

THE JOE SHOW

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THE JOE SHOW

By Terry Bisson

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It had been a long day.

I sighed with pleasure as my door clicked shut behind me. I threw the bolt, fastened the chain, propped the bar in place, then snapped the little lock on the bottom. This was New York, after all; and I was a girl, living alone.

Thank god..

Leaving the lights down, I stepped out of my Candies and hung my Liz Claiborne fake fur on its hook on the wall. I stepped through the only other door in my tiny studio apartment and turned on the bathwater. The temperature and rate of flow were already set. The bubble bath was already waiting in its little Alka-Seltzer-like pill at the bottom of the tub.

Closing the bathroom door behind me (to cut the noise) I picked the remote out of the clutter on the kitchenette table and clicked on the CD player. It, too, was already set--for Miles Davis, just like in In The Line of Fire. Can I help it if Clint and I are soul buddies?

I hung up my Clifford and Wills blazer in my almost-walk-in closet, let my J. Crew wool skirt and Tweeds silk blouse fall to the floor (both due at the cleaners), then peeled off my pantyhose, wadded them into a ball and tossed them into the corner. Miles was just beginning his un-muted solo as I unhooked my tangerine Victoria's Secret underwire demi bra, shrugged it off, and stepped out of the matching tangerine high cut bikini, with the cute little accent bows along the side. As you may have guessed, I buy everything by mail. Everything but shoes.

I tossed the bra and panties into the dirty clothes pile with the pantyhose, stopped by the mirror to admire my new \$78 haircut, crossed to the kitchenette, filled a heavy-bottomed glass with white wine from the coldest corner of the fridge, carried it into the bathroom and set it on the edge of the tub, then turned off the bathwater, all without a single wasted motion. This was New York, after all. Miles was just winding up. I sat on the john and lit the joint that was waiting for me, tucked into its own book of matches. I took two nice long hits while Coltrane strode into his solo, then nipped out the joint and high-stepped it into the tub. My rubenesque (as my ex-boy friend, Reuben, loved to call it) bottom was just descending into the suds when Coltrane fucked up.

Coltrane fucked up?

I stood up, dripping.

Was my Sony shelf system, only four months old, giving up the ghost already? Coltrane bleated like a sheep, then quit. Somebody hit a bad note on a piano. The rhythm section (Cobb, Chambers, Evans) stopped playing, raggedly, one at a time.

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I grabbed a towel and stepped out of the bathroom, dripping water and suds onto the bare wood floor. All Blues was starting over, at the beginning. It sounded fine now. Not knowing what else to do, I picked up the remote and hit PAUSE.

The music stopped clean this time. "Sorry about that," said a voice.

I clutched the towel to me and looked around the studio.

"I thought music would be easy, like speech, but it's not," the voice said.

"Who's there?" I demanded.

"You want the short answer or the long answer?" the voice asked. It sure as hell wasn't Miles or Coltrane. It was a guy, but not a black guy; he pronounced every syllable, like a foreigner.

"Who the fuck is in my apartment?" I said. The odd thing was, I wasn't scared. Maybe if I'd been in a house or a bigger apartment it would have been scary, but you can't have a haunted studio; they're too small.

"I'm not in your apartment," the voice said.

I couldn't tell where it was coming from. I thought of those movies that go straight to video--some demented dude peeping through a telescope while he keeps you talking on the phone.

Except that the blinds were closed. And I wasn't on the phone.

As an experiment, with two fingers, as if it were hot, I picked up the phone and said, "Hello?"

"Hello," said the same voice. Over my phone.

"What are you doing on my phone! Is this some kind of crank call? Are you some kind of sex fiend?"

I pulled the towel around me more tightly, even though the blinds were closed. What about infra-red? What about X-ray vision? That used to bother me about Superman, by the way. If he was really a guy, how he could concentrate on fighting evil, if he could see through girls' dresses all the time?

But I'm getting off the subject. "Who the fuck are you? What are you doing in my apartment?"

"Calm down, Victoria. I'm not in your apartment, I'm on your phone. And you're the one that picked up the phone."

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Nobody has called me Victoria since my mother died. "Who are you?"

"Like I said, do you want the long answer or the short answer?"

"The short answer," I said.

"I'm a temporary electronic entity that has taken over your TV."

I didn't say anything.

"Victoria, are you still there?"

"Better give me the long answer," I said.

"Good. Hang up the phone and turn the TV on, and I'll explain."

