

The Nine O'clock News

"Whatcha watchin'?" Jessie came into their living room freshly showered and towelling his black hair. He had been at the garage till eight. Better than the last few nights, anyway. One of his old high school teachers--his art teacher, and the best teacher he had ever had, in fact--had brought in her Porsche for some work, and he had promised to do it himself. (The job would require lots of test drives, of course.) (It was a *black* Porsche.)

But Hank (her real name was Mirabelle but since that was ridiculous, her friends called her Hank) (good thing too--when Jessie came along he almost broke off their first date when someone told him what her real name was). Hank had just got home herself, her shift at the bank ending at seven-thirty this week. "The news" she answered, moving over for him to sit beside her on the couch. She had set their dinner on their vintage Goodwill coffee table. Weiners in a sort of tomato and onion sauce, pork and beans, and mashed potatoes.

"You mean W5 or something? The news isn't on now."

"Yes it is. This is *The Nine O'clock News*."

"Hi," a voice from the tv said, "and welcome to *The Nine O'clock News*." She grinned at him and put her fork on top of her head like an antenna.

He grinned back and tossed his towel at her, then sat down beside her, shovelled a forkful of weiners into his mouth, and turned his attention to the tv. He saw three people sitting on a couch talking. Well two actually, one guy was in a wheelchair.

"This is the news?"

"Yeah, why?"

"It doesn't look like it. It doesn't look--professional", he tried to clarify.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, they don't look very business-like."

"What, a profit motive should be part of the news?"

"No, that's not what I meant by business--"

"*What* did you mean?" she persisted playfully.

"You know, look at what they're wearing!"

She looked. The white guy had on light-coloured pants and a sweater. The other one, the one who was reading the first item--something about solar energy cars in Los Angeles--was wearing a blue shirt, long sleeves rolled up a bit, and jeans. And the woman, a fat east Indian woman--Hank liked her the best, she always said exactly what she thought--had on a multi-coloured sari.

"Yeah? So? What's your point?"

"Come on, you know what I mean, do they look like experts?"

"I don't know--how can I tell by looking at them? Should there be some mark on their forehead?" She turned back to stare at the tv with mock intensity. "Actually Charid has one--" she pointed with a weinered fork, "see that red dot there, right between her eyes? Maybe that's the official 'dot of expertise'." She popped the weiner into her mouth then continued thoughtfully. "Geez, the other two don't have a dot, though I think--" she squinted at the tv, "I think George--" and pressed her face against the screen, "I think George has a pimple!" She turned back to Jessie holding her face still squeezed out of shape, "Does that count?"

"Cut it out", Jessie was laughing.

"Well! What *do* you mean?" She scampered back beside him on the couch. "Do you think you look like an expert crawling under a car with grease up to your armpits?"

"Yeah, actually, I think I look pretty sharp in my uniform." He added then, grinning, "Mrs. Morray said so when she dropped of her Porsche."

"Oh! Your uniform makes you an expert does it? And when you work on your own cars here on the weekends in your jeans and that old pyjama top, then you're *not* an expert anymore and you don't know what the hell you're doing?"

George turned to face Charid. "I think you'll like our next item..."

"He's got a pony tail for god's sake!" Jessie cried out, waving his fork at the screen.

"It's called a rat's tail. And so? You sound like the bank when they wanted to fire Zeebo because she spiked her hair and dyed it pink. She was suddenly 'unprofessional', remember? That woman is the fastest teller in the west! And she always always *always* balances at the end of the day!" She held up three fingers on each hand and looked puzzled, as if the concept was unfamiliar to her. "I thought you were going to sneak a penny into her till one day--"

"I tried", Hank mumbled, her mouth full of beans. She swallowed then, "but she caught me! I swear she's got eyes in the back of her head! I tell you if we're ever held up by gangsters, I hope they go to her wicket. She'd be able to recognize their *fingerprints* in a line-up! Three years later! Blindfolded!"

"With their snowmobile gloves on." Jessie had met Zeebo at a staff Hallowe'en party.

"...senior citizen's nursing home in Nova Scotia," George was reading, "Harpin's Manor, accepts the pets of residents. In fact, residents without pets are encouraged to get one if they like. A few students from a nearby senior public school have been given part-time jobs to come at eight-thirty, noon, and after school to help look after the animals."

"The students take the animals for walks?" Charid asked.

"Well apparently the property is fenced in--"

"For some of the happier wanderers?" Arnie interjected the question, with a smile.

"You got it--so the animals are free to roam and therefore they already get a fair amount of exercise. But some of the residents need help feeding their pets: one woman can't bend low enough to set the dish on the floor and her dog is too old now to jump up on her bed to get to it. And then there's cleaning litter boxes and bird cages."

"Any hamsters and guinea pigs?" Charid asked.

"Yes," George scanned the report he was holding, "and also those long floppy-eared rabbits--they have become quite popular."

"Well it's about time, isn't it?" Charid responded to the news. "I mean studies have shown for years the positive benefits of having a pet: something to talk to, something to hold--and something that needs you."

As George set the report onto the coffee table in front of them, Arnie added to her comments, "And of course for those with pets before--"

"Yes! I can't imagine being seventy or eighty and having to say good-bye to my dog of maybe ten years, I'd rather die! Really!" Charid was nodding her head for reinforcement. "And take my dog with me if it came to that!"

"What would you do?" Hank asked Jessie. "What would you do if you had a dog

for ten years and you were seventy-five and you had to move into a home cuz you kept forgetting to turn off the stove or something?"

Jessie was remembering Bruce, his St. Bernard he'd had to leave for two years when he went away to college. "I don't know", he answered. "Sell the stove."

"And in the House," Arnie was speaking, "the following Bills are being discussed. Bill 304 is an amendment to the CMP, Canada's Medical Plan, to include cosmetic surgery for birth defects on the list of eligible procedures. Bill 342 is an amendment to the Immigration Act allowing all those seeking safety to enter Canada, regardless of national origin and occupational potential."

"Wow--that's a biggie", George commented.

Arnie agreed then continued, "Also under discussion are motions to increase the garbage tax, to expand rail service in the North, and..."

"This is weird", Jessie observed.

"What?"

"Well you don't usually hear this kind of stuff on the news", he waved his knife at the tv.

"Yeah. Neat, isn't it?" She went out to the kitchen to get more milk. "They have a rule," she called out, continuing, "no more than ten percent of the items can feature death or physical injury, and more time has to be given to conflict resolution not involving violence than to that that does."

"That must cut out quite a bit." Jessie was distracted for a moment then by the tail end of a joke Arnie was telling, about how many Canadians were needed to build a railroad. "So what do they report on?"

"What do they report on?" she echoed as she returned. "There's *lots* of news that doesn't involve violence. It just started this week but so far they've covered all sorts of talks: arms talks of course, and labour negotiations--not the riots, and conferences--"

"Did they ever give a reason? I mean. for their restriction on content?" Jessie interrupted.

"Yeah. Partly it's a value judgement. They think conflicts worked through without violence are more important, more *worthy* of our attention. Partly it's a conditioning thing--" Jessie raised his eyebrows so Hank went into an explanation. "They figure we make violence special, we make it sensational, by watching it. By paying attention to it, we're saying it's worth attention. You know, like when there's a fight--like at school--everyone would go watch. Well if everyone were bored with it--and frankly I am, now--and just walked away--think the guys would keep fighting?"

"Well maybe--depends what they were fighting about." She made a face at him as if to say 'oh come on!'

"Okay, not as much", he conceded. "Having an audience does make it harder to stop, to give in, to give up--I'll grant you that."

"So," Hank began to continue but then stopped.

"You know," George was saying, "in other countries, people have been paying by the pound for their garbage disposal for years."

"And has it cut down on the amount of trash?" Charid asked.

"Oh yeah! Everyone in Europe has a compost heap--and in Sweden it's *illegal* to throw out anything that can be recycled!"

"So do you think an increase in the garbage tax is the way to go?"

"Well if..."

"So," Hank resumed then, "these guys figure they're gonna say to all those thugs and mugs--"

"And gangsters?" Jessie teased.

She ignored him, "say 'hey we don't care who punches who out'--"

"And then they'll stop." He shook his head. "Right."

"Well, it's worth a try--" her tone admitted to some of his disbelief.

"And partly," she concluded, "it's a manipulative thing--"

"They said that?"

"Oh yeah. They said that if they were going to manipulate us, the least they could do was be upfront about it. Anyway, they feel that the more people hear about positive, good things, the more positive, the better they'll feel, and the more they'll try to *do* positive things, see--listen--" she broke off quickly.

"Don't forget," George was saying, "if you have an opinion on any of these issues or an idea you think should be mentioned and considered, call your MP." "If you don't know who your MP is", Charid added, "or what their phone number is, call 1-800-471-1111 and just say what riding you live in." The number appeared on the screen under the title 'MP Directory'.

"See? When *they* say their news is 'action-oriented'," Hank said, "they mean that it's news we can take action about, not that it looks like a Stallone movie."

"And," Arnie stuck his head into camera view, "if you don't *know* where you live--" Charid pulled him back laughing.

"And without all the Stallone stuff, they can fill an hour?" Jessie asked then,

chuckling at Arnie.

"Oh yeah! Easy! Do you know how many 'survival think tanks' there are? People all over the *world* are getting together to work out strategies to save us. 'Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War', 'Secretaries for Tomorrow'--"

"*I've* never heard of those groups before--"

"Exactly!" Hank continued, "They also cover things like medical breakthroughs. And they have an 'ordinary hero' spot: every night they highlight some ordinary person doing something pretty fantastic or just something good--" She shrugged then, "I don't know what else--listen!"

"The company plans to begin expansion in March," Charid was saying, "creating 40,000 new jobs. However environmental groups agree that the ground water of the entire area will be at risk. One of the chemicals used in the wood treatment process is arsenic, and if the new facility is constructed according to plan, runoff will leach from the stored wood into the soil." Charid went on to explain exactly what the problem was, what the company had said to the protesting groups, and what the Ministry of Environment was doing about it.

"They seem to spend a fair amount of time on each item", Jessie noted.

"Yeah--most news programs have a length restriction of thirty seconds per item. They don't follow that rule."

"The company's president is Robert Dusseldorf, their address is 1426 Broadway Street, Timmins, Ontario, and their products are marketed under the name 'TimberWood'." She threw the item onto the table in disgust.

"See? So we can write a letter or boycott the company."

"Do something negative", he chided her.

"Well, negative for the company yeah. They have good things on that you can write about too. Did they give the address of that old age home? They give dates and places of meetings and rallies and work parties--"

"Work parties?"

"Yeah--like instead of just saying a tornado hit so and so, they'll say rescue squads are meeting at 6:00 a.m. at the community centre, for instance."

"Or money and canned goods can be sent to so and so--" Jessie was beginning to understand the idea. "I wonder if the newspaper will start to do the same thing."

They watched a bit more, finishing the food on their plates. Jessie commented then, "I wonder how they decided on two men and one woman."

"No, actually, there's six of them."

Jessie held up two fingers on one hand and one on the other, looking puzzled. She laughed.

"None of them needed a full-time newscaster's income, so they all job share. George shares with a woman named Pat O'Malley--she's neat--she's in her sixties--they alternate every day. And Arnie shares with James Cree--"

"Is he?"

"Is he what?"

"Cree? An Indian?"

"Oh," she thought about it, for the first time. "I guess he might be. They're on a 'four days on, four days off' shift change, I think, I've only seen him once. And Charid shares with someone named Anna Krstanovich. I haven't seen her at all yet, I don't know

how they rotate." Hank stopped, her attention caught again by an item.

