

The Man Whose Television Wouldn't Work.

a very short story
by James Oswald

I am awake but the alarm has not yet sounded. I lie, warm, comfortable and safe, my thoughts mingling with the traffic noise outside to form weird images. This is the dream-time when problems are easily solved, life is happy and I am the hero galloping confidently from one adventure to the next.

The alarm bell rings. Reality asserts itself on my senses. Dull grey light stops at the window, unsure whether to come in or not. Last night's cigarette smoke pub reminds me of its stale odour as it wafts off clothes arranged in chaotic patterns around the room. I get up.

Cold water on my face and I wonder how it is the toothpaste escapes. Possessed by some demonic force its occasional freedom is witnessed by mirror, floor and walls liberally flecked in soft pink gelatine. I imagine late at night; the witching hour an orgy of dispersal brought swiftly to a halt by the coming of dawn. I screw tight the lid of the toothpaste tube and stalk warily from the room.

Back in the bedroom I avoid opening the curtains, aware by some strange telepathy of the dull day outside. If I leave it for long enough, perhaps something more interesting will come along. I ponder briefly what to wear. Whether to be smart despite knowing I will see no one all day. As usual my decision is made for me as the wardrobe yields jeans, T-shirt and a threadbare sweater as grudgingly as any small child.

The kitchen is a sorry place; old gas cooker caked in grease and half-burnt food. One cupboard, without a door, full of old saucepans unused since the turn of the century. Dirty dishes grow out of the sink in all directions, fertilised by whatever it is in the drainpipe that smells like a multi-storey car park stairwell. The kettle squats, scowling in the corner, its malevolence strangely comforting at this early hour. I approach it carefully, grabbing a mug that is not quite totally blackened inside and using it as a shield. I switch it on and it gives me hot water without electrocution. This time.

Coffee and toast, stale and dry. I settle down in front of the television for a day's gainful unemployment. Press button, switch on, switch off.

Images of turquoise and green malingering flicker into life. Vast oceans of motes, tiny and ever moving, unchanging and never the same, leap and frolic on the screen. Sound both loud and meaningless swims around a room that has suddenly become alive with stagnation. I wait for the picture like an addict waiting for that first surge after the needle.

Nothing new happens. Swirls of colour fill my attention, dragged into the small box so dominant in the room. Noise settles to a dull susurrations, the promise of a thousand stars muttered through the cotton wool of ages.

The moment is lost. Something is wrong. I rise as if in slow motion. Crossing the room takes an age and I wonder, was it golden? My hand rises as if to a child who has overstepped the mark and I bring it down with a loud crash.

The picture wobbles, sickeningly, shocked at such treatment from an old friend and faithful servant. It gathers itself together, readying a reply, then disappears. A full stop, white and final, marks the end of any possible conversation. A quiet electrical voice screams and is abruptly cut short. The television is dead.

Slowly, painfully this information sinks in. As if released from shackles, my perceptions expand. Its hold gone, I see the television as it really is. A small wooden box with a glass front, it squats on four shapeless legs, for all the world a fifties alien foiled in its plans for world domination.

Behind, the wall climbs upward. Tacky flock wallpaper; roses and strange greenery no botanist would ever recognise. The fireplace, square and solid, silenced by a plywood gag, badly fitted and once painted white. It waits, yellowing for a time when it will again breathe fire.

Light filters in. Red and brown patterns from seventies curtains worn thin with misuse. I draw them and watch spears of white stab the murk of the room.

Dust dances an elegant downward polka towards the floor. It settles on the floorboards; poor little girl's legs showing through the dirty, torn dress of the carpet's edge. Over the floor my eyes notice the old sheepskin rug, stained and crusty. I look at my bare feet and wonder how I managed never to cut myself.

Beyond the rug an old sofa lies asleep, snuggled up against the wall. It looks like it has not been fed for a few weeks. I pity the poor unfortunate who unwittingly sits in it.

The door to the kitchen stands ajar, revealing its fetid secrets. Sticky parquet flooring and ancient mystic ceremonies, I dance a slow waltz around various obstacles, monuments to meals long dead, closing the door on such a terrible sight.

In the far corner a shrine has been built to the telephone god. Directories for years long forgotten and towns never visited pile high around a plastic table. The wall here, plastered with numbers, notes and scraps of paper, shows all the signs of recent and historic rite. Pen tops and pencil sharpenings litter the area, discarded after the sacrifice of their bodies. A half-empty coffee mug has become the birthplace of a strange new life form. I reach for a faded yellow tome and then stop, mesmerised by the play of the not-so early morning sun on the detritus-strewn patch of dead vegetation outside.

I stand motionless as a battle is fought across the subconscious plains of my mind. Outside is wet and cold, ventured into only on Thursday mornings and occasional shopping-trolley hunts for food. Outside is warm, sunny, inviting, interesting, attractive. I must arrange to have the television mended as soon as possible, worry later where the money comes from. I must rush outside and feel the wind, the sun, the roar of engines, the smell of diesel smoke.

I glance sideways at the small wooden box, pathetic and useless at the far end of the room. It rasps a long drawn-out sigh, painfully dying in endless wheezy cough and sinister single-point madness. Mercifully I switch off the life-support. My decision is made.

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