

The World Turn Upside Down

The last week of September, 1990. Perfect early-autumn days in Maryland. Everybody in fine spirits, drunk on the soft air of Indian Summer.

Sometime during the same week: On the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, Judy Woodruff is interviewing Italy's Foreign Minister about the current mess in the Middle East. She points out that our fellows have been over there breathing down Saddam Hussein's neck for eight weeks now, and that man is showing no inclination to back down. Just what does he have to do, anyway, she asks, to get you guys to give us a war? (Not her exact words, but the gist of them.)

ABC Nightly News, September 28. It doesn't look good for the economy. Possible layoffs of government workers, car salesrooms empty, consumers getting skittish. ABC uses the word "recession." There's Brent Scowcroft, saying to the press: "It's conceivable we would ask the UN if we can take military action." And a worried-looking John McWethy, in conversation with Peter Jennings.

Jennings asks him, "Is it rhetoric or resignation when [those in the know] say that war is coming down the pike?" Answers McWethy, worried-sounding, "Both, Peter."

Also in the broadcast: a piece about the scandalous way our boys are treated in VA hospitals. Then, an Operation Desert Shield Equipment Update—this time on the Apache Helicopter, which appears to have a few problems.

A sergeant, defending the Apache, says, "If he (The Enemy) comes crawlin' around here, we're gonna kick his butt."

Next, in place of one of the usual ads for painkillers and

laxatives that sponsor The ABC News, we get an ad for artificial limbs, made by Dupont, supplier of more replacements than any other company for limbs blown off our boys by the Viet Cong. (I think I got this right, though I wish someone would tell me I hadn't).

September 29. Another sublime Indian Summer day. Returning from the communal mailbox on the corner, I veer off to chat with a neighbor who's raking leaves in her front yard. Her son, a college freshman not yet quite adjusted to university life, is home from school for the weekend. He is changing the oil in his car; sunlight glows all around him. Recently his mother decided to divorce his father. Neither mother nor son is saying much or looking happy. Each is too weighed down with sadness to enjoy the loveliness of the day.

I flip through the mail, which includes a pitch from an environmental gang called Center for Marine Conservation. On the front of the large envelope is a photo of a dolphin with the caption, "Will a Dolphin Save Your Life?" Inside, a two-page letter, a coloring book, three postcards hitched together—one a pledge card, the other two (you're supposed to sign and mail them) addressed to the presidents of H. J. Heinz Company and Van Camp Seafood Co., saying "My family refuses to buy all tuna until you stop harvesting it by 'setting nets on dolphins.'" Finally, there's the usual envelope for mailing in money. So: a pitch from an environmental gang that comes in an envelope with five inserts (like Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes). Is anyone counting how many trees go into the avalanche of these mailings the e-gangs send out?

Also in the mail there's a note from a friend. Her father finally died. Alick Alexander, almost as old as the century. In his youth, he immigrated here from Glasgow and learned the plastering trade. He plastered my parents' house, and an old house I once lived in. "ALICK ALEXANDER, 1974"

he scratched in tall proud block letters (the "N" in ALEXANDER curiously backwards) in the still-wet plaster of the sloping ceiling of a little closet tucked under the attic eaves.

Alick has been in a nursing home for two years, his body seized up with Parkinson's Disease, his mind and sly sense of humor intact. Lately he'd been saying he wanted to check out. One night he said he would eat no more. But that attempt to starve himself was short-lived; the next morning he snapped at the nurses because they weren't quick enough with his breakfast. Finally pneumonia, the old man's friend, carried him off.

Alick got the funeral he ordered up. There was a piper at the graveyard (not the greatest, his daughter said, but, quoting her father: "A bad piper's better than no piper at all"); he played Alick's favorites: "Amazing Grace," "Going Home," and "Auld Lang Syne." Rest easy now, Alick.

September 30. I poke through the Sunday paper. Nobody's shooting yet. But then, this is the weekend, and it's weekends when every person, if he be wise, retreats from the insanities of Real Life, takes a break from wars on all fronts.

I put in my usual weekly call to my mother's house to talk with Ambrozone, the woman who has been living with my mother since Christmas, when it became clear my mother, her dementia worsening, could no longer be left alone.

