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PRIME TIME

By Norman Spinrad

Edna chose to awake this morning to good old breakfast loop A. John was reading a newspaper over pancakes and sausages in the kitchen of their old home. The kids were gulping the last of their food and were anxious to be on their way to school.

After yesterday's real-time-shared breakfast with John, she really felt she needed the soothing old familiar tape from her files today. It might have been shot way back during the 1987-88 television season on a crude home deck, it might be snowy and shaky, but Edna still ran it three or four mornings a week in preference to the breakfast soaps or more updated domestic footage. Somehow it captured what prime breakfast time with John and the kids had really been like, and somehow that made it her prime breakfast programming choice.

Edna: Now, Sammy, you finish the rest of your milk before you run outdoors!

Sammy: (slugging down the rest of his milk) Aw, Ma, I'm gonna be late!

Edna: Not if you don't take your usual shortcut past the candy store.

Of course the old tape hadn't been shot from her stereo perspective, and there was something strange about seeing yourself in your own domestic programming, and it certainly wasn't as well written as a breakfast soap, but then none of the soaps were personalized and none of her other domestic tapes with John had footage of the kids at grade-school age.

John was always after her to share real-time programming with him. He'd voice her over on the communication channel and show her tapes he had made for himself with her in them, or he'd entice her with shared domestic tapes, or he'd bombard her with porn-channel footage.

But the domestic tapes he programmed for them to share all took place in exotic locales, and the story lines were strictly male-type fantasies-John's idea of suitable real-time programming for the two of them to share ran to camel caravans across the desert, spaceship journeys to strange planets full of weird creatures, sailing the South Seas, discovering lost cities, fighting in noble wars. And her viewpoint role was usually a cross between Wonder Woman and Slave Girl. Well, that might be how John wished to real-time-share with her, but Edna preferred her soaps and romantic historicals, which John categorically refused to real-time-share with her under any circumstances.

As for the porn channels that he wanted to realtime-share with her, the only word was disgusting. Still, he was her husband, and she felt she had to fulfill her conjugal obligations from time to time; so five or ten times a season she gritted her teeth and real-time-shared one of his crude male porn channels in the sex-object role. Less frequently he consented to time-share a historical X with her, but only because of the implied threat she'd withhold her porn-channel favors from him if he didn't. So by and large it was mealtime program sharing that was their least distasteful channel of contact and

the one that saw most frequent use.

John: (wiping his lips with his napkin) Well, honey, it's off to the salt mines. Ready to go, Ellie?

Ellie: I got to make wee-wee first.

TOTAL TELEVISION HEAVEN 60-SECOND

SPOT #12 FINALIZED BROADCAST VERSION HARD CUT FROM BACK

A series of low, pink buildings, emphasizing sunrise through the palm trees.

Announcer's voice-over: (medium hard sell) To-

tal Television Heaven, the ultimate retirement community for Electronic Age seniors . . .

A rapidly cut montage from the adventure channels, the porn channels, the soaps, etc. Make it the most colorful and exciting footage we've got and emphasize expensive crowd scenes and special effects.

Announce's voice-over: (orgasmic) Twenty full channels of pornography, thirty-five full channels of adventure, forty channels of continuing soaps-live, full-time, in over a hundred possible realities, produced by the finest talents in Hollywood . . .

CLOSE-UP ON A MAN'S HEAD

Intelligent, with neat, dignified, gray hair. As hands fit stereo TV goggles over his eyes. (Earphones already in place.)

Announcer's voice-over: (institutional) You live as the viewpoint character in a wonderland of sex and adventure through the electronic magic of total stereo TV!

MEDIUM SHOT ON A FAMOUS OLD ACTOR

Cast someone with recognition value who's willing to sign up for a two-hundred-year annuity.

Famous Old-Actor: And that's not all! Tape your family! Tape your friends! Take your loved ones with you to Total Television Heaven and keep them with you forever!

