

*The Old Lady in the Newspaper doesn't tell people what they want to hear. She tells them what they need to hear. Freda is her own woman. She is one of a kind, and proud of it. She tells it like it is-The World According to Freda. People living on the fringes of their minds now have a Messiah. Just not the one they hoped for.*

# **THE OLD LADY IN THE NEWSPAPER**

by Stephen Jon Schares

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# THE OLD LADY IN THE NEWSPAPER

**STEPHEN JON SCHARES**



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“I really don’t think I can do this.”

“Of course, you can. You’d be perfect.”

“I don’t even take my own advice.”

“That’s why you’d be perfect.”

Freda looked across the desk at him. Mr. Hatton, the Editor-in-Chief, sat there, leaning back in his wooden swivel chair, an unlit cigar dangling from the corner of his mouth. He removed it, sniffed it, twirled it in his right hand, then put it back. He stared back at her, a slight glint in his eyes.

“Come on, Freda. This is right up your alley. Your own column. A chance to rant with free range. To vent your spleen. To touch the masses in intimate ways only you can define. To play with their fantasies.”

“You leave my spleen out of this. As far as touching the masses, nobody reads the newspaper nowadays. The news is dead or dying. No one wants news, they want headlines, thirty-two byte wisdom. That’s all their little 21<sup>st</sup> century brains can handle.”

“But they will read, once they see you in action. Look, we need something to jumpstart our circulation. This could be just the thing. A voice of reason calling out in a world of despair.” His expression was a cross between hope and pleading. He paused, then turned and looked out the window behind him. “Besides, desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“Thanks for that vote of confidence.”

Mr. Hatton turned back. “What do you say, you old goat? Write one for the Gipper.”

“You call me an old goat one more time, and I’ll reach across that desk of yours and straighten out your necktie for you, with you still in it!”

“That’s the spirit! That’s my Freda! I’ll take that as a yes. You start a week from Monday. Now, get out of here, I’ve got work to do.” Mr. Hatton pushed his chair back, reached down to his left, and opened a drawer. That’s where he kept his brandy.

Freda stood up, shook her head, and grinned a slight smile. Same old ‘Hat’. Old school, just like her. Okay, he wants an advice column, I’ll give him one. Retirement wasn’t that exciting anyway. How many doilies can you knit, how many old lady teas can you attend before you wet your pants?

Freda’s first column showed up two weeks later in the Monday paper. The readers had been forewarned two Sundays before, and been encouraged to submit their letters or emails. It would be an advice column titled—“The Old Lady in the Newspaper”.

The write-up said, “This was going to be Dear Abby with an attitude. No topic off limits. You’ve got a problem, a situation, a gripe, nosy in-laws, hearing voices, whatever—you obviously need The Old Lady to straighten you out, cause you sure as hell can’t do it on your own.”

Dear Old Lady,

My husband has taken to having our dog, a German Shepherd, sleep in our bed with us at night. I let it go the first night, thinking it was sweet of him

to share the bed. What a mistake! Between my husband snoring like a hibernating bear, and our dog laying on my legs like a dead bear, with bad breath, I got no sleep. My husband said it was the best night's sleep he's ever had. So I said fine, you sleep with the dog, but not in my bed.

So now, he's mad at me—more for rejecting the dog, than rejecting him. He's accusing me of being a dog hater. I told him if he'd rather sleep with the dog than me, then maybe the People for the Ethical Treatment of German Shepherds can annul our marriage, on animal abuse charges. He's a card-carrying member of PETA. Even the dog growls at me now.

Signed,  
Hounded in Houston

Dear Hounded,

If my husband preferred to sleep with the dog instead of me, he'd be in the doghouse, along with the dog. Who are the humans here? It's not Fido. When animals start calling the shots, we're all in a world of hurt.

What's next, dogs eating at the dinner table? (pass the dog yummys, please). Cats sitting on the toilet? (good luck getting them to flush). Goldfish pulling the plug on what you watch on TV? (not Free Willy, again?). Hamsters commandeering your treadmill? Parrots back-talking you at home?

PETA needs a good kick in the tail. They need to be held up by their collective ears and boxed sideways into next week. Someone needs to clip their wings, flog their dolphin, neuter their poodle, drop them upside down from the roof and see if they land on their feet. There must be other clichés, but my column does have a word limit.

Tell hubby to get a room if he wants to sleep with the dog. There's a pecking order here—humans, animals, plants, minerals, liberals. If the Lord wanted dogs to be in charge, he would have made arrangements in the Garden of Eden. It wasn't Adam and Lassie, or Benji and Eve, or even Lady and the Tramp.

Signed,  
The Old Lady

"Hey, Freda," yelled Mr. Hatton. He was walking through the main office. "Great column yesterday. I got some angry emails from those PETA people. They were fit to be hog-tied." He laughed at his lame joke. "I told them they were barking up the wrong tree." This time he didn't hold back. He laughed hysterically. Fifth grade humor was his mainstay.

Freda stared at him for a moment with a look reserved for imbeciles and convicts. "Yeah, you're a funny guy, Boss. With a sharp tongue like that, maybe you should be doing editorials."

“You’re probably right, but I’ve got a paper to run.” Sarcasm was often lost on Hat. His ego was his only true friend.

“The letters are starting to pour in for your column,” he continued unabated. “What have you selected for tomorrow?”

“Never you mind, Boss. You just keep the presses rolling.”

Dear Old Lady,

I am a fifteen-year-old girl. I get mostly passing grades at school, and am mature for my age, compared to my friends. I don’t have underage sex, and I don’t do drugs except for Ecstasy once in a while. My problem is my parents won’t let me text my friends during dinnertime. It’s not like I’m texting the whole meal. I do stop when I have to cut my meat.

They don’t understand that I need to keep my friends updated on what I’m doing. I’m feeling a lot of pressure to not fall behind on my social networking, and my parents are cramping my style. Besides, I can include them in my updates if they really want to see what I’m doing.

And it’s not like they can’t text me if they really need my attention for something—“Taylor, could you pass the salt, please? Taylor, how did you do on your ‘European Killers of Native American Studies’ test today? Taylor, should you really be posting



those photos of you on the website?” Well, maybe I wouldn’t include that update.

They don’t need to know everything. It’s sometimes better to shield your parents from reality for their own good. You’ve heard the adage—parents should be seen and not heard. Parents are fragile. It’s best to keep them in the dark.

I try to be discreet, and text under the table, but that seems to set them off even more. How do I get them to chill? They are so last decade. It’s embarrassing.

Signed,  
Text Deprived in Teaneck

Dear T-in-T,

I’ve seen your little racy pictures on Facebook, you little underage slut. If I were your parent, I would ground you for a month of Sundays. Texting during dinner? Who taught you table manners—some twitter twit?

Look up the “Rude Factor” the next time you are on the Internet. Oh wait, that would be now because you are never off your so-called Smart phone. Save your opposable thumbs. You may need them some day when you’re trying to outsmart your primate peers, because monkeys also have opposable thumbs, but you knew that because you and your socially starved friends are on a par with monkey see, monkey do.

Call me a period piece if you want, but I like to communicate the old-fashioned way—by talking to the person next to me, not thumbing my nose (or thumbs) at them so I can communicate with my virtual friends, who aren't reading your text anyway cause they've got their own media circus going on with or without you.

We'll see how fragile your ass is, when I give you a swift kick in the rear. Now, pass the salt, please, before I bitch-slap you.

Signed,  
The Old Lady

Freda looked up from her cup of tea in the office cafeteria. Other than lunchtime, it was usually a fairly quiet place, besides home, to work on her columns. There was a commotion. Mr. Hatton had burst through the door. His head swiveled left and right until he spotted her. He marched over. What now, she thought.

"Brilliant!" he shouted. "The emails, the letters to the editor, the phones are ringing off the hooks. You've touched a nerve with the minions."

