

Private Eye

by Terry Bisson

Our editors like to think that this issue features stories in a variety of styles or modes. There are several stories that would fit right in with *The Twilight Zone* magazine if it were still around, one or two that might not be out of place in *The New Yorker*, some stories that would be appropriate for almost any science fiction magazine you could name, and a couple of yarns that might have been suitable for that groundbreaking fantasy magazine of the '40s, *Unknown*. We present you now a story that strikes us as being in a *Playboy* mode—a sexy, saucy tale that probably isn't suitable for our most tender readers. If you read *F&SF* with your kids or grandkids, save this one until after they're asleep.

Mr. Bisson reports that his next two books are *Planet of Mystery* and *Billy's Book*, both of which include material that first appeared in our pages.

* * * *

"Spare one of those?"

"Of course." I shook a Camel out of my pack, which was sitting on the bar as a reminder of better days. She was wearing a raincoat—Burberry; we notice such things—over jeans. It matched her hair, almost; it wasn't buttoned, only belted at the waist. She was three stools away, but I caught a glimpse of a narrow black strap on a narrow pale shoulder when she leaned down the bar to take the cigarette from my fingers.

We notice such things. Especially in a quiet bar on Eighth Avenue, on a rainy Thursday autumn-in-New York afternoon.

She was careful not to touch my fingers; I was careful not to touch hers. I have a lot of respect for cigarettes, these days.

"Thanks."

Her hair was what they used to call dirty blonde, cut short. Full, red lips and a low, smoky voice with eyes to match: dark, deep Jeanne Moreau eyes, filled with a certain sorrowful something. Regret? Loss? Perhaps. She was coasting, like me, on the high side of forty and her face looked it, which I found appealing, and her body didn't, which we find appealing. So many young girls have empty eyes.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

She sat back and examined the cigarette as if it were a fish she’d caught. Holding both ends in long fingers, very deft. Great hands. A dancer’s hands.

Then she lit it!

She tapped it on the bar and put it between her lips and struck a match and lit it.

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

I turned on my stool, alarmed, but the bartender was paying no attention. The little faux bistro—there’s one on every block in the west twenties—was empty except for us.

“Excuse me,” I said, sliding my drink down the bar and taking a seat next to hers. “But I thought you couldn’t smoke in New York bars anymore.”

“You can’t,” she said. “But Lou cuts me a pass every afternoon at about this time, when the lunch crowd’s gone.”

It was ten after two.

“Extraordinary,” I said, tapping a Camel out of my pack. “Perhaps if I pretended to be with you, Lou would cut me a pass, too?”

“Depends.” She eyed me sideways. “Are you a good pretender?”

“Good?” I contrived to sound insulted. “I’m the Great Pretender. Plus you’ll probably want another anyway.” I laid the pack down like a high card. Maybe even a trump, I was thinking.

“As long as we are pretending,” she said. “Just don’t get any ideas.”

“Ideas?” My head was filled with ideas. “I never get ideas.”

“I’m here to take a break,” she said. “Not to get hit on. As long as you understand that, we can pretend we are friends. I’ll even pretend to enjoy your company.”

Not to mention my Camels.

“Not to mention your Camels,” she added.

* * * *

Lou did, indeed, cut me a pass. And she did enjoy my company, or at least pretend. And I hers. She was an “Internet worker bee” (or so she called it, then) who worked at home, right around the corner. I was, well, whatever I told her I was.

“Burberry,” I said. “An old boyfriend?”

“All my boyfriends are old,” she said. “The young are too needy.”

“So many young girls have empty eyes,” I said, and ordered us both a wine. White for her, red for me.

Her coat fell open when she leaned forward to pick up her glass. I saw the top of a slip, black silk, or something very like it. The strap was loose which told me that her breasts were probably small. But we couldn't see enough to tell.

“What is it with you guys and straps?” she asked, lighting another Camel off the one she was smoking. “It's not like you're actually *seeing* anything.”

Busted. Even honesty is, sometimes, the best policy. “Extrapolation,” I said.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Each part suggests the whole. That inch and a half of narrow strap, seen as if by accident, suggests the lacy cup to which it leads, which in turn suggests that which it cups, shapes, presents. That little strap takes the mind's eye to where the eye alone can't, quite, yet, go. Extrapolation.”