CAMERA PULLS BACK FOR A FULL SHOT

We see that the Famous Old Actor is being helped into a glass amnion tank. He keeps talking and smiling as the attendants strap him to the couch, fit the earphones and stereo TV goggles, hook up his breathing mask and waste tube, and begin filling the tank with fluid.

Famous Old Actor: A vast tape library. Customcut programs to your order! I wish I'd signed up years ago!

The throat mike is attached, his hand is taped to the tuner knob, the nutrient tube is inserted in his arm (no on-camera needle penetration, please), the amnion tank is topped off and sealed. The camera moves in for a close-up on the face of the Famous Old Actor, seen floating blissfully in his second womb.

Famous Old Actor: (filtered) I'm never coming out-and I'm glad!

DISSOLVE TO: SUNSET OVER TOTAL TELEVISION HEAVEN

The sun sinks into the sea in speeded-up time over

the pink pastel client-storage buildings, and a glorious, star filled sky comes on like an electronic billboard.

Announcer's voice-over: (transcendent) No man knows God's intent for the hereafter, but at Total Television Heaven modern biological science

guarantees you a full two hundred years of electronic paradise in the safety and comfort of your own private tank. And a full annuity costs less than you think!

FADE-OUT

John: Maybe we can make it out to the lake this weekend. Edna: Supposed to be clear, in the seventies, I heard on the weather . . .

This season John had been acting stranger and stranger, even during their mealtime sharing. His conversation was becoming more and more foulmouthed and even incoherent. He had taken to appearing in elaborate character roles even over breakfast, and yesterday's real-time-shared breakfast had been just about more than Edna could take.

He'd voiced her over the night before and invited her to breakfast the next morning in Hawaii, where they had real-time-shared their honeymoon in the dim, distant past-so many seasons ago that no recording tape of it existed; none had been made way back then, before anyone had even dreamed of retiring to Total Television Heaven. It had been a very long time indeed since John had invited her to realtime-share their past at all, even in a reconstructed version, and so when he told her he had customprogrammed breakfast on the beach in Hawaii, Edna had been so thrilled that she agreed to time-share his breakfast program against what had lately been becoming her better judgment.

The program wakened her to sunrise on the beach, the great golden ball rising out of the dark sea in speeded-up stop-motion animation like a curtain going up, illumining the bright blue sky that suddenly flared into existence as she found herself lying on the sand beneath it.

This to the theme of an ancient primetime show called Hawaii Five-O, as a majestic breaker rolled and broke, rolled and broke, again and again, in a closed loop beyond the shoreline foam.

John appeared in the role of a tanned, blond, muscled Adonis wearing a ludicrously short grass skirt. A breakfast table was set up at the edge of the sea itself, in the foot-high wash of foam kicked up by the eternal rolling wave that towered and broke, towered and broke, above them.

Naked, godlike Polynesians-a youth for her, a maiden for John-helped them to their feet and escorted them to the wicker peacock chairs on either side of the strange table. The table was a block of polished obsidian on Victorian-looking brass legs; there was a depression in the center, out of which a grooved channel ran to the seaside edge of the tabletop.

This was certainly not their Hawaiian honeymoon as Edna recollected it, and she didn't need a tape in order to be sure of that!

"Welcome, O love goddess of the north, to my groovy pad," John crooned in a strange, cracked voice. He clapped his hands. "An oblation in thine honor."

The naked maiden produced a squealing piglet, which she pressed into the pit in the center of the table. The naked youth handed John a huge machete. "Hai!" John screamed, hacking the piglet in half with a swipe of his blade. Blood pooled in the pit in the table, then ran down the groove to the edge and dripped off into the sea. As the first drops of blood touched the ocean, the water abruptly changed color, and for a few moments a towering wave of blood arched over them.

A few moments later, when the eternal wave was blue water again and Edna's viewpoint angle returned to a shot on the table, the gory mess had been replaced by a white tablecloth, two plates of ham and eggs, a pot of coffee, and a bottle of dark island rum.

