

Science Fiction

# Slow, Slow Burn

By George Alec Effinger

  
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Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*"All right, this is the way I picture it: We're in a busy midtown brass-and-fern bar, OK? Table on the sidewalk, umbrella says CINZANO on it, we'll see. Two women poking at salads, glasses of white wine. They're dressed very nice, expensive but not flashy, they pay attention to details, they accessorize, know what I mean? One's older, see, she's the mother, though you don't see the age difference. They could be sisters. Both blondes. The older one's got kind of a suit on, she's the dynamic woman on the go. The daughter sort of mirrors that, a subtle thing, nice blouse that says she's shopping the right stores, and she's never more than fifteen minutes out of style. This is like 'Beauty Hints of the Idle Rich' or something.*

*"So the girl is toying with her radicchio, see, and she puts her fork down and goes, 'Mother, may I ask you a personal question?'*

*"Mom says, 'Of course, darling.'"*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*Daughter looks down at her plate, she's just a little bit embarrassed. That's good, makes her human. Audience will relate to that. She looks back up and goes, 'Mother, have you and Dad ever used'—pause for effect—'modular marital aids?'*

*"Big smile. Maybe she, you know, reaches out and pats the kid's hand. Like: There, there. She says, 'Let me tell you a secret, dear.' She laughs. The daughter laughs. Then Mom reaches into her bag, see, and what do you think she takes out? Take a guess."*

\* \* \* \*

Two account executives have flown all the way from America to talk with Honey Pílar, who, everyone agrees, is the most desirable woman in the world. Even account executives want her, though their motives are mixed, and that's why these two anxious men have come from New York to Honey's walled estate in the south of France. She is sitting at a long table made of polished *limba*, an exotic hardwood from the Congo basin that not even the architectural

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

magazines know about yet. Beside her is her husband, Kit, who likes to think of himself as her manager. The adman's throat is very dry after his speech, yet he is too self-conscious to sip from the fluted glass of Perrier-Joué in front of him. He glances quickly at his associate, but it is easy to see that he can expect no help from that quarter.

Kit stares, but he's not going to say anything. The silence goes on and on. The hopeful smile the adman is wearing begins to vanish. He looks again at his associate, who is still no help whatsoever.

"On the phone, I think we discussed the kids' market," says Kit, just as they reach the breaking point. He purses his lips and turns to Honey, who is sipping Campari and soda through a straw. "She doesn't like it. / don't like it. Come back with something else."

The adman lays his sweating hands on the beautiful glossy tabletop. "Miss Pílar?" he says hopelessly.

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

“Kit doing business,” she says and shrugs. When she smiles, both account executives are inspired with possible new approaches. The sound of her voice, they tell themselves, is something, after all. The opportunity to meet with her again will motivate them to find just the pitch she and Kit are looking for. “You have nice flight,” she says.

\* \* \* \*

Kit is in the control room, watching his wife on the bed with a 17-year-old Italian boy. Kit watches them through the grimy glass, wishing he'd worn a shirt, because he is sweating heavily in the hot, stale air of the studio and his naked back is sticking to the black vinyl padding of the chair. He peels himself away and leans forward, checking meters and digital readouts that don't really need checking. Honey is a consummate performer. It's as if she had an accurate

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

internal clock ticking behind her forehead, cuing her: 00:00 *initiate encounter*, 00:30 *initiate foreplay with passionate kiss*, 00:45 *experience preliminary arousal*.... They are seven minutes, ten seconds into the 30-minute recording. By the outline on Kit's clipboard, Honey is supposed to begin oral stimulation at 07:15, and goddamn, if she isn't already sliding down the boy's tanned body. No cue cards, she doesn't even need hand signals. Kit pretends to check the levels again, then turns away from the big glass window.

Kit had his brain wired long before he met Honey. If he wanted, he could jack into a socket on the board and feel just what the Italian boy is feeling, or he could jack into another socket and eavesdrop on Honey. Kit doesn't need to peek on the boy's responses, because he's been married to Honey for five years, and she's every bit as good live, in person, as she is on cassette. At the age of 45, Honey Pílar is still the most desired woman in the world. One out of every

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

eight moddies—of all kinds—sold through the big modshop chains is a Honey Pílar sex moddy. Kit has never been her partner in any of them.

At 14:20, Honey and the boy curl together on their sides. Honey's eyes are closed, her face flushed. The boy is naked except for a pair of black matte-finish sunglasses. Drops of sweat glisten on his hairless chest. Kit stands up and turns away again. He leaves the control room, sure that nothing out of the ordinary will happen. He wanders down the long hall. He kicks off his deck shoes and feels the pile carpet warm on the soles of his feet. There is the strong odor of stale beer in the hall, as if several cans had soaked the floor recently and no one had cared to do anything about it. None of the windows are open, and it is even hotter in the hall than in the control room. Kit pushes open the scarred blond-wood door at the end of the hall. He is in another control room. He chases a green



Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

lizard the size of his hand from the padded chair and sits behind the board. He stares at meters and digital readouts. They are all flickering at safe levels.

Beyond the glass, a young woman in a torn T-shirt and a bikini bottom sits at a microphone, clutching a sheaf of typewritten pages. Kit knows that she works for some revolutionary organization, but there are too many even to begin to guess which one. She reads the pages in a slow, husky voice. Kit thinks her voice is pretty damn sexy. He likes everything about this girl, what little he knows. He likes her bikini bottom, her torn shirt, her rumpled black hair and the way she talks. After a moment, Kit hears what she is reading.

*"Achtung! Achtung!"* she says. Her voice has no accent, neither German nor otherwise. She has brown skin, pale full lips and Oriental eyes. *"Achtung! Dreihundertneunundsiebzig.... Fünfundzwanzig."* Then she begins reading a list of five-digit

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

numbers. She reads 25 groups of digits, meaningful only to the audience listening to her frequency, reading the key to her code. "Ende," she says. A moment later, after shifting to another frequency, she begins again in Spanish. "*&iexcl;Atención! &iexcl;Atención!*" More numbers, more signals. Kit would like to buy the brown-skinned girl a drink, look into her black eyes, ask her if she knows who might be listening to her broadcast.

Kit leaves the control room. She has never looked up, never known for an instant that he was there. Kit walks back down the stifling hallway. As he enters the small room, he sees Honey astride the Italian boy. Kit checks the clock on the board, checks the script. The recording is still precisely on schedule. He hasn't been missed. Just as the girl at the microphone did not know he was there, Honey does not know he has been gone.

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

Kit sits in the black vinyl chair. He takes a moddy from a stack on the control board. He doesn't care which moddy it is. He reaches up and chips it in. There is a moment of disorientation, and then Kit's vision clears. He is Cary Grant as Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest*, suave, well dressed and certainly in command of his feelings. He allows himself a moment of sadness for Honey, whose life could never be as interesting as his. After all, he is Cary Grant. His future will be better than good: It will be amusing.

\* \* \* \*

*"Twenty years ago, as a young feature reporter on my first assignment for Euro-Urban Holo, I interviewed Honey Pílar. I remember the rough wooden pier across the beach from her walled estate and the sparkling Mediterranean waves. I remember the bright morning sun making me squint a little into the camera. The*

*cries of the gulls punctuated my lead-in. 'Here in her palatial estate,' I said, 'Honey Pílar reigns as the superstar of the sex moddies. In five years, she has risen from talented newcomer to both critical acclaim and commercial supremacy. Let's take a quick look behind the scenes and find out what Honey Pílar is like in her unguarded moments.'* The camera zoomed to the main gate—and then, nothing. We weren't allowed in, even though my news service had confirmed our appointment for that morning. Honey had changed her mind.

