, became more serious, "Look, man, your score is way down—down to thirty-four. Doesn't that say to you that something's wrong? You *need* one of our

guidance units."

"I can't afford it," John mumbled.

"You can't afford not to! This is to save your marriage, man! If you didn't need it, I wouldn't be sitting here right now. We don't lease our units to people who don't need them. Do you actually *want* a divorce, Mr. Russell? That's where you're heading—"

John shook his head.

Then what's your objection to the unit?"

John looked at the other man, "I'm not a puppet."

Wolfe leaned back in his chair, "Oh, so that's it" He started to close his case, then hesitated, "I really should get up and leave, you know. I really should. You've just shown me how absolutely little you know about the unit. But I'll stay—if only to clear up your misconceptions. I can't stand to see a man misinformed—especially about *my* company. I've got to clear this thing up. The guidance unit is *not* a puppeteer. It is a *guidance* unit—that's why it's called a guidance unit. If it were a control unit, we'd have *called* it a control unit."

"Oh," said John.

Wolfe rummaged around in his case, brought out a neat four-color photo, "Now, look. This is the unit—isn't it a beaut?"

John took the picture and looked at it. It showed a device resembling the one he already had at home sitting on his dresser, but slightly larger and with an additional set of controls.

"The unit monitors the sensitive areas of both you and your partner," said Wolfe. "It has a positive feedback reaction hooked into the guidance modules—all of which means that if your wife's responses indicate that she will react well to certain types of stimulation, then the guidance system will trigger the impulse within you to provide that stimulation. You can resist these impulses if you want to, but why bother? The machine is your friend—it wants you to enjoy yourself."

John looked up at him, "It works both ways...?"

"Oh, yes, of course. She'll be responding to your needs just as you'll be responding to hers. Not only that, but the machine is programmed to guide you both to a simultaneous climax. That alone makes it all worthwhile."

"Yes, well, I don't know..."

"I *do* know, Mr. Russell," Wolfe said persuasively. "The machine lets you be more sensitive. Your score is thirty-four today. How would you like it to be sixty tomorrow? And it'll get better as you become more experienced."

John shrugged, "You make it sound awfully good..."

"It is, Mr. Russell. It is. I use one of these units myself—that is my wife and I do."

John looked at him. "You?"

"I know it may seem hard to believe, but it's true. Of course, I will admit that my wife and I never allowed our situation to reach the point that you and your wife have, but I can tell you that we have never regretted it."

"Never...?" asked John.

"Never," said Wolfe, and he smiled proudly.

Act Three

After the installation men had left, John looked at his wife as if to say, "Now what?"

Marsha avoided his gaze. It was almost as if she were having second thoughts herself. "I'll get dinner," she said, and left the room.

Dinner was a silent meal, and they picked at it without relish. John had an irritating feeling of impatience, yet at the same time he dreaded the moment that was rushing down on both of them. Neither of them referred to the new machine waiting in the bedroom.

Finally, he pushed his plate away and left the table. He tried to interest himself in the television, but it was all reruns except for the movie, and he had seen that at the local theater last year—with Marsha, he remembered abruptly. He switched off the set disgustedly and picked up a magazine instead, but it was one that he had already read. He would have put it down, but Marsha came into the room, so he feigned interest in an article he had already been bored with once.

Marsha didn't speak; instead she pulled out her mending and began sewing at a torn sock. From time to time she gave a little exhalation of breath that was not quite a sigh.

It was his place to say something, John knew, but at the same time he didn't want to—it would be too much effort. He didn't feel like working at being nice tonight. He could feel the silence lying between them like a fence—and on either side of it the tethered dogs of their tempers waited for the unwary comment.

John dropped the magazine to the floor and stared at the opposite wall, the blank eye of the TV. He glanced over at Marsha, saw that she was already looking at him. He glanced away quickly, began rummaging through the rack for another magazine.

"You know," she said, "pretending that I'm not here won't make me go away. If you don't want to do it, just say so."

He dropped the magazine he was looking at, hesitated, then continued to rummage. "What's your hurry?" he said.

"You're just as curious as I am," she answered.

"No, I'm not I really don't think that it's going to make that much difference. I only bought it for your sake." Then, having sunk his psychic barb, he returned his attention to the magazines.

She bent to her mending again, biting her lips silently, thinking of all the things she wanted to say, but knew she shouldn't. It wouldn't take much to make him storm out of the house and not come back until after the bars closed.

After a while, she bit off the end of the thread and said,

"There's nothing to be afraid of," and immediately regretted having said it.

But he did not take offense. He just said, "I'm not afraid," and continued paging through an old copy of *Life*.

She put her mending down. "Remember when we were first married...? How we used to stall all evening long—both pretending that *that* wasn't the only thing on our minds...?"

He grunted. She couldn't tell whether it was a yes-grunt or a no-grunt.

