

A friend of mine named Brenda Bell used to be a producer for a shopping channel. She would telephone in frustration and have me choking with laughter about the latest insults being perpetrated against taste and humanity at her place of work. I kept telling her that she should be writing about her experiences, and she started but, pressed for time, asked me to take over the writing of a treatment for a half-hour weekly series.

We proposed Real Deal TV as a three-camera situation comedy. It was to be set at a third-tier, shop-at-home network and promised to advance all of television to a whole new low in commercialism. An essentially live show about selling things should be able, with seven-second phone delays, to work in real viewers who really want to know about the real merchandise and interact with the story line by really buying some. Thus Real Deal would blend scripted reality with real life, just like Survivor or The CBS Evening News.

Well, we got nowhere. But here you are, wondering, What next? Therefore I present my short story adaptation of Brenda's and my treatment for the pilot episode....

REAL DEAL TV

by Jeff Andrus

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They were called Mr. and Mrs. America, the average couple whose real names cannot be used here, and they lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico. So much stuff crowded their living room, every marketer from Franklin Mint and the Queen of Lucite herself, Lillian Vernon, to the most respected political consulting firm in the nation applied considerable energy and money to find out what rang their chimes. Cynics said they were brain dead, but the experts who kept track of their habits didn't like what that implied about dedicating their lives to the challenge of selling to the couple. Instead, the experts wrapped Mr. and Mrs. America in a mass of statistics, focus group surveys and psychological studies. All of it pointed to confusion. The couple confused buying things and voting in certain ways and maintaining opinions about this and that with what everyone wants in his or her life. A little excitement. A little glamour. A little mystery. But one day Mr. and Mrs. America really did get all that in spades just by watching television!

It started in the morning when the Mrs., dressed in bathrobe and slippers, waddled to the couch with coffee and a plate of doughnuts. The mister, though, couldn't be tempted to clog his arteries just then. Mouth slightly open, he was

enthralled by the tail end of Fly Tyin' & Home Loadin', hosted by Bill Hurley, the Mr. Outdoors of Real Deal TV.

Mr. Outdoors looked shaken. Literally. He was spilling shot everywhere except into the ammo press. The reason was a call-in shopper with a Latino accent mocking him "and those womens chew work for." The caller dared Mr. Outdoors to light a dish of smokeless gunpowder to demonstrate, unfortunately, that it filled the set with smoke.

"Now," complained the Mrs., "would be a good time for you to go outside and paint over the lawn jockey.

Meanwhile across town in what might as well have been another galaxy, Summer Roberts arrived at the station, late as usual. Summer had been a beautiful and sophisticated series star, a natural blonde her Los Angeles publicist had kept saying, who made the leap from ingénue to executive in charge of production for Real Deal Television Network, a distant third, ratings-wise, compared to QVC and Value Vision. She no longer had a publicist, and her hair was a much brighter shade, like whitened brass. By many standards Summer was a success, but she secretly considered herself a failure because it was such a far cry from dramatic stardom to being a behind-the-scenes "gray suit" in television's answer to junk mail, dinnertime phone calls and door-to-door salesmen. Feeling the way she did gave Summer insight into many of her staff. They, too, wanted to somewhere else because "tape editor for Ginzo Knife pitches" wasn't what most of us would have put under Future Careers in the high school yearbook. But being a survivor, Summer wasn't going to let insight or sympathy get in the way of looking out for Number One.

"Nice but..." was how Summer's right hand Janey Davidson characterized her boss. Janey really was a blonde, her coloring as natural as the hide of a mouse because she didn't have time to liven it. She briefed Summer on sales as they crossed the closed set, neither paying attention to the fireman ventilating the room with a smoke extraction fan. Janey had to try to be a tough cookie, trouble shooting and running shows against all odds, but she seldom forgot to say "please" and "thank you." At heart Janey was a gooey romantic torn by three forces. She agreed with her mother that it would be nice to be married with children. She agreed with her roommates that it would be nice to establish her career first. She agreed with the Dr. Phil that you can't base happiness on either the men in your life or your work. "So with so much agreement," Janey kept asking herself in the wee hours of the morning, "why do I feel so miserable?"

Janey started to ask Summer a question about leaving early for lunch when Mr. Outdoors accosted them. "Last night I saw this picture. This vision. This foreshadowing."

"Were you asleep?" Summer asked.

"Yes."

"I think it's usually called a dream."

