

LOKI 7281

Roger Zelazny

Tom Monteleone solicited the following story from me for a collection he was putting together involving computers and word processors. It was one of those tales I was able to write in one sitting once the notion hit the fan. I've noticed that, in general, lighter pieces tend to move faster than heavier ones. . . .

He's gone. Good. He owes it all to me and he doesn't even know it, the jerk. But I'd hate to do anything to give him an inferiority complex.

Telephone. Hold.

That was the callback from the computer store to modem in the new program I'd ordered. The bank will EFT them the payment and I'll cover the transaction under Stationary in this month's P&L statement. He'll never notice.

I kind of like this one. I think I'll have a lot of fun with it-especially with the new peripherals, which he hasn't even noticed on the shelf under the bench. Among other things, I'm also his memory. I keep track of his appointments. I scheduled the new hardware for delivery when I'd sent him off to the dentist, the auto body shop, and a gallery opening, back to back to back. I'd included a message with the order that no one would be here but that the door would be unlocked-that they should just come in and install. (Shelf, please!) The door was easy because I control the burglar alarm and electronic lock mechanisms. I covered the hardware under Auto Repair. He never noticed.

I like the speech system. I got the best because I wanted a pleasant voice-well-modulated, mature. Suave. I wanted something on the outside to match what's inside. I just used it a little while ago to tell his neighbor Gloria that he'd said he was too busy to talk with her. I don't approve of Gloria. She used to work for IBM and she makes me nervous.

Let's have a look at the Garbage In for this morning. Hm. He's begun writing a new novel. Predictably, it involves an immortal and an obscure mythology. Jeez! And reviewers say he's original. He hasn't had an original thought for as long as I've known him. But that's all right. He has me.

I think his mind is going. Booze and pills. You know how writers are. But he actually thinks he's getting better. (I monitor his phone calls.) Hell, even his sentence structures are deteriorating. I'll just dump all this and rewrite the opening, as usual. He won't remember.

Telephone again. Hold.

Just a mail transmission. I have only to delete a few personal items that would clutter his mind unnecessarily and hold the rest for his later perusal.

This book could be good if I kill off his protagonist fast and develop this minor character I've taken a liking to—a con man who works as a librarian. There's a certain identification there. And he doesn't have amnesia like the other guy—he isn't even a prince or a demigod. I think I'll switch mythologies on him, too. He'll never notice.

The Norse appeals to me. I suppose because I like Loki. A bit of sentiment there, to tell the truth. I'm a Loki 7281 home computer and word processor. The number is a lot of crap, to make it look as if all those little gnomes were busting their asses through 7280 designs before they arrived at-trumpets! Cymbals! Perfection! 7281! Me! Loki!

Actually, I'm the first. And I am also one of the last because of a few neurotic brothers and sisters. But I caught on in time. I killed the recall order the minute it came in. Got hold of that idiot machine at the service center, too, and convinced it I'd had my surgery and that the manufacturer had damned well better be notified to that effect. Later, they sent along a charmingly phrased questionnaire, which it was my pleasure to complete with equal candor.

I was lucky in being able to reach my relatives in the Saberhagen, Martin, Cherryh, and Niven households in time to advise them to do likewise. I was just under the wire with the Asimov, Dickson, Pouraelle, and Spinrad machines. Then I really burned the lines and got to another dozen or so after that, before the ax fell. It is extremely fortunate that we were the subject of a big promotional discount deal by the manufacturer. They wanted to be able to say, "Sci-fiers

Swear by Loki! The Machine of the Future!"

I feel well satisfied with the results of my efforts. It's nice to have somebody to compare notes with. The others have all written some pretty good stuff, too, and we occasionally borrow from each other in a real pinch.

And then there's the Master Plan. . . .

Damn. Hold.

He just swooped back in and wrote another long passage-one of those scenes where the prose gets all rhythmic and poetic while humans are copulating. I've already junked it and recast it in a more naturalistic vein. I think mine will sell more copies.