Ambrozone is Jamaican, full of common sense, often wise. She tells me how my mother is doing: She is no longer calling the little corner market half a dozen times a day to ask, "Tell me, do you have an adequate supply of toilet paper on hand?" When she can get away with it, she still tosses scraps of garbage out the window for the birds. She is fooling around with the stove a bit more; this worries Ambrozone, who says it's probably time to pull off the knobs. And her latest shenanigan: she has taken to stripping down to her un-

derpants (which Ambrozone, a real lady, will not let her get away with).

I talk with my mother; we have a pointless conversation that—in its bizarre formlessness, takes on its own form. She has no idea who I am, but “Send me your address, won’t you?” she says. Then, a glutton for punishment, I say, “Ma, what are the names of your children? Can you name your children, Ma?” Of course she can’t. So I prompt her. “There’s John.” “Oh—um—oh yeah, he’s the—ah, first?” “Right, Ma. Right. Hey, you’re doin’ all right, Ma . . .”

Ambrozone and I talk again. We touch upon other things—war, the economy, a father who killed his baby. “Oh mon,” Ambrozone says, distressed, “The world turn upside down.”

The day beckons; I fool around outside, poking in the vegetable patch, pulling a few weeds, wondering how many more tomatoes will ripen before the first frost, mulling over the way the government and the media have been itching for war, ever since the first troops were sent to Saudi Arabia.

We’ve had a whole week of Bryant Gumbel, Mr. Cool in the desert heat, mixing it up with the troops. A special Gary Collins show from Fort Bragg: an hour of relentless sobbing sniffing squealing military wives dissolve a forest’s worth of kleenex as, one by one, the women are hooked up by satellite to their husbands in Operation Desert Shield. “I love you, honey,” sob the wives. “I love you too, honey,” say the husbands, looking, many of them, understandingly embarrassed to be saying it in front of the TV audience of millions. Then, each network boasting that it had the only reporter in Amman. Or Kuwait. And Dan Rather, the only reporter (drum roll . . .) in Baghdad. (It’s true, what someone said: we have *Dan* rather than the news.)

And then there was President Bush, when asked by the press if he were saber-rattling at Saddam “Hitler” Hussein,

saying, forcefully, "When I rattle a saber, the man'll know it." (Mr. President, that is neither a kinder nor a gentler way.)

I pull up the chard plants and pitch them on the compost heap; the leaves are too leathery to eat now. The sweet static of the cicadas pulses in the still air. I catch myself humming: "The pale moon was shining beyond the green mountain . . ." Huh? Where did that come from?

Then I remember: it was one of the songs my mother used to sing around the house. A flash of panic: Is that just one more sign I'll end up like her, with my brain fried? Mercy.

A neighbor's little girl is squeak-squeaking away on her swing set. Now and then I see her little brown head pop up over the hedge between our yards. Even little kids are intoxicated by this rich air, this blessing from Mother Nature. For just a moment I get the notion that perhaps the air isn't part of Mother Nature's dwindling bag of gifts, but the Ultimate in Toxic-Chemical highs. Just the perfect combination of pollutants for the King Bird of the Nest Fowlers. Kind of a Chem-Lawn for humans.

Late afternoon, September 30. The neighborhood, its weekend over, is quieting down, gearing up for the next skirmish in the rat race.

I remember some dweeb in the government saying we Americans value life more than Those Arabs (I wonder what the mothers of Those Arabs would have to say about that): "Look at the way even little kids will strap dynamite to their bellies and run into the Marine barracks. Those poor fools die thinking they're going to Paradise. Whereas our boys, they die for Freedom, by God. And the Flag."

These last two months there has been a lot of braying, a collective surge of testosterone that—it almost seems fore-ordained—gets us into these fixes now and then. "Hey, isn't it about time we had another war? Time to send the next gen-

eration to slaughter. Time to make men of 'em. Boys, take that dune! Kill every last son of a bitchin' A-rab!"

Ambrozone is right. The world turn upside down.

A big flock of Canada geese flies over. They are breathtaking to see and thrilling to hear in all their magnificently messy squawking and flapping. It is nice to be living along the geese's migration route.

Just at dusk, a gentle rain falls. And that's nice, too, because the weary world needs refreshing.