"Well, in this 'dream' there was a fat balding guy standing in front of his TV set with a gun. And I'm on the air. And when that maniac shoots the gun, the bullet goes right through the screen and comes out of the camera, a-a-and I think it might have killed me." He snapped his fingers and pointed at Janey. "Now I remember! You were there."

"I was not," protested Janey.

"It was my dream. How would you know?"

"So," injected Summer, "what's the point?"

"That is the point." He turned to Janey, "Was I killed?"

"But you just said, how would I know?"

Jewel, the Vanna White of gold and silver, grandly interrupted. She said that she was aware of agreeing to take over the afternoon's Dolls, Knives & Collectibles show. She explained that she had hoped it would stretch her "acting instrument," but she had just looked at the copy. "And it's not me. What would my fans think?"

Summer turned sweetly to Mr. Outdoors. "Would you mind replacing Sarah Bernhart?"

"Me? Do Dolls?"

"Selling them was more of what I had in mine."

But he was on a psychic roll: "Don't you get it? If I was killed, then the dream was not really a dream. It was a premonition. A warning. And guess what?"

Summer frowned with an heavy, impatient sigh, leaving Janey to ask, "What?"

"I got a call from a weird shopper this morning. And he had the same voice as the maniac in the dream!"

"Wow," Janey enthused, "I think I know what people are saying in dreams, but I don't actually hear voices. I mean, color was a breakthrough for me."

"Worse is coming." He shuddered. "I can feel it."

"I had a dream too," said Summer. She described how in her dream Iron John, the touchy-feely leader of male identity seminars, worked for a wicked step-mother who actually docked his pay for things that were broken during his sessions. One time he used too much lighter fluid on the campfire and almost burned the forest down. He nearly went bankrupt because of it. Summer asked Mr. Outdoors, "I wonder what that was all about?"

He harrumphed that he didn't know, but maybe he could take the afternoon show, "If it doesn't conflict with an emergency appointment I have to make with my...my consulting people."

"Therapist or channeler?" Summer asked.

"Oh," huffed Mr. Outdoors, "why would you care?" and he sulked off.

When Summer and Janey entered the office bullpen, Carmela, the tattooed tape editor, was going on about having some body parts pierced for an upcoming rave, but she was still too sore to lie down.

Before anyone could ask what exactly she meant, the network's president, Don Cisco, The Boss of Bosses, made what employees called a "drive-by." He walked through briskly, oblivious to any real problem, and fired off an ultimatum about head-in parking only.

Which cleared out the control booth.

Which left the current host and vendor's rep to do what they did best--ignore the product and do their Regis and Kathy Lee imitations.

Rushing to the booth, Janey tried simultaneously to talk them back to their senses via their earpieces and to tell Summer that she had scheduled a very

important business lunch. It was with a cleansing products manufacturer who could become a vendor. Janey would like permission to take time off to shower and change, get her hair done and go to the florist to buy a lily. Like now.

Before Summer could answer, Bob, the colorless Ad Department director, introduced his grandma from out of town. Granny gushed on about Summer's ex-series. The old dear couldn't remember from People, "...or was it Soap Opera Digest? Maybe The Star, whether you married or divorced that fellow you saw sometimes? You know, the Mexican boy who played the gardener."

Summer coolly replied, "You are probably referring to a very important behind-the-scenes personage at the studio, who happened to be of Castilian ancestry, not that it matters And, no, we were not divorced, so we could have never been married."

"Well," Granny sighed, "that's all right, dearie. Someday I'm sure a man will want you." She smiled vaguely and her eyes went blank as she remembered, "But didn't he have something to do with getting you fired?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Madam. Bob, shouldn't you get her back to the home before you lose your job?"

Summer retreated to her inner office where she took a long, calming slug of Evian water then called The Greater Southwest Models & Actors Clearing House to nail down a backup replacement for Dolls, Knives & Collectibles.

At which point a high-powered vendor charged in, followed by Tina, an oh-so-correct secretary who had tried to keep the vendor out. The vendor complained that a shopper on the telephone feed to "Regis and Kathy" was acting very strange.

"No caller is strange," Summer said, "if they're buying units."

"I like that, I like that," said the vendor.

Summer continued to charm the vendor on their way to the control booth, where the chain of command from Janey to the floor manager were still being ignored by the co-hosts.

Exasperated, Janey suddenly yanked the plug on the caller, which caused some bizarre ad libs on the set, and had the technical director, just returned from the

parking lot, up in arms about interfering with the artistic freedom of his being in charge of what went out on the air.

