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CUSTOMER CARE by Jonathan North

Solo Character: A WOMAN (appearance casual or scruffy; age not important but must be able to switch voices)

The WOMAN is sitting on a chair or stool next to a telephone. The phone rings; she picks it up and purrs into it in a put-on “sexy” voice:

Hello, Charmaine here. How can I help you? Oh, you want to speak to Melissa? Just a mo, sir, I'll connect you.

She places her hand over the mouthpiece and bellows in a coarse voice:

Effie! It's fer you!

She shrugs and replaces the phone, then addresses the audience:

Well, it's a job, innit? All the rage now, these call centres. They say they've chose up here 'cause (*in exaggeratedly Scottish tones*) our cute wee Scottish accents is so lovely. Och aye the noo, ken. (*reverting to her normal voice*) Aye, this is the service industry o' the future, Gawd help us.

Mind you ... calling it industry! Answering a bloody phone! Ma dad, he was in the shipyards. Now *that* was industry. Steel, iron, sweat, hard graft and danger – and at the end o' it all, something you could be proud to help make.

But this? Sitting in a huge tin shed, nae windaes so's you dinnae get distracted, have tae put your hand up when ye want a piss, and if you dinnae make your quota, you're oot the door. Industry! Ha! Battery hens hae a better life. What have we come tae, eh?

I mind ma first week. (*in a “telephone” voice*) “Hello, I'm Tracy and we're doing a special promotion on conservatories in your area ...” Trust the eejit computer to pick me out a list of addresses in a tenement district. I mean, how do ye stick a conservatory on a fifth floor flat?

But what can we dae? Cannae go back tae real industry, cause we've gave it all tae the Japs. In the war ma granddad used tae kill Japs, by the way – no offence, eh? – but now we work for them.

Anyway, I stuck the conservatories for a while, then moved on tae double glazing and kitchens. Terminal boredom, it was, but we needed the money since Sandy went on short time at the factory. Actually, it was Michelle who told me about this job.

Michelle! We go right back tae Primary One. She was aye a gallus wee hussy, even then. The first one tae smoke. First one tae get a real kiss, in the playground behind the bike shed. We all hid and watched, it was dead good.

Aye, and the first one up the duff and all. Love child, she called it – sounds nicer than bas ... Well, anyway. Her mum was terrified it might be black, though her brither reckoned it could be yellow, 'cause one in three babies these days is Chinese.

Then I met Michelle in the pub one night. Looked really good – smart dressed and all. “How’s it gaein’?” she asks. “I’m pissed off,” I says, “pissed off wi’ a capital F.” We got talking. “I’m in the same line as you,” she says, “but better paid and mair fun.”

“Fun?” I says, “are you oot o’ your mind?”. “Aye,” she says, and she tells me all about it. At first I’m not so sure, but as she explains ... well, at the end, she says, casual like, that one o’ the girls left this morning, so if I fancied a change ...

Change? I was on their doorstep crack o’ dawn next morning for an interview. And here I am.

She pauses and looks around

Sandy asked what it is I sell. I had tae explain, it’s mair a customer service thing really. Advice and that ... well, it is, isn’t it?

And ma mum ... she was big in all that Red Clydeside Union stuff when she was young, bangs on about the exploitation o’ women and that. But in this business, you gotta ask, who’s exploiting who?

The phone rings. She picks it up and answers in her “sexy” voice:

Charmaine speaking? Oh, hello, Alex, is that you? How are you, big boy? *(she places her hand over the receiver)* One of ma regulars, see. *(she rolls her eyes)*

So what am I wearing? *(glancing down at her scruffy jumper etc)* Why, your favourites ... my tiniest leather thong. And the black lacy bra with red tassels. What? – er, clockwise, I suppose. No, I dinnae ken if they go anti-clockwise in the southern hemisphere. I’ve never been tae Australia. *(hand over mouthpiece)* Jeez, what a plonker!

Did you get my panties? Good, good. What, to work? Didn’t folk, er, say anything? Oh, *under* your suit. I see. So what are you doing now? Really? With my knickers? How nice. *(she looks at the audience and mimes a “yuck” look)*. *With hand over receiver)* Well, in this business they say the customer always comes first.

Make sure you keep them well hid, eh? Wouldnae want the missus tae find them, would we? Aye, I know, she just disnae understand you, eh? (*hand over receiver*) Trouble is, she understands him too bloody well.

So where's she now? Still out at work? Must be tough, eh, stuck with a boring fat frump like that? Oh really? Improved a bit, has she?

Did you get that, er, special gadget I mentioned? Sure to drive her wild, guaranteed. And all the time, you can pretend it's me. So she's in for a right surprise tonight, eh? Hey, don't let her get too good, or I'll be jealous, big boy.

Better go now, dinnae want her to catch you on the phone to me, do you, you naughty boy? Bye, you gorgeous hunk.

She puts the phone down and shakes her head ruefully

Poor Alex. The first time he called, I nearly fell aff ma chair. Alex, Sandy, didnae even hae the guile to give a false name or disguise his voice. He says he imagines it's me when he's making love to his Jeannie. (*pause*) He's closer than he thinks. If he only knew that the sleek, sexy Charmaine, the one he tells all his secret desires ... if he knew that Charmaine was the same person as his fat, frumpy wife ...

Those panties ... what a laugh. Some weirdo punter sent them in for Michelle, but they were too ridiculous even for her to wear. Rubbed them on the cat tae give them a bit o' a smell, then posted them off tae him.

And yet, funny but ... since all this started, well ... I'm no one tae discuss ma personal life in public but ... let's just say that he's been a lot mair fun in that department recently.

She looks at her watch, picks up the phone and dials

Well, that's about time ... Oh, hi, Sandy. It's Cha ... er, it's Jeannie here, just about to come off shift, see you in twenty minutes, OK? What's that, love? A surprise for me, eh? Mmm, I can hardly wait.

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First Performed 2/10/2000 at the Traverse Lizard Lounge by Elizabeth Strachan; Directed by Kate Nelson

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