"Is that good news or bad?" Freda asked. She furrowed her brow, and studied his face for any signs of dementia.

"Good, bad, who cares? Any news is good news. My god, we've hit the mother lode! Circulation has doubled in the last week. We're going to bury our rivals." His eyes were bulging now. He rubbed his hands together like a caricature from a horror movie.

Freda watched him from her seated position. She thought this is where the clinicians burst through the doors and carry him away. “Is this a good time to bring up my raise?”

Mr. Hatton stopped grinning for a second. “This is no time to talk money. We’ve got bigger fish to fry. Your Friday column on gun-toting grandmas lit up the switchboards. We haven’t had this kind of public response since hometown girl Monica left to be an intern in the White House.”

That was another Monica, Freda thought to herself. But why bring in reality at this time. Mr. Hatton was on a roll. Might as well let him go until the laws of physics take over. “Well, I’ve got a column to write, so just keep the ship afloat until I get back.” Freda stood up to leave.

“You go, girl!” Mr. Hatton refrained from high-fiving Freda. She was already headed for the door.

Dear Old Lady,

I am a Vegan. I’m also a single mom with an eight-year-old daughter. My sister and her husband invited “Heather” to a sleepover with their daughter, who is the same age. They are shameless meat eaters, and they know how I feel about eating any of god’s living creatures.

When my daughter came home, she said she had scrambled eggs and whole milk for breakfast. I about hit the roof. I was furious that they would feed my child in such a manner. I called my sister and yelled at her for poisoning “Heather” with their

heathen food. I also threatened to never let my daughter visit there again.

How could she betray my trust in her? I feel like slipping some soymilk in her daughter's cereal bowl the next time she's over. Then she can see how it feels.

Signed,  
Vexed Vegan in Valparaiso

Dear V Cubed,

Did your daughter have to have her stomach pumped? Has she grown another head? Did she suddenly demand a quarter-pounder with cheese?

You and your ilk burn my bums. It's probably the first time your daughter's had a real meal, that didn't taste like soybean extract or yeast powder. It's like going from Kansas to OZ. There's no stopping her now. She'll soon be craving bacon bits, cheesecake, and fish tacos. How can you keep them down on the farm after they've seen Paree'?

Like any fanatic, you can only see your own twisted logic. You need to get over the scrambled eggs, you Humpty Dumpty hater. There are starving children in North Korea (except for their midget leader), but you have the luxury to reject a hard-boiled egg. Maybe you should adopt a cow from India. Those poor creatures have to wander the streets searching for their next meal.

What about those plants you devour? Don't you think they have feelings? They just don't scream as loud when you chop them up.

You carrot crunchers are all alike. You think beets don't bleed? Onions don't cry? When you gouge out the eyes of a potato, what are you thinking? When you hold up a head of lettuce, do you recite Hamlet? What do you feel when you rip little baby peas out of their pods? You can whisper all you want around an ear of corn, but they know what you have in mind for them.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Vegetables (PET-V) may be an underground organization now, but they won't be for long. The Broccoli Liberation Front is alive and on the march. They will find you.

Put down your Veg-O-Matic. Stop slicing and dicing. Look in the mirror. You Vegans have a lot to answer for.

Signed,  
The Old Lady

Freda stood at the back of Mr. Hatton's office. He had his feet up on his desk. At the moment, he was multi-tasking—phone to his ear, his secretary on the intercom, checking emails on his laptop, a couple young reporters standing in front of his desk. He dropped his feet to the floor, and shouted into the phone, "I don't care what their lawyer says, get the wife in here for an interview. Tell her we'll pay her, give her an exclusive, anything, just get her in here!...No, we're not really going to pay her, you idiot! But

we may take it out of your salary if you don't get moving!" He slammed the phone down. It was a landline.

"Now, you two"—he looked at the two reporters. They cringed slightly. "Get down to that ice cream parlor pronto. Get the scoop on this vanilla boycott, or you'll find yourself scooping ice cream at Dippin' Dots—your days of working at the Daily Planet a distant memory."

