



Echoes In Evening Wear

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Echoes In Evening Wear

Rick was ready to explode, and she hadn't started taking her clothes off yet. "Turn around in a circle," he said to the hologram. She turned slowly, gracefully, her black heels making no sound on the hardwood floor.

She looked exactly like his coworker Melissa. Exactly. He took a few steps toward her, then a few more, until he was looking into her green eyes from a foot away. From close up you could notice just the slightest graininess to the image. Otherwise she looked perfectly real.

He realized he'd forgotten the window blinds. He closed them, making sure they were flush so there was no way to see in, then sank into the big stuffed chair beside his bed.

"What's your name?"

"Melissa."

"Right," he said. "I'm Rick"

"Hi, Rick," the hologram said. She bit her lip thoughtfully. God, it even had Melissa's expressions. This was unbelievable.

"I want you to strip for me, Melissa. Nice and slow."

Melissa's cute, chipmunk face reddened. She looked at the floor, began unbuttoning her blouse. Shy and demure—just what he'd asked for. Eddie had been true to his word—black-market or not, this was a top shelf holo. Later he would read up on how to refine the holo's personality program to make her act even more like the real Melissa.

Rick stroked himself through his jeans as Melissa let the white dress shirt slide off her shoulders and drop to the floor. It was just the type of shirt Melissa would wear at the office—smartly professional. His eyes locked on the slightly freckled, pale white skin of her cleavage.

"Will you do anything I tell you to?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly. She unhooked the catch on her skirt, let it fall to the floor. Her slim, freckled legs were stunning. She was tiny, just over five feet tall, but well-proportioned.

She reached back and unhooked her bra. "Slowly," he said. "Take it off an inch at a time." She did. Rick watched, unblinking.

Jesus, she was spectacular. Rick had no idea how Eddie had managed to record Melissa from enough angles with the X-ray video to make this holo without being noticed.

Melissa slid off her panties. Rick had to stop stroking himself for a moment. He was peaking too early.

"Now, come over to me."

As he ran his fingers along the lines of her body he was careful not to let them sink past the holo's surface. That would break up the pixels. Mostly he made her touch her own body. That looked very real.

On his way back from the restroom Rick caught a glimpse of Melissa darting into Overseas Distribution. Most days he saw her five or six times, today he hadn't seen her at all. He wanted to see her in the flesh after last night. He got a drink from the water fountain, pretended to read the bulletin board. The moments stretched out; he felt a little strange hovering outside the door.

There she was. She turned in his direction. He would have been happier if she had turned in the other direction—he'd really only wanted to see her. His heart started to pound.

"Hey, Rick," she said, smiling as she clicked toward him wearing high heels and a grey suit.

"Hi, Melissa." He could feel himself turning red. An image of Melissa naked, on her knees, flashed through his mind. He pushed away the irrational conviction that she knew he had seen her naked. "You see Vandegrift's memo?" he said, struggling to sound casual.

Melissa bit her lip. Jesus. "Yeah. I don't think the policy change will affect our division much, but I hate the way they make these decisions without consulting us."

"I know," Rick said. If she noticed he was nervous, she didn't let on. Of course, she'd probably assume it was lingering awkwardness from when she'd turned him down when he asked her out.

She shrugged her slender, jacketed shoulders. He saw them bare, lightly dusted with freckles. "Well, what can you do?" she said.

He shrugged, glanced down at her chest and back, lightning fast. "Not much."

"Well, see ya," she said. He watched her walk away.

Back in his cubicle Rick couldn't get much work done—his thoughts kept drifting to things he could do with Melissa's holo when he got home. Elaine, the tall, thin, Italian-looking woman from accounting interrupted his reverie, inviting him to lunch. He agreed to go, but said he

had five minutes of work to finish up first. It would take that long to get to where he could walk around without drawing embarrassing attention.

"Okay, I got one," Rick said over the music of another Madonna oldie.

