The Hello Man

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The Hello Man

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Louis was a happy man. Everyone that met him thought he was either happy, or eccentrically simple. He was neither. His cousin Leda thought he just had to grow up. By the time he hit 45, Leda knew it was more than just a matter of maturity, but she deigned to bring up the topic to anyone. Her interest in him was a combination of ancestry and a faint notion of obligation. However, she didn't see Louis as particularly unusual, just terminally satisfied with everything he saw. Her heavily made-up face looked perpetually disgusted."

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Louis was a happy man. Everyone that met him thought he was either happy, or eccentri­cally simple. He was neither. His cousin Leda thought he just had to grow up. By the time he hit 45, Leda knew it was more than just a matter of maturity, but she deigned to bring up the topic to anyone. Her interest in him was a combination of ancestry and a faint notion of obligation. However, she didn’t see Louis as particularly unusual, just terminally satisfied with everything he saw. Her heavily made-up face looked perpetually disgusted.

Because both of their parents were tragically killed in the same plane crash on their way to a vacation in Reno, Leda felt morally compelled to look after him, as she said all men had to be looked after. But for all her fawning and nagging and attempts at affection, her daily phone calls and frequent midafternoon visits to Louis’ small, neat apartment were interrupted due to Leda’s miscalculation in stepping onto an escalator in the shopping mall downtown. One man, who was traveling on the UP escalator, said he heard the woman, who was Leda, mutter, “Sonuvabitch!” as if it were one word as she tumbled like a human snowball down the DOWN escalator, knocking down other shoppers and pulling them along with her as she fell.

“Hello, hello,” Louis said amiably to the young girl walking toward him on the street. Her soft, lemon-colored hair fluttered like the feathers on a bird’s wing in the gentle, cool September breeze. She nodded acknowledgement and then shook her head silently as they passed each other.

Louis smiled gleefully. He saw no reason to be sad, or frightened, or even worried today. He rarely did. Making his way toward the park, he sat down on a bench opposite a tall stone structure that marked a memorial to a general in the Civil War. He had supposedly led his battalion bravely and blindly through the battle lines and was promptly met by enemy forces. He died a gory but courageous death and was thus immortalized in stone. It was a twelve-foot high statue, with a figure of a man leveling a rifle at an unknown target. Louis didn’t care for the statue - he didn’t hate anything - because he thought it was too big. A real man, he thought, is only six feet tall, and this man, pedestal excluded, stood at about eight feet. And Louis specifically remembered that in the Guinness Book of World Records, the Tallest Man was never in the Army.

A pigeon strutted in front of Louis’ bench. “Hello,” said Louis to the bird. The pigeon continued pacing back and forth, as if waiting for Louis to go away so it could sit on the bench. Louis liked birds immensely. They never seemed to mind anything. Looking at the pigeon, he wondered if the bird’s neck ever hurt from jabbing forward all the time.

The sun was dying a bright and bloody death in the sky beyond the park. Louis listened to the twilight birdsong. Sitting perfectly still, he could hear it. So beautiful. Why didn’t the others hear it? He liked the music the birds made; it was their language, and it was always the same. Each bird had a voice and that voice was all it needed. One sound that communicated everything it needed to. Louis wished people could be the same way, with one sound that everyone else understood.

Two girls dressed in grubby clothes laughed suddenly and made gestures in Louis’ direction with their short, stubby hands.

Louis lowered his head and squeezed his eye shut until the voices faded and the ring of the birdsong returned pleasantly in his ears. He left the park quickly.

The television sets in the window of Bezler’s were always on. Or it seemed so. On cold nights, as darkness set in, Louis liked to walk down Finch
Street, toward Bezler's and see the glow of electronic buzz get brighter and brighter as he approached. Purple, blue and peach blobs mingled together and fell on the sidewalk in a muted beam.

Louis ambled down to Bezler's and stood in his spot, between two splotches of old gum, one pink and one a beige-rose color, like someone's fancy living-room furniture. There were the unusual ten television sets, arranged in three rows with four sets on the bottom half, four on the middle and two on the top. The shelves, painted a rich green color, matched the green and gold awning above the main door. The colors were nice. Nice and simple and they matched.

Every day that he came down to the television sets, Louis watched the set on the far left in the bottom row. The channel didn't make a difference. Tonight the news was on. They were broadcasting a tape of an electric chair execution that had taken place earlier that day. The man in the chair had pushed his pregnant girlfriend out of a twenty-third story window. Louis watched intently as the priest in black and red robes prayed over the man, and then blessed him with the sign of the cross.

A man walked out of Don's Bagels two doors down from Bezler's, a bag of sesame bagels in his right hand. He looked down the sidewalk and saw the tantalizing glow of the TV's. Usually, he didn't like to watch store window TV's by himself - he always felt self-conscious when he was alone in any endeavor. But tonight, another man, with a red and black plaid jacket was standing, shoulders hunched and forward, in front of the window. The man shrugged and strolled over to Louis, and quickly became engrossed in the macabre picture on the screen.

"Wow," he said. "They showing these on the TV now?"

Louis looked over at the man. "Hello," he said and turned his attention back to the television, smiling. "What did this poor slob do to get the chair?"

Louis looked, wide-eyed at the man, with an important expression creeping over his face. There was a sudden motion on the screen, and the condemned man flopped around in short spasms. The scene was cut abruptly to show the murderer lounging quite limply over the arm of the oak chair.

Louis pointed to the television and screamed with laughter. He turned to the man next to him, roaring.