"Oh, John," she said disgustedly, "it's all so . . .

SO-99

"Eldritch? Excessive? Demented?" John said petulantly, crotchety annoyance cracking his handsome, twenty-year-old features. "You're such a timid bird, Edna. No sense of fun. No imagination."

"Killing things is not my idea of either fun or imagination," Edna retorted indignantly.

John laughed a weird, nervous laugh. A whale breached not far offshore, and immediately a giant squid

wrapped tentacles around it. A fight to the death began. "Killing things?" John, said. "But there's nothing alive here to kill!" This is Heaven, not Earth, and we can do anything we want without consequences. What else can we do?"

"We can have a normal, civilized breakfast like decent human beings."

"Normal, civilized breakfast!" John shouted. "Decent human beings!" A volcano erupted somewhere inland. Terrified natives fled before a wall of fiery

lava. "Who cares about being decent human beings when we're not even alive, my princess?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," Edna said primly. But of course some small part of her did, and that part was chilled to the core.

"Sure and begorra, you do, Edna!" John said mockingly. "Avast, matey, what makes you so sure we're still alive? For lo, how many television seasons has it been since we retired? A hundred? Two hundred? Verily and forsooth, time out of mind. Can you even guess, my slave girl? I can't."

Edna blanched. She didn't like this kind of talk at all. It was worse than his machismo adventure programs, worse than the porno programming he enjoyed putting her through, worse on a whole other level she had trained herself not to contemplate.

"Of course we're alive," she said. "We're real-timesharing now, aren't we?"

Bathing beauties water-skied in a chorus line through the curl of the wave. A flying saucer buzzed the beach. A giant crab seized their servants in its pincers. It whisked them away as they screamed.

"Ah, mine Aphrodite, how can we be sure of that? Thou couldst be croaked and I could be tuning in to an old tape where you still lived. Har-har, I could be dead except in this program of yours."

"This is certainly no program of mine, John Rogers!" Edna shouted. "Only you could have invited me to a breakfast program like this!"

"I stink, therefore I am," John cackled. Lightning rattled. Schools of porpoises leaped in and out of the great wave.

And so it had gone. Nubian slaves lighting cigarettes. Dancing gulls. An orgy sequence. And all throughout it, John babbling and ranting like a demented parrot in his beachboy body. Only one thing had kept Edna from tuning him out and tuning in a breakfast soap, and that was the dim, distant thought that to do so might precipitate the final break between them, the break between her and something that she could no longer conceptualize clearly. John: (rising from the table) What's for dinner tonight, by the way? Edna: Roast chicken with that corn bread stuffing you like.

He kisses her briefly on the lips.

John: Mmmmm . . . ! I'll try to pick up a bottle of that German wine on the way back from work if I'm not too late.

He opens the door, waves, and exits.

Edna: Have a good day.

But now, while she watched her image bid good-bye to John as he left for work on that dim, fuzzy old tape she found so soothing, Edna wondered how long it would be before she would consent to real-timeshare a meal with the "real" John again, a John she no longer recognized as the husband in her domestic tapes, a John she was not sure she wanted to know about.

After all, she thought, turning to Elizabeth the

Queen, her favorite historical romance of this season, too much of that could ruin her domestic tapes with John for her, and then where would she be if she could no longer live comfortably in her past?

Right now she was seated on her throne in the early evening light, and Sir Walter Raleigh was bowing to her with a boyish twinkle in his eye that made her quiver.

Rolling among naked teen-aged girls in a great marbled Roman bath. Popping off Indians with his Remington repeater. Swinging on a vine through a jungleful of dinosaurs. Leading the pack around the last turn at the Grand Prix de Monaco.

Boring, boring, boring! Irritably John flipped through the broadcast channels, unable to find anything capable of holding his attention. What a lousy season this was, even worse than the last! There wasn't a single adventure program that had any originality to it; the porno channels made him think of Edna and her damned disapproval of anything still capable of turning him on; and old domestic tapes, he knew, would just make him furious.