“Well said,” she said. I thought so too. She blew an almost-perfect smoke ring, then looked me straight in the eye and asked: “How many of you are there?”

Busted again. I glanced at my Fauxlex. “Sixty-seven, as of now. They come and go. How'd you know?”

"I read about it in *Wired*," she said. "Cyberhosting. Private Eyes. It's the new new thing. And a girl can tell. There's a certain—intensity of regard."

"Well said," I said. "And you don't mind?"

"On the contrary, it's kind of appealing." She leaned forward and the Burberry fell open, just enough. "Especially since *regard* is all that's involved."

"There are Protocols," I said. There was that lovely intimate little strap again. "Appropriate for just such an occasion."

"Well said," she said, sliding off her stool. "It's almost three. Tell you what: you may come up till five."

She picked up my Camels and left the bar. Scarcely believing our luck, I touched my Fauxlex to the bill strip, beeped Lou a fifty to cover the tip, and followed.

* * * *

Her name, she told me in the elevator, was Eula. I didn't realize, then, what it meant. Her place was a mess. It was a studio filled with computers, monitors, cables, drives, all the apparatus with which I am, ironically, so unfamiliar. One high window (dirty), one houseplant (dying), one futon couch facing a cluttered coffee table on a faded fake Persian rug.

With a nod, she sat me down on the rug. Then she slipped off her Burberry, hung it carefully on the back of a chair stacked with computer manuals, and disappeared into her tiny kitchen. She came back with two white-wine glasses and a bottle to match. Pinot Grigio.

She sat on the couch with her long legs tucked underneath her. "So you are cyberhosting," she said. "There was an article in *Playboy* too. What's it like, being a Private Eye? Been at it long?"

The strap, both straps, led down to a black slip with lacy cups tucked into tight, faded jeans. High end tank top.

"A few months," I said. "Nobody's been doing it long. It's a new technology, the nanobiotech thing. My clients log in and they see what I see."

She lit a Camel and tossed me my pack. “And that’s it?”

“Private Eyes operate under very strict Protocols,” I said. “No physical contact. My clients would be bounced off immediately, were I to touch even your fingertips. And I would be out of a job.”

I had been wrong about her breasts. No bra, as far as we could tell. And we could almost tell.

“And that suits them—your clients?”

“It seems to. My clients are all lookers. See-onlys. Perhaps they have been disappointed in love. Perhaps a look is all they want.”

“And yourself?” She shrugged one strap off one narrow shoulder. That made both shoulders, somehow, even more appealing.

“I’m kind of a looker myself.”

“So I see.” She blew a smoke ring. “But isn’t it weird?”

“Being a looker?”

“Having all those strangers lurking inside you.”

“They’re not actually inside me,” I said. “It’s virtual. A Private Eye is just a sender, that’s all.”

“They watch on a screen?”

“You must not have read the whole article; they just close their eyes. It’s all bio, like I said. They suck on a chip and close their eyes and see what I see. Satellite link.”

“A chip. Like hard candy. What if they swallow it?”

“They don’t. All the sensories are in the mouth. You don’t taste with your stomach, do you? Besides, it’s rather expensive.”

“I like that part,” she said. “And where do you find them? These clients?”

“I don’t have to. I have no idea who they are. They buy the chip at Circuit City and surf all the different Private Eyes.”

“So it’s a kind of competition.”

“I suppose. I do okay. All I have to do is find a pretty girl to talk to.”

“Or woman,” she said. “And peep down her dress.”

“Or her Burberry.”

“And get paid for it.”

“A modest sum,” I said. “As long as I observe the Protocols. Plus I get expenses.”

“The cigarettes.” She kicked off her shoes, or rather slippers; or rather, pulled them off by the heels with long dancer’s toes, one and then the other.

“I pay for the Camels,” I said. “The bar tab goes through my Fauxlex. I only host on weekday afternoons, one to six.”

“Free drinks,” she said. She crossed her legs. Her jeans were pulled tight, making a wide V between her thighs. “And can they hear all this?”