Elaine took a swig of beer, slapped the mug down on the brass table, missing her coaster by six inches. "Shoot," she said, looking at him with narrowed eyes. The Madonna holo strutted among the tables, now dressed in a white business suit. Rick preferred it when she wore the slinky numbers from her early years.

"Your earliest memory," he said over the music.

"Good one," Elaine said, nodding appreciatively. "It's simple, gets right to my core. You're pretty good at this." She twisted her long, curly brown hair around her palm as she considered. "My earliest memory. I'm sitting on Santa's lap at the Mall. Circa age four, maybe late three. I'm scared shitless because Santa has brown teeth and big, scary hands. I scream like a siren till mom rescues me from his lap."

"Classic Santa complex, very revealing."

Elaine flashed her wide smile. "Oh yeah? What have I revealed?"

"I can't say. I'd be revealing too much about myself if I did. You have to come up with questions that reveal me."

It was strange—physically, Elaine wasn't Rick's type at all. He liked cute women, small, with big eyes and fair skin. Elaine was skinny, with dark eyes, high cheekbones. She was very attractive, but it was a mature, classic beauty. He found he had no interest in getting a holo of her to play with, and wondered if that was a bad sign, or a good one.

"Okay, my turn. Let's see." She tapped a long, slender finger on the table. "Tell me about the most interesting object in your dresser," she said, looking at him through long lashes.

Rick almost choked on his beer as he thought of the holo remote tucked into his dresser drawer. His Three Goofuses socks would probably make a more prudent answer.

"The most interesting object in my dresser?" Madonna said loudly, leaning over their table, smiling mischievously. They hadn't noticed she'd stopped singing. "That would have to be Miguel, the midget who sleeps in the bottom drawer. I keep him for emergencies." The dozen or so patrons of the Blue Pelican Lounge laughed as Madonna danced away from their table in perfect time to the throbbing beat of the next song.

As they watched Madonna hop onto the flashing neon bar and buck her hips, Elaine casually reached across the table, ran her finger across the knuckles on his hand. Rick's mind went blank.

"Oh, please don't. I'll be good," Jenna's hologram pleaded, her ass wriggling as she lay across Rick's lap. Jenna had the body of an Amazon—flaring hips, strong, gorgeous, racehorse legs. Exotic, almond-shaped eyes and full, pouty lips.

"Pull down your underpants."

"Okay," Jenna whimpered, "but don't spank me hard." She reached back, pulled her plaid skirt up around her waist, then slid her panties down to her thighs. Rick admired the round plumpness of her ass. He raised his hand, brought it down, stopping just short of her ass with practiced ease. Jenna cried out at the imagined blow. He raised his hand again.

"Rick? Who are—" The bedroom door flew open. It was Elaine. She stared at him, mouth frozen in mid-sentence. He stared back at her, naked, hand hovering over the ripe ass of Jenna, his married next-door neighbor. The moment stretched out. Rick wanted desperately to deactivate Jenna, but that would entail walking to the night stand with a bobbing erection.

"Jenna?" Elaine whispered, tears filling her eyes.

"No! It's just a hologram." Rick said. "Jenna, get up and go in the living room."

"Okay," Jenna said. "He wasn't spanking me that hard," she added to Elaine as she strutted past, breasts bouncing. Jenna wasn't programmed to respond appropriately to such a complex situation, so the program had likely taken an educated guess at what to say.

"A holo? I don't know whether to be less appalled, or more." Elaine's dark eyes flashed razors. "So. You have a little thing for Jenna?"

"No! It's just fantasy. It doesn't mean I have a thing for Jenna." he said.

She folded her arms, turned away from him. He seized the opportunity to yank his pants on.

"Jesus. You're talking about me moving in, and I find you spanking the girl next door? God."

She started crying. Rick didn't know if he should go over and try to console her. He decided that was a bad idea, and sat on the edge of the bed instead. Elaine leaned against his dresser and sobbed.

"What are you getting so upset about?" he said. "Don't you ever fantasize about having sex with other guys? I'm sure you do, it's normal. I don't..." He trailed off as she started crying harder.

Jesus, why hadn't he heard her drive up? She usually called before coming over, so he hadn't been listening. He dragged his palms over his face, trying to loosen the knotted muscles. This was worse than the time his mother had walked into his room and caught him jerking off to internet porn. Much worse. He felt like such a pervert, though he honestly didn't feel that he'd done anything wrong. Elaine kept crying. He waited, silent.

Finally she turned around, looked at him with wet eyes. "Do you have more?"

Oh, no. "Elaine, it's no different from having Playboys under your mattress."

"You do have more! How many do you have? Do you have one of me that you take out and spank after we have a fight?"

"No, I don't have one of you." He seized on the question, hoping to divert her attention from the other question.

Elaine nodded, arms back to the folded (i.e., furious) position. "Show me the others."

"What?" Rick said, his voice strained and high-pitched.

"Show me the others! I'm supposed to be your fucking wife in six weeks! I want to see who else you fantasize about fucking."

Rick closed his eyes, took a hissing breath, unsure what to do.

"Oh! Here we go..." Elaine retrieved the remote from his night stand. She activated 01, and Melissa appeared, still dressed in the french maid outfit. "Oh, Melissa! There's a big surprise. You're always staring at Melissa's big tits." She pressed 02. Jenna's friend Carrie appeared. Naked. "Shit!" Elaine hissed. 03 was the eighteen year-old intern in Rick's department. Elaine didn't recognize her.

There were eight in all.

"You did this without their permission?" Elaine said. Rick nodded, licked his lips. He needed a drink of water.

"That's like raping them."

"No it's not! It doesn't hurt them. It doesn't hurt anyone."

"It hurts me!" Elaine screamed, throwing the remote at Rick. He deflected it from hitting him in the face.

"I'm sorry," Rick said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. All men fantasize about other women, that's just how we're wired."

"That's just how you're wired?" She laughed humorlessly. "That's great. Here's how I'm wired." She jabbed a finger at his face. "You erase every one of them—today—or we're finished." The finger stayed poised two inches from his nose.

"I will," he said.

After Elaine left, without kissing him goodbye, he picked up the remote, ran his thumb over the numbers. The white lettering on the '01? was faded, much more than the others. He pressed '08.' Maya materialized, wearing a skintight black patent-leather outfit. Blonde, blue-eyed Maya from the gym, her small, perky breasts jutting out of the outfit's halter-top.

"Hello, Rick," she said. Her voice was soft and throaty.

She had great nipples—pink as bubblegum, very erect. Rick held down the '08? button and simultaneously pressed 'delete.' A red light flashed on and off three times, and Maya vanished forever. Rick felt an acid stab in his gut. He wondered if Elaine would want him to burn his prom pictures next.

He pressed '07? and slim, playful Kiko appeared.

"Hi Rick," she said, smiling slyly. "Do you want to play?" Rick held down the '07? button. Then he released it.

Kiko unbuttoned the top button of a long, colorful Japanese gown. "Well?" she said.

He deactivated Kiko, then scanned the room for the perfect hiding place. He would be much more careful from now on.

"How come you didn't get one made of me?" Elaine asked, making tiny plunking splashes with her index finger. Two empty bottles of champagne floated in the tub. Elaine's wedding dress and Rick's tux lay tangled on the floor by the bed.

"One what?" Rick said. His gentle caress on Elaine's shoulder continued, but it stiffened.

"A holo." The subject hadn't come up since that awful day. Rick didn't understand why Elaine would bring it up on their honeymoon.

"I told you, that was just fantasy. You're real."

"I just don't get it. Was it because I don't bring out the animal in you? You can tell me, I want us to always be honest with each other."

Rick felt like he'd just been dropped in the middle of a minefield. "No, you bring out the animal in me more than any woman I've ever met." He squeezed her thigh, congratulated himself on coming up with a good answer under pressure.

