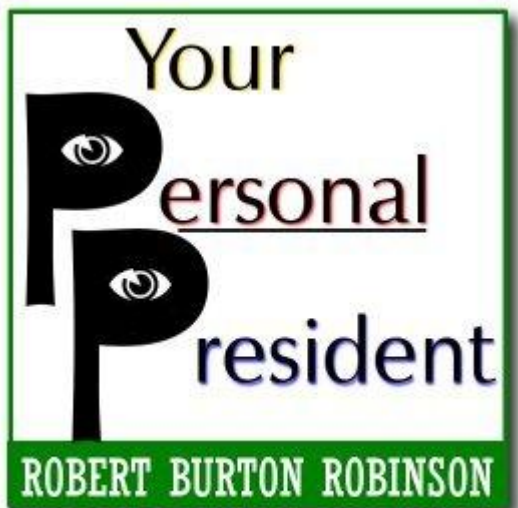


# Your Personal President

*by Robert Burton Robinson*

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GENRE: Suspense. LENGTH: 2,457 words. SYNOPSIS: The year is 2018. Television is obsolete. Everything is web-based. Watch any show whenever you want. And thanks to massive computer databases and powerful processors, all data is now saved. Place your grocery order. You don't have to specify what you want—they already know. Fries with that? They don't even need to ask. Everything can be personalized. Even The President of the United States.

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Liz unlocked the door, swung it open, and tried to push her suitcase through the door. It got hung on something and abruptly stopped—but she didn't. She fell on top the suitcase and rolled to the floor.

When she realized she wasn't hurt, she began to laugh. The three Margaritas still had her a bit loopy. But her first week on the job had been a tough one. She had needed to unwind.

Her phone rang.

“Hello?” she said, still laughing.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“I just walked in the door, Marci.”

“What are you laughing about?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“You’re at your new apartment?”

“Yeah, I just *dropped in*.” She started laughing again.

“You’ve been drinking.”

“How can you tell?” She giggled. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

“So, what it’s like?”

She walked around the apartment as she talked. “Well, let’s see—tiny kitchen, small living room, small bedroom. Basically, it looks just like the one they showed me when I signed the lease.”

“Tell me about the bathroom.”

“I don’t think there’s much to tell.” She opened the bathroom door and turned on the light. “I can sit down while I put on my makeup.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Yeah—I’ll just have to remember to put the seat down.”

Marci laughed. “At least you’ve got your own place.”

“And my own pot.” She giggled. “I mean, you know—my own toilet. And now I won’t be mooching off my parents anymore.”

“And you need to have your freedom, Girl.”

“That’s right. So I can do stupid things, like getting drunk. Stupid.” She tried to shake off the grogginess. “So, when are you making the move?”

“My dad’s been ragging on me to get a place of my own. He says if I don’t, I’m gonna have to start paying him rent. Maybe I could get an apartment where you are.”

“I’m sure you could—it’s pretty cheap.”

“But it’s *government* housing, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a Federal POD.”

“Pod—that’s sounds kinda icky.”

“No, it’s not that bad. POD stands for *Private Occupancy Dwelling*. They’re supposed to be super-efficient. They were state of the art five years ago when they were new.”

“So, now you’re stuck with yesterday’s electronics?”

“Actually, it’s as good as what most people have in their homes. There’s a thirty-inch screen in every room except the living room. It’s got the standard sixty-incher.”

“Hey, that’s not bad at all. So, even if you can’t afford to go out, you can at least watch all your favorite web runs.”

“Oh, you know I wouldn’t have rented a place without good web.”

“So, you’ll have to invite me over soon. We can watch some of our favorite episodes of *Gossip Tree Creek* while we pig out on chips and dip. It’ll be just like old times.”

“Yeah, I could definitely go for that,” said Liz. “Do you like *Law and Order: HC*?”

“I haven’t ever heard of that one. How many different *Law and Orders* does this make? Fifteen? Twenty?”

“I’ve lost track.”

“What does the HC stand for?”

“Hard Core. Miley Cyrus plays this tough-as-nails judge. Her name is Willa Flushem. It’s a hoot watching her lower the boom on every stinking murderer and rapist that ends up in her courtroom.”

Liz admired a woman like Judge Flushem. One time, after she’d sentenced some creep to 75 years, he threatened to track her down as soon as he got out. He’d start by cutting off each of her fingers and then her toes.

But the judge doesn't scare easily. She told him: 'By the time you get out, I'll be long gone, resting comfortably in my grave. But you can come dig me up, if you've still got the balls.'

The screen on the living room wall lit up.

"What the—?"

"What's the matter?"

"I'm in the living room and the screen just came on all by itself."

"Sure you didn't sit on the remote?"

"I'm *standing*."

"Weird. Hope you didn't rent a lemon."

"Well, I need to go, Marci."

"Wait. Did you remember to vote?"

"Yeah, I remembered, but I haven't done it yet."

The voting age had been lowered from 18 to 16 in 2013.

"Come on, Liz. It's been five years and you still haven't exercised your right to vote."

"I know. I feel kinda bad. But you're an activist. It's your *life*. I just don't care that much about politics."

“Well, you *should*. The things they do in Washington and in the state capitol have a direct impact on your life. And there are so many more opportunities to vote now that we have one-year presidential terms.”

“I know—you’re right. But I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“Well, you’d better figure it out soon—the deadline is midnight. You want me to tell you who *I* voted for.”

“No, thanks. I’ll make up my own mind.”

“Well, it’s important, Liz. It’s our right and our duty.”

“Enough. Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

What *is* this? The male avatar on the screen had paused mid-sentence. Suddenly he began to talk again.

“—and I want to continue be *your* president. Your *Personal* President.” President Alfa was running for re-election. Liz had heard his campaign slogan a bazillion times: I want to be Your *Personal* President.

The screen went black. Then Senator Baita appeared.

“A vote for me is a vote for the future. There are only four hours left to cast your vote.”

Liz had assumed she was watching a prerecorded ad. This must be *live*, she thought. Live in *her* time zone. But, of course, they could do that now that campaigns used ani-

mated avatars. They could target regional areas—or even neighborhoods since the avatars were computer-generated.

And because they were created on the fly, the latest polling data or other pertinent information could be incorporated into the message. The only limiting factor was the cost.

“Remember, it’s all about the future.”

President Alfa butted in. “Don’t listen to him, and his hollow promises. Remember—I am your *personal* president, *Liz*.”

What? How did he know her name? Liz had never seen an ad *this* targeted. The president’s campaign must be spending a fortune. They were apparently mining the public records database—right down to whose name was on a lease.

“You’re a beautiful young woman, Liz. You just graduated from college and you’ve got your whole life ahead of you. So, what you need is someone in the White House who will look out for your own personal interests. My challenger makes vague promises about the future. But what I offer is a personal relationship. What do you think, Liz? Will you allow me to be *your* president?”

Her jaw dropped. Her lease application didn’t contain that level of detail, did it? They must be tapping into everything, she thought. They probably had the guest list of her Sweet Sixteen birthday party.

“Don’t be shy. Tell me what you think.”

Liz snatched up the remote, turned off the screen, and walked out of the room. She went into the bathroom and shut the door.

This was crazy. Her mind was playing tricks on her. She'd had those three drinks with dinner, but...just relax, she told herself.

She needed to pee anyway. But no sooner than she sat down, the screen that was built into the mirror lit up.

"I'm counting on you," said Senator Baita.

President Alfa broke in, and now the two were in split screen mode.

"Do you mind?" screamed Liz. "I'm kinda busy here."

"Well, normally I wouldn't mind," said the senator. "But this is critical. The survival of our nation could depend on your vote."

"He's right about *that*," said the president, "This could be very close, Liz. Your vote could decide this thing."

"Can you see me?" said Liz.

"Yes," said the president, "I can. But Senator Baita can't. He doesn't have access to Department of Defense technology, thank goodness."

"But I can *hear* everything," said the senator. "And Mr. President, I plan to launch a congressional investigation into your abuse of power."

“Cool it, Baita, or I’ll appoint you Presidential Fisherman to Antarctica.”

“There’s no such post. And even if there was, I wouldn’t accept it.”

“You won’t have a choice.”

Liz screamed. “Get out. Get off. Leave me alone!”

“I can see you,” said The President, “but I’m not a real person. I’m just electrons in a computer. So, please don’t be offended. We’re both just political avatars—advocates for our candidates.”

“I *know* what you are. Get out!”

The screen went black.

When she got back to the living room, the screen came on and a female avatar appeared, saying, “You will now test your remote to make sure the voting buttons are working properly. Please press either ‘A’ or ‘B.’ This is only a test.”

“I’m not participating in any test,” shouted Liz. “Just leave me alone.”

The screen went black and Liz heard the woman’s voice say, “You have successfully cast your ballot for Senator Baita. Thank you for participating in this presidential election test.”

“I didn’t push a button,” said Liz.

The two candidates reappeared and began to argue with each other.

Liz ran to the kitchen closet, opened the breaker box and began to frantically trip the breakers, one by one. All the lights went off. The air conditioning stopped. Finally the screens all went dead.

The apartment was completely black. Liz took a deep breath and exhaled.

She was startled by a loud knock at the door.

She felt her way over to the door and looked through the peephole. It was Maik, the autobot leasing agent. She opened the door and looked up at him. Liz was five-foot-four. Maik was seven feet tall.

“President Alfa is very disappointed that you did not vote for him.”

“What? I haven’t voted yet. It was just a test.”

“Did you believe him when he told you he wanted to be Your *Personal* President?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so.”

“Then why didn’t you vote for him? What are your reasons? And please be specific.”

“I didn’t vote for *anybody*.”

He just stared at her.

“Hey—I’m not gonna discuss this with you.”

She tried to close the door, but Maik’s foot was blocking it.

“I need to know why you didn’t vote for President Alfa. You must give me an answer. My owner is being paid by the campaign. Do you promise to vote for him?”

You’ve got to be kidding me, she thought. This is illegal.  
“Sure, whatever.”

“Very good.”

“So, now will you please move your foot?”

“I must watch you vote.”

“Hey—I’ll vote when I’m good and ready.”

“No. You will vote *now*.” He pushed the door open, knocking her back.

She ran into the short hallway that led from the living room to the bedroom.

He ducked under the doorway and walked inside, closing the door behind him. His eyes lit up like lasers. He scanned the kitchen, but did not see her. Then he walked into the living room.

She wondered whether he could detect her breathing, or sense the warmth of her body. Hopefully he was a low-end model.

“I am not going to harm you in any way,” he said, removing his pistol from its hidden compartment as he continued to scan the living room.

She ran and leaped onto his back.

“You have miscalculated, Liz.” He began to spin around.

She was barely able to hang on. *If* he was a low-end model, she thought, there should be a power switch right about...here. She clicked it.

His spinning slowed and then stopped. Thank goodness he was programmed to shut down gracefully rather than to just collapse. If his heavy body had landed on hers, she might have been a goner.

Liz climbed down. “Consider my lease hereby cancelled.”

She kicked him hard in the torso, and he tipped over and crashed to the floor.

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“Oh, I’m sorry, Honey. I didn’t know you were here. I thought you were spending the night in your new apartment.”

Liz rolled over in bed. “I thought I was too, Mom.”

“Well, just go back to sleep. I know you had a hectic first week on the job. I’ll see you later.” She closed the door.

What a nightmare, thought Liz. Her dreams weren't usually so vivid. Maybe it was all that Mexican food she ate for dinner. No—it must have been the three Margaritas. She normally stopped at one.

She remembered feeling tipsy when she left the restaurant. It was a wonder she had been able to drive home safely. She would never get behind the wheel in that condition again.

Liz tried to visualize her drive home. But what she saw confused her. She pictured leaving the restaurant and getting on the highway. But wait—she was going the wrong direction. Then she saw herself stop at the Federal POD. But it was just a dream, wasn't it?

She tried to block the false memories and see herself driving to her parent's house, and then walking into her old room and getting into bed. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not do it.

Liz shook her head like an Etch-a-Sketch, hoping to erase what shouldn't be there. It's a scary thing when dreams seem more real than reality.

She made herself take a deep breath and relax. None of it made sense. Maybe she just needed more rest. Yes, that was probably it. She lay back down, pulled the covers over her head and tried to turn off her mind.

She was just beginning to doze off when she heard the screen on her bedroom wall come to life.

“So, today I begin another productive year as your president.”

Liz spun around in bed and yanked the covers off her face. It was President Alfa’s avatar. Couldn’t the actual human give his own acceptance speech?

“I would like to thank all of you who live on Maple Street. Each and every one of you voted for me.”

She knew her parents had voted for Alfa. And the name of their street was Maple. Creepy.

“And thanks to those living in the Federal POD. All of you voted for me, with the exception of one man who unfortunately had a heart attack last night, and, of course, YOU, Liz.”

She gulped. Her entire body began to tremble.

“But I know you’ll vote for me next year, won’t you, Liz? I mean, why would you vote for anyone else? You need a voice in the White House that speaks for *you*. And that voice is *mine*. Because, always remember, Liz:

I am YOUR *PERSONAL* PRESIDENT.”

THE END

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