Summer hardly paid attention. She was brooding about the caller's voice. A memory? A premonition?

Just then Mr. Outdoors burst into the control booth, yelling, "It's him! It's him! The maniac who just called in! He's still after me!"

When Mr. Outdoors was calmed down, agreeing that his imagination was running amok, he announced that he was going into hiding in case someone really was nuts.

Summer's features remained composed, but her blue eyes became as hard as gunmetal.

The high-powered vendor dogged Summer back to her office. He really liked how she handled that situation. He wanted to discuss the ground rules for becoming his mistress over lunch, but she claimed a prior engagement at L' Petit Chou.

A phone call allowed her to shut the door on the vendor, but now she had to deal with Mr. Outdoors' lawyer. He bellowed and squeaked that his client was taking legitimate sick leave and that Summer would be responsible for opening the network to a huge lawsuit if she persisted in firing him. Then it got nasty. The lawyer threatened the ultimate male power play: to play golf with Don Cisco unless Summer rectified the situation.

So Summer ended up with a double vodka at a nearby bar & grill, referred to by station regulars as The Slurp & Burp. While a stocky man with a hat pulled low came to brood at the window, Summer spotted Janey, who had an immense day lily in her hair.

Janey was looking for someone and clearly did not want to hang with her boss. So Summer insisted that they share a table. When Summer took her seat, the mysterious stranger entered and skulked to a place in the far corner.

Janey admitted that she had been stood up by the salesman who had sounded really cool on the internet. The lunch was supposed to be a first step meeting, just to see if they'd like to take another toward the altar, "Like that Marsha Mason/James Caan thing in whatever that old Neil Simon movie was."

"Not that old," insisted Summer, who flicked the side of her hair to indicate the flower in Janey's. "So what's the new look? South Pacific or Bikini Atoll?"

"So that he can pick me out of crowd. In one of his early emails he said, 'The brightest lily grows in the darkest mud.'" Janey smiled grimly. "Guess I'm a sucker for haiku."

Summer pointed out that there were a few syllables missing then went into a semi-confessional mode herself. Being unfairly released from her series contract while at Betty Ford and not being able to get work as an actress afterwards were still thorns in Summer's side. But what really hurt was an associate producer, a very nice boy really who, strangely enough, sounded a little like that weird caller. Summer was really young herself; she wasn't really in love; they weren't really engaged; she had dumped him because of their respective status. She did it for his sake. She was sure that he had gone from strength to strength although she had been too embarrassed to keep track. But she did care enough to hope that he was washing cars in Oxnard and could never see where she had ended up.

Janey was shocked at Summer's lack of self-esteem. She replayed her mother's tape about how lucky one is to have a job when so many people in China have rice. Summer, she explained, held an executive position that any man would kill for, so Summer should feel doubly blessed that she had something important to do until the right man came along.

When they got back to the network, an aging replacement from the agency was waiting. She was done up like Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* It was the "Dolls" part of the afternoon show that had confused her.

To make matters worse, Don Cisco pulled another drive-by, informing Summer that he was putting *Dolls, Knives & Collectibles* into a different time slot. Namely, the one coming up in five minutes.

Summer blurted that Janey would fill in as the host.

The first rule of the network was *Never Get Mr. Cisco To Stop*. The second was *Never Get Him Talking*. Don Cisco had stopped. He was talking. He didn't know there was a hosting problem.

When Summer explained the situation, he was puzzled about who this Janey person was. When Janey pointed out that she's been working for him for one year, sixteen days and four hours, he wondered if she was ready to go on-air.

Janey made the surprise announcement that she had been taking a correspondence course in voice and a night class in broadcast journalism. "I have been waiting for this opportunity for the last three months of my entire life. Because today it may be Dolls, but tomorrow could be Nightline."

Summer was so pleased with the way the problem was working out, she was ready to claim Janey as a second cousin, but Don Cisco was still talking. He said that Dolls, Knives & Collectibles wasn't Star Search. "If an amateur is the best you can come up with, Ms. Roberts, then you're fired."

There was no time for makeup, just a quick chug from the special Evian bottle at the bottom of Summer's drawer.

Nearly catatonic, Summer felt signs of life under the hot lights. She was sweating like roast duck. Miked to her earpiece, Janey took her through a sales pitch that made sprinting through a minefield seem easy.

The first hitch was that the antique doll copy was for a new line of reproductions, the display samples of which were still en route from the factory.