*"Fifteen years later, I was working for Visions/Rumelia, and once again, I stood by the high gilded gate. 'What secrets does this young beauty know that maintain her position as the world's premiere moddy star?' That was my lead. Honey Pílar never told me her secrets, of course. But she did make an appearance. She was tanned and smiling and, well, perfect. A week before that interview, a poll had announced that sixty-eight percent of the seven billion people*

*on earth could identify her face. Eighteen percent could identify her naked, unaugmented breasts. That was five years ago.*

*"Tonight, we begin a new series: 'Honey Pílar: A Quarter Century of Fascination.' Never in the history of the personality-module industry or, indeed, of the entire entertainment industry, has one performer so dominated the charts. Since her now-classic first moddy, 'A Life in Lace,' recorded when she was a mere youth, she has turned out thirty-eight full-length recordings and nine of the 'quickies' that A.T.B. experimented with and then abandoned. Her total sales top one hundred and twenty million units, and every one of her recordings remains in print. As of last week, she had eight titles on the 'Brainwaves' Hot One Hundred Chart, with two in the top ten.*

*"What the world wants to know—and what she has never told us—is just what kind of woman invites the whole world to listen in on her*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*private sexual experiences? Does Honey Pílar provide surrogate passion, and happiness, to millions of people dissatisfied with their own love lives, or is she merely pandering to an emerging taste for high-tech titillation?*

*"Next time, I'll tell you how this reporter sees it."*

\* \* \* \*

Kit and Honey are having dinner in a small, dimly lit café near the ocean. A tall white taper burns on their table and, shining through their wineglasses, casts soft burgundy shimmers on the linen tablecloth. Across the narrow room is a stage made of scuffed green tiles. Lively North African music, distorted and shrill, plays too loudly through invisible speakers; hovering just an inch or two above the stage is the holographic figure of a demure-eyed, big-hipped belly dancer. There are streaks and scratches on the woman's face and

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

body, as if this recording had been played many times over many years.

Honey Pílar sips some of the wine and makes a little grimace.

“How are you thinking?” she asks in a soft voice.

“It was all right,” says Kit. He looks down at his broiled fish. “What do you want me to say? It'll sell a million, you outdid yourself. Your climaxes made the dials go crazy. OK?”

“I never know you telling me truth.” She frowns at him, then picks up a delicate forkful of couscous and eats it thoughtfully.

Kit tears a chunk of the flat bread and puts it in his mouth, then takes a gulp of wine. Communion, he thinks. I'm absolved. “If you didn't believe me a minute ago, what can I say or do that will make you believe me now?”

Honey looks hurt. She puts her fork down carefully beside her plate. Kit wishes the shrieking Arab music would die away forever.

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

The café smells of cinnamon, as if teams of bakers had been making sweet rolls all day long and then hidden them away, because nothing on their plates or on the menu contains the least hint of cinnamon. Kit knows that Honey wants to go back to the house in Provence. She's not comfortable in public places.

Kit finishes his glass of wine. He reaches for the bottle, tops up Honey's glass, then fills his own. He takes out a beige pill case from his shirt pocket, finds four Paxium and drinks them down with a Château L'Angelus that deserves better. "What next?" he says.

"What next now?" asks Honey. "Or what next we make another moddy?"

Kit squeezes his eyes shut and lets his head fall back. He opens his eyes and sees black beams made of structural plastic crossing the space overhead. He wishes that something, *anything*, with Honey could be simple, even dinner, even conversation. So she's the most



Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

desirable woman in the world, he thinks. So she makes more money in one year than the C.E.O.s of any ten major corporations you'd care to name. So what? His private opinion is that she has the intelligence of three sticks and a stone.

He lowers his gaze and forces himself to smile back at her. "What do you want to do, sweetheart? Stay here, go back home, take a trip? You've earned a vacation, baby. We've got your next blockbuster in the can. The world is at your feet. You name it, *chiquita*. Someplace exotic. Someplace you've always wanted to go."

He knows exactly what she will say next.

She says it. "I rather only go home."

