

# Looking Into It

By Ron Goulart

THE COMPUTER handed him a piece of lint.

Phil McKinney took off his earphones and said, "What?"

"You've really got it bad," said the computer. "Your head's in the clouds. You're walking on air."

Phil straightened in the bubble chair, clicked off the eavesdrop playback and set the earphones on his desk. He was a large, lanky young man in his late twenties. "Actually, I've never even met her, Gabbo."

Gabbo, the big master monitoring computer, said, "You worship her from afar. You can't take your mind off her."

Phil said, "I don't have to take my mind off Melissa Marcas. She's part of my job, at the moment. What's that lint for?"

The computer was still holding the bit of white fluff between silver wire fingers. "A microphone. You're supposed to plant it on Doctor Hopely's suit tonight."

"He's not going to be fooled by this, Gabbo," said Phil, taking the lint mike and carefully slipping it into a plyofilm envelope. "This is really Just a variation on the thread mike and he noticed that the same night I planted it on him."

Gabbo said, "I'm not the West Coast office of the National Security Organization, am I, Phil? No, you and I are simply employees of NSO. I pass on to you what I'm told to pass on."

"That transistorized wallpaper didn't work either," said Phil, putting the clear envelope into an inner pocket of his tweed tunic.

"Dr. Hopely didn't tumble to it, though, did he?"

"Okay, he didn't. But he put it up in his rumpus room and all we hear on it is ping-pong games and cartoon shows," said Phil. "I didn't enjoy posing as that gay wallpaper salesman either."

"Well, you've got a better cover now."

Poking at the earphones, Phil said, "It's not that much more dignified than posing as a fag. Being a stand-up comedian in Poppa Bopper's Skin City. Even by San Francisco standards it's not much of a place."

"Still it's perfect for keeping an eye on Dr. Hopely," pointed out the computer. "Since the doctor began to show signs of going blooey in the head he's been spending almost every evening at that nudie bistro."

"And so have I," said Phil. "Now I don't get to watch Melissa more than twice a week."

"Don't I let you listen to everything the concealed mikes, in her cottage over in Marin, pick up? Don't I let you look at all the film footage her cat sends in?"

Phil said, "Melissa's an awfully bright girl, Gabbo. I don't see why she hasn't figured out that the cat is a fake, a clever mechanical simulacra of her Sluggo. Unless . . ."

"Unless she's completely innocent," suggested the computer.

"Well, I can't say this to most of my superiors in the National Security Organization, Gabbo," said Phil. "Sal Kibbs, the West Coast Director of NSO, is convinced that Melissa is some kind of Brazilian agent. For no reason really."

"She's sleeping with Professor Dolan."

Phil looked down at the white formica floor of his office. "Yes, I saw the footage on that. Still, that doesn't mean she's a spy for Pro-Brasil. It doesn't necessarily make me jealous even, Gabbo. Because actually Melissa's never even met me. Except for the times when I pose as a substitute lecturer at Marin JC and take over her graduate course in Pop Culture 201. You can't expect her to fall for me in that context."

"She fell for Dolan and he's a lecturer at the college too."

"But Dolan is a Brazilian spy. She has to fall for him."

"You said you thought she wasn't involved in espionage."

Phil looked across his black-and-white office at the black-and-silver computer. "Well, I don't know, Gabbo. Sometimes during a war it's hard to think straight. Especially these South American wars. When we had the war with Chile, back in 1980, I was still in junior high and things seemed a lot simpler. Now we're fighting in Brazil and the Brazilians have got this Pro-Brasil spy network and apparently Professor Manuel Dolan is working for them and he's trying to get the secret of a new weapon out of Doctor Hopely, who heads the Disease Weaponry Lab at Marin JC. And Sal Kibbs is convinced Melissa Marcas is also working for Pro-Brasil and will probably serve as a courier if Dolan does get the weapon info out of Hopely. But she's so pretty and innocent looking. Fragile, yet vital. Usually I like blondes. The two

girls I was engaged to were both blondes."

"Love knows no boundaries," said Gabbo.

"The thing is," said Phil, "I know so much about Melissa. Where she grew up, all about her parents, her immunization records, her high school grades, her dental patterns. I've even seen X-rays of her."

"You've seen her in bed with Dolan."

Phil said, "I know you mean well, Gabbo. I know you're sympathetic, or we wouldn't be having these talks. Please, though, don't keep alluding to that."

"The green-eyed monster has reared its ugly head," said the computer. "You're burning up with jealousy."

"No, you can't expect a girl to fall in love with you if she's never much met you. Melissa doesn't know I've been looking into her case for the last six months, putting together a massive dossier of audio, visual, and print material concerning her. She doesn't know I spend two or three hours a day going over the films and tapes our hidden monitors bring in. Worse, she doesn't know I'm in love with her."