“They’re see-onlys,” I said. “No sound, according to Private Eye.”

“So they miss out on all the conversation?”

“They don’t seem to mind.”

“Am I suppose to be flattered?” she asked.

* * * *

The apartment darkened as the afternoon light dimmed. We talked of mystery novels and Tenth Avenue bars, until she looked at her watch and sent me away.

“It’s five,” she said at the door.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I was surprised to find I hadn’t been pretending to enjoy her company.

“Protocols,” she said, and shut the door.

* * * *

"You're back," she said the next afternoon. Friday.

"By popular demand," I said, laying my Camels on the bar. I showed her the counter on my Fauxlex.

"Seventy. Your numbers are up. I suppose I should be flattered again."

"I suppose. I would be."

We bothered Lou just twice, once for wine and once for matches, before she headed upstairs and I followed, exactly at three.

"Don't you have a girlfriend?" she asked, in the elevator.

"I did and then I didn't," I said, following her into her studio. "You know how it goes."

"I do." She slipped off the Burberry and hung it on the chair before sitting down on the couch, across the low table from me.

"I find this more intimate anyway," I said. "Being a Private Eye."

"Not so very private," she reminded me. Instead of jeans over the slip, she wore black tights under it.

"And you don't mind?"

"On the contrary," she said. She stretched out one long dancer's leg and pulled the other up under her chin. "So where's your chip? Stick out your tongue and let me see."

"It's not a chip, it's a nanocoil." I tapped one eyebrow. "Wrapped around an optic dendrite. A painless laser insert, on a timer, like I said."

"Cool," she said. "And this three score and ten from one to six, do you feel them looking through your eyes?"

"I'm not supposed to, but there's a little feedback. When they see something they like, there is a kind of glow."

“So you can tell when they are pleased.” She spread her thighs, a little.

“Sometimes. Like right now. They can see the pale outline of your panties through your tights, like a ghost, hiding in the shadows.”

She held up two fingers and I lit a Camel for her.

“And they like ghosts,” I added.

“And you?”

“I like ghosts. And shadows, too.” I leaned across the coffee table, and she took the cigarette between her fingers, being careful not to touch mine. It was an oddly intimate move.

“I see,” she said. She stretched out her long legs and there was that ghost again. “And if those fingers had touched?”

“My coil would shut down. They would all go find another Private Eye.”

“And you would be out of a job.”

“It’s only a part-time job,” I said.

* * * *

We do like ghosts. The afternoon light faded as we talked of de Kooning and Long Island wine, and cities we both knew, and some that we didn’t.

Until exactly five, when she saw me out. In the elevator, and later, on the street, I felt my clients, like a flock of birds, departing into an autumn dusk.

I felt the glow fading.

I was sorry it was Friday.

* * * *

It’s only a part-time job, but I love it.

I miss it on weekends, when I’m off. Sometimes—okay, most of the

time—I ramble around the Web, looking for the kind of women I look for when I'm working; the kind who like to be looked at.

Regarded with a certain intensity.

Still, I was surprised when I found her on the Web.

Eula-Cam. Live. Updated Daily, for Members Only.

I scrolled through the Free Stills, and there she was, sitting on the couch in her black slip over black tights, ghostly, talking to a guy on the rug.

His back was to the camera but I knew who it was.

Me.

* * * *

“You might have told me,” I said on Monday, laying my Camels on the bar.

“What?”

“That we're in the same business.” I raised two fingers and Lou brought two wines, one white, one red. “You're a jenni. A cam girl.”

“Busted,” she said. She was wearing the Burberry over the straps. But the jeans were gone, and the tights too. “You're a smart guy. I figured you would figure it out for yourself.”

I considered that while we sipped and smoked. The bare legs were intriguing.

“I suppose I should be flattered,” I said.

“I would be. Besides, we're not exactly in the same business, you know.”

“We're not?”

“Your clients are looking *through* you. My clients are looking *at* me.”

“So are mine,” I said. “Which makes you the principal attraction. The main event. The feature presentation.”

“Well said,” she said. “Got a problem with that?”

I didn't have a problem with that.