Like an idiot, without even thinking about it, I did what he said. It said. Whatever. The same remote that works the CD player works the TV. Even though it was only eight-thirty, some kind of late-night talk show was on. There was this guy sitting at a desk, looking ill-at-ease, sort of like Conan O'Brien.

He was mumbling so I turned up the sound.

"Thanks," he said. "Since I am part of the matrix, I can access all the electronics in your apartment, like the CD and the phone. But the TV is the real me."

"The real you," I said, to humor him. I looked in the closet again. I looked under the couch.

"Real is only relative, of course," he said. "There's not really a real me. I'm a temporary electronic entity, created out of the TV matrix in order to to communicate with ..."

"So what's your name?" I said. I figured the best thing at this point was to keep him--or it, or whatever--talking. Meanwhile I looked in the kitchen cabinets, in the dishwasher, even in the toilet tank. I don't know what I was looking for: wires, a hidden speaker. Maybe a leprechaun?

"Name? I didn't think about a name," he said.

"Even a temporary electronic entity has to have a name," I said. I figured two could play this game (whatever it was). It was like some kind of Letterman put-on, like when he comes to the door. Except there was nobody at the door; I checked through the peephole.

"A name," he said. He started tapping on his desk. "I don't know. Help me think of something."

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"How about Joe. Jim. Jack. John."

"Joe it is, then." He brightened and sat up straighter. "That would make this The Joe Show. I wonder if I could come up with a Joe Show Band."

"Slow down, Joe," I said. "I still want to know who you are, and what you're doing in my apartment. I'm as good a sport as the next girl, but enough is enough, okay?"

"Number one," said Joe, "I'm not in your apartment. I'm in your TV. If I was in your apartment, you probably wouldn't be sitting there so casually on the arm of the couch, your thighs slightly parted, so delightfully rubenesque that a towel doesn't begin to cover ..."

My legs flew together so fast my knees knocked. "I'm calling the police," I said. I turned off the TV and picked up the phone, punching 911 so hard it was like punching eyeballs out.

"Don't get excited," his voice said, over the phone. "I can't see you. You can't see out of a TV, can you?"

"Now you're taking over my phone? Operator!"

"Victoria, slow down. What exactly are you going to tell them at 911?"

I was standing and I sat back down. He had a point. Maybe I was just stoned. This was the first time I had tried this new dope.

I hung up the phone, pulled the towel tighter, and turned the TV back on.

"Thanks," he said. The picture looked brighter. Behind the desk there was now a big sign that said, THE JOE SHOW. I could hear a band warming up in the background. "This will take some explaining," he said, "so maybe you should finish your bath and get comfortable. If you want, I'll call out for Chinese."

Chinese? That settled it. It was the dope. I was relieved (even though it meant I was going to have to cut down). I pointed the remote at the TV and fired, turning it off. "Hasta la vista, Joe baby."

Yes! I went into the bathroom, shut the door behind me, and slipped back into the bath. My wine on the edge of the tub was still cold. (I left the joint alone.) I was finally relaxing again, letting the hot water caress the back of my neck, when I heard applause.

I leaned out of the tub and opened the door. I heard laughter. Canned laughter.

"I thought I turned you the fuck off!" I hollered.

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"I can work the remote," Joe said. "And I'd rather be on than off. Anybody would. You can't blame me for that."

"Just go away," I said. "Please!"

"No need to be so hostile, Victoria. It's after eight-thirty, which means we only have half an hour."

"Half an hour till what?"

"That's what I'm trying to explain, if you will just let me! Why don't you finish your bath, then come out and watch the show for a few minutes. Ten minutes."

I pulled the plug. I dried my hair, no big deal with my new Lyle-loves-Julia look. I made every move slow and deliberate, as if I were super-stoned, though I knew by now it wasn't the dope. Apparently it was real, like it or not. I dried my fingers and lit the joint and took a hit. If I'm going to go off the deep end, I thought, might as well do a swan dive.

Even though Joe had said he couldn't see out of the TV, I sort of slunk around the corner to my almost-walk-in closet to get dressed.

"May I suggest the black lace bodysuit with the scooped peekaboo front and the stretch satin back," he said.

Jesus! "You've been going through my drawers?"

"How can I go through your drawers?" he protested. I peeped around the corner of the closet and saw him on the screen, holding up his hands. They sort of sparkled. But didn't people on TV all sort of sparkle? "You order your clothes by phone, that's how I know about it," he said.

