

AIR

a treatment for a short teleplay
by Robert Locke

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In a small shabby apartment an OLD MAN is committing suicide.

As the old man moves about in the f.g. making his meticulous preparations, an early model TV plays in the b.g. The volume rises and falls as we follow the old man around the apartment.

The old man brings from the medicine chest in the bathroom every pill bottle he possesses and sets each out on the end table beside his armchair which faces the TV. He dusts the table, lifting and setting down the bottles in turn. He empties the pills from each bottle onto the table into discrete, colored piles. He brings from the kitchen a bottle of bourbon and a tumbler. He goes one more time to the bathroom to examine himself in the mirror as he combs his hair and adjusts his tie. He takes one last, close, puzzled look deep into his own eyes, then leaves the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Very dramatic dialogue and music, meanwhile, have been coming from the TV. The TV FATHER and TV MOTHER are warming to a family crisis. The TV BOY, their son, has gotten in their way, has been rebuked by both parents, and has now taken up a position of retreat in the living room in front of his late model TV which always remains on, now showing a commercial for TVs.

WHAT WE SEE FOR ONE BRIEF MOMENT -- SHOOTING FROM BEHIND the armchair, we see the back of the old man's head as he sits at ease before his TV. To his right is the end table with the piles of pills, the bottle of bourbon and the tumbler. Straight ahead of him is his TV, showing TV BOY lying down in front of his TV, that TV showing in turn the commercial featuring its many TV sets, all displaying TVs that are displaying TVs. TVs to infinity.

The old man carefully pours himself a tumbler full of bourbon, fingering a pile of the pills as the CAMERA SLOWLY ZOOMS over his shoulder into a CLOSE SHOT of his TV screen until that TV frames with our TV screen.

Over the sound of the boy's TV continues the sound of his mother and father arguing even more violently. The father is packing to leave forever.

CLOSE SHOTS of the boy as he watches his TV, the light of his TV flickering on his face as he tries not to listen to his parents.

Finally in frustration he rises, walks to the Hi-Fi and sets a record playing. It is the "Hungarian Rhapsody Number 2" by Franz Liszt. The boy turns the volume up full blast and returns to lie in front of his TV which is now playing a children's show "Colonel Candy's Cartoons".

At the moment COLONEL CANDY is on the air, talking with two different KIDS AT HOME who are about to play Colonel Candy's computer game "Bam" from their sets at home. Colonel Candy is giving them both instructions on how to play and we hear their small, unsure voices assuring Colonel Candy that they are ready to play. The boy's TV screen is taken up now by the computer game as the two kids at home begin competing.

"Bam! Bam! Bam!"

The father and mother charge into the living room, bringing the fight in with them. The father flings a last retort at her then turns to the boy.

FATHER

Skipper, you want to come with me?

MOTHER

Like Hell! Like Hell! Get away from him!

FATHER

I'm talking to Skipper. Shut up.

MOTHER

You keep your dirty hands off him. I'll call the cops.

FATHER

You afraid who he'll choose?

MOTHER

Like Hell!

The father goes to the phonograph and scrapes the needle off the record. Suddenly it's all quiet except for the little

voices on the TV shouting "Bam!" and Colonel Candy's "Good shot! Nice one!" etc.

FATHER

So what do you say, Skipper? You've always been skipper of your own ship. That's how we always wanted it, right? Now your mommy and me can't make it any more, so I'm goin'. But you can come too, and we'll have a lot of fun, just the two of us. What do you say?

MOTHER

We can have a lot of fun here, too, Skip. It'll be just like it always was. Daddy can go away and it'll be better. I'll take you to the park. I'll take you to the zoo-

FATHER

I know this freighter, and they've already said I can work for them, and they said they'll let you come along with me.

MOTHER

They never said no such thing. What are you tellin' him lies like that for?

FATHER

We'll go to Japan. We'll go to China. What do you say?

MOTHER

Oh, Skip, he's tellin' you such lies! You know where you'll go? Out on the streets, that's where. You'll be sleepin' on the sidewalks just like that little boy last Christmas, remember?

FATHER

Would you shut up! It's his choice, dammit.

MOTHER

Remember, Skip? Without even a coat on. That'll be you.

The father lunges at the mother, pushing her over from where she has been trying to kneel close to the boy. She regains her feet, backing away from him.

MOTHER

I swear to God, you touch me, you lay one hand on me, and I'll have the cops down on you so fast you're dog meat.

FATHER

I wouldn't touch you with gloves on.

The father backs the mother out of the room, but we stay with the boy in the living room as the sound of their argument grows dimmer as they move into other rooms. The boy, more shaken than ever, goes back to the Hi-Fi and scratchily places the needle back onto the record. The rhapsody comes on again, full volume, and the boy resumes his place in front of the TV.

A Tom and Jerry cartoon is now playing, "The Cat Concerto" from 1947 that features Tom as a concert pianist and Jerry as the mouse living inside the grand piano. Tom is trying to play the "Hungarian Rhapsody #2" but Jerry keeps fowling up the keys. The record on the Hi-Fi vies with the TV and the boy watches the TV without response as we shift ANGLES between CLOSE-UPS of the boy with FULL SCREEN SHOTS of the cartoon on his TV screen.

Finally WE LEAVE the boy altogether and HOLD ON his TV screen as the cartoon ends and Colonel Candy comes back on with his wrap-up talk to the kids at home.

COLONEL CANDY

And so, boys and girls, stay tuned for more cartoons and more fun. We'll be back in just a few minutes with Zuppo the Clown!

CAMERA ANGLE changes and we see the TV studio. The stage crew begins rerigging for the ZUPPO program. Lots of bewildered kids are being herded here and there to seats for the clown show.

Colonel Candy escapes from in front of the studio camera and, nearly running over one ADULATING BOY in his path, heads for the john where he pukes into the toilet.

CELIA, the production manager, comes to the door of the john and watches with distaste as Colonel Candy cleans himself up.

CELIA

Where were you last night?

CANDY

Busy.

CELIA

I'll bet.

(waits, nothing more)

They're waiting for you. They want a decision on Jane.

CANDY

I don't have time.

CELIA

They want it now.

CANDY

I've got to make up for Zuppo.

CELIA

Lenny, bring the Zuppo makeup to the screening room. Come on, Candy, they're waiting.

CANDY

I've got to get some—

CELIA

They're waiting.

Candy follows Celia out through the studio and its mayhem of scared kids into an adjoining room. On their way, again the adulating little boy gets into the way like a puppy. Candy gives the little boy a preoccupied, gentle shove into the hands of one of the crew who ushers the kid back to the gallery.

In the screening room are several producer types. As Celia brings Candy in, quick greetings are dispensed and the screening begins. We discover through incidental dialogue from the production people that they are looking for a woman to go with Colonel Candy on his show and on the Zuppo Program to give the shows a beautiful young mother image. She will be called "Jane". The screen tests of the actresses called back for Jane are being viewed. Under the dialogue of the screen tests, we hear the dialogue of the production people assessing the qualities and lack of some of the two candidates.

We cut from the screen to Candy's face as his Zuppo the Clown makeup is being put on by Lenny. Candy and Celia continue their own dialogue sotto voce over the dialogue of the screen tests and production people.

CANDY

There's no reason for me to be heare anyway. They don't care what I think.

CELIA

It's a courtesy to you. You should be grateful.

CANDY

I can't go back and do Zuppo today.

CELIA

You'll do it.

CANDY

I'm sick

CELIA

You should have thought of that last night. Who is she this time? Do I know this one?

The screen test changes. We now see a blonde, JANE if there ever was one. Candy's eyes open up; this one he remembers. Celia sees his expression, is hurt.

This Jane has at once a motherlike beauty and a husky quality in her voice and a childlike innocence in her manner. She is intense and enigmatic and gentle. As her interview with Candy continues on the screen, the under-dialogue from the production people shows a favorable evaluation.

CUTAWAYS to Candy as his Zuppo makeup is being put on. Candy is intently watching the screen test and Celia is intently watching Candy. The CAMERA stays more and more with the interview until finally we no longer cut back to the screening room at all. We are completely with Candy and Jane in their interview.