Of course he had a big file of classic recordings and custom-programmed favorites to draw upon when real-time programming got boring, and so he started flipping through his videx, desperately looking for something to fill this time slot.

Flying his one-man space fighter low over an alien glass city, shattering the crystal towers with his shock wave as he rose to meet the bandits. Chasing a fat merchantman under a full head of sail: Avast, me

hearties, prepare a broadside! Auctioned as a sex slave to a mob of horny women. Doing a smart left bank around a skyscraper, with Lois Lane in his arms.

He really had some choice footage in his tape library, but he had run all of it so often down through the long seasons that every bit of it seemed engraved in his real-time memory. He had lost the ability to surprise himself, even with how gross he could get, and he had to go further and further out to avert . . . to avert . . . to avert . . .

Onward, the Light Brigade! Thousands of screaming teen-aged groupies mobbed the stage, grabbed his guitar, tore off his clothes. "Frankly, Scarlett," he said, as she sank to her knees, "I don't give a damn." If only Edna had the gumption to be a real wife to him! Lord knew, he tried to be a real husband to her. Didn't he regularly invite her to real-time-share the porn channels with him, and didn't he take pains to choose the most far-out sex programming available? Didn't he invite her to all his best adventure programs? Didn't he invite her to the best mealtime custom programming instead of the same old domestic tapes?

He did his best to make her programming day interesting and surprising, and what did he get from her in return? A lot of whining about his dirty mind, a determination to get him caught in one of those saccharine historical X's with her, and a dreary desire to mealtime-share the same musty old domestic tapes over and over again. What was the purpose of retiring to Total Television Heaven in the first place if you were afraid of grossness, if you insisted on realism, if

all you wanted was to watch endless reruns of the same old, boring past?

Striding through the jungle, a great, hairy gorilla beating his chest while the natives flee in terror.

Executing a snappy Immelman and coming up on the Red Baron's tail, machine guns blazing. Getting head from the legendary Marilyn Monroe.

Damn it, retiring to Total Television Heaven before either of them was sixty-five had been Edna's idea in the first place, John told himself, though a part of him knew that wasn't exactly totally true. With the kids at the other end of the continent and the economy in such bad shape and nothing interesting going on in their real-time lives, it was only his job that had kept them from trading in their Social Security equity for a two-hundred-year annuity to Total Television Heaven. He figured that if he could work

another ten years and save at the same rate, it would enable them to buy an extra fifty years of Heaven. But when the cost of living rose to the point where he wasn't saving anything . . . well, at that point he hadn't really needed that much convincing, especially since there was a rumor that Social Security was about to go bust and the smart thing to do was get into Heaven while you could.

But what good was two hundred and ten years in Total Television Heaven if your wife insisted on living in her tape loops of the past? How much fun could you have if all you had to rely on was the broadcast programmers and your own imagination?

Making love to a fair rescued damsel on the steaming corpse of a slain dragon. The image began to flicker. Diving out of an airplane, spreading his arms

and flying like a bird; the air seemed to turn to a thick, choking fluid. Tarzan of the Apes, making love to an appreciative lioness, felt an uncomfortable pressure against his eyeballs.

Oh, God, it was happening again! For some time now something had been corroding John Rogers. He could feel it happening. He didn't know what it was, but he knew that he didn't want to know what it was.

I'm just sick and tired of having to fill every time slot in my programming day with something I have to choose myself, he told himself nervously. Sure, he could time-share with Edna and let her fill some time slots for him, but her idea of programming made him want to puke.

In fact, the lover of the insatiable Catherine the Great felt a bubble of nausea rising within him even as the beautiful czarina crawled all over him. Napoleon's mind felt a nameless dread even as he led the triumphal march through Paris. Because the thought that had intruded unbidden into his mind was, What would happen if he didn't choose anything to fill the time slot? Was it possible? Would he still be there? Where was there?