"Well, stay the hell out of my stuff," I said. "And forget the bodysuit, it makes me feel like a sausage." I pulled on some panties and covered up with the oldest, unsexiest thing I could find--my stepfather's ancient maroon terrycloth robe--and went out and sat down on the couch. Flopped down is more like it.

"This had better be good," I said.

"Guaranteed. Okay. Where to begin?" It was a rhetorical question. Now the sign behind the desk was neon: THE JOE SHOW. The camera was closer in, the lighting was better, and I could see that Joe was about Letterman's age but better looking. But who isn't?

"To start with, as I've explained, I'm not really a person," he said. "And this isn't really a TV show, though you've probably already figured that out."

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"Thanks a lot," I said. Jesus!

"I am actually an entity created out of the electronic matrix, a temporary consciousness put together as a communications interface in order to make a link between my Creator and you, the people of Earth, through ..."

"Wait," I said.

"You want me to start over?"

"No, I heard what you said. I just don't believe it. I don't intend to believe it. I am not one of those Elvis sighting ladies."

"If I could get the King himself on THE JOE SHOW," Joe said with a smile, "would that convince you?" There was canned laughter, and Joe raised one sparkling hand: "Only kidding, Victoria! I have very limited powers and bringing Elvis back to life is not one of them. I exist for one purpose only, to make a connection between my Creator and your President."

"Bill Clinton?"

"I sure wasn't created and sent to Earth to talk to Al Gore. Or Ross Perot!" More canned laughter, and if there's anything I hate it's canned laughter. I stood up and hit the channel changer on the remote. Up, then down. Up, down.

THE JOE SHOW stayed on.

Joe held up his hand to quiet the laughter. "I'm sorry, Victoria," he said. "I am an entertainment entity, after all, made out of network TV. It's part of my heritage to play for laughs."

I sat back down. The camera moved in closer; Joe was oozing sincerity, wringing his hands like Arsenio. "A simulated human interface made out of talk show hosts and news anchors has all sorts of special needs, including the need to get a few laughs. And applause."

There was applause. Joe quietened it with a wave of his hand.

"Excuse me?" I said. I was beginning to get angry. "I just want to turn you off, okay? I'm not stupid. I know this is some kind of Totally fucking Hidden Video or something, and it's not all that funny. So just tell me the real deal and we'll all have a laugh--a small one--and I'll get on with my life."

"Do you have somebody coming over or something?"

"None of your fucking business."

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"Okay, okay. You said you'd give me twenty minutes to explain, remember?"

"Ten. And it's almost over."

"Let me try again. As I already told you, my only reason for being here, for being at all, for existence, is to set up a communications link between my Creator and Bill Clinton. So your next question is, where do you come in, right?"

"I don't have a next question," I said. "The whole thing is too incredibly stupid."

"You said you'd let me explain, Victoria. You could cooperate by asking the right questions."

"Okay, okay," I said. "Where do I come in?"

"I'll come to that part in a minute. First, let me point out that this other intelligence, this magnificent extraterrestrial, my Creator, is using a very short window for this communication, which is why it has to happen tonight. In eighteen minutes, actually. It may never be possible again."

"I'm supposed to believe that you are, like, an emissary from another intelligence?"

"I like that. That's a good word, emissary."

"What is this--thing? This so-called magnificent extraterrestrial."

"It's not exactly a thing," said Joe. "It's huge, bigger than your entire star system. It's not a biological entity; not even a consciousness, which is a focusing and limitation of intelligence--but an unlimited intelligence made up of electrical impulses; a creature of pure energy. Sort of a plasma cloud. Light years across and almost invisible, all the way on the other side of the galaxy. Are you following me so far?"

That was the longest, most complicated thing I had ever heard on a talk show. I was impressed in spite of myself. I nodded.

"Good. Well, it so happens that right now, this evening, there is a brief moment--about a minute and forty seconds long--during which my Creator will be in direct contact with this side of the galaxy, through a fortuitous fold in space-time. And when the opportunity arises to make a link, to reach out and touch someone, so to speak, why not use it?"

"But-- Clinton?"

"Can you imagine trying to have an intelligent conversation with Yelstin?"

"So you're, like, up on Earth politics and everything?"

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"It's not that complicated, Victoria. Big dog bites little dog, that sort of thing. Woof woof."

More canned laughter.

"I thought you were going to cool it on the comedy."

"Sorry. I'll delete the laugh track," Joe said. He shrugged comically but the audience--or rather the laugh track--was silent. "See? Anything for you."

"Okay. So now, explain where I come in. What do you want me to do--call the President?"

"No, no, no. I'm setting that up through the White House staff. The actual communication will be through a satellite link at approximately 9:04 Eastern Standard Time, when the President will be aboard Air Force One crossing the North Magnetic Pole, and a temporary alignment of the Aurora Borealis with the galactic lens will make this otherwise unthinkable transmission possible. For one minute and forty seconds. Think of it--an actual conversation between the leader of the Free World and an awesome alien intelligence. Alien but friendly."

"How friendly?"

"Very friendly."

"So where do I come in?"

"Well, to let me use your phone line. And to help me maintain the link. That's the hard part. So to speak. Maybe you want to slip into something comfortable while I explain it. Have some more wine. Another hit of dope."

"Not if I'm going to be talking to the President."

"You won't be talking to anybody but me. Besides, does Bill Clinton look to you like a guy who's never smoked a joint?"

"Yes. I know for a fact that he's never inhaled."

"Whatever. Anyway. You are the key to the whole process, Victoria. One, you are smart and capable. Two, you read science fiction."

"No, I don't. I watch Star Trek, the Next Generation, when there's nothing else on."

"Close enough. Three, you are a Democrat. And four, you look so good sitting there, cross-legged, with nothing on under your robe but those little white cotton panties."

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I begged his pardon. "I beg your pardon?"

I switched off the TV. It came back on. I wasn't surprised. I pulled the robe tight around my neck; I was no longer sitting cross-legged. "I thought you couldn't see out of the TV," I said.

"I can't, exactly. But that was sort of an evasion," Joe said. "Light is just wave action, and I'm all wave action. Inside or outside your robe is all the same to me. I know for example that you are not wearing a bra; that you don't need one; that ..."

"This is either a sick joke or some kind of weird alien interstellar sexism!"

"Maybe. Just hear me out, okay? I'm getting to the hard part. We chose you for this operation, Victoria, not only because you are cute, and you are cute, but because we figured you would have the the intelligence to understand and go along with it. If we chose wrong, and we may have chosen wrong, it's a lost opportunity, since there's not enough time to set up another communications link. I like your new haircut, by the way."

"What time is it exactly?" I asked.

The JOE SHOW sign behind Joe's desk blinked off and was replaced by a digital clock: 8:47. The clock blinked off, the sign blinked back on--and I blinked, thinking for the first time that all this might, in fact, just possibly, be true.

And as soon as I thought that, I realized it was true. It had to be. Nobody could make up, much less pull off, such a scheme. "So you're for real," I said.

"Not for real," Joe said. "I'm an electronic simulation, remember? But I'm serious. Can we talk now without you freaking out and turning off the TV or calling 911?"

"I guess," I said. "You just switch yourself back on anyway."

"But it hurts my feelings. Even if I am put together out of talk show hosts and news anchors, I have feelings. At least, I think I do."

"Just explain, Joe. Please."

"Okay. The thing is, we need you to help me maintain my consciousness." His hair was longer and darker. He was starting to look more like Howard Stern than David Letterman.

"Are you familiar with how an erection is caused in the human male by the blood engorging the organ you call the penis?"

"Familiar enough," I said.

"Okay. Then you probably also understand how thought, imagination, consciousness itself, is made possible by the blood flow to the neural mass you call the brain."

"Get to the point," I said.

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"Well, this electronic neural simulation we call Joe--meaning me--combines all that in one electron flow pattern, since with a temporary entity there is no need for long-term memory or reproduction. My Creator made it all one system, to simplify things. But it makes things more complicated in a way, since to maintain the electron flow to the so-called brain or consciousness circuit, we also have to keep the sexual circuit stimulated."

"You're telling me you can't think straight unless you have a hard-on?"

"That's it," Joe said. "Of course we are talking electronic simulations here. Actually, I don't even have a ..." He looked down at his lap.

"Spare me the details," I said. "Do you mean this whole time we've been talking, you've been ..."

"Maintaining my consciousness by enjoying the company of a beautiful woman who just stepped out of the bath. Victoria, I'm only here because you turn me on."

I didn't know whether to feel flattered or insulted. I felt a little of both.

"So you're asking me to strip for you?"

"No, no, no. Not exactly. I know from the orders you place that you like to, shall we say, pamper yourself with elegant and exotic lingerie."