"Every line of work has its heartaches," said Gabbo. "When you have a government job you must put duty before love."

"Exactly what Sal Kibbs would say if I confided in him."

"Well, I hope I'm not starting to sound like a brass hat."

Phil massaged the hollow of one of the gray earphones. "No, you're okay, Gabbo. I think of you as a friend. What with security precautions and all, I can't really talk freely with any of my friends on the outside, friends I've made myself. I don't mean those nitwits I've gotten to know at Poppa Bopper's Skin City. I've been thinking."

"About a way to get to know Melissa better?"

"Yes, exactly. Afterall, she's probably not really involved in this case, except by accident. Once it's cleared up she won't be under observation."

"Probably not."

"At least not anywhere near as thoroughly as she is now. I was thinking, knowing as much as I do about her I should be able to use what I know."

"How so?"

"Well, for instance, I could say to her after a lecture sometime . . . something like, 'I understand you were born in Cleveland, Ohio, Miss Marcas. What a coincidence. So was I.' Something like that."

"You weren't born in Cleveland."

"But I know a lot about Cleveland, from looking into her case. I could certainly tell her a few street names."

"She doesn't strike me as the kind of girl who'd enjoy standing around exchanging the names of old streets in Cleveland."

"What I'm outlining, Gabbo, is only tentative. I need some kind of opening move."

"An ice breaker."

Phil nodded. "After we'd talked a little, I might say, 'How would you like to go to a noise club. Miss Marcas?' "

"That's right, she likes to go to those new night spots that feature simulated earthquakes and volcano eruptions and other loud explosions."

"She's an active, outgoing girl," said Phil. "Or I could invite her to the Laguna Honda Home when the old retired rock singers are putting on one of their Senior Citizens' concerts. Since she likes Americana."

"The Americana thing may just be a cover."

Phil said, "I haven't worked the actual approach out. I'm only saying that knowing as much about Melissa as I do, it will be easy to approach her."

"Oh, I agree that ..." A white bulb on Gabbo's black surface flashed. "Here's something for you." A panel popped open and five pages of white paper flipped out. Gabbo caught the pages in a silver hand and passed them to Phil. "New material for your act at Poppa Bopper's."

Phil frowned, turning the script pages quickly. "You don't write these jokes, do you?"

"No, there's a computer down in our Los Angeles office who does your material," explained Gabbo. "He used to be in charge of monitoring the Mafia on the West Coast and he got to know a lot about show business."

"He may know the Mafia, but he doesn't know the kind of audience they get at Skin City," said Phil. He began a sigh, cut it off, stood up. "I'll go into the rec lounge and memorize this."

The computer waved goodbye.

Phil decided he'd better start his bowtie revolving. "Well, that's enough about sports," he said to the audience. "Boy did I come from a tough neighborhood."

"Blah blah," cried a curly-haired insurance man at a nearby table.

"Yes, that was really a tough neighborhood," continued Phil, taking a step back on the club's pie-shaped stage. "Even the little babies were tough. Yes, when my mother rocked my cradle, she used real rocks. How about that?"

"Rock you." That was one of the nude waitresses heckling him. Off in the back of the domed club, lost in thick purple light. Even the help here didn't like him.

"And my little brother was so tough he never got baptized. No, every time we took him to church he mugged the priest."

"Mug you." That was Doctor Hopely himself, which indicated how far he'd fallen. He was slumped at a stage side table, a long, thin man in a sharkskin jumpsuit.

"Boy, was that a tough neighborhood. Even the cops were afraid in that neighborhood. That's right, they'd make all their arrests by picphone. Ever try to frisk somebody over the phone?"

"Frisk you." Doctor Hopely again.

"Let's see some more nookie," cried the curly-haired insurance man. He took off his plastic shirt and waved it in the purple air.

"Say, have you heard about my fat wife? Boy, is that woman fat. I mean, the first time she went to the beach in her new bathing suit she got arrested for smuggling watermelons."

"Let's see some naked skwack." This was Doctor Hopely. It was yelling things like this in public that had first led NSO to suspect he might be a security risk.

Phil started his tie spinning in a counter-clockwise direction. "Boy, did we have a lot of queers in my old neighborhood. But I see my time is up."

The curly-haired man had jumped up on the stage. "Relax," he whispered. "I'm FBI. I'm going to throw you into the doc's lap so you can plant the lint mike."

"FBI?"

"We're cooperating with NSO on this one." He got a stranglehold on Phil, shifted him up into an airplane spin and let him fly in the direction of the suspect chemical biological warfare man.

As he sailed through the purple ambiance of Poppa Bopper's, Phil managed to dig the lint mike out of his baggy pants. The FBI man had good aim and Phil landed across Hopely's sharp knees. "Excuse me," he said, getting to his feet and pretending to brush at the frail doctor's suit. He got the lint mike hooked good and firm in Hopely's sharkskin armpit.

Hopely smiled. "Please don't take my heckling to heart, young man. Actually you're quite droll. Have you ever heard of Grimaldi?"

Another Mafia hood probably. "No, but thanks for the compliment."

"So long as society has its jesters it is not completely lost," said Hopely. Then he turned toward the stage, cupped long, bony fingers around his mouth and cried, "Let's have more skin."

Phil walked unobtrusively back to his dressing room as the line of ex-teen-age beauty contest runners-up danced out onto the stage.

"Your act's doing better," said the black Poppa Bopper from next to an exit door.

"You think so? Thanks."

Poppa Bopper said, "You got to deliver twenty gags before they threw you off the stage. Last night, at this show, it was only twelve you managed to get through. Keep the tough neighborhood stuff in. It's fresh."

Phil nodded and went back to sit and wait for the midnight frolic show. If he were back at the NSO office he could spend the time monitoring the newest footage on Melissa. Here he sat and went over the tough neighborhood jokes.

He always wore a beard when he was teaching. Another good reason why Melissa couldn't possibly know him as he really was. He didn't have to plant anything on her this time, no microphones or anything. Phil had only to make a detailed report on what she did in the lecture room and for the rest of

the morning around the campus. She was in a back row seat of the sunlit room, wearing a vinyl shift with a paper rose in her dark hair. Unfortunately Professor Dolan, the suspected Pro-Brasil agent, slipped into the hall during the lecture and sat next to the small, slender girl for several minutes. The sight of the wide, handsome Dolan unsettled Phil to the extent that he mixed up his popular culture lecture notes and talked about Daffy Duck while showing a film clip of Woody Woodpecker. No one caught the slip.

That afternoon, without the beard and wearing a red wig, he pretended to be Professor Dolan's dentist. Dolan, who at times seemed too frugal to be a spy, always had his dental work done in the campus college of dentistry. Dolan was used to getting a different student dentist each time and so the sight of Phil did not surprise him.

Though he did ask, "Aren't you in your late twenties?"

"Yes, sir," said Phil, unobtrusively setting the tooth cap mike on his working tray.

"Little old to be still in school, isn't it?"

"Well, sir, I took a few years off to found a commune in the Mojave Desert."

"Why'd you give it up?"

"I had to travel a hundred miles everytime I wanted a dentist."

"Oh," said Dolan.

Phil stuck his finger and a silver pick into the handsome professor's mouth and began to pry off the old and cracked tooth cap from a lower rear molar. "When I get this trade down good enough I may go back to the commune."

"Could you do your own teeth?"

"In the MoJave Desert I'd have to." Phil was somewhat clumsy getting the old cap off and the new one on. The professor assumed apparently that was because he was still in the process of learning. He didn't suspect the mike was in his mouth now.

Phil kicked at the puff of dust on the office floor. "Is that a concealed mike?" he asked Gabbo.

"No," replied the computer. "That's real dust. One of our vacuum cleaners went berserk this afternoon and didn't get around to this office."

Phil sat down in a tin chair. "I thought I noticed a vacuum cleaner running amok in Union Square as I walked up here."

"These simpler mechanisms can't stand the strain."

"It was sucking up pigeons, this one," said Phil. "If I'd known it was one of ours I'd have caught it and brought it back."

"That might have broken your cover."

Snapping his fingers, Phil said, "My mind is wandering. I saw Melissa today."

"Even if I didn't know that," said Gabbo, "I could have guessed."

Phil took several spools of data in his right hand. He clacked them on his knee. "I figure to go over her background again and then some of her aesthetic preference scores from high school and college. Then I'll get a better idea about how to approach her. She likes robot swing combos. I suppose I could ask her to the next Monterey Mechanical Jazz Festival."

"That's been cancelled for the duration."

"Duration of what?"

"Our war with Brazil."

"Really? You wouldn't think mechanical Jazz would give aid and comfort to the enemy," said Phil. "Especially with them down in South America and the festivals here in California. Well, there are a lot of other ways to approach Melissa."

A rasping buzz came out of Gabbo's speech grid. "Oops, here's your boss," said the computer. "Look up on monitor screen six."

Phil moved the Melissa spools onto his desk top. "Good afternoon, Sal."

Sal Kibbs was on screen six, a small stalkerly man of forty-seven. He wore a sleeveless, plaid tunic and a rimless hat to match. "You've been looking into this Pro-Brasil mess for about half a year now, Phil. I'm happy to say we're seeing daylight at the end of the tunnel at long last."

Phil glanced from the screen to the spools and back. "Oh, so?"

Sal tapped his right elbow and it flipped open like a jewel box lid. "I've got a secret report here that



should cheer you up," said his chief.

Phil said, "I thought it was your left elbow you had the secret compartment in, Sal."

"That wasn't enough room so I had another one implanted in the right elbow. I may even have to use my knees and buttocks if the volume of work keeps expanding the way it has." Kibbs unfolded a thin sheet of fax paper that he'd extracted from his hollow elbow. "That lint mike has paid off."

"Doctor Hopely's lint mike?"

"That lint mike, yes," said Kibbs, tapping the sheet. "This is a transcription of the pertinent material. I won't read it all ... something, something . . . 'Nobody can hear us in this cave under the faculty glade, Dolan ...'... something, something ... 'I'll slip you the formula for the hay fever gas tomorrow night. . . . We'll meet at the paper flower exhibit at the Marin Art & Garden Center tomorrow night at 10.'"

"Hay fever?"

"That's the CBW weapon Hopely's been working on," said Kibbs. He folded the transcript, put it back in the hollow and slammed his elbow. "Hopely's hay fever gas is a humane weapon. You can't wipe your nose and shoot a laser rifle at the same time. You should have seen the field tests on this stuff. There's no known cure either. The poor bastards sniffle and sneeze for the rest of their lives."

"Is that really humane?" asked Phil. "I had hay fever when I was a kid, only in the autumn. Permanent hay fever is no fun."

"Compared to what we could use on those Brazilian bastards, this is humane. Anyway, congratulations."

"You'll have agents stop the passoff of the formula between Hopely and Dolan?"

"No, we'll let it happen and see what Dolan does next. I'll be talking to you." The screen blanked.

Phil picked up the spools. "I won't have long to wait. I better get busy working out a way to meet Melissa," he said.

The computer tossed him a bottle of hair-dye and a travel guide when he came into his office the next morning. "You better sit down," suggested Gabbo.

Phil caught the flung objects, sat down at his desk. He absently shook the bottle of black dye, then noticed the title of the travel book. "Mexico?"

"Part of your new assignment," said Gabbo, making a slight irregular humming as he talked. "You see, Phil. . ."

"What about this case?"

"You'll still be looking into the activities of Pro-Brasil. NSO has reason to believe there's a cluster of them at the Tijuana campus of the University of Mexico. Your basic cover will be that of a professor of Mural History. There are a lot of murals in Mexico."

"Mexico?"

Gabbo hummed for a moment. "Let me level with you, man to man, Phil."

"About what?"

"The Hopely business is all cleared up. The case is closed."

"When did that happen?"

"Last evening, during the night shift."

"I wondered why Hopely wasn't at Skin City." Phil smiled tentatively at the long black-and-silver computer. "I should have time to talk to Melissa before I start the Mexico assignment. She's in the clear now, isn't she?"

Gabbo said, "Now, I have some footage of what happened, but I think perhaps you won't want to look at it Just yet."

"What happened to who? Melissa?"

"There was a crash, a plane crash."

Phil rose up and walked toward the computer. "What was she doing on a plane?"

"It was a robot jet bound for Mexico City. It crashed."

Phil put one hand flat against the machine. "You mean she was killed?"

"I'm afraid so, Phil. As I say, I have footage of the crash."

Putting both hands against the metallic surface of Gabbo, Phil asked, "How'd you get pictures? You couldn't have anticipated a crash unless it was arranged."

Gabbo replied, "We only work here, you and I. I don't know all the details, Phil. You see. Professor Dolan passed the information he got from Doctor Hopely, passed it on to the girl. Melissa was enroute to Mexico City to deliver it to someone."

"She was a courier then?"

"Apparently so."

"The crash. How many people were killed?"

"She was the only person on the plane. It's an automatic flight, you know."

"No other passengers? Then it obviously has to be a set up. It was arranged by somebody in NSO." Phil moved back from the computer. "Why couldn't they simply have taken her into custody?"

"I assume they wanted to make sure the information didn't get to its destination," said the computer.

Phil took a deep breath, rubbing his right fist into his left palm. "I really liked Melissa."

"Yes, I know."

Phil said, "I'm going to do something about this, Gabbo. I'm going to get some kind of revenge."

"How?"

Phil said, "It should be easy to avenge Melissa. They shouldn't have just killed her that way." He paced. "The thing is, knowing what I know about NSO it should be easy to do something. I mean, I know the backgrounds of the people here. I know how this agency works. I should be able to figure something out."

"Let's talk about it," said the computer.