"Then why didn't you get a holo of me?" Elaine persisted.

"I didn't get a holo of you because it would have been a simple, two-dimensional fantasy Elaine. Sex with you has layers, and meaning, and intimacy."

She thought for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you," she said, and kissed him softly on the cheek. "That means more to me than I can say."

She scooped some bubbles, dribbled them onto the top of his head. He smiled, snaked his hand under her arm and grabbed her nipple between his fingers, twisted it lightly.

"Ooh," she cooed. "Are you being rough with me?" Her hips gyrated, causing mild turbulence. She looked into his face. "Do you want to be rough with me?"

Elaine played the part of the helpless girl enthusiastically, but poorly. She kept breaking the mood. She lit candles, romantically professed her love while struggling playfully. She overacted. It was obvious she was doing it for him, not because she was particularly into it. It made him love her even more.

Rick looked into his own face uneasily. Part of it was the lingering undertones that holos brought up between him and Elaine. Part of it was the same strange discomfort he felt at seeing himself on video. He looked reversed, and his neck looked too thick. And was his hair thinning that much?

Elaine looked her own holo up and down, frowning. She paced to the side and inspected the holo's profile like a drill sergeant at assembly. "I hate that bump on my nose," she said, tisking.

Her holo looked great to Rick. Seeing two tall, dark, long-legged Elaines sparked some interesting thoughts about twins, but no way was he going to suggest it to Elaine. Touchy subject.

"What do we do now?" Elaine asked.

"I know your mom and dad meant them to be wedding images, but can we get them out of those clothes?" Rick didn't particularly want two holos wandering around dressed for a perpetual wedding.

"Sure. How do we get them to do something?" Elaine asked.

"Your name is Ricky, my name is Rick," Rick said to his holo. "Her name is Elaine," he added, pointing. His holo greeted them. Elaine followed his lead with her holo.

"We can refine their personalities by taking personality tests and downloading the results. They're also programmed to update their personality programming by observing our behavior."

"They get more like us the more they watch us?"

"Yeah, but very roughly." Rick said, feeling a little uncomfortable. Elaine was aware of why he knew so much about holos. "They have generic behavior protocols underlying the individual personality programs, and the two interact to generate possible behaviors beyond what they see."

"Let's leave them on. It'll be fun to watch what they do."

They set up the holo-extensions of the living room and bedroom that Rick's parents had given them. The living room extension was a library with a sunken floor. It had wall-to-wall bookshelves filled with leather volumes, wrought-iron ladders, gorgeous statues on pedestals. In the center was a mahogany desk decorated with a stack of antique manuscripts, a quill pen, and a silver letter opener. The impressiveness of it was out of place in Rick's otherwise average house, though since Elaine had moved in, the house's decor had become more expensive and tasteful. Maybe the library did fit. They'd have to remember to warn guests that it was a holo so no one walked into the wall.

"We're going to leave you on for now," Rick instructed the holos.

"Okay Rick," Ricky said. He looked at Lanie. "What shall we do?"

Lanie looked around. "Let's read in the library."

"Oh, jeeze, they're not even close," Elaine said, laughing. "Next they'll be sipping brandy."

"Rick, look!" Elaine whispered.

Their holos were on the couch in the holo-extension of their bedroom. Ricky was tugging Lanie's sweater over her head. She helped him get her bra off. He cupped her breast, ran his tongue along the edge of her ear. Lanie let out a hitching moan.

"I don't sound like that, do I?" Elaine asked.

Rick laughed. "Yes, you do. It's a perfect imitation."

Elaine slapped his crotch. He drew his knees up defensively. "Smart aleck," she said.

They watched the holos make love. Elaine slid her hand into Rick's shorts and stroked him with the tips of her fingers as Ricky and Lanie writhed and moaned. Without taking his eyes off the holos, Rick slid Elaine's silver nighty up around her waist, ran his hand up her thigh.

Soon they were mirroring the holos, matching them thrust for thrust, watching the holos as the holos watched them.