"Home," he repeats quietly. He finishes the wine in one long swallow and signals the waiter.

"Kit," she says, "I *was* in happy mood."

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

I was in happy mood, thinks Kit. But don't let me kid you, sweetie. It's been great.

\* \* \* \*

*"Six o'clock in the morning, and the haggard winter sun is rising over the red-tiled roofs of Santa Coloma. Wrapped in scarves, packaged in parkas, slapping their mittened hands together to fend off frostbite, Fawn and Dawn huddle against the fogged plate-glass window of the Instant Memories Modshop on Bridger Parkway. Fawn and Dawn are standing in a long line of people waiting for the manager to open the store. They've been waiting all night in the cold and wind and sleet, because today's the day Honey Pilar's new moddy, 'Slow, Slow Burn,' goes on sale. Fawn and Dawn want to be the first in their neighborhood to own the new Honey Pilar. They want to get it as soon as the shop opens and take it to school with*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*them. Fawn and Dawn are in the ninth grade; these days in Santa Coloma, ninth graders all have their skulls amped, except for the trolls and feeb.*"

*FAWN (shivering): My God, I haven't felt my toes since midnight.*

*DAWN: I haven't felt my lips. Or my nose, or my ears, or my fingers.*

*FAWN: But if we leave now, I'm going to feel like a total fool.*

*DAWN: We can't leave now. These jerk-offs behind us will get our place.*

*FAWN (making a face): If only the wind would stop blowing.*

*DAWN: Oh, sure, the wind. If only the wind stopped blowing, it would still be, like, ten degrees below zero or something.*

*FAWN (rubbing her cheeks): Hey! (Pointing through display window) Here he comes!*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*DAWN (to store manager): Let us in now, and you can have me right on top of the cash register.*

*"The manager is, in fact, opening the front door. He's smiling in anticipation; the store is going to make a fortune today. 'Slow, Slow Burn' is stacked up four feet high in the front window, piled up beside every register and loaded into cardboard dumps scattered all around the selling floor. You can't turn around inside the store without staring into the liquid green eyes of Honey Pílar. Her holographic likeness is more than just inviting; if the mythical sirens had looked like Honey, they wouldn't have had to sing.*

*"When the door opens, of course, what disappears is any respect for the length of time Fawn and Dawn have been waiting in the freezing night air. They are pushed aside by the jerk-offs behind them and by the jerk-offs behind them. Fawn and Dawn are cast aside by the charging throng of people. They announce that this is*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*truly unfair and rude, that they'd stood in line longer, that they are going to complain, but no one listens. The flood of bakebrains shoves the two girls this way and that, until they are afraid of being trampled. At last, however, Fawn and Dawn are pitched up like driftwood at the front cash register, each with credit card in one hand, moddy in the other.*

*FAWN (clutching package, fighting way out of shop): Wow!*

*"On the street again, with the air so cold it shocks nose and throat, the two girls wait for the bus to take them to school."*

*DAWN: Are you and Adam going to use it tonight?*

*"Fawn's eyes open wider and she smiles. She taps the crown of her head, the corymbic plug invisible now beneath her hair."*

*FAWN (smiling slyly): I've got it all down on this moddy. Who needs him any more?*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*"Think about study period tonight: to be Honey Pílar in the throes of ecstasy, instead of Fawn and Dawn in the grip of homework!"*

\* \* \* \*

Two account executives sit on the couch in the north parlor. "Nice, huh?" says one of the admen. Kit thinks that "nervous" doesn't begin to do the man's condition justice.

"I think—" says Honey.

"She doesn't like it," says Kit. He has to be tough, and quick, or these Madison Avenue guys will think they're doing *her* a favor. And then it will make it that much harder to deal with them the next time. Kit wonders why Honey hasn't learned this by now.

"I think it work fine," says Honey.

Kit gives her a stern glance, but she ignores it.

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

"Good," says the adman, tremendously relieved. "We think we've put together a nice spot here."