And questions like those brought on the leading edge of an immense, formless, shapeless, choking dread that took him out of the viewpoint character and made him see the whole thing as if through the eyes of a video camera: lines of dots, pressure against his eyeballs . . .

He shuddered inwardly. Convulsively he switched to a domestic porno tape of himself and Edna making love in the grass on the slope of a roaring volcano. She screamed and cursed and moaned as he stuck it to her, but . . . but . . .

Edna, I've got to get out of here!

But what can I possibly mean by that?

Frantically he voiced her over. "Edna, I've got to real-time-share with you," he said shrilly. "Now!"

"I'm tuned in to China Clipper now, and it's my favorite historical X," her voice-over whined as he continued to pound at her under the volcano.

"Please, Edna, porn channel Eight, real-time-share with me now, if you don't . . . if you don't . . ." A wave of molten lava roared and foamed down the mountain toward them as Edna moaned and swore toward climax beneath him.

"Not now, I'm enjoying my program," her distant voice-over said.

"Edna! Edna! Edna!" John shrieked, overcome with a terror he didn't understand, didn't want to understand.

"John!" There was finally concern in her voice, and it seemed to come from the Edna who thrashed and moaned beneath him in orgasm as the wave of lava enfolded them in painless fire.

"John, you're disgusting!" she said at the height of the moment. "If you want to time-share with me, we'll have to go to a domestic tape now. Loop E."

Raging with fear, anger, and self-loathing, he followed her to the domestic tape. They were sitting on the

back porch of their summer cabin at the lake, overlooking the swimming raft, where the kids were playing a ragtag game of water polo. Oh, Jesus . . .

"Now what's got you all upset, John?" Edna said primly, pouring him a glass of lemonade.

John didn't know what to say. He didn't know how

to deal with it. He didn't even want to know what he was dealing with. He was talking to a ghost. He was talking to his wife talking to a ghost. He . . . he . . .

"We've got to do more real-time-sharing, Edna," he finally said. "It's important. We shouldn't be alone in here all the time."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're babbling about," Edna said nervously. "As for more real-timesharing, I'm perfectly willing to share mealtimes with you on a regular basis if you behave yourself. Here. At the house. On our honeymoon. Even in a good restaurant. But not in any of your disgusting programming, John, and that goes double for the porn channels. I don't understand you, John. You've become some kind of pervert. Sometimes I think you're going crazy."

A burst of multicolored snow flickered the old tape. Edna sipped her lemonade. His eyes ached. He was choking.

"I'm going crazy?" John cried thickly. "What about you, Edna, living back here and trying to pretend we're really still alive back then, instead of here in . . . in-"

"In Total Television Heaven, John," Edna said sharply. "Where we're free to program all our time slots to suit ourselves. And if you don't like my programming, you don't have to time-share it. As for your programming, I don't know how you stand it."

"But I can't stand it!" John shouted as a waterskier was drawn by a roaring speedboat past their porch.

"That's what's driving me crazy." From somewhere came the sounds of a softball game. A 747 glided by overhead.

"Daddy! Daddy!" the kids waved at him.

"But this is worse!" he screamed at Edna, young and trim in her two-piece-bathing suit. A neighbor's dog came up, wagging its tail, and she gave it her hand to lick. "This isn't real, and it's not even an honest fantasy; you're dead inside of here, Edna, living through your old tape loops, floating in . . . floating in . . ."

He gagged. An image of a fetus faded in, faded out, faded in again. He felt something pressing against his face like an ocean of time drowning him, pulling him under. Nothing was real. Nothing but whatever Edna had become speaking through her long-dead simulacrum near the lake.

"Stop it, John! I won't listen to such filth!"

"Oh, Jesus, Edna, we're dead, don't you see? We're dead and drifting forever in our own tape loops, and only -"

"Good-bye, John," Edna said frostily, taking another sip of lemonade. "I much prefer the way you were to this!"

"Edna! Edna! Don't break the time-share! You're all that's left!"

Edna: Say, honey, why don't we go inside and make a little love in the afternoon.

