

RATIONAL SUBTITLES

by Wilton Summer

There are some people who, upon discovering that the world is not quite as it seems, grow either very frightened or very proud. Edward Linley did neither. He merely adjusted his spectacles, blinked twice, and assumed he had overlooked something obvious.

It began on a Thursday, an unremarkable day by all accounts, while Edward was taking tea alone in his narrow kitchen. The kettle had just settled into silence when he noticed, hovering faintly above the teacup, a line of text.

He believes the day will proceed normally.

Edward frowned. He looked behind the cup, then beneath it, and finally at the ceiling, as though the words might have been projected from some hidden apparatus. Finding nothing, he reached out and waved his hand through the sentence. It rippled, like smoke disturbed by a breeze, and then re-formed.

“Well,” he said aloud, “that is inconvenient.”

The sentence changed.

He attempts to remain composed.

“I am composed,” Edward replied, somewhat stiffly.

The words lingered, as if unconvinced.

Now Edward was, by profession, a translator of technical manuals, an occupation that rewards patience and discourages imagination. Yet even he could not dismiss the phenomenon as mere fatigue. The text persisted as he carried his tea to the sitting room, where it followed him like a particularly literate ghost.

He suspects he may be unwell.

“I do not,” Edward said, though he had begun to suspect precisely that.

At this point, a lesser man might have panicked. Edward, however, resolved to conduct an experiment. He set his teacup down, folded his hands, and spoke deliberately.

“I shall now stand up.”

He remained seated.

The words above the table shifted.

He considers standing but decides against it.

Edward’s eyebrows rose. “That is not what I said.”

The text did not respond. It merely hovered, serenely factual.

He stood up.

He stands.

“Well, at least you keep up,” Edward muttered.

It was only later, as dusk settled and the lamplight gathered in soft pools about the room, that Edward realized the true peculiarity of the subtitles: they did not describe what he intended to do, nor even what he believed

himself to be doing. They described what he was doing, sometimes more accurately than he knew himself.

At supper, for instance, he declared, "I shall have something light."

He chooses the larger portion.

Edward paused, fork halfway to his mouth. "That is not—" He glanced at his plate, then back at the words. "...entirely inaccurate."

From that moment on, a most uncomfortable suspicion took root. If the subtitles were correct, then there existed, somewhere, a perspective from which his own thoughts were, at best, approximations.

The next morning, Edward determined to test the limits of this peculiar narration. He dressed with unusual care, keeping a close watch on the air before him.

He hopes to catch the words in a contradiction.

"Indeed I do," Edward said.

He is confident he will succeed.

Edward allowed himself a small, satisfied nod. "Quite right."

He approached the experiment with method. First, he attempted deception.

"I shall now recite the alphabet backwards," he announced.

He has no intention of doing so.

Edward hesitated. "Well, not now, perhaps."

Next, he attempted spontaneity. He flung open a drawer at random.

He expects nothing of interest.

Inside lay only a collection of neatly folded handkerchiefs.

Edward shut the drawer rather quickly.

Finally, in a moment of mild desperation, he tried defiance.

“I shall do something entirely unpredictable,” he declared.

The air remained still for a moment, as though considering.

Then:

He will attempt unpredictability in a predictable manner.

Edward sank into a chair. “That is intolerable.”

And yet, the more he observed the subtitles, the less intolerable and more illuminating they became. They revealed not only his actions, but the small, unacknowledged motives beneath them.

When he greeted his neighbor with particular warmth, the text noted:

He wishes to be thought kind.

When he declined an invitation:

He prefers comfort to inconvenience.

And, most unsettling of all, when he knelt beside his bed that evening (a habit long maintained but seldom examined) the words appeared more slowly, as though carrying weight.

He hopes someone is listening, though he is not certain who.

Edward remained very still.

“I had not,” he said quietly, “put it quite that way.”

The subtitles did not reply. They never did. They simply presented their account, without argument or apology.

In the days that followed, Edward’s life acquired a curious duality. There was the life he experienced: the familiar sequence of choices, thoughts, and small routines... and alongside it, the life as it was subtitled: precise, unsentimental, and, at times, disconcertingly honest.

At first, he resented this intrusion. It seemed an invasion of privacy, a violation of the delicate fiction by which one maintains dignity. But gradually, he began to suspect that the fiction itself had been the greater intrusion.

For instance, when he gave a coin to a beggar, he had always thought himself generous. The subtitles, however, suggested otherwise.

He gives to avoid discomfort.

Edward flushed at this, but the next time, he hesitated longer, and then gave more.

He gives, though still uncertain of his motives.

“Well,” Edward said, “that is an improvement.”

So it went. The subtitles did not compel him to act differently, but they made it increasingly difficult to act without awareness. And awareness, as Edward discovered, has a way of altering things.

One evening, as he sat by the fire, he spoke aloud to the empty room.

“Who writes these?” he asked.

The words appeared, as always.

He asks, though he suspects the answer may not be comfortable.

Edward considered this. “I do not require comfort,” he said.

There was a pause... longer than usual.

Then, for the first time, the subtitle did not describe him.

You are being described.

Edward felt, not fear, but a peculiar clarity, as though a window had been opened in a long-closed room.

“By whom?” he asked.

The answer came, simple and unadorned.

By the one who knows you.

Edward removed his spectacles and polished them, though they were not in need of it.

“I see,” he said, though he did not, not entirely.

The fire crackled softly.

He does not fully understand, but he recognizes the truth of it.

Edward replaced his spectacles.

“Yes,” he said. “I believe I do.”

From that night onward, the subtitles remained. They did not grow louder or more intrusive; if anything, they became less obtrusive, as Edward grew more attentive. He found that, on occasion, he could

anticipate them... not because he controlled them, but because he had begun, at last, to recognize himself.

And sometimes, though only sometimes, the words would change in a way that surprised him.

One morning, as he paused before the mirror, he said, "I shall try to be better today."

The subtitle appeared.

He desires to be good.

Edward waited.

Nothing more was added.

For a moment, he felt an odd disappointment, as though expecting a correction. But none came.

"Well," he said slowly, "that is... encouraging."

The words remained, steady and unqualified.

Edward straightened his tie.

He goes out to live, now slightly more honestly than before.

And if this does not sound like a grand transformation, you must remember that most transformations are not grand at all. They are, rather, a series of small adjustments, each one scarcely noticeable, until, taken together, they amount to something quite remarkable.

Edward, for his part, continued much as before: taking tea, translating manuals, and occasionally arguing with the air. But beneath it all, there

was a growing sense, not of being watched, precisely, but of being known.

And that, as it turned out, was not nearly so dreadful as he had first imagined.