"Don't you feel something like that now...?" she asked. "I mean, doesn't it feel the same to you?"

"No, it doesn't," he said, and there was a hardness in his voice that made her back off.

She sighed and put her mending basket aside. She went into the kitchen and made coffee instead. Once she started to cry and had to blink back the tears. She thought that John hadn't heard, but suddenly

he was standing at the kitchen door. "Now what's the matter?" he asked tiredly.

"Nothing," she snapped and took the cream out of the refrigerator and put it on the counter. "I burned myself, making you coffee."

"I don't want any," he said, then as an afterthought, "Thanks."

She put the cream back in the refrigerator and followed him into the living room, "Then what *do* you want? Do you Want to go to bed?"

John looked at her. Who was this woman who had suddenly become a part of his life? Where had she come from? Why was he so reluctant even to touch her? He shoved the thought out of his mind. "I'm tired," he said.

"No, you're not," she snapped. "You don't want to. You always say you're tired when you don't want to." She pointed toward the bedroom, "Well, that thing's in there now, John—and it's not going away either. Sooner or later, you're going to have to see how it works. Why not tonight?"

He looked at her for a long moment, as if trying to remember the girl she had once been. Finally, "All right I'll turn out the lights..."

She waited and they went into the bedroom together, without words. She started to help him out of his clothes, but he pushed her hands away and shrugged out of his shirt without letting her touch him. He unloosened his belt and let his pants drop to the floor.

And then, suddenly, she was standing in front of him—he hadn't even noticed when she'd shrugged out of her dress, but here she was, wearing only bra and panties. In the dim light she was only a silhouette and he had to rely on his memory to tell-him what she looked like.

She slid into his arms and they stood there for a moment, without effort, without moving.

After a bit, she broke away and began looking for the wires and bands. "The pause that depresses..." she smiled at him, but he did not smile back. Instead, he sat down on the edge of the bed to wait.

She handed him the ankle and wrist bands and showed him how to attach the wires. "Mr. Wolfe showed me how, but it's also in the instruction book. Bend down, so I can do your head." He did and she did.

"My turn now," she said. "Come on..."

He stood there, looking at her, conscious of the wires trailing from his wrists and ankles and from the top of his head. But she did not laugh. "Aren't you going to help me?" she demanded instead.

He glanced around and found that she had stacked her bands neatly on the night stand. With a minimum of effort, he clipped them to her forearms. He did not resist when she kissed him affectionately on the ear, but neither did he react. Marsha caught at his hand and held it, "It'll be good, John. I know." For the first time in a year, she looked into his eyes, "Trust me."

He looked back at her, this strange woman who was his wife, and his first impulse was to snap, "I'm doing it, aren't I?" But something in her glance held him back, and he just nodded instead.

Being careful of the wires, they climbed into bed.

For a while they lay side by side, she looking at him, he looking into the darkness. They listened to the sound of each other's breathing, like two titans in the dark. Finally, impatiently, she moved into his arms.

"They say you should relax," she whispered. "Let the machine do the guiding. But you do have to start it, John. You have to give the feedback and reaction systems something to start with..."

She lifted her face up, wanting to be kissed. He kissed it. He let his hands move incuriously over her body, feeling how her once-trim form had begun to pile up layers, had begun to turn to fat; the

once-smooth skin was beginning to go rough and there were wrinkles. But he let his hands roam across her anyway, without direction, not noticing how they had already begun to quest and probe.

Marsha's hands too were moving across his body, through the sparse hair on his chest, up and along his never well-muscled arms, across the uneven pimple-stained skin of his back. Yet, he noticed, her hands seemed to be more gentle than they had seemed in the past, more sensitive, more knowing and more active. She was beginning to caress parts of his chest and legs, places that seemed to be more alive than he remembered them.

His hands too had taken on a life of their own—and yet, they were still his hands. He stroked, he fondled, he caressed with a technique and a skill he had never noticed in himself. And Marsha was reacting, responding, giving with an enthusiasm he had never before seen in this woman who was his wife.

Now he was moving and thrusting with a wholeness of being that had to be shared—it was too big for any one person—and he moved and thrust at her all the more willfully, trying to push his sharing all the deeper into her. Marsha too seemed to be arching, thrusting, giving—as if she too had something overwhelming to give.

It was as if they were both doing the right thing at the right time and at the right place—and for one brief bright flash it reminded him of what it had been like when they had been young, and when nothing else had existed but each other and the bright surging world.

They forgot the wires, the bands, the guidance module on the dresser. Their external beings had disappeared and they immersed themselves in their lovemaking. It was a surging climbing wave, a bright crashing thing that built ever higher. Ever higher.

And it was very good.

He smiled at her. She smiled back, and they kissed. It wasn't until the next morning they discovered the guidance module had not been connected.