“Me neither.” She picked up my cigarettes and left. I beeped the bill strip and followed.

* * * *

She slipped out of the Burberry and hung it over the chair, carefully. I was looking over my shoulder.

“Looking for the cam? It's built into the TV,” she said.

I saw it: a little green light, like an eye. There was a number underneath it: 04436.

“Those are your numbers? I'm impressed.” I said. “But not surprised. It's on all the time?”

“It's green when it's on and it's on when I'm here. And I have to be here except between one and three, when I'm on break.”

“MicroCam pays the rent?”

“That would be slavery,” she said. She contrived to look insulted. “Or worse. I'm just paying off a debt.”

She pointed at the computer in the corner. Even I had heard of the XIntelL99. It purred silently like an expensive cat.

“All I have to do is be myself. And, of course, observe the Protocols.”

“And what are your Protocols?”

“Quite strict. The Internet's not free anymore, you know. I'm on a soft-user open-public band. No nipples, no pubic hair; no nudity except when I'm alone.”

“Alone with your four thousand guys,” I reminded her, nodding toward the TV.

“And no visitors, except between three and five.”

“I suppose I should be flattered,” I said. And was.

“I suppose you should.” She sat down on the couch across from me. As she crossed her legs I caught a glimpse of white panties. Not the ghost but the real thing.

“Sorry to disappoint,” she said.

“Do I look disappointed?”

She pointed at my wrist. “Your numbers are down.”

I checked my Fauxlex. Fifty-five. Then fifty-four.

“That’s them, not me. They come and go. Maybe they don’t like your Protocols.”

“I thought you said they couldn’t hear us.”

“Maybe they can read lips,” I said. Hers were deep red.

“Hope you don’t get paid by the client.”

I did but I didn’t mind. She stretched out one leg and showed me her panties again. Narrow, silk, edged with lace. “It’s more intimate, this way,” I said. “Just us forty-two. And your four thousand.”

“Five.” She pointed at the TV: 05035. “You must be good for business.” She leaned forward to set down her wine, holding the top of her slip closed with long fingers, like a card player hiding her hand. It was less than effective.

I felt a glow. I told her so.

“Even with your numbers down?”

“It must be my own.”

We talked of movies and restaurants. We shared many favorites. It was not surprising. We were colleagues, in a way, after all.

At precisely five she saw me out. “Protocols.”

I felt my clients departing, all thirty-four of them.

She was killing my business, but I didn't care.

I hurried home.

Eula-Cam.

I scrolled through her Free Stills. There she was, carefully taking a cigarette from my fingers without touching them. Even though cams have no sound, I could hear her voice in my head. Low, smoky, intimate—

I clicked on the next Free Still.

She had just closed the door after seeing me out. I clicked again and she was starting to pull her slip off over her head. I happened to know she wasn't wearing a bra.

I clicked again, a little too eagerly, and a new screen came up: End User Licensing Agreement.

EULA.

I scrolled through it. All I wanted was to see her nipples. All it wanted was my credit card number, and my scout's honor that I was Over 18.

I almost clicked on *I Agree*.

Almost. Then I thought of the five thousand other guys and went to the movie instead. I saw Meg Ryan's nipples along with a hundred other guys.

I went to bed feeling lonely for the first time in months.

* * * *

On Tuesday Lou brought two wines without asking, white and red. I tapped out two Camels.

"Eula," I said. "End User Licensing Agreement. I'm a little slow but I got it. What's your real name?"

"I'm not allowed to say," she said. "Protocols."

“Am I allowed to extrapolate?”

“Isn’t that your specialty?” She leaned forward to get a light. The Burberry fell open and there was that dear little strap. But tight, not loose, and pink, not black. “But why extrapolate when you can see everything on the Web?”

“With five thousand other guys?” I lit her Camel for her. “I prefer the intimacy of a private conversation.”

“Even when it ruins your business?” She pointed at my Fauxlex. It was down to twenty-one.

“It’s not a business,” I said. “It’s a part-time job.”

“I suppose I should be flattered,” she said, picking up my cigarettes.

It was 2:55. “I suppose you should,” I said. I beeped the bill strip and followed.