"I'm not sure," says Kit. He doesn't want these men to get self-congratulatory.

"Kit," says Honey, "be quiet. It's for my moddy; I like it."

Kit is going to have to have a serious talk with Miss Honey Pílar, international star. He doesn't tell her how to do her job, he doesn't want her telling him how to do his.

"The girls, they pretty," she says.

The account executive's smile grows wider. "My daughters," he says in a proud voice.

\* \* \* \*

Mood swing by candlelight.

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

Honey marches, in tight zebraskin pants—not zebra-*stripe*, but the genuine pelt of a former zebra, which is becoming less obtainable all the time—and a gauzy *moiré* tunic created by the actual hands of Lenci Urban of Prague—not by one of his underling designers but by Lenci himself, making the design even dearer than the zebraskin—back and forth in front of the long, high picture window. Kit watches her eclipse first the lighthouse beyond, then the strings of lights marking the marina, then the sallow moon maundering over the ocean. Honey reaches the far end of the room and turns, blocking the moon again. In the air is the heavy scent of incense, church incense, the fragrance Honey loves best, because she thinks it reminds her of her childhood. Kit hates it, and he's panting in shallow breaths. In a corner of the room is the largest commercial datalink money can buy. Kit sits at the keyboard and calls up the first reactions to *Slow, Slow Burn*. Honey watches it indict her.



Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

Total sales for the first seven hours of release: 825,000 units.

“Eight hundred thousand,” she says. She is carrying half a melon in one hand, hacking at it with a knife she holds in the other, and flicking seeds across the dusty-rose carpet.

“Eight hundred thousand,” says Kit noncommittally.

“In one day, I sell eight hundred thousand. Eight hundred thousand people come out of their house all over the world, they just to get the new moddy. You don't know what can be happening—the rain, the bombs in the airport, the police—all these people come out to pay money for me.”

Kit presses a key and columns of figures begin to scroll up the screen. “Sales are up in Provence and Aragon,” he says. “They love you here.”

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

"I see that, I see," says Honey. She tosses the bulk of the melon into a corner of the white-on-white brocade couch. "I see also I have no million sales today, first day. You told me a million sales."

Kit glances up at the ceiling, hoping for courage. "A million sales, eight hundred thousand, what difference does it make?"

"Sales *up* at home," she says, turning her back on him, looking out the window. Far below, the crisp thin line of surf wrinkles toward the beach. "Sales *down* in England, Burgundy, Catalonia. That list get longer." She faces the screen again, and the sales reports are like the incessant waves, in their sum victorious, devastating. "Turn it off," she pleads.

Kit is glad to kill the data. He watches Honey misplace her manic energy. How quickly she is drained and empty. Kit feels a peculiar thrill, knowing that none of the 800,000 who have bought the new moddy could even imagine their dream lover in such a mood, that he

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

alone is privileged with this intimacy. She lowers herself into a black leather chair and draws her small feet up on the cushion. She hugs her knees. Kit knows that she wants him to tell her the sales figures mean nothing; he does not. He knows she wants him to come over and rub her neck and shoulders. He will not. He watches her massage her temples with trembling fingers.

On the first day of sales, Honey Pílar's latest moddy has sold 825,000 copies. Her previous moddy, on its first day, sold 972,000. The one before that, 1,200,000. Is this a trend?

Goddamn right, it's a trend, Kit thinks. If it weren't, why have computers track the numbers? Honey and Kit respond differently, however. Kit doesn't see any practical point in mourning 100,000 sales one way or the other.

But Honey weeps quietly. In the silence, in the candlelight, in the cloud of burning incense, there is a peculiarly supplicatory feeling in

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

the house. Honey herself seems wrapped in a fragile innocence. Kit thinks that, for him, this was once one of her chief attractions.