"CLAND, Canadian Lawyers Against Nuclear Destruction, is taking the federal government to court. They are charging the government with conspiracy to commit murder because of the nuclear weapons it continues to produce," Arnie was reading from the small sheaf of papers he was holding. "If the case is successful, it will be declared unconstitutional for the government of Canada to produce any nuclear arms, in part or in whole, directly through manufacture or indirectly through foreign contracting."

"That's an interesting idea," Jessie commented, "I wonder if it'll work." She shrugged, not with disinterest, then continued her explanation about their job-sharing system.

"They said they'd rather have extra time than extra money. Arnie has new baby twins and likes spending entire days with them rather than just evenings. And--"

"How do you know all this?" Jessie was on his way to the kitchen with his dishes.

"Oh, they talked about themselves a bit on the first show."

He stopped then and addressed the living room of their apartment. "Hi. My name is Arnie. And I'm an--"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's so--unprofessional!"

"What's unprofessional about it?"

"A professional is not supposed to get personally involved. You're supposed to be objective, impartial."

"There's no such thing. Unless you're a robot. They also talked about that. These guys *react* to the news they tell. They're human! And, usually, conscious! They're not

like most of the clowns who say only what someone else tells them to say--in a practised voice that covers three octaves to sound interesting. These people don't have to *sound* interesting--they are! If Charid thinks an item is a crock of shit, she says so. And George--"

"But that's all wrong!" he came back. "They're manipulating you, telling you how to react!"

"They are not! Just because Charid thinks something is bullshit, doesn't mean I'm going to think so too. Nor does George or Arnie. They're always tossing things back and forth--"

"You don't think the government should *ever* be above--or outside--the law?" George was asking Charid.

"No!" she was vehement. "What's the point of working long and hard for laws that guarantee individual rights and freedoms if the government can toss them out whenever it pleases--declare a 'state of national emergency' and impose 'martial law'!"

"But what if it's for our protection?"

"As in 'for our own good'? George," she scolded gently, "we're *big* boys and girls now. We don't need a daddy--or a big brother--looking after us. We can--and we gotta--look after ourselves!"

"But--"

"You think nuclear weapons are for our protection too, don't you?" she challenged.

"See?" Hank was pleased. "Being subjective makes more sense! Dropping an item from out of nowhere into a vacuum, being 'objective' and 'impartial'--that doesn't

work! No context, no meaning!"

"Well, portraying both sides is kind of like being objective."

"Both? Who said anything about two sides? Sometimes they all agree, but usually between the three of them they come up with six or seven sides."

"'Wild Kingdom' will be back after these messages", Arnie dead-panned to the camera.

"Did you hear that? He's been doing that--how can they expect to be taken seriously if they aren't even serious themselves?"

"What, when someone cracks a joke--or smiles--they blow all credibility? What kind of logic is that?" He had no answer.

"No sports?" he asked then during the commercial, noting that it was almost ten o'clock.

"Too trivial. This *is* a serious show", she smiled.

"Weather too trivial too?"

"Well--yeah--on a day to day basis. I mean millions of people live quite adequately not knowing if it's going to be eighteen or nineteen degrees tomorrow. Or what the chance of precipitation is. They do have environmental reports though: global trends, and climate changes, the condition of the ozone, pH readings--that kind of thing."

The Nine O'clock News was signing off. Hank got up to take her dishes into the kitchen.

"And it's on every night--at nine o'clock?"

"Looks like it," she paused at the doorway. "I guess someone finally figured out that not everyone works nine to five and goes to bed at eleven. Besides, it does seem

silly for every station to put their news on at the same time. That way you can only watch one and you have to choose. If they staggered the times, someone who likes to watch the news can do it whenever it's convenient, and they can watch more than one program."

"Yeah, but given a choice between the news and whatever else is on at *nine* o'clock, who do you think will choose to watch the news?"

"So," Arnie was looking out at them. "This is goodnight," he grinned, "from Larry, Curley, and Moe."

"We did", she grinned triumphantly.