* * * *

I sat down on the rug and watched while she spread her Burberry carefully over the back of its chair.

She wore a black half slip and a little pink brassiere. Cups edged with lace.

I checked the TV. The green light was on and the counter under it read 06564.

“So why are they here?” I asked.

“Who?”

“Your clients. Why are they even logged on when I am here? A visitor. They must know your Protocols.”

“You seem to resent them,” she said.

“The Protocols?”

“The clients.”

I did but said I didn't. She was working, after all, just like me.

"Maybe they're romantics," she said. "It must be the suspense. Protocols are all about suspense."

"So are bras," I said. Her pink cups were not so little after all.

"Extrapolating again?" She sat on the couch, pulling the slip down between her thighs. "What is it with you guys and bras, anyway?"

"The brassiere," I said, pouring us both a glass of Pinot Grigio, "is the most romantic invention of western civilization."

"Next to the Web."

"Better. The brassiere is itself a kind of web. It traps guys. It's a kind of Protocol. It restricts, restrains. It shapes and displays that which it conceals. It focuses the regard. It presents."

"Well said," she said, adjusting her cups, first one and then the other. "Plus it keeps the green light on."

We both looked at the TV. 07865.

"Were it to come off," she said, "the light would go red and they would all be gone." She reached out for a cigarette.

"I wouldn't miss them," I said. I gave her one and lit it, being careful not to touch her fingers with my own.

"I might," she said. "They're paying for my XLintel99."

We talked of sports and sonnets and she saw me out at five.

I felt my clients departing, all eighteen of them. I still could feel the glow.

* * * *

Eula-Cam.

I scrolled through her Free Stills until I was gone. She was on the couch, alone, in bra and panties, putting on lipstick. The label said Deep Rose.

I clicked. She was reaching behind her back with long fingers to unhook her bra.

I clicked again and I was at the end of the Free Stills.

END USER LICENSE AGREEMENT.

I almost clicked on *I Agree*. Then I thought of the seven thousand other guys. She was taking it off for them.

I was beginning to hate them, every one.

* * * *

The next day she was late, for the first time. "Where you been?"

"A girl likes to shop," she said.

"On the house," said Lou, setting down two glasses, one white, one red.

"Down to seven," she said, checking out my Fauxlex as I lit her Camel. "They're jumping ship. And yet, you're back."

"They're a fickle bunch," I said. "They like excitement. Nudity. Nipples at least."

"And you don't?"

"I'm a romantic, remember? Intimacy's my thing."

"Hard candy's mine," she said, puckering her lips. "That's what I was shopping for."

I followed her upstairs. She folded her Burberry over the chair and let me watch her walk across the room in bra and panties. It was a different bra. I could see her nipples through it.

Round little shadows. "Doesn't count," she said, looking down approvingly. "As long as they're covered."

"Protocols," I said. Her panties were sheer too, except for the little triangle that barely covered her pubic hair. Even with just eight clients—no,

nine—I was glowing like a stove.

“Now they’re back,” she said, leaning over me to glance at my Fauxlex. “What is it with you guys and panties, anyway?” She sat down on the couch with her feet pulled up underneath her and her knees just slightly apart.

“Honey, do you have to ask?” I thought that was clever.

Instead of answering, she closed her eyes and leaned way back.

“It’s the little triangle,” I said. White silk, or something very like it, pulled tight between her thighs. “It’s like the pubic hair I’m not allowed to see. It says, *Here.*”

“Well said,” she said, lifting one leg and hugging her knee to her breast. The triangle narrowed to a soft white lane that led down out of sight. The silk road.

Her eyes were closed. Mine were wide. I felt a glow.

“They present. Like the brassiere, they display what they conceal,” I said. “There’s a certain intimacy in the presentation.”

“And in the regard as well,” she said, her eyes still closed.

I supposed I should be flattered.

“Indeed, you should,” she said. She opened her eyes and reached out for a Camel, carefully, and we shared the wine and talked of cabbages and kings.

The silk road faded in the failing light.

At five she showed me out, and I felt my clients fleeing. All but one. He stayed with me till six, and so did the glow.

Eula Cam.

I clicked through Free Stills, and there she was in bra and panties, seeing me out. Closing the door with the fingertips I had never touched.