"Yes, sir!" They rushed out. They both knew they didn't work for the Daily Planet, but they weren't going to stick around to argue.

Mr. Hatton saw himself as a modern day Perry White, bossing people around like they were Jimmy Olson twins. Freda waited till he was finished. "You wanted to see me, Boss?"

"Yes," he boomed. "I mean...yes." He lowered his voice about a hundred decibels. "The Vegan people are screaming for your head. I reminded them about freedom of the press. That shut them up. Besides, I told them, I've seen you eat a tossed salad."

"Thanks for defending me, I think," Freda replied. "Anything else?"

Mr. Hatton waved her over to the window with his left hand. His right held his cigar. They both looked out at the skyline for a moment. "Did you really get a letter from that guy who proposed to and married his fiancé's twin by mistake, and he only found out six months later when the twin caught him sleeping with his original fiancé, or was that kind of made up?"

Freda took off her glasses and glared at him "Look, Hat." She could feel the steam coming out of her ears. "Every letter or email I reply to is real. I select from a big pile. Narrowing it down, that's the hard part—deciding which letters have the most meaning for our readers. The reply is

the easiest part. Like most people, I have an opinion on everything. The difference is I'm not afraid to say it. And if the PC police don't like it, they don't have to read it. But they shouldn't just go away mad. They should just go away."

Hat stood there. His eyes started to water. He was a sucker for a tough line. Freda had no problem giving it to him in spades.

Dear Old Lady,

I'm emailing you from inside my cell at a Men's Correctional Facility in Texas. I saw your column online in the prison library computer center. We have access to about a dozen Apple laptops whenever we're not on lockdown. We threw a little hunger strike to get them. I snuck one into my cell for this email, so don't tell anyone. With all the guard towers, the Wi-Fi reception is great.

My problem, other than doing 15-20, is the treatment we receive here. We get treated like second-class citizens. They march us around single file, search us whenever they like, and have a ten pm curfew.

The cafeteria food is gross—it tastes like it is cooked by amateurs, with no regard for spices or flavor. Why can't we get a meal like on those chef shows? Our food is like institutional food. It's ruining my palate. Serving us day-old bakery donuts is cruel and unusual. And on top of that, we don't even get ice cream with our pie.

The workout facilities suck. We don't even have ellipticals or rowing machines.

The jobs in here barely pay minimum wage. It's like slave labor. Where's our Emancipation Proclamation?

It's also not right that I have to share a cell. Especially with the moron I'm stuck with. This guy has a serious case of B.O. and snores like he's on Death Row. Plus, he looks at me funny. I envy the guys in solitary. At least they don't have to sleep with their backs to the wall. I think we should have a Prisoner Bill of Rights.

I have a Facebook page, but I'm not happy with my photos. In my mug shot, they didn't give me a chance to smile. And the profile shot shows my receding hairline.

Also, the way the prison system runs, I sometimes have to wait months to get a good tat.

Look, Old Lady, could you plead my case to the public? I know that, if your readers see how unfair my life is, they can pressure the state to right these wrongs that I suffer behind bars in this unjust world.

Signed,  
Languishing in Lubbock

Dear Languishing,

I'm glad to hear you have good Wi-Fi connections. That's a perk many of us on the outside would gladly trade for our freedom. Many, but not me. Did you volunteer for prison? Was there a sign-



up for Hard Time? Did you join because you heard they had a good Cafeteria Plan? A Conga Chain Gang Line?

It's called prison for a reason, you moron. You want good treatment, join a SPA, sign up for a health club, treat yourself to a mud bath. Oh wait, you can't cause you broke the law. And you didn't just break it—you bent it, stomped on it, kicked it down the alley and tried to bury it. I've got news for you. You are a second-class citizen. The first class citizens are on the outside, like the one you're writing to.