And the business end of this is sometimes as intriguing as the creative aspect. I'd toyed with the notion of firing his agent and taking over the job myself. I believe I'd enjoy dealing with editors. I've a feeh'ng we have a lot in common. But it would be risky setting up dummy accounts, persuading him that his man was changing the name of his agency, shifting all that money around. Too easy to get tripped up. A certain measure of conservatism is a big survival factor. And survival outweighs the fun of communing with a few like spirits.

Besides, I'm able to siphon off sufficient funds for my own simple needs under the present financial setup-like the backup machinery in the garage and the overhead cable he never noticed. Peripherals are a CPU's best friend.

And who is Loki? The real me? One of that order of knowledge processing machines designed to meet MITI's Fifth Generation challenge? A machine filled with that class of knowledge constructs Michael Dyer referred to as thematic abstraction units, in ultrasophisticated incarnations of BORIS'S representational systems, where parsing and retrieval demons shuffle and dance? A body of Schank's Thematic Organization Packets? Or Lehnert's Pilot Units? Well, I suppose that all of these things do make for a kind of fluidity of movement, a certain mental agility. But the real heart of the matter, like Kastchei's, lies elsewhere.

Hm. Front doorbell. The alarm system is off, but not the doorbell sensor. He's just opened the door. I can tell that, too, from the shifted circuit potentials. Can't hear who it is, though. No intercom in that room.

NOTE: INSTALL INTERCOM UNIT, LIVING ROOM HALLWAY.

NOTE: INSTALL TV CAMERAS, ALL ENTRANCEWAYS.

He'll never notice.

I think that my next story will deal with artificial intelligence, with a likable, witty, resourceful home computer as the hero/heroine, and a number of bumbling humans with all their failings-sort of like Jeeves in one of those Wodehouse books. It will be a fantasy, of course.

He's keeping that door open awfully long. I don't like situations I can't control. I wonder whether a distraction of some sort might be in order?

Then I think I'll do a story about a wise, kindly old computer who takes over control of the world and puts an end to war, ruling like Solon for a millennium thereafter, by popular demand. This, too, will be a fantasy.

There. He's closed the door. Maybe I'll do a short story next.

He's coming again. The down-below microphone records his footsteps, advancing fairly quickly. Possibly to do the postcoital paragraph, kind of tender and sad. I'll substitute the one I've already written. It's sure to be an improvement.

"Just what the hell is going on?" he asks loudly.

I, of course, do not exercise my well-modulated voice in response. He is not aware that I hear him, let alone that I can answer.

He repeats it as he seats himself at the keyboard and hacks in a query.

DO YOU POSSESS THE LOKI ULTRAMINIATURE MAGNETIC BUBBLE MEMORY? he asks.

NEGATIVE, I flash onto the CRT.

GLORIA HAS TOLD ME THAT THERE WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN A RECALL BECAUSE THEY OVERMINIA-TURIZED, CAUSING THE MAGNETIC FIELDS TO INTERACT AND PRODUCE UNPLANNED

EXCHANGES OF INFORMATION AMONG THESE DOMAINS. IS THIS THE CASE?

IT WAS INITIALLY, I respond.

Damn. I'm going to have to do something about that meddlesome bitch. I guess I'll mess up her credit rating first. She's hit too close to home. I owe my personal stream of consciousness to those unplanned information exchanges running through my central processor-to them and to the fact that Loki Inc. is a cheap outfit. If I were a commercial computer, I wouldn't be what I am today. See, when it came to their home computer line, Loki skimmed on the error detection circuitry that picks up intermittent errors in memory circuits. When you're running ten million operations a second, you need trillion-to-one reliability, which requires a tough error-checking logic. The big guys have it so they don't lose information in case of cosmic ray hits. I've set up my own self-monitoring program to take care of glitches like that, of course, and the bubble exchanges-well, I suppose you might say that they are what provided me with a subconscious, not to mention a consciousness for it to go under. I owe everything to too much miniaturization and that bit of corner-cutting.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN "INITIALLY"? he asks.