I could almost hear her saying, “Tomorrow, then?”

Tomorrow, then.

I clicked again and those same fingertips were inside the waistband of her panties, about to slip them down.

I clicked again and the EULA filled the screen.

I wasn't even tempted to click on *I Agree*. It wasn't what I wanted.

I clicked BACK until I found her putting on her lipstick.

Deep Rose.

I left it there. What I wanted was to read her lips with mine.

* * * *

"What's with the hard candy," I said. "Are you trying to quit smoking?"

"Hardly." She reached for my Camels, tapping the pack on the bar. "A girl likes to have something to suck."

"Sorry, guys," said Lou. "I got a complaint. You'll have to take the cigarettes outside."

"We have to talk," I said, outside. "I'm thinking of quitting my job."

"I've been thinking too," she said, in the elevator, looking up at me. I leaned over to kiss her but she stepped back, just one step.

The elevator door opened.

"Don't do anything rash," she said, glancing at my Fauxlex. "You still have one client left."

I was feeling rash. "I'm feeling rash," I said.

"It's a sort of new feeling, isn't it," she said, hanging the Burberry carefully over its chair. "For such as us."

I nodded. She was wearing little pink panties, and the not-so-little pink bra. The original again. I sat down on the rug and checked the TV.

9865.

“You could make them go away,” I said.

“Too soon,” she said. She pointed at the TV: 9904. “My XLintel99 is not quite paid for.”

“I can help,” I said. “How much do you owe?”

“You’re already helping,” she said, sitting down on the couch across from me. She opened her thighs to show me her little silk road.

“I want to be alone with you,” I said. “Is that too much to ask?”

“What about your cyberhosting job? You still have one client left.”

“I know how to get rid of him,” I said. I reached for her hand but she pulled it back. Teasing me?

“Not so fast,” she said. “Look.”

We both looked. 10007.

“Now we can talk alone.”

She reached behind her back to unhook her bra, the most intimate of moves. It would be ungentlemanly to say just what she showed me; and more ungentlemanly still to deny the glow they gave me.

The light on the TV was green at 10011, 10012, then suddenly red. 00000.

“Alone at last,” she said. “My XLintel99 is finally paid off. Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

“Read my lips,” I said, getting up from the rug. “I still have one client to get rid of. And I know how to do it.”

I reached for her hand but she pulled it back. “Not so fast,” she said. “I have something to show your last client. A little farewell gift. I want you to feel the glow.”

She slipped her fingertips under the waistband of her panties, just like in the still, and pulled them off. She lay back on the couch with her eyes closed. “You always said you were sort of a looker.”

I sat back down. Her very white thighs were opened, very wide.

“You’re something of a looker too,” I said. It was only one client, but the glow was strong.

“I suppose I am,” she said. She reached out to take my hand and the glow was gone as my last client was bounced. Replaced by a stronger, more intimate glow.

“I like this glow better,” I said, and I kissed her.

And she kissed me. Our tongues played chase in her mouth and then in mine, and then—

“What’s this?” I said. Mumbled.

She spit it out, delicately, into her hand.

It was a chip. Why was I not surprised?

“Double the pleasure,” she said, tossing it onto the rug. “And double the fun. Now come here.”

I came there.

* * * *

Five o’clock came and went. She put on her lipstick, a touch-up, and that was all. Deep Rose.

“It’s Rose,” I said. “Your name. I finally got it.”

“I was beginning to wonder,” she said, pulling on her panties and lighting a Camel, our last one. It was also white. She left off the little pink brassiere.

Her not so little nipples were also pink. Wet pink now.

“I guess we’re both out of a job,” she said. “What now?”

“You mean forever, or this evening?” I asked. I took the cigarette from her fingers, being careful to touch them as I did.

“Both,” she said. “Let’s start with this evening.”

“For that, my sweet Rose,” I said, “there are Protocols.”

For once she looked worried. “Protocols?”

“Chinese or Thai?” I said. “Eat out or order in?”

“Thai,” she said, smiling. “And I’d hate to have to dress for dinner.”

“*I Agree*,” I said, picking up the phone.