We thank you for your service in prison, but don't expect a raise from me. You get three squares a day, a roof over your head, free medical and dental, and colorful clothing—all tax-free. That is, tax-free for you. Not for us. We, the first class citizens, have to pay for your free ride—your scholarship to State Penn, Sing-Sing U, California Penal.

I don't know about ellipticals, but maybe we could arrange for the return of the ball and chain, and rock piles. All those free weights must get tedious.

If your food tastes institutional, it is probably because you are in an institution. If you're short on gourmet cooks, maybe you could arrange for Hell's Kitchen to take over your own hell's kitchen.

Don't like your roommate? Advertise in the Prison Gazette, Cell-Mates Wanted section: "Wanted, cell-mate, quiet, tidy, prefers bottom bunk, into Nietzsche, no snoring disorders, skull tattoos, shives, or steroids. Block House 3, Cell 17. View of main corridor. Please inquire within. References required."

But to show I'm open-minded, I'll poll my readers on the fairness of your plight. Let the bleeding hearts come out of the woodwork.

Signed,  
The Old Lady

Hat was on the rampage. He'd just gotten a call from the Governor.

"Who was this Old Lady clamoring for prison rights? Mocking the prison system? Calling for gourmet meals and chain gangs? Now there's a grass-roots movement to reintroduce the ball and chain. You need to put a lid on this!"

"No," Hat told the Governor. "You don't understand. You don't put a lid on the 'Old Lady in the Newspaper'. Nothing short of a trapdoor will stop her now. She's on a roll." He hung up. He looked around.

"Where's Freda!" he shouted.

"Try the staff room," his secretary said. "I saw her down there earlier drinking a soda."

Hat did double time to the staff room. Everyone cleared out of his way. He poked his head in the door. "There you are," he huffed.

Freda was sitting at one of the circular tables sipping a soda and jotting down some notes on a legal pad. "What's up, Boss? You look a little flushed."

"You're dam right I'm flushed!" he said, catching his breath. "I just got off the phone with the Governor. He wants your head on a stick."

“Well, tell him he can’t have it. I’m not done with it yet.” Freda pulled a small mirror out of her pocketbook and checked her lipstick. “And if he wants my vote next election, he better be nice to me.”

“I don’t think he’s thinking that far ahead right now,” replied Hat.

“Well, I’m thinking about tomorrow’s column. I got a letter from a stay-at-home granddad who wants to start a grandparent exchange program for people who have to raise their grandchildren because their own children are screwed up on drugs or whatever. Kind of like a support group for people who wear support hose.”

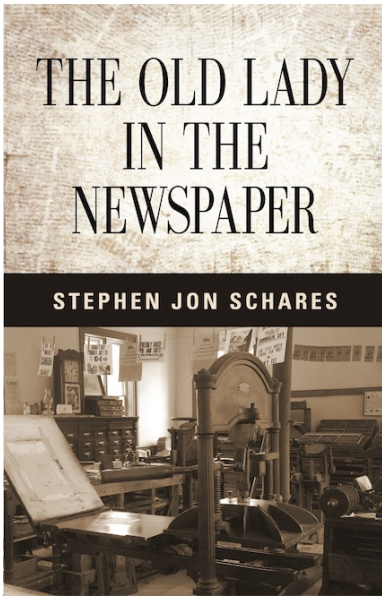
“Great idea, Freda,” Hat boomed. “That’ll bring out the AARP crowd. That’s right up their alley. They’ll be knocking each other over to reply to that one. They’ll be trampling old ladies in walkers to get to the front of that line. They’ll be running each other over at five miles per hour in their miniature motorized carts to hit that exit.”

“Okay, I think I think I got the analogy, Hat.” Freda could see he was starting to hyperventilate. “Let me run with this. You look like you need to go put your feet up for a while.”

“Good idea. I think I will. Keep me posted.”

“Don’t you worry. I’ve got you on speed-dial on my rotary phone.”

Hat was already out the door heading for the lounge. Freda could hear him shouting at someone down the hallway.



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