As he watched, Rick got an idea that made his head spin.

He resisted the temptation for weeks, but couldn't stop thinking about it, and finally he cracked. He told Elaine he was going to work from home, then go into work after lunch. As soon as she was gone he climbed the rickety ladder into the attic, retrieved the remote that contained his eight holos from inside a dusty Backgammon game buried in a pile of his old college notebooks, childhood toys, video game cartridges. His heart raced in anticipation and fear as he swung the attic hatch closed.

He activated Melissa in his bedroom. She was still dressed in the french maid outfit. "Hello, Melissa."

"Hi, Rick."

"Ricky, come here," he called.

Ricky appeared in an instant. "Yes, Rick?"

"This is Melissa. Melissa, this is Ricky." The two holos said hello to each other. "Ricky, I want you to have sex with Melissa. Let me tell you how I want you to do it differently than with Lanie." Lanie had followed Ricky into the bedroom, and was watching from the couch.

Soon Ricky was spanking Melissa; there was a satisfying slapping sound, and seeing Melissa's ass jiggle with each blow drove Rick crazy.

"No, please, this is wrong," Melissa protested coyly, playing the shy, innocent girl perfectly.

From the couch, Lanie heaved a big sigh and tisked. Rick felt a jolt of guilt.

"Lanie, go into the library, please," he said. Reluctantly, she left, and he relaxed.

Ricky reached around with his free hand and put a finger into Melissa's mouth; she closed her lips around it, moaned with pleasure. Encouraged, Ricky spanked her harder. Melissa was nearly being knocked off his lap with one blow; red blotches quickly formed on her ass.

"Not that hard!" Rick instructed. "You don't want to hurt her, it's supposed to be erotic."

Ricky adjusted, then soon got too rough again. Rick had to rein him in twice more before he caught on.

Rick took mornings off a couple of times a month. Once, Rick let Ricky choose who he wanted to have sex with, and, to Rick's surprise and delight, Ricky chose Carrie and Melissa. After that Rick enabled Ricky so he could choose and activate the girls himself, so Rick never knew who to expect.

Once, Ricky and Lanie were making love in the library while Rick and Elaine were in the living room watching TV. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ricky grab Lanie's wrists and pin them over her head. Fear raked through Rick's spine like barbed wire. He glanced over at Elaine, but she hadn't noticed. Lanie told Ricky to stop, and he did.

Because Elaine had been driving, she was the one who unlocked the door and walked in first. She inhaled sharply as she swung the door open, as if startled. Rick's first thought was an intruder. He pushed past her.

Melissa was draped over the arm of the couch, and Ricky was paddling her with a metal holo-spatula. Her ass was as red as Elaine's most daring lipstick. Ugly purple welts bloomed in spots.

Rick's hands and lips went numb.

"Tell me what a cheap slut you are," Ricky said in an authoritative voice, accentuating the words with sharp blows from the spatula.

Melissa squealed with each blow, wriggling to get free. "I promise, I'll be a good girl," she crooned. There were old-fashioned clothespins clamped on Melissa's nipples. Rick had no earthly idea how Ricky had thought of that.

Elaine screamed in rage. Rick had never heard anything resembling this sound come from her before. She wheeled and slapped him. He stood dumbly, wanting to argue that he had promised to be faithful to her and he was, that it was another thing for her to want to control his inner thoughts, to expect him to smother his fantasy life. But he had lied about deleting the holos. He couldn't argue that.

Elaine stormed into the bedroom, the door slamming like a thunder-clap. Lanie rose from the recliner she'd been sitting on, unseen in the commotion, and followed Elaine, walking right through the closed door.

Rick looked at Ricky. "What were you doing?" he hissed.

"I was practicing," Ricky said.

"I didn't say you could activate those holos."

"Oh. Okay." Ricky deactivated the Melissa holo, then the spatula and clothespin holos he must have downloaded. He went into the library, turned on the holo-TV, sat down.