The DIRECTOR of the interview yells, "Cut!" and approaches Candy and Jane. He compliments her on how she has done so far and tells her he would now like to get some footage of her interacting with some of the kids. He brings up some kids and arranges them around her and then shouts, "Roll Camera!"

Through this there have been CUTAWAYS to the Candy of the screen test (as opposed to the Candy of the screening room with his Zuppo makeup being applied). This Candy has been intently watching Jane in person as the Director has placed the kids around her. We get into EXTREME CLOSE-UPS of Candy's eyes and into some FLASH CUTS to a scene in his imagination.

IN CANDY'S IMAGINED SCENES, he and Jane are sharing a bottle of champagne before a flickering fire. They are on the floor, intimate. As they begin to make love, the CAMERA STAYS MORE AND MORE with them in his imagination and less and less with them at the interview session. Finally, we are entirely with them before the flickering fire. Their kisses grow even more intimate, and clothes begin to come off. Finally they come to a sweet lull in their lovemaking where he begins to explore her face and eyes gently with his fingertips.

CANDY

You are so lovely

JANE

(rising) I'll be right back.

She goes into another part of the house.

CAMERA STAYS CLOSE on Candy as he contemplates with happiness what is about to take place. But a subtle change has occurred. He puzzles for a moment: "what's different?" Then he turns quickly to the source of the flickering and finds that it is not the fire at all but a TV.

WHAT WE SEE -- Candy is lying on the floor, turned now with his back to us looking at the TV. On the screen of the TV is a picture of him lying on the floor before another TV. On the TV within the TV is the same picture, and on down the line, TV within TV until infinity.

Candy reaches out and turns off the TV.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP of Candy. He is startled and confused.

PULL SLOWLY OUT OF CLOSE-UP and we discover that we are back at the interview, back from fantasy, and Jane is still playing with the children.

"Cut!" the director calls.

CONTINUE TO PULL BACK until we have a WIDE SHOT of the screen in the screening room. The projector flickers off and the production people turn to each other to make their final decisions on a Jane. Candy is now completely in his Zuppo the Clown costume and makeup. The producers decide on the redhead.

CANDY
But what about the blonde?

CELIA

Yeah, Candy, what about the blonde?

CANDY

I liked her.

CELIA

They like the redhead.

Candy looks at Celia for a moment, then around the screening room at the producers, grows sick of it all.

CELIA

Come on, Candy. It's time for Zuppo.

Celia gently pulls Candy up and tries to hurry him along, but at the john he must stop and throw up what's left of his guts. Then he rushes into the studio just in time. The Zuppo Show is about to air. The children are in order now in the gallery and, at the prompting of the crew, they begin to applaud and cheer wildly. The Adulating Boy sits wide-eyed with delight and confusion.

As Candy goes into his Zuppo act with great energy, CAMERA PULLS BACK to reveal that we are now again in the TV BOY's living room. The boy is lying now in front of his TV but with his head heavy on his arm, no longer watching his TV. He has been crying a long time and has now lapsed into sobs. The "Hungarian Rhapsody #2" has finished and the needle is now hitting the center space on the record again and again and again without reject.

Subtly under the sound of Zuppo, under the sound of TV BOY's sobs, and under the sound of the needle on the record swells the sound of labored breathing. TV BOY becomes aware of this new sound, lifts his head, puzzles over it a moment, then turns his head to look directly into the CAMERA.

CAMERA PULLS BACK and we see that we are still watching the old man's TV set in the shabby apartment. On his TV screen is the boy looking at us from in front of his TV screen where Zuppo the Clown is doing his show.

CAMERA CONTINUES TO PULL BACK and we see the old man from behind, still sitting in his armchair. It is from him that the sound of labored breathing has been coming. CAMERA PANS down to the top of the end table and we see that the pills and bourbon have been consumed.

CAMERA REVOLVES AROUND the old man and finally comes full front on him in CLOSE-UP as his head falls to the side. His eyes are wide open staring dead into our eyes. He breathes his last.

FADE OUT
THE END