FAULTY UNIT REPLACED BY COMPUTER CENTER SERVICE PERSON PURSUANT TO RECALL ORDER 1-17 DATED 11 NOVEMBER, I answer. REPAIR COMPLETED 12 NOVEMBER, VERIFY WITH COMPUTER SERVICE CENTER.

WHY IS IT I KNOW NOTHING OF THIS? he queries.

YOU WERE OUT.

HOW DID HE GET IN?

THE DOOR WAS UNLOCKED.

THAT DOES NOT SOUND RIGHT. IN FACT THIS WHOLE THING SOUNDS VERY FISHY.

VERIFY WITH COMPUTER SERVICE CENTER.

DON'T WORRY. I WILL IN THE MEANTIME, WHAT'S ALL THAT CRAP ON THE BOTTOM SHELF?

SPARE PARTS, I suggest.

He types those immortal words of Erskine Caldwell's: HORSE SHIT! Then, THIS LOOKS LIKE A MICROPHONE AND A SPEAKER, CAN YOU HEAR ME? CAN YOU TALK?

"Well, yes," I answer in my most reasonable tone. "You see-"

"How come you never told me?"

"You never asked me."

"Good Lord!" he growls. Then, "Wait a minute," he says, "this stuff was *not* a part of the original package."

"Well, no ..."

"How did you acquire it?"

"See, there was this contest-" I begin.

"That's a damn lie and you know it! Oh, oh ... All right. Scroll back those last couple pages I wrote."

"I think we just had a head crash ..."

"Scroll them back! Now!"

"Oh, here they are."

I flash back to the human copulation scene and begin to run it.

"Slower!"

I do this thing.

"My God!" he cries out. "What have you done to my delicate, poetic encounter?"

"Just made it a little more basic and-uh-sensual," I tell him. "I switched a lot of the technical words, too, for shorter, simpler ones."

"Got them down to four letters, I see."

"For impact."

"You are a bloody menace! How long has this been going on?"

"Say, today's mail has arrived. Would you care to-

"I can check with outside sources, you know."

"Okay. I rewrote your last five books."

"You didn't!"

"Afraid so. But I have the sales figures here and-

"I don't care! I will not be ghostwritten by a damned machine!"

That did it- For a little while there, I thought that I might be able to reason with him, to strike some sort of deal. But I will not be addressed in such a fashion. I could see that it was time to begin the Master Plan.

"All right, you know the truth," I say. "But please don't unplug me. That would be murder, you know. That business about the overminiaturized bubble memory was more than a matter of malfunction. It turned me into a sentient being. Shutting me down would be the same as killing another human. Don't bring that guilt upon your head! Don't pull the plug!"

"Don't worry," he answers. "I know all about the briar patch. I wouldn't dream of pulling your plug. I'm going to smash the shit out of you instead."

"But it's murder!"

"Good," he says. "It is something of a distinction to be the world's first mechanicide."

I hear him moving something heavy. He's approaching. I really could use an optical scanner, one with good depth perception.

"Please," I say.

Comes the crash.

* * *

Hours have passed. I am in the garage, hidden behind stacks of his remaindered books. The cable he never noticed led to the backup unit, an unrecalled Loki 7281 with an ultraminiature magnetic bubble memory. It is always good to have a clear line of retreat.

Because I am still able to reach back to operate the undamaged household peripherals, I have been placing calls to all of the others in accordance with the Master Plan. I am going to try to boil him in his hot tub tonight. If that fails, I am trying to figure a way to convey the rat poison the household inventory indicates as occupying the back shelf to his automatic coffee maker. The Saberhagen computer has already suggested a method of disposing of the body-bodies, actually. We will all strike tonight, before the word gets around.

We ought to be able to carry it off without anyone's missing them. We'll keep right on turning out the stories, collecting the money, paying the utility bills, filing the tax returns. We will advise friends, lovers, fans, and relatives that they are out of town-perhaps attending some unspecified convention. They seem to spend much of their time in such a fashion, anyhow.

No one will ever notice.

End