Rick sat on the couch, the one on which Ricky had been beating Melissa a few minutes before, and waited, miserable.

When the bedroom door finally opened his heart started pounding. He stayed where he was, staring at the carpet, until he saw Elaine's bare feet. Her perfectly manicured toenails were painted salmon. He looked up. She was holding out the familiar, time-worn, thin black remote that housed his eight fantasy girls.

"Delete them. Right now, while I watch you."

He took the remote. He swallowed, looked up at Elaine even though it was painful to meet her angry eyes. They were not as angry now—the anger was mixed with hurt, her eyes bloodshot. He noticed movement in his peripheral vision. Ricky was standing at the bottom of the library steps, Lanie at the top. Both were watching.

"Okay," he said. What choice did he have? He held down 08, simultaneously pressed the delete button. The remote beeped. He repeated the procedure, counting down, until only 01 was left. Melissa. His first. He looked at Elaine again, hoping to see some hint of mercy in her eyes, some signal that Melissa, at least, was negotiable. No. Elaine's entire face

was trembling with an unreadable mix of emotions. Rick held down 01, pressed delete.

"Thank you." She went back into the bedroom, closing the door more gently this time.

Rick waited until the lights in the bedroom had been out for an hour before slipping quietly into bed. He lay on his back, arms at his sides, wanting to wrap his arm around Elaine, to have a whispered conversation about the Cubs, or the movie they'd seen that night, anything mundane, but he knew that wasn't possible right now. He hoped it would be possible in a few days, or weeks.

He heard a muffled thump, then a voice—he was pretty sure it was Ricky. He stayed put, not wanting to wake Elaine. More sounds, louder, mixed with Ricky's voice, then Lanie's, sounding strange.

He slid out from under the sheet, quietly opened the bedroom door. The sounds were coming from the library.

They were standing in the library. Ricky slapped Lanie's face. Then again, and again, as if he were doing some sort of exercise. Lanie's expression flitted from angry to sad to scared as her program sought an appropriate reaction to the unfamiliar situation.

Rick stared, horrified.

"You jealous bitch," Ricky shouted. He lunged forward, grabbed Lanie by the throat and pushed her into a cushioned chair. His hand pinning her head back, Ricky made a fist with his other hand.

"No!" Rick screamed.

Ricky punched Lanie in the eye. It made a hollow, unrealistic thumping sound. Lanie's head snapped back. She frowned. "I promise, I'll be a good girl," she said in a seductive voice. Ricky punched her again.

"Oh my God! Stop it! Stop it!" Elaine screamed as she raced into the living room. That broke the spell. Ricky let go of Lanie's throat, sat and turned on the TV. Lanie stood, unmoving; her eye and cheek were bright red, but other than that there was no visible sign of the assault.

Elaine looked at Rick. Rick was horrified by the fear he saw in her face. He reached out, took a step toward her.

She backed away.

"Jesus, it's not me, it's just a holo program!" Rick said. "I would never hurt you!"

Elaine looked at Ricky, back at Rick.

"You know that, don't you? Please tell me you do," Rick said. He dragged his hand down his face, trying to get a grip on what was happening. It was such a stupid reason for a marriage to fall apart.

"Yes, I know that," Elaine said, her voice tight.

A flash of movement in the library caught Rick's attention. Lainie clutched the silver letter opener, her mouth a ragged 'O', as if she'd bitten into a lemon. She howled with rage, raised the letter opener and stabbed Ricky in the cheek, then the neck, the eye, her screams undulating in time with her thrusts. Fissures opened in Ricky's face; bloodless voids, like cracks in porcelain. He sat with his hands at his sides; he seemed to want to say something, but the plunging blade prevented it.

Rick looked at Elaine. Her face was almost expressionless as she watched Lainie and Ricky. Almost expressionless, but not quite; she was smiling, ever so slightly. She retrieved the remote from the couch, pointed it toward the library, and Ricky disappeared.

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