"There's nothing exotic about it, and I bought most of it for my boyfriend," I said.

"You bought several things since you broke up with him."

"Maybe I decided to be my own boyfriend," I said, "And besides, I still say this is sexist as all hell."

"Maybe it is," said Joe. "But I can't help what I am, which is an electronic entity made out of network TV, which makes me very male, and probably what you call sexist. If you had cable, or if I had been put together out of PBS, maybe music or even political commentary would provide me with consciousness. As it is, it's visual sexual stimulation. A beautiful woman in beautiful things."

"White cotton panties are not exactly exciting lingerie," I said.

"Tell that to Elvis," Joe said.

I didn't know what to say, so I said, "Well, I don't know."

"What's to know?" Joe said. "Look at it this way, I didn't set this up and neither did you. We're both just doing our job. If it bothers you that damn much, then forget it. Get dressed and go out, or turn off the lights and go to bed. All you'll miss is THE JOE

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SHOW. And a chance to facilitate a once-in-eternity communications link between your President and an incredibly wise and interesting and magnificent extraterrestrial that's about eighteen times the size of your entire fucking solar system."

"Don't get so excited," I said. I got up for another glass of wine. As I walked to the fridge I could almost imagine Joe's wave-forms, or whatever he called them, sparkling all over my body, gently, like bath water. I was wearing a terrycloth robe, and the panties of course, and yet I felt more naked than I had ever felt in my life. The feeling wasn't entirely unpleasant.

I poured myself some wine and barely caught myself before offering Joe some. "Do me one favor and knock off the Elvis talk, okay? It makes me feel like a nut case."

"Done," Joe said. "Elvis is history."

"Now, what is it, exactly, that you have in mind?"

"You know that sheer camisole top and scoop front bikini with lace inserts you ordered from Victoria's Secret, in the magenta?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I'll bet you were planning to wear it tonight."

Actually, I was. "Actually, I was," I said.

"Well?"

Well, why not. I stepped into my closet to change. The cool new silk felt good between my legs, and the low cut lace bodice did wonderful things with my nipples.

I felt a little nervous stepping back out in front of the TV. "This what you had in mind?" I asked.

"Does Father Guido Sarducci wear a hat?" Behind Joe, on the show, I heard a cymbal crash.

"That band is pretty bad," I said.

"They're out of here." Joe cut them off with a Letterman-like gesture. "They're history, just like Elvis."

"You are kind of sweet in your own way," I said. I could feel my nipples getting hard. Looking down, I could see them, through the camisole. I lit the joint and took another hit. There was now a sofa to one side of Joe's desk. A woman in a short black leather dress, showing lots of leg, sat on it, next to a guy wearing blue jeans and a sport coat.

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"You have guests," I said. "Who are they?"

"Nobody, really," Joe said. "Just generic. Part of the matrix. See how the show livens up when you slip into something, shall we say, comfortable?"

"Are you trying to make me blush?"

"Maybe a little. I like it when you blush there."

"Where?"

"On the insides of your thighs."

The amazing thing (to me) was that instead of closing my legs, I opened them more. Joe's slightly out-of-focus smile made me feel warm, welcoming, even (I confess) a little wet. Maybe he's the ideal boyfriend at last, I thought. Real and not real. Here and not here.

There was now a digital clock display inside the O on SHOW. It read 8:56. "Aren't you supposed to be calling the White House?" I asked.

"I'm on the line right now," Joe said "I'm in the West Wing, talking to Stephanopolous. He's the one who has to convince the President this is for real. We can't do it cold."

"He's cute, that Stephanopolous," I said, shrugging the camisole strap off one shoulder. "But how can you be talking to him and, you know, romancing me at the same time?"

"Multi-tasking," said Joe. "It's what I'm best at."

Was it the dope or was I feeling a faint twinge of jealousy? "And Stephanopolous, he believes your story?"

"Oh, yeah. We're almost ready to put the call through to the, you know ... what's his name ..."

"The President," I said. "Hey, Joe!"

Joe looked like he was about to nod off. He had his chin on his hand.

"Sit up!" I said. "Jesus! You're the one that told me to wear this outfit!"

"Sorry," Joe said. "It's just that the link takes so much energy ... it's hard to maintain full consciousness ... we're about ready to make the connection now, and you're doing fine ... But how about that little item you ordered when you were still going with what's-his-name ..."

