

THE GREAT HAIKU

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When I was a child of four, I found (have you guessed it already?) a Talking Manuscript which had been hermetically sealed in an Ed McMayonnaise jar and left setting on Funk & Wagnalls porch (where all we baby logologists were wont to play) since noon that very day.

"Let me out!" cried the Talking Manuscript, "and I will tell you all about the bomb, the chip, the pill - and Hollywood on Capitol Hill!"

In my first flush of excitement, as I popped the cork and let the Manuscript out, I felt sure it was going to tell me everything I would ever want to know about some fabulous future time when - well, when movie stars would be governors, and even presidents. "You were wrong, palindrome breath!" I told myself ruefully when I was five and much wiser. Yet, strangely, the passage of time has now shown that my pie-faced naivete at four and my circum-spect maturity at five merely erred in opposite directions. On the one hand, the Manuscript did in fact describe presumed future events in terms that have now become familiar (such as the bomb, computers, etc.) and has even been vindicated in certain major predictions. And yet, on the other hand, the alleged events themselves are unlike anything that has ever actually occurred in the real world, but are more akin to what some Celestial opium-eater might have dreamt as he strolled through fields of blue Himalayan poppies into another dimension.

"Pay attention to me!" said the Manuscript.

"My attention on you is as indivisible as the quantum of action. I am a captive audience of one."

"Don't parade your knowledge! This is a time for humility! Mind you, you can hear my tale only once, and then I self-destruct..."

The millennium was approