

Albedo

A full-length play

By Larry Pontius

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Characters

Joe, an astronaut

Tom, an astronaut

Control, on an Orbital platform above the surface of Titan

Vision in a Space Suit

Hologram, a hardlight hologram of Control

Place

The surface of Titan

The Living Module on Titan

Time

Years into the future

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

Dawn, on the shores of a methane sea on the moon Titan.

In the sky, Saturn, huge, imposing. If our eyes are sharp enough, we could see the rings turn.

The beach is made of hard rock, reddish brown gravel.

An astronaut, JOE, in a silver space suit enters. His breathing is being picked up by his headset.

He carries with him two large equipment bags, they would be heavy on Earth, but in the lower gravity of Titan, similar to the Moon, no problem.

He kneels, opens the bags, and begins to remove the remove the equipment.

A male voice crackles on his radio.

CONTROL

Joe?

(Joe continues to work.)

CONTROL (CONT'D)

Joe. It's me. Control.

(Joe says nothing.)

CONTROL (CONT'D)

Are you receiving the transmission? Joe. Come in please, this is Control. How is it down on Titan today? Joe? Are you receiving?

(Joe begins to fit the pieces of the equipment together.)

CONTROL (CONT'D)

Are you ignoring me? You shouldn't ignore me. That's against protocol. You know you really shouldn't do that. It worries Mission Control back home if you don't respond to Control. Joe? Joe, I know you're there. I can see you on the scanner. Joe, please respond.

JOE

(stopping, looking up)

I'm trying to assemble the core sampler. I thought they wanted me to get soil sample of this sector.

CONTROL

And they do.

JOE

(going back to work)

Then let me do my work.

CONTROL

I understand, Joe. It's just...well...I need to check in with you. Do you have a moment? Joe?

JOE

You can do this with Tom.

CONTROL

Frankly, I would rather do the check in with you.

(Joe pauses.)

JOE

Go ahead Control.

CONTROL

First, we need to do a quick run down on supplies. Oxygen?

JOE

Fine.

CONTROL

Oxygen, check. Food supplies?

(Joe doesn't respond.)

CONTROL (CONT'D)

Food supplies? Joe? Are you listening?

JOE

What?

CONTROL

Food--

JOE

Yes. Yes. Can we get something different? Tommy, I think, is going a little bonkers from all the meatloaf wafers.

CONTROL

I think you know the answer to that one. Food supplies, check. And you?

JOE

Me?

CONTROL

Yes.

JOE

Fine.

CONTROL

Fine?

JOE

Nominal. Within parameters.

Oh. CONTROL

(Silence.)

Can I get back to work? JOE

I have some news. CONTROL

Ok. JOE

(Silence)

It's about me. CONTROL

Ok. JOE

I'm getting married. CONTROL

You are? JOE

Yes. CONTROL

Congratulations. JOE

I'm a lucky guy. CONTROL

What's her name? JOE

Asha. There's something else you should know. I'm leaving the program. CONTROL

JOE

What?

CONTROL

I'm leaving--

JOE

It wasn't a transmission problem. You're leaving the program? What are you going to do?

CONTROL

Asha's father has a company. I'll be heading back to Earth. Nebraska, actually.

JOE

Where did you meet her? How long have you been--

CONTROL

She works up here. In Orbital Insertion. And, we started dating, and we, we...we hit it off, Joe.

JOE

This all seems so sudden.

CONTROL

I miss the wind, Joe. I miss the wind.

(Joe looks up into the sky.)

CONTROL (CONT'D)

Are you mad at me?

JOE

No.

CONTROL

You sound a little mad.

JOE

Congratulations, Control. That's great. How soon?

CONTROL

This is my last transmission.

JOE

Your last?

CONTROL

I couldn't bring myself to tell you sooner. I thought it would be best this way.

JOE

Oh.

(Pause.)

CONTROL

I want to invite you to the wedding. But.

JOE

It will take place in Nebraska?

CONTROL

Yes.

JOE

You know that's not possible.

CONTROL

It was the thought, really.

JOE

Thank you. It would have been nice to finally meet you. Face to face.

CONTROL

That would have been nice.

(Joe goes back to work.)

LIGHTS CHANGE

SCENE TWO

The common room in the living capsule on Titan. It's compact, a table, doorways that lead off to other compartments. TOM sits, staring at a chess set. He scratches at several days growth of facial hair.

Joe enters, removing his helmet. He, too, sports a beard.

TOM

Where have you been?

JOE

Outside.

TOM

Well. Of course. Outside. I know when you're in the living module. I can smell you. Where were you?

JOE

I was assembling--

TOM

Yeah, yeah, I remember, I remember.

JOE

Control is leaving.

TOM

Leaving?

JOE

Yes. He's getting married.

(Tom scatters the chess pieces.)

JOE (CONT'D)

He sounds happy.

TOM

Well, good for him. But what about us?

(Joe shrugs. He begins to remove his spacesuit.)

JOE

There will be a replacement Control, I guess.

TOM

He didn't even have the decency to call me to say good bye. Why do you think that is? Do you think he hates me? I don't know why he hates me. I'm a decent guy. A hard working... He made a mistake. You know that, don't you. It's just a question of when

JOE

IF.

TOM

WHEN we discover life, he's not going to be around for that. He will NOT be around for the most EXCITING moment in human history, the discovery of microbial life on another planetoid! So, fuck him.

(Beat. Tom picks up the chess pieces.)

TOM (CONT'D)

I shouldn't have lost my temper.

JOE

I understand.

(Tom looks at Joe.)

TOM

I'm going to miss him.

JOE

I know.

TOM

Why didn't he call me?

JOE

He said he was busy.

TOM

Busy?

JOE

You know how it is. In orbit. There's a lot going on around Saturn. They're constantly receiving orders. Time isn't your own.

(He steps to a panel, pushes a button. Steam. A beep. A panel slides, revealing a food tray, pasta. He takes it and goes to the table and begins to eat.)

TOM

Did he say anything about me?

(Joe stops. He looks at Tom. Then.)

JOE

He said he was going to miss you most of all.

TOM

He said that. Really?

(Tom smiles.)

TOM (CONT'D)

It's the little things. You know?

JOE

Yeah.

TOM

Do you want to finish our game of chess?

(Joe looks at the board. All the pieces have been moved to the side.)

TOM (CONT'D)

I remember where the pieces were.

(Tom resets the board. He looks at Joe. Joe chews. Then moves a piece.)

TOM (CONT'D)

Did control say anything about the meatloaf wafers? I'm tired of them you know.

JOE

He didn't.

(Joe continues to eat. Tom looks at the board, makes a move. Silence. Joe makes a move.)

LIGHTS CHANGE.

SCENE THREE

Night. The common room.

Joe steps into meeting room, he's in a t-shirt and boxes, pale blue. He looks around. He tip toes to a panel. He presses a button.

A recording.

A WOMAN'S VOICE

Good morning...or is it night there, I can never figure the time difference. I can barely figure out what time it is for your sister in Hong Kong, don't ask me to figure out what it's like for you all the way out there.

Your father is fine. He says he'll record a message for you later. He's very excited to tell you about the Vikings. They played today and won. Oh. Wait. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Maybe...Oh. Shit. How do I? Well, I don't know how to erase on this thing, so you'll have to act surprised, alright, when your father tells you, you act surprised.

Oh! Before I forget, I bought your sister her birthday present for you to give to her. I mean. Well. You know what I mean. You can pay me back when you can. Your father and I are looking forward to seeing her and her baby girl. She is the cutest thing on the planet. Have you seen the pictures? Anyway.

(She's beginning to become
emotional)

I have nothing else to say, I was just calling. I do wish I could see you. Stupid regulations. I'm just a voice from the Earth to you. Anyway. That's all. Be careful. I want my baby boy--

(Lights flick on. Tom is in the room. Joe turns off the recording.)

TOM

Gotcha!

(Joe looks at Tom. Says nothing.)

TOM (CONT'D)

How many times have I told you--

JOE

I'm sorry--

TOM

I've told you not to--

JOE

I know, I know, I couldn't help myself.

TOM

It's private. That was a private letter to me.

(Pause.)

JOE

You could share.

TOM

Share?

JOE

Sure. Share. So...it's not like there was anything in that letter that's like...private. It's the same thing that any mother would send--

TOM

Except MY mother sent it to ME. That makes it private.

JOE

Two fucking years alone with you on this moon, you think anything is private?

TOM

Messages from home--

JOE

I don't remember home. I don't remember what it was like to feel the wind on my face. I don't remember what a blue sky looks like. I don't remember--

TOM

Neither do I!

(Tom goes to the panel. He pushes some buttons.)

JOE

What are you--

TOM

Deleted. Now it's private.

(Joe sits down. Tom walks away. Stops turns.)

TOM (CONT'D)

I shouldn't have done that. I wish I hadn't done that.

(Tom thinks.)

What does my mother sound like? Is she... Does she have an accent? No. That's silly. She's... Her voice is.... Oh, shit, shit.

(He goes to the panel, pushing buttons. Joe exits as Tom continues.)

LIGHTS CHANGE.

SCENE FOUR

Morning. Joe enters, he's exhausted. Following him is Tom, also exhausted. This is how it goes every morning...

Joe goes to the food dispensary, while Tom goes to a shelf.

Joe pushes buttons, Tom collects the utensils. Food arrives.

They arrive at the table together. They eat.

Tom stands with his coffee mug. Joe raises his, without looking, Tom takes it. He fills them. Adds milk and sugar to Joe's mug.

They drink. They eat.

JOE

So, I'm going to run those samples today.

(Tom says nothing.)

JOE (CONT'D)

Do you want to help me with the tests?

(Tom says nothing.)

JOE (CONT'D)

Listen. About last night.

(Tom stops.)

JOE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have listened to your mail.

TOM

No. I should apologize. I shouldn't have snapped. My mom would think of you as her son, too. So.

(Pause.)

JOE

Alright.

TOM

I'll run those tests with you. Who knows, maybe today.

JOE

Great.

(Joe finishes his food. Stands.
Puts it back into the machine)

JOE (CONT'D)

I'll go set up the lab.

(He goes. Tom looks after him. He looks at his fork. He stabs his breakfast with it. He smiles.)

LIGHTS CHANGE.

SCENE FIVE

The afternoon on the shores of the methane sea. The distant sun is high in the sky, but, as always, Saturn dominates.

Joe, back in his space suit, looks at the soil sampler. He holds a wrench.

Assembled, it looks like a miniature oil rig. And there seems to be a problem.

A voice crackles on the radio, it's Tom.

TOM

Well?

JOE

The onboard computer isn't telling me anything.

TOM

Did you--

JOE

Yes, I looked in the gas manifold.

TOM

What about--

JOE

I looked at the laser bit, it's fine.

TOM

And did you--

JOE

It was operating just fine when I left it yesterday. I just got the red light--

TOM

You must've done something wrong. It's not working.

(Joe kneels down, he grabs a tool and begins to unbolt the side of the soil sampler.)

JOE

I did nothing wrong.

TOM

You don't have to get angry with me.

JOE

This would be a whole lot easier if you would just come out--

TOM

We've been over this

JOE

I can't be the only one who goes outside.

(Pause.)

TOM

Up until now, you've been doing an excellent job.

JOE

Tom.

TOM

If you hadn't messed up the soil sampler, then you wouldn't have to try and convince me to go outside, something that you know I won't do, so, really, if you're upset, you only have yourself to blame. You really should be thinking of the mission.

JOE

It's been six months, I think it's time that you got over--

TOM

I am perfectly fine--

JOE

It could have happened to anyone, it was a freak accident.

TOM

Of course it was. Don't you think I know it was? It was a freak accident. It could have happened to anyone.

JOE

Yes.

TOM

BUT IT HAPPENED TO ME.

(Pause.)

JOE

Alright. I'm going to take a look into the retrieval mount--

TOM

Well, that's a stupid idea--

JOE

None of your ideas--

(Static blasts through the radio.
Joe grabs at his ears, but, of
course, he can't reach them through
his helmet.

(A voice, distorted, cutting in and
out.)

CONTROL

Do you. Please. Receive? Come. In. Control.

JOE

Tom? Did you hear that?

TOM

Who the FUCK is this? This is a SECURE channel, get the fuck right off, or the Program will haul your ass--

(The voice and the distortion suddenly clear, it's a woman's voice. She is a ray of sunshine.)

CONTROL

Do you receive? Titan base? Hello! This is Control.

TOM

Control?

(Silence.)

JOE

Hello?

CONTROL

Hiya! Can you hear me now? I was having some trouble hearing you.

TOM

You were blasting us with static.

CONTROL

Was I? Oh, sorry. Not to point fingers, but, it's a totally different panel than the one I trained on, it's a little bit old school up here in orbit. It's like taking a jump back--

JOE

Are you the new Control?

CONTROL

I am! How are you? You're...Joe, right? And if you're Joe, then that must mean...Tom, is that you?

(Tom is silent.)

CONTROL (CONT'D)

I'll take your silence as a positive. How are you guys?

JOE

Um.

CONTROL

So, I understand there's a little problem with the soil sampler--

TOM

Yeah, we can handle it.

CONTROL

What's the trouble? I see there's a red light alarm--

JOE

I was just about to look into the retrieval mount--

TOM

Joe has got it under control.

CONTROL

Have you tried looking into intake valve--

(Joe moves to the intake valve,
opening the vent. He reaches in.)

TOM

The intake valve?

CONTROL

Sometimes debris can get blown into the intake valve.

TOM

Debris? Blown? Listen, I don't think you know what you're talking about--

(Joe pulls out a small stone.)

JOE

Got it. A small stone. Must've gotten inside. Thanks, Control.

CONTROL

Glad I can be of help guys! Hey, I'm sorry, but I got to run, I got this meeting, bleh. I just wanted to say hi. So: hi! Talk to you both at 1800 hours. Control out!

JOE

Control?

TOM

She's gone. What a loon.

JOE

Yeah.

(He pushes a button on the core sampler. It chugs to life. Joe looks up at the sky.)

LIGHTS CHANGE.