\* \* \* \*

*"This is Jerome Nkoro in the critic's corner at New York CommNet 'Morning Magazine,' and today I'm going to be talking about 'Slow, Slow Burn,' Honey Pílar's new moddy from A.T.B.*

*"In these days, when, thanks to surgical and biological wonders we've come to take for granted, men and women routinely maintain their youthful looks well past their seventieth birthday, it probably shouldn't matter that our number-one fantasy girl has just celebrated her forty-fifth. But it's something to think about. Honey Pílar is forty-five. Does that make you feel old? It makes me feel like the last of the dinosaurs.*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*"I can remember having holos of Honey Pílar in my bedroom when I was twelve, alongside my Death-to-Argentina football and my scale model of the Mars colony. My first sexual experience was a dream in which Honey couldn't remember her locker combination. And now this is her thirty-ninth moddy, and she's old enough to be a grandmother...."*

*"But don't get me wrong, I still think Honey is the most exciting woman in the world. I've left word with my secretary that if she calls, she can have my home phone number any time. And my locker combination, too! The problem with 'Slow, Slow Burn' is certainly not Honey's age. The problem is that my moddy library has two full shelves devoted to her, and I'm beginning to ask myself, Do I really need another Honey Pílar moddy?"*

*"Believe me, I've never had a complaint from anyone about her moddies. My partners agree with me that they're likely to get more"*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*pleasure from Honey than from anyone else's moddy—or from me, either, for that matter. Whether the moddy is turning my partner into a hungry, writhing Honey Pílar or consuming me in one of Honey's recorded sexual fire storms, there's never any chance that she will fail to perform.*

*"The question is simply this: How will she continue to keep our interest? Her partner in 'Slow, Slow Burn' is an uncredited seventeen-year-old. As she gets older, must her partners get younger? I'm dismayed by the vision of Honey Pílar offering the kids ten-speed bikes to entice them. And, for myself, doesn't a lifelong relationship with three dozen plastic moddies begin to resemble—I hate to suggest this—a marriage?*

*"'Slow, Slow Burn' is right up to the standard Honey Pílar has set throughout her long and dazzling career. I guess it's just that after all these years, I'm beginning to realize that although I've been to*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*bed with Honey a million times, I'm never actually going to have her. All I'm going to have is two shelves of plastic with her name on them, and an exquisitely detailed knowledge of what she's like in the sack.*

*"I'm getting to the point where I wonder what she likes to talk about afterward. What she's like at breakfast. I guess I'm getting wistful in my old age. But don't mind me. Go out and buy 'Slow, Slow Burn.' As always, it does what it's supposed to do."*

\* \* \* \*

Kit and Honey are throwing a party in their hotel suite, after the annual Pammie Awards. Honey is still clutching her special Lifetime Achievement statuette. It has been a wonderful, satisfying evening for her. Reporters and fans and fellow artists come up to her and tell her again and again that the honor is long overdue. Honey knew in

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

advance that the association was presenting her with the Lifetime Achievement, so her acceptance speech was gracious and tearful and as nearly grammatically correct as she could manage. She looks beautiful in her silver Lenci sheath.

Kit stands looking out across a city that seems to live for the night, toward a black harbor streaked with the pale-green lights of bridges. Beyond the window, the world seems cold and clean. People are hurrying according to unknown but vital reasons; they are not ... wandering. The stars are hard, white, not dimmed and hazy with smoke. Kit turns and gazes at the room, at the men and women talking and laughing. The hotel has catered this party, and the champagne is cheap and sweet. Kit sets his plastic champagne glass on the holoset for the maid to clear away. He looks for Honey.

He finds her in a corner, talking with her agent and a representative from A.T.B. He brings her a fresh glass of the awful



Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

champagne. Honey looks up quickly and smiles at him. Her eye make-up looks terrible. The agent indicates the Lifetime Achievement Award in her hand. "They wouldn't have given that to you if they didn't love you," he says.

"I owe you, too," says Honey. Kit thinks that he wound her up too much earlier in the evening, and now she just can't stop being gracious.

