

Helping an old woman, age 90, turn on

Hank Malone

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Age 90 is very different. A dusty journey has been traveled, a time-tunnel has been penetrated. Her 20th Century is a vast prismatic blur, a fantasy in which some parts hold up for the Truth.

In 1900, this beautiful woman was 21 years old. So many years ago that what you're saying, what I'm saying today is a drop of curious mist in the great and sheer storm of human survival. Little more than a grunt, glint, tiny fart, etc., of the 90 year old cosmic voyage of this lady.

One day, not long ago, this lady in her tiny outmoded body, possessing only a single lonely dress, hung wet in her living room for the hot drying drafts of summer, called on me (me like a branded staring lamb) to fix her television set. Please, would I do it? Heavy with dust, a corpse (a fascist corpse!) whom she had sought to revive to life after two years of unburied death, sat in the corner of her living room. The old woman raised her tiny hands in gentle tranquility and asked me, over and over, to repair this TV set. She prayed.

Monster Eye of the 20th Century. Cathode Cyclops. She wanted him back to life!

She had also been without her own ears for a long time, and only occasionally plugged together the plastic transistorized communication apparatus into her ear. WHAT? HELLO! DON'T TALK TOO LOUD! WAIT TILL I TURN DOWN THE VOLUME! There that's better. Now we can talk.

Let me call her Mrs. Lewis. She is short, but speaks as if she had spent her first fifty years much taller, pulled down later perhaps by the ignominy of Time itself to meet the ritual and symbolic expectations of those 40 and 80 years younger.

Through a haze of pleasantly-wrinkled flesh there is constant laughter emerging, merriment, and full-bodied lonesome emotions. Nourishing no one else for years, she has turned all her motherhood in on herself, and has mothered the child latent in her, creating a sunny rose and an appealing kindness surrounded by visible ruins.

Unable to talk with her precisely, separated somehow by the literal phantom distance in decades, I can do little more than actually help her (like a robot monster from another dimension) to realize her simple and literal requests. Were she to have talked to me of metaphysics I would have shrunk physically into a babbling infant. Shortly after she asks me to do so, I find myself taking refuge behind the fascist television corpse, trying to fix it.

As I work, her words fill the room. She keeps talking. It is like using a strange drug and falling into an unanticipated excitement and confusion of tubes and correspondence and resistors and serpent-like updrafts of hot air, distantly-boiling potatoes, and the ghostly aura of prehistoric gossip and playful sunbursts from another century.

In the nest and crater of TV wires and tubes and dust I listen to what seems like Ramakrishna and Blake and Dehorahara Baba, who moans "Oh how wounded; how wounded!" She tells me, finally, "I've become bored talking to myself, bored with my deafness and silence. I want to talk with the television set."

Twentieth Century!

Years of silence and meditation and solitude, a half-billion brain cells dying in self-conversation, sitting alone in a group of rooms no larger than the single passenger' row of an airplane. Mrs. Lewis, halfway to God, perhaps more, wants to talk with the TV set because she is tired of talking with herself!

And I work on in the 20th century, my hands entangled in the red and orange and green electric miasmas of thistle-haired wires.

Soon, lines begin to appear across the screen, and she throbs as if I were lifting a coffin-lid. Lightning flashes screech into her eyes, half-pictures rolling and turning insanely on the surface of the Cyclopes.

Suddenly it is there, wearing soft golden girdles, looking frantically for Ajax cleanser, the thousand-minded Meat-God speaking of News and the 'Sixties.

I have resurrected a monster!

And yet, here is her clean eye-lit laughter and delight. She has called me out from the middle of the century to enter her distant past, to convince me that her loneliness is somehow better spent with the Chirp and Oily Hands of television than with her own head having spent so many years inside itself that she has choked on the suffocating boredom of all that lies beyond everything.

It is her own world, finally, and she will make everything in it, including the rushing vomit of the TV tube, her own to embrace, embellish, and intrigue her.

Long on her way to Jupiter, well past Mars, age 90, with only the barest trees lining the cosmic road, China is not her enemy, nor Russia, nor America, nor youth. Her breast aches, but not over lost husbands and money-moistened tears. Hers is not a trembling hand that hates you and me because we are young. It is all so simple. For her, we simply don't exist at all! Neither in Prague, nor in Chicago, nor in Vietnam, nor in a million debates, nor ANYWHERE.

Mrs. Lewis was once young. Now she is old, and alone, for it is age itself that brings about the full realization of the human condition: its essential loneliness. Her birth, like a physical ray of light, has wandered through a century, and makes its way toward another kind of century crowded with delightful movies where Big Business and Giant Labor Unions collide in endless cross-eyed modernity. China and Ajax cleanser and the Peacemakers and the great Revolutionists conspire on Earth. And the Earth is a distant planet she has left behind, her and her TV set, on their way to Jupiter and Beyond.

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