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Clap Hands, Here Comes Anything

By JEFF GREENFIELD

HAROLD'S dream began years ago, in the early days of television, in the dimly remembered time of "Strike It Rich" and "Queen for a Day."

"Why?" Harold would ask his patient wife Loretta. "Why do these studio audiences applaud a widow with eight children and terminal goiter? A few tears, an offer of cash, these things I can understand. But why do they cheer?"

His dream was nurtured in the Middle Years, the Gilded Age of "The Price Is Right." "Look at this, Loretta," Harold would say in wonder. "The audience has just given a standing ovation to an electric Chop-a-Matic and a 12-Speed Blender. You think they expect those machines to stand up and take a bow?"

But Harold's dream became an obsession with the flowering of the television talk show. Night after night, armed with a remote control and an unlimited sense of indignation, Harold would give shape and substance to his dream.

"This is intolerable," he said to Loretta one night. On The Johnny Show, the author of "Praying Away Your Cholesterol" had just said, "You know, Johnny, if we stopped talking about good food and started talking about God food, we'd all be better off. I deeply believe that." The audience had responded with a burst of applause that lasted clear through two airline commercials and a spot for a feminine dandruff spray.

Angrily, Harold switched on The Merv Show. A Senator who was officially Not Running For President was explaining his beliefs to Merv, gesturing forcefully to the camera. "Merv," he said, "I've talked to young people all over the country. I know they want something better, Merv. They want commitment, not compromise. They want performance, not promises. They want results, not rhetoric. And they want a President, not a posturer,

Merv. I deeply believe that."

The cheers split Merv's water glass and temporarily deafened a CBS sound engineer. "Fools, they're all fools," exclaimed Harold and micro-waved away Merv for Dick. A 17-year-old singer was fingering his yak-fur vest as he talked earnestly.

"See . . . the thing . . . is uh . . . I mean . . . all of us . . . you know . . . love . . . see." The applause almost forced Dick to cancel the Herb Klein Folk Singers, a Washington group formed to insure the application of the Fairness Doctrine to music.

Harold flung away the remote control. And he began to talk again of his dream. "Someday, Loretta, someday I shall appear on one of those shows. I will tell the audience—to its collective face—of its stupidity. I will tell them they are debasing the art of conversation with their interminable handclapping. I will teach them that a discussion is not a prize fight. And they will stop, Loretta. They will hear me and they will stop this assault on the sanity of rational men."

Loretta smiled and stroked Harold's fevered brow. She had heard the dream many times before. But this time, there was to be a tragic difference. For Harold was still so angry the next morning that he dashed off a letter to The Times. Since the President hadn't invaded an Asian nation that week, letters were slow. On Sunday, Harold's letter appeared in The Times. An alert talent coordinator for The Johnny Show read the letter and came up with an idea, and within three weeks, Harold found himself booked as a guest on the show.

"I can't believe it," Harold said to Loretta as they waited backstage. "It's a dream come true."

Loretta smiled and straightened his tie. "It is exciting, dear," she said. "I even invited our closest friends to watch the show at our house. We'll have a nice party afterward."

"Oh . . . oh, look at this,

Loretta. They're starting in again." Harold pointed to a monitor. An actress starring in a new series, "The Young Car-Hops," was talking about poverty.

"I say that a nation that can send a man to the moon can find a way to end poverty," she said, to a crescendo of cheers.

"See? See?" said Harold. "Already."

"Don't get excited, dear," Loretta cautioned, but a few moments later, Harold leapt to his feet again in a rage.

The Governor of California, having finished three warmly appealing stories about the digestive habits of his infant grandchildren, was speaking of poverty.

"I say, Johnny, and gosh, I know it's controversial, but it's what I deeply believe, that if a man can walk to a welfare office, he can walk to a job."

"Stop with this cheering!" Harold yelled at the monitor.

"You're on," said a page, and an angry Harold walked out to the audience's welcoming applause.

"That was quite a letter you wrote," Johnny said to Harold. "Why don't you tell the folks what's on your mind?"

"Thanks, Johnny," said Harold, turning to the camera. *Why am I turning to the camera?* he thought. *I should be talking to his face.*

"You see," Harold heard himself saying. "I care about how we talk to each other. You can't carry on a conversation if you're applauding each other. Why," he felt himself grinning warmly, "imagine if you cheered when your wife told you she loved you." *Oh my God, Harold thought, why am I being warmly appealing?*

The audience laughed appreciatively.

"No," said Harold. "Seriously. A few minutes ago you folks applauded two completely different sentiments. And you all applauded both. You can't believe the governor and the actress. Think—think before you cheer. I deeply believe we must listen

to each other."

Before Harold could check himself, the words were out and the audience responded with deep, heartfelt applause.

"No—see—you're doing it again. You must listen, not cheer all the time. You're not sheep. You're human beings. Act like it!"

The applause was longer and deeper.

"You're doing it again!" Harold was yelling now. "Please! Can't you see that any demagogue with a smooth tongue and a good sense of timing can seduce you into cheers? Can't you see how you're fooling your selves? Stand up and think!"

The applause was so long that Johnny finally cut it off with a commercial and a page led the white-faced, exhausted Harold off stage.

"Great! Come back again," Johnny said as Harold collapsed into Loretta's arms.

"You were very good," she said.

"No . . . no . . ." he mumbled. "They didn't listen. Don't you see? Even I was trying to win their applause. It's a trap . . . There's no hope."

"Come, dear," Loretta said. "All our friends are waiting for us."

As the car pulled up to Harold's home, the crowd was anxiously peering out of the living room window.

"Come on, folks," one of Harold's best friends shouted to the group of friends and neighbors. "Let's show the TV star how good he was. Let's give him a really big hand."

Inspector McGafferty was frankly puzzled, as he sat with a few reporters in a bar near Harold's house. "I don't know, boys," he said. "I thought I'd seen everything. But when a man with no financial worries and no girl friends murders all of his closest friends in a blind rage? It makes no sense at all."

"No motive, chief?" said a newshound.

"Nope," McGafferty said. "Damndest case I ever saw." He raised his glass and gestured to the reporters.

"Well," he said. "Cheers!"