The agent smiles. "You did all the work, Honey."

Kit thinks of the 17-year-old boy from the beach.

The woman from A.T.B. swallows the last of her potato salad. "Are you giving any thought yet to retiring?" she asks.

The agent glares at her. Honey's eyes open wide, and then she runs across the room. Kit hears the agent say, "There isn't any air in here anymore."

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

\* \* \* \*

Half an hour later, the party is over. Kit and the agent are trying to make Honey feel better. "That woman was a fool," says the agent.

Honey shakes her head. "They give me the Lifetime Award. They do when your career is over."

"That's not what it meant at all," says the agent. "They were telling you that you're the best, that you've always been the best."

Kit takes a deep breath and lets it out. "I think we'd better call it a night," he says.

The agent stands up. "Well, anyway, it's time for me to run. Thanks for the drinks." He bends to kiss Honey on the cheek. "Congratulations, baby," he says. "Don't worry about that A.T.B. woman. She'll be out of a job tomorrow."

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

When they're alone, Honey puts her head on Kit's shoulder and sobs. He pushes her away. "Don't start," he says. "Don't get into this sad and insecure business again. I don't want to put up with it right now; I'm too tired."

Honey stares at him. "How do you talk to me like that?"

Kit turns away. "It's easy," he says. "We have this same conversation about three times a week. I've learned my part. You're still trying to get it right, because in your line of work, you don't have to worry about learning lines."

Honey turns him around and slaps his face. Kit gives her a thin smile. "You want me to tell you that you're *not* getting old?"

Honey slams her fist into his chest. He flinches but says nothing. She runs into their bedroom and slams the door.

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

Kit stares after her. "You're still my wife, you know," he calls after her. "Get undressed, and get ready." He knows this will make her even angrier.

This is the only part of their relationship that is all his, that exists only between the two of them. Kit becomes aroused. "I want you," he says.

She opens the bedroom door and looks at him blankly.

"I want you," he says. "But tonight, I want you to use this." He offers her a pink plastic moddy. He has never asked her to be anyone else before.

Her eyes narrow. She looks at the moddy. "But this is me," she says, not understanding.

He laughs. "Yes, it's you. Only *younger*."

Kit will hold her in his arms and let himself be carried away by her passion, but already he is thinking of someone else, a young woman

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

with Oriental eyes, leaning close to a microphone and murmuring cryptic messages in other languages.

\* \* \* \*

*"Here on 'Venezia Affascinante' tonight, we're going to tell you everything there is to tell about the people you love and the people you'd rather hate.*

*"There may be a billion people in this world right now who don't like Honey Pílar, and there may be a billion people who don't care. The other five billion, though, absolutely adore her, and we're wondering tonight how they'll take the news that her fourth marriage has come to a shattering, devastating conclusion. Shattering and devastating, that, is, to her fourth husband, Kit, because after you've been married to Honey Pílar, the rest of the women in the world must suddenly look a little on the drab side.*

*"'Venezia Affascinante' today conducted its own scientific poll on the subject. Our question to one hundred average moddy users was this: 'Which aspect of their relationship will Kit miss the most now that he's been abruptly shown out of Honey Pilar's life?'*

*"'Quick starts, low maintenance and high performance' was the most popular reply. If you take our meaning.*

*"The second most popular answer was 'Honey's bank account,' because, after all, a good deal of her irresistible attraction lies in her wealth, her extravagant lifestyle and her association with the most stimulating celebrities in the world.*

*"The third answer was, unpredictably, 'her nose,' which, we must admit, is certainly cute enough.*

*"It took us several hours to get in touch with Honey's most recent ex-husband to compare these answers with Kit's own personal reactions in our exclusive long-distance interview. When he finally*

Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

*accepted our call, we put our question to him for his definitive reply.*

*He said, and this is a direct quote, 'You can goddamn go to hell!'*

*"And you'll hear that nowhere else but on 'Venezia Affascinante.'*

*"Some unanswered questions remain: How long before Honey Pilar marries again? Will she continue to record new moddies, or does this alteration in her life signal a desire to make a fundamental change in her professional career? And who will be her new business manager? Did her experience with Kit teach her a sad lesson about combining her emotional and business interests in one person?"*

*"Whatever she decides, 'Venezia Affascinante' is on the job to bring you the news. Twenty-four-hour-a-day coverage of the world, the world you wish you lived in. We'll be back after this word."*

\* \* \* \*

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

Two account executives sit in the smaller of the two dining rooms in Honey Pílar's home in Provence. They've finished lunch and are sipping brandy and beaming down at Honey at the far end of the long table. Both men feel wonderful—first, because the meal they've just enjoyed was one of the finest in their memory and, second, because this is the only time they've come to the walled estate with any real confidence that they'd be able to bring their business to a satisfactory conclusion.

"The meal was truly marvelous, Miss Pílar," says the first adman.

"Was good, no?" Honey smiles with innocent pleasure.

"Well," says the account executive, letting his expression become gradually more serious. "Perhaps it's time to turn our attention to business."

"Go ahead," says Honey. "You shoot."



Slow, Slow Burn  
by George Alec Effinger

"Yes, well. *Slow, Slow Burn* has been in the stores now for a little more than six months. I trust you've had the chance to look over the figures we sent you."

"Yes, I see them."

"They're a little difficult to understand, even after you've been in the business as long as I have."

"No, OK, I understand them fine."

The adman frowns. "That is, I know you've been without a business manager ever since, uh—"

Honey gives him a reassuring smile.

The man from the agency looks a little uncomfortable. "Uh, as I say, you've been without a business manager. Well, we want you to know that we value your account very highly. We've represented you for almost twenty years. I want to tell you that you can rely on us during these troubled months."

"No trouble," says Honey.

The adman opens his briefcase and takes out a report. "We've taken the liberty of drawing up a preliminary schedule of promotional opportunities for *Slow, Slow Burn* and a suggested scenario for your next personality module. Our consultants have made some valuable suggestions relevant to regaining the market support you enjoyed on some of your previous releases."

Honey gives him her brightest smile. The account executive smiles back. "May I have?" she asks, holding out her slender hand for the report.

"Certainly," says the adman. "I'll be happy to—"

Honey rips the papers in half while she looks directly into the man's eyes. Her smile never wavers.

"Miss Pílar," says the adman unhappily, "we have some of the best market analysts in the business studying current trends in the

Slow, Slow Burn  
*by George Alec Effinger*

personality-module industry and your own standing as a recording artist. While your reputation is greater now than ever, your impact at what we call point of sale seems to be softening somewhat. Our proposals are designed to make the best use of what our agency considers your chief strengths—”

“In twenty years,” says Honey Pílar, “I earn much money for your agency, no?”

“Why, yes, of course.”

“We call New York. Your boss is good friend.”

The man takes out a handkerchief and mops the perspiration on his upper lip. “I don't think that will be necessary,” he says. “We'll, uh, give them your views. Later, if you should find that handling your career on your own is too much for you, we can always—”

“You not understand. I handle my career some twenty-five years,” Honey says. “I think you go now.”

Slow, Slow Burn  
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The two men from New York glance at each other nervously and stand up. "As always, Miss Pílar," says the first adman, "it's been a pleasure."

"You bet," she says.

As the men are retreating from her home, the second account executive pauses. This is the first time he has actually summoned the nerve to speak. "Miss Pílar," he says, looking down at the tiled floor, "I was wondering if I might invite you to dinner tonight."

Honey laughs. "You Americans!" she says, truly amused. "No, Kit was American, too. Next time, tall, blond, Swedish, maybe Dutch."

The second adman hurries after his colleague, not even looking back at their client. Honey watches them for a moment, then closes the door. She is still holding the agency's torn report. She goes back into the living room, toward the wastebasket.

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