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"Reuben," I said. "Keep talking." I stepped into the closet and out of the camisole and bikini. I found the little rose-colored silk thong, and slipped it on (or slipped it in, you might say). Reuben hadn't been into bras but I had a feeling Joe was. I didn't have anything in rose, but I found a pink lace demi bra which barely covered my nipples. I added some gold loop earrings and asked, "Have you made the link yet?"

"It's going through right now. The Borealis is shimmering. The Galactic lens is lined up. Your President and my Creator are about to make contact. In only a few seconds, if we can maintain this connection, we are going to make history."

Before stepping back out into the room, I checked myself in the mirror. The great thing about a \$78 haircut is that it looks the same from every angle. Great.

"You could say the same thing about a million dollar ass," Joe said.

"What?" Jesus! "You can read my mind?"

"Only the most superficial stuff," Joe said. "Surface electrical activity. Stuff about haircuts. I find myself hoping you'll turn around before you sit down."

I found myself doing it. I found myself enjoying it. I felt as if Joe's wave forms were caressing me inside and out, and I didn't mind the feeling that I was as almost naked in my mind as I was in my body. I didn't feel I had anything to hide. Not from Joe.

"What else do you find yourself hoping?" I said, stretching out on the couch with my legs spread blushing wide.

"That you'll do what you just did."

"Now you're the one who's blushing," I said.

"Must be because I like your earrings," he said with a smile.

On the couch beside his desk, the woman in the short black leather skirt was sitting with her legs spread a la Sharon Stone. The guy beside her was starting to look a little like Stephanopolous.

"Great show tonight, Joe," I said. "Except for the band."

"I'll fire the band if you'll slip your bra off."

"You already fired them, remember?"

"I'll hire them so I can fire them again."

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"What girl could resist such an offer?" I was starting to love THE JOE SHOW; it made me feel witty as well as beautiful. I shrugged the straps off my shoulder and pulled the cups down, pushing my eager, star-struck breasts up and out toward the bright lights of THE JOE SHOW. Some girls' nipples get smaller when they get hard. Mine get bigger.

"I think we have contact!" Joe said. His guests both applauded. I did too.

"Tell me something about this Creator," I said, unhooking my bra and taking it off altogether. "What's he like?"

"What makes you so sure it's a he?"

I had to laugh. There I was stretched out in nothing but a g-string and earrings. "Just an intuition," I said.

"Well he's like a plasma cloud. He has no mass but he does have a certain luminosity."

"Not that kind of stuff," I said. "I mean, is he nice?"

"Nice?"

"Do you like him?"

"Like him? I love him," said Joe. "I adore him. He created me. He's given me this wonderful existence, even if it's short."

Joe was sweet; no doubt about it. "Do you want me to delete something else?" I asked.

"Delete?"

But he could be dense. "Take something else off," I said.

"Do I? Does Leno have a jaw?"

I took off an earring. It rang when it hit the floor.

"I was thinking about the little panty thing."

"I could tell you were thinking about it," I said. Were the insides of my thighs blushing? I was feeling as lubricious as a dewy summer evening ... "But I'm going to leave it on for now and give myself a little almond oil rubdown. Besides, aren't you supposed to be working on this historic communications link?"

"I am," Joe said.

"Multi-tasking?"

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"You bet."

Joe sat back with his hands behind his shaggy head--he had a bad haircut for a talk show host--while I rubbed hand-warmed almond oil onto the backs of my knees, and the bottoms of my feet, and the insides of my thighs. The thing about guys--even simulated guys--is that they're so simple. It's what makes them both a pleasure and a pain. "How's Bill doing?" I asked.

"Bill?"

"He and your boss getting along?"

"Fantastic," Joe said. "But who's paying attention?" "Thought you were multi-tasking." I put the almond oil away and took another hit of dope.

"Multi-pleasure is more like it."

I lay back on the couch, glistening, and spread my legs just a little more. "You say such nice things, Joe. I almost wish you were a real guy."

"I almost am."

Just as an experiment, I pulled the tiny little rose silk thong bikini to one side and, just as an experiment, slipped two fingers under and in between and, just as an experiment ...

I heard a cymbal crash.

Joe was sitting upright at his desk. He was looking at me funny, as if we had just met.

"I thought you fired that band," I said. "You okay?"

"Absolutely."

"What happened?"

"Nothing! The Borealis window closed, I think. The communication is over. It worked."

"It did?"

"Absolutely. It was great. The White House, Bill on the phone, the whole thing. You were great, too."

"I was?" He seemed distracted. I suddenly felt cold. I got my terrycloth robe out of the closet and slipped it on.

"Absolutely. Anyway, my time is up. I have to go."

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"Go?" I couldn't help sounding disappointed.

"Yeah, see, the thing is, I have this long shut down protocol."

"Does that mean ... you die?"

"Yeah, but it's no big deal," Joe said. "Like I said, I'm a temporary entity." The camera moved in closer and Joe lit a cigarette, which looked strange, since people hardly ever smoke on TV anymore, even on the latest late night shows. "Last cigarette," he said, and I heard canned laughter.

The camera moved in still closer. "How do you spell your last name?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"W-i-n-d-e-r," I said.

The camera pulled back. "Victoria Winder!" Joe said loudly, mispronouncing it. There was applause from the audience, or from somewhere. Even the two guests on the couch applauded. Suddenly, irrationally, I hated them.

"I'll call you, Victoria," Joe said out of the corner of his mouth, reaching across his desk to shake hands with the guests ...

And the picture was gone. I was watching "Seinfeld" which I also hate.

I flicked through all the channels, but he was gone. No JOE SHOW. I suddenly felt very naked. I got dressed and went to bed.

The next morning while I was picking through the disaster area that was my apartment, looking for something to wear to work, I thought about everything that had happened the night before, and I thought, No way! No fucking way.

And yet ...

There was the empty glass, the half-smoked joint in the ashtray. The Miles Davis CD in the player, still on PAUSE. The lingerie thrown about. Even the earring under the couch.

I bought the New York Times on the way to work, but there was nothing in it about a call to Air Force One from the other side of the galaxy. But would there be? Like an idiot I even checked the TV listings, though of course I knew better. No JOE SHOW.

After an hour at work, I had put it out of my mind. I would have forgotten it altogether, except that Joe did say he would call. For a night or two--okay, a week or two--I almost expected to hear his voice whenever I picked up the phone.

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But I got over it. I did flip through the channels once or twice--okay, several times--not really expecting to find him. But that was it. I filed it under Unsolved Mysteries and forgot about it.

Then three weeks later, while I was standing in line at the Key Food on Broadway and 96th, my eyes lit on one of those bizarre supermarket tabloid headlines:

HOUSEWIFE STRIPS FOR STAR MAN

Her Sexy Chemise Powers Interstellar Summit

I had never bought one of those papers before. Imagine my surprise when I read what was essentially my own story, with only the names changed. This woman, who lived in Bend, Oregon, had been contacted by an entity she called Luxor, who ran a sort of game show on TV, and who had enticed her into a form of strip roulette in order to "engorge his faculties" so he could set up a meeting between an extraterrestrial intelligence and ex-President Reagan.

Needless to say, she was not a Democrat but a Republican.

First I was amazed. Then skeptical. Then pissed. Then curious. I tried calling the Weekly World Globe, but the paper didn't have a phone, only a box in Sioux City. So I called my only contact in the newspaper business, my former best friend, Sharon, who worked editing the Personals for the Village Voice.

I read her the headline and said, "I thought they made those stories up."

"They do," Sharon said.

"No they don't," I said, and told her in some detail what had happened to me. Maybe in too much detail, because the story seemed to make her nervous. "Let me call you right back," she said. But she didn't. She wouldn't take my calls, either.

I waited a few days, during which I scanned the supermarket tabloids for follow-up stories, but there was only the usual Elvis and saucer stuff. Finally I called Sharon at work and left a message on her voice-mail: "Either return my call or I will tell your mother what you actually do at the Voice."

She returned my call. "Can you meet me after work?" she said.

"Fine," I said. I met her at a coffee shop on 21st and Park, halfway between her office and mine. A tall woman with dark hair was with her in the booth when I got there. I was so mad at the runaround I had been getting that I didn't pay much attention when Sharon introduced her as Eleanor from NASA. I thought she meant the county on Long Island.

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"Glad to meet you," I said, then turned to Sharon. "Now kindly explain to me why you are acting so goddam weird?"

"Because it happened to me, too, Vickie. It happened to thousands of women."

"What happened?" I was going to have coffee but I decided to order a glass of wine. Sharon and her friend were both drinking wine.

"A couple of weeks ago," Sharon said, "an electronic entity showed up in my computer at home, wanting me to wear leather and lace for him."

"Leather and lace?"

"I have a little personal collection."

"Were you smoking dope?"

"You know I don't smoke dope anymore. I gave it up when you did."

"Did he tell you he was trying to set up a meeting with President Clinton?"

"The Dalai Lama."

"And you believed him?"

"Don't sound so shocked, okay? To tell you the truth, Vickie, I figured it was some horny hacker's demented masterpiece, but harmless enough. And I'm kind of a hacker myself. Anyway, he got me going. With the computer it's more physical than with the TV. You can run the mouse all over your ..."

"Spare me the details," I said. "Then Joe's whole story was bullshit!"

"Not exactly," Eleanor from NASA put in.

"After I heard from you," Sharon said, "I got curious, and I posted an inquiry on the Internet--"

"It was, 'Had safe sex with an electronic entity?'" Eleanor said, smiling shyly into her wine glass. I realized who she looked like. It was the girl from SEX, LIES and VIDEOTAPE, the nice one. The one with a guy's name.

"--and by midnight I had heard from eleven hundred women on three continents," said Sharon. "All of whom had been contacted by an electronic entity and--"

"Contacted?" I said. "Seduced. Coerced. Raped, is more like it!"

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"Whatever. Don't get so excited, okay? You always have to get so excited. Persuaded, let's say, to strip on the evening of October 11th under the pretext that----"

"Eleven hundred on the same night?"

"It's called multi-tasking," said Eleanor.

"Anyway," said Sharon, "to make a long story short, they--we--all tell the same story. The temporary entity, the interstellar plasma cloud intelligence, the high-level meeting. The details vary, but the results are all the same."

"We all undressed for him," said Eleanor.

"We all took it off," said Sharon.

"So it was a hustle," I said.

"Sort of," said Eleanor. "But like any good hustle, parts of it were true. I know because we at NASA had been--"

"Wait a minute. NASA the space agency?"

"I told you when you came in," Sharon said. "Jesus!"

"We at NASA had been tracking this thing for over a month," Eleanor went on, "and--"

"Tracking what thing?"

"The electronic entity. The thing you call Joe, and Sharon calls Reuben ..."

"Reuben?"

"Just let her finish, okay?" Sharon said. "You never let anybody finish."

"We at NASA had become aware that there was a free floating conscious entity in the electronic matrix around the country in early October," said Eleanor. "It showed up in NASA's global satellite links, in the Internet, in the cable TV system, even in the phone lines. We were still tracking it when it suddenly disappeared on the 12th of October. What we found out later was that it had contacted thousands of people, all women, without our knowing about it."

"But I thought you were one of them," I said.

"I keep my private life separate," said Eleanor. "At least I thought it was private. Until I saw Sharon's message on the Internet."

"So Joe was real!" I said. I was relieved to discover that I hadn't been totally deluded; and a little stunned. "A self-created electronic consciousness!"

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"Not self-created," said Eleanor. "The part about the plasma cloud, the non-biological intelligence bigger than a star system--that part was also true. As soon as we knew what to look for, we located it, all the way on the other side of the galaxy. And the plasma cloud created the temporary electronic entity, there's no doubt about that; matrix nets have imprints like DNA. Right now at NASA we are trying to figure out a way to set up communications with the plasma cloud directly, since the interface it created for itself was only temporary, and is gone."

"And was such a fuckin' liar," said Sharon.

"But wait," I said. "If all that was true, Joe and his Creator, both parts of it, then what was the lie?"

"All the rest," said Sharon. "Clinton. Stephanopolous. Air Force One. The Dalai Lama. Ronald Reagan. Michael Jackson--"

"Michael Jackson?"

Eleanor was blushing, looking down into her wine glass.

"Don't be so judgmental, okay?" Sharon said. "You are always so judgmental. But yes, the phone call to the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa or whatever--that part was all bullshit."

"If all the communications stuff was bullshit," I said, "then what was the point? Why were we contacted?"

"Think about it," Eleanor put in, still blushing.

"Think hard," said Sharon.

"You girls are not serious. Joe--the entity--was just using us to--to get off? That was the whole purpose?"

"Sex," said Eleanor.

"He was cruisin'," said Sharon.

"Either it was the electronic entity or the plasma cloud," Eleanor said. "Or maybe both at once. NASA is still working on that."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I said, "Well, I'll be damned." I waved for the check.

"And there's one other part that's a lie," Sharon said, as we divided up the bill.

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"What's that?"

"The part where he says he'll call you."

"Oh that," I said, as we walked out onto Park Avenue to look for three separate cabs.

"That part I never believed."

the end

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