The second was that the authentic German high command dagger set elicited a call-in from a boy who wanted to know if Summer's series was the one his mom talked about watching when she and "Dad were getting ready to deceive me?" That put Mama on the line, who squealed that it had been seven years... "Can you believe it? Seven long years!"... and two more kids since she last saw Summer.

Janey murmured, "How sweet," while Summer tried to direct conversation to a beautiful replica of the re-issue of the Christmas Plate Series hand painted in the style of Norman Rockwell at a special Spring clearance price.

But the word was out. The calls poured in. There was a genuine has-been on America's Alamo of shopping channels!

But you had to buy an item to talk to Summer. "Like a ticket, a box office ticket," Janey hissed to Summer, alternating with the chant, "Niel-son, Niel-son."

During the break Summer snapped, "All you'll want me to do next is announce, 'I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. de Mille.'" But the skepticism and Gloria Swanson imitation were a star turn. When the show began again, Summer was a consummate professional.

In her moment of triumph the weird caller came on-line. He trilled his "R"s with sultry disdain: "I am Reynardo del Pero."

Summer went pale.

Janey mouthed, "Reynardo?"

Summer made a lame attempt to get him to talk about nieces, nephews, cherry pickers, anyone he might be thinking of giving gifts to. But he already had bought ten units of everything shown for the opportunity, "To ask chew one simple question. Why, my little chucabara?"

Summer felt naked and vulnerable, and that was when the magic really hit the fan. She became soft and womanly, fully human and very ticked off. The dirtball was accusing her in front of the whole world of leaving him because she thought she was too good for a bus boy in the studio commissary. He countered that she had him fired when the newspapers got wind of their romance.

"Newspapers? You didn't go to the newspapers. You went to The National Enquirer!"

"But I had to use the scoop money to pay for an operation. My poor madrequita."

"Your mother?"

"Didn't chew know?"

As they went at the past hammer and tongs, Janey thought she heard an echo. She noticed a stocky man in a hat in the studio, now yelling into a cellular phone. "But I loved chew. I never stopped loving chew. I built a whole chain of car washes to show chew what I really am."

"Great Freaking Gatsby," Janey gasped.

Tears in her eyes, Summer was remembering. "What do you look like now?"

Reynardo stepped onto the set and doffed his hat. He admitted that he was no longer the lithe bullfighter with buns of steel to whom she had so often compared him. Getting rich, he had to eat a lot of expensive restaurant food. He had

penciled in a hair transplant in his busy schedule. If she would only promise to marry him, he would go all the way and hire a personal trainer.

The choice should have been a no-brainer, but Summer took a dramatic pause.

The call screener yelled that the computers were burning up. The phone company had threatened to shut them down because they were about to take out the whole the whole Southwest grid!

Janey manhandled the technical director out of the way to punch up a promo for an upcoming segment.

From the floor Summer's and Reynardo's voices came over the audio monitor. She wanted to know how many calls were for "Yes" and how many for "No."

Reynardo pleaded with her to see beyond appearances while Summer wondered whether he had enough money to finance an independent film she could star in. She was about to take a leap of faith, but he misread her silence and cried out in desperation:

"Inside my heart, I am the same man chew remember. The brightest lily grows in the darkest mud!"

Janey stormed onto the set just as the show went live. "You're Reynardo Of The Internet! You used me to get to her!"

Mr. Outdoors hit the floor on his knees, skidding to a stop behind Reynardo. He begged Summer to reinstate him. He promised he would never go to the doctor ever again.

Reynardo turned to see who this poor wretch was. Could his beloved be so cruel as to fire a man for seeing a doctor?

Upon seeing the stranger's face, Mr. Outdoors popped to his feet like a deranged Jack-in-the-box, grabbed Reynardo by the throat and shrieked, "THE MANIAC! THE MANIAC!"

Television screens around the country blacked out. Mrs. America shook her head, confused and disappointed. She put the phone down, reporting that she couldn't get through.

"Now what do we do?" the mister asked petulantly. But mulling over his own question, he gave her a sly look.

"Oh," she frowned, "I suppose."

So they both got off the couch, leaving the living room empty save for the coasters, toasters and commemorative coins, doilies, polyester lap rug and fake Lladros, Ant Farm, Whoopee Cushion and Custer's Last Sword & Sitting Bull Doll combo, not to mention the portrait of a clown about which the sensitive always said, "Ah, look. There's a tear in his eye." And while the Elvis clock ticked away the silence, Mr. and Mrs. America made a lovely copy of themselves in the bedroom.