

Plasma Television

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I didn't put it there. By the curb where the trash is supposed to go three times a week. The big stuff only on Wednesday evenings. But this isn't mine and anyway it isn't Wednesday evening. I've just awakened from a nap, no more than an hour I was at it, trying to sleep, and when I wandered over to the window for no particular reason, there it was sitting by the curb.

I'm standing at the window, still waking up, still watching the plasma television do nothing. I live on a moderately busy one-way street that's not as bad as it used to be. Because there's a new stoplight about two blocks down, two years now it's been there, and so my street's not good anymore as an alternate route when the highway's busy. Still, a car is already stopped by my curb, right in front of my house. And a guy gets out of the car who's talking on his cellphone as he walks over to the plasma television. His car is nice and sleek, and he's wearing a suit too. He stares down at it, still talking on his cellphone. The television is turned sideways, orthogonal to the curb, so I can't see its screen from where I'm standing. I wonder if the plasma television is what the guy's talking about, or whether he's doing something else at the same time. The television must be broken somehow because of the way he's looking at it. And why else would someone leave it in front of my house? He finally walks away, gets back into his car, still talking, and drives off. No one is going to pick up that thing, that's what I realize.

Watching it from my window, I'm struck by how thin the plasma television is. It's a giant thin square resting on wide aluminum feet, all the little holes for various jacks visible along its back bottom. I can see them clearly even from here. I'm trying to remember if plasma televisions are the sorts of things you're supposed to call the Sanitation Department about before hauling them to the curb the way you're supposed to do with refrigerators. I can't remember if I've read a list and if plasma televisions are on the list. Probably. Since someone dumped one in front of my house.

I've limped outside now. I'm by the curb, looking down at the television. And sure enough the screen is cracked across the lower left edge, light jagged diagonal cracks, several of them streaking the glass or plastic or whatever its screen is made of. Naturally I'm looking up and down my street, wondering how it got here, and I notice two houses down that there are things piled by the curb. Someone is rifling through what looks like an old bureau, a car idling on the curb next to them. There's other stuff too, books on a couple of rickety tables. Some boxes with old clothes in them. Spring cleaning I guess. Even though it's still February.

When I get to the house, there's a young woman I've never seen in my life standing near the house, rocking a baby carriage, one of those new ones that take up so much room on the sidewalk. I also see by the curb, being ignored, a low table designed for plasma televisions to rest on. It's brown and slightly dusty. The guy looking for something free continues to pull the drawers out of the bureau, and push them back in. I wonder what he's trying to figure out, why it's taking him so long to decide.

Where did all this stuff come from? I call out to the woman rocking the baby carriage. I'm gesturing at the stuff on the sidewalk. "The third-floor people," she tells me. And that plasma television down there, I say, pointing down at it. The one that goes with this table over here. "The table's theirs but that television's not theirs," she tells me. "They just got a new plasma television." They just got a new plasma television, I repeat. And then they threw the old one out, that's what I add. "That's not theirs," she tells me, "they didn't have any television before." And this table, I say, pointing down at the table that I've just realized has soft imprints of plasma television-feet surrounded by a light coating of dust. "That's theirs," she says, "but the television down there isn't theirs."

Dumping's illegal, I tell the woman, and I pull out my cellphone like it's a threat. My cellphone isn't as up-to-date as those other phones people have, but it works. I'm going to report this, I tell her. "What makes you think that's their television?" the young woman says. Which is an odd thing to say, really. Because there's all this junk in front of their house. And nothing else on any of the other sidewalks around here. Except for the plasma TV in front of my house. The young woman has gotten out her blackberry or tablet or something. "I'm going to text them," that's what she says to me. The guy is still inspecting the bureau, he still hasn't made up his mind about taking it. It looks pretty cheap to me, not worth hauling away.

"Old shit," that's what I think I've heard the young woman who was rocking the baby carriage say. As I'm walking away. Or maybe she said, "This old shit." I'm calling my son while I'm

walking back towards my house. It goes straight to voicemail. I look down at the plasma television and try lifting it with one hand. It's too heavy for me to move.

My son is saying to me, "Dad, it never pays to get into fights with the neighbors over the trash." I tell him that I don't know if the Sanitation Department collects these things without prior notification. "So call and find out," my son says. *I shouldn't have to do this*, I say to him, because I didn't put that thing out there. And I can hear him shrug, I can hear that he's shrugging over the phone, I mean.

When my doorbell rings, I already know who it is. I come to the door and I can see the woman isn't sure how she wants to begin the conversation. She almost looks like she wants to start by yelling at me. Because she's so busy and it's my fault. She steps back and takes a breath. And I realize I've never seen her before in my life. "Can I talk to you?" she asks me. Yes, I say. "My babysitter," she says next, "she claims that you think that we dumped that plasma television in front of your house. It's not ours." I didn't call in a complaint, I say. "I'd never do something like that," she says, "we got a new plasma television three weeks ago."

I say to the woman, she told me you'd just gotten a new plasma television. She didn't say that you'd gotten it three weeks ago. "And we threw out the old one when we got the new one," the woman says, "we just got around to tossing the table today." I see, I say. And now she's getting ready to go, she's backing off slightly, readying herself to turn around and stride off. "My babysitter said you were pretty aggressive about this," she adds. That would be a misinterpretation, I say. "It's not ours," she tells me again.

We've both walked out to the sidewalk now. And the television says: "Mommy, mommy, don't leave me here on the street." It says that loud enough that both of us immediately turn our heads towards it and then back to one another, looking shocked. So there's no pretending that either of us didn't hear what television just said. We're both stunned into silence for a moment. That's how it strikes me, anyhow. And then I say, Umm. That's all I say. I don't even smile. But she's furious, she's rushed up close to me, she's waving her hands practically in my face. "How'd you *do* that?" she's yelling at me, "how'd you pull that one off?" Not me, I'm saying, I didn't do anything.

I'm trying to back off a little, but my bad leg doesn't let me move too fast.

It didn't call *me* Mommy, that's what I say next. "It didn't call *me* Mommy either," she's yelling at me. And her face is *distended*. Really. I don't think I've ever seen a distended face before. Not distended like that, anyway. Most people I know keep their emotions pretty much cut and dry these days. I try to back away from her because she's so angry, but she doesn't let me. She's even grabbed my hand to hold me in place. "Pull that stunt again," she yells into my face, "and I'll report you." Then she lets go of my hand dismissively and strides off rapidly, not glancing back at me or at the television. I'm wondering what *report me* could mean? Report me for what? Report me how? When something takes you by surprise, that's when you show everyone who you really are.

I inspect the thing on the sidewalk in front of my house. It's still cracked on the screen. I wonder idly if there's a power source in there that's retained some electricity somehow, if that's even possible. I nudge it a bit and nothing happens. Then I try to lift it again because maybe I should try to move it over to the front of her house. Because of what I've witnessed. But I don't.

So I keep wandering towards my window to stare at it. Every fifteen minutes or so I do this.

While I'm eating part of a sandwich for example. When it begins to get dark outside, a car pulls up. Two guys wearing colored tee shirts and blue jeans get out of the car quickly, lift the television up and tip it over into the back trunk of their car. Then they drive off with it, the trunk top still wide open, the television sticking up out of the back of their car.