"What the hell...buddy, you got a funny sense of humor," said the man, taken aback at Louis' display.

The laughter subsided, and Louis' arm slowly reached out toward the TV, where the doomed form of the criminal was still pulsing across the screen, and the laughter returned in small, helpless bumbles. He smiled broadly and looked hopefully at the brown-haired man staring at him in silent amazement.

The man took a deep breath and let it out. "Fella, that just ain't funny." There was a pause as Louis thought this over.

"Fella, that just ain't funny," he replied. "That's for sure."

"That's for sure."

The man exploded. "Crazy fuck! Why are they all a bunch of crazy fucks?" He wheeled around and was gone. Louis watched his form grow smaller and smaller until he was only one inch tall, near as Louis could tell. "Crazy fuck," said Louis.

That was Sunday. The next day, Louis awoke at 5 AM to go to his job at the factory. He walked the half-mile from his apartment to the enormous structure of concrete and old dusty glass as he did every weekday. It was a pharmaceutical manufacturer, and the company made a variety of pills...diet pills, allergy pills, anti-depressants, blood-pressure pills. Leda had gotten him the job through a friend of hers who supervised the production lines in Section E. His name was Fred, and he and Leda had had a torrid affair which ended when Fred's wife came back and begged for a reconciliation. Leda took it as fate. She took mostly everything that way.

Louis worked on Line E2, which chugged out cold capsules. They were clear, filled with tiny blue and red balls. His job was simple. Every day he sat on the tall black stool and watched the pills
surge by on the belt. Next to him, near the end of the belt were six pigeons, three on either side. These were specially trained pigeons and were extremely intelligent. Their job was to pick out those capsules that were filled wrong, or half-filled, or defective in any other imaginable way.

All Louis had to do was watch the pigeons to make sure they did their job. He also had to feed and water them and put them back in their cages at the end of their shift, the A shift, which ended at two o'clock.

Louis loved his work. Every day he watched with fascination as the pigeons would pluck out a mutant pill with a quick dart of their sleek necks and drop them into a tray which ran alongside the belt. Fred had told Louis that when the pigeons grew too old and dull to perform their job, Louis could take them home.

"Hey Louis! How the hell are you?" Fred came up and slapped Louis on the shoulder. Louis smiled and nodded. Leda had told him to talk as little as possible. "Fred's a nice man, but I don't think he'd like you too much if you go opening your mouth too much," she had said to Louis.

Louis looked at his birds and rocked to and fro slowly. He liked to pretend that the stool was his perch. The swaying motion calmed him. Fred walked away.

The soft coos of the pigeons were also soothing. Louis tried to imitate them - he wanted to speak too. He looked at a bird across from him and readied his throat.

"Grrahcht," he said.

The pigeon looked up, startled.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" it said, head cocked.

Louis sat very still. He said nothing. Then he said, "Hello." And waited.

The pigeon seemed satisfied and returned to its job.

Even his trusted birds were turning on him now. The sun, high in the noon sky, shone ominously through the cracked window near the ceiling. It made him dizzy. It made him see hundreds of pigeons filling the room, their calls building and wings swooping in giant circles around him. Louis held his hands to his ears and shook his head so violently that he fell off of his stool.

Louis got up and grabbed a cage used to keep the pigeons in at night. He focused in on the impertinent one and jabbed his hand toward it. Maybe all birds were nice, except for this one.

Leda would have stomped over to Louis' apartment, if not for the thick white cast on her right leg. Instead, she hobbled. The sound of the hard plaster alternating with the click of her shoe made an odd beat. She had not seen Louis since the accident, or mishap, as she preferred to call it, and had tried to telephone but there was never an answer. Louis wouldn't be home for another hour, she thought, so perhaps she would get some of his laundry done.

Louis came through the door while Leda was down the hall in the laundry room. He put the cage carefully on the table and took his coat off. He paused, one arm still in the coat sleeve, and listened. There was a strange hollow sound, like water gushing through a tunnel. He breathed and slowly and waited. The noise finally receded a bit and Louis looked around the small half-lit apartment, forgetting at once what he was looking for. Then he saw the TV. Funny things happened on the TV. He turned it on. The pigeon gave a mighty "Cool!" that startled Louis for a moment. He turned and gave a radiant smile to the bird. "Hello." He went over to the cage and put his hand on the thin wire bars. He sensed that his pigeon was not happy in the factory, would never be happy. He wondered if other people heard what the birds were thinking. He didn't want them to laugh at his poor pigeons just because they didn't understand their language. He picked up the cage. He wanted everyone to hear he and his pigeon and the thing they had to say.

Wobbling through the door, Leda set the basket of clothes down on the table. The television, silent when she had entered, suddenly blared forth a commercial. "We love to fly and it shows." While she was trying to remember if she had turned the television on when she had first arrived, she felt a cold draft of air. On the TV, a National Geographic special showed an ancient
tribal ritual of sacrifice; a woman in colorful garments and colored ostrich feathers stood on the rim of a volcano, ready to leap in at the given signal.

Something was different about the room, Leda thought. The window was open, but the light seemed to have gone out of the sun. It was dark. On the arm of the couch she spied Louis’ coat. Red and black checked - strong colors. Maybe not so strong, she thought with sudden fear.

“Louis?” she called, glancing down the hall to the bedroom. She could smell the awful smell of those nasty birds he was always playing with. “Louis! Where are you? I don’t clean your clothes and your apartment to be fooled around with. Come out now!” she heaved a quick sigh and started down the hall. On the windowsill, the small grey feathers danced and circled like leaves on a smoky autumn day.