A thunderclap rends the sky. It begins to rain. Edna laughs and undoes the halter of her swimsuit.

Edna: Oh, I'm getting wet. Why don't you grab a towel and dry me off.

She gets up, giggling, takes John's hand, and leads him inside.

"Oh, no, no!" John shouted as his viewpoint followed her. For she was no longer there, and he remembered every scene, every angle, every special effect of this program. Something inside him snapped. He had to get out of here. He switched his videx to rapid random scan, unable to think of choosing a program to fill his time slot.

Getting head from Marilyn Monroe sailing the Spanish Main-fetus floating in the eternal amnion - a giant gorilla chasing dusky natives from dinner with Edna and the kids in the dining room of their house - a million flickering electronic dots against his eyeballs - flying like a bird through the towers of New York around the Eiffel Tower - choking in the sea of time - leading the cavalry charge to plant the flag on Iwo Jima - lungs straining for a surface that wasn't there - stepping out of the air lock under triple suns - trapped in syrupy quicksand forever - arriving at the sultan's harem in King Arthur's squad car - Awake, aware, alive for a long, horribly lucid moment - floating and choking in the amniotic quicksand with meaningless images attacking his eyeballs - waking up from a long suffocation dream into a long suffocation dream that wouldn't go away, couldn't go away, or there'd be - Dueling with the musketeers swinging on a vine through the jungle of the Great Barrier Reef with Edna in a hammock screaming orgasm in - the harem with a dozen houris soaring through space screaming

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around great ringed Saturn screaming against the dead cold black phosphor-dotted everlasting void drowning choking screaming god oh god oh oh oh -

As she faded out of the viewpoint character of Elizabeth the Queen, Edna thought of John. How long ago had that terrible final real-time sharing taken place? Was it still the same television season? It was time for dinner, and she programmed dinner loop C. She, John, and the kids were seated at Thanksgiving dinner. She was wearing her Sunday best, the kids were neat and combed, and John was wearing a suit.

John: This stuffing is delicious, honey!

Sammy: Can I have the other drumstick?

Ellie: Pass the cranberry sauce.

Edna: It's wonderful to have a quiet Thanksgiving dinner just for the four of us, isn't it, John?

Edna felt so contented, so at peace with herself and her family, so right with the world. I really should invite John to real-time-share this wonderful Thanksgiving, she thought maternally. I really ought to give him one last chance to be a proper father to the kids and husband to me.

Filled with Christian charity, she voiced over to his channel. "John?" she said, scooping up mashed yams with brown sugar and passing the salt to her beaming husband, who planted a little kiss on her wedding ring en passant. "I'm having Thanksgiving dinner with you and the kids, and I'd like you to be a good father and real-time-share with us."

There was nothing on the voice-over channel for a moment as John handed the drumstick to Sammy. Then, as Sammy took it from him and bit into it with boyish gusto, John screamed.

An endless, ghastly, blubbering shriek that rattled Edna's teeth and poisoned the moment with unremitting horror.

"John Rogers, you're an animal. I don't know you anymore, and I don't want to!" she shouted back at the horrid sound and broke the connection once and for all.

John: Don't gobble your food, Sammy, or you'll

turn into a turkey.

Sammy: (turkey sound) Gobble, gobble!

All four of them laugh heartily.

John: Please pass me some more of the peas, honey. What do you say, kids, isn't your mother the best cook in the world?

Sammy and Ellie: Yay, Mom!

Edna beamed as she handed John the bowl of creamed peas. He smiled at her. Edna relaxed. How good it was to have a nice, civilized Thanksgiving dinner with your husband and your family just the way you liked it. Peaceful and loving and together forever.

She decided to play a romantic porn program after dinner. She would meet John in an elegant cafe in old Vienna, a waltz in a grand ballroom, share a bottle of champagne on a barge in the Seine, and then make love on a bear rug in front of a roaring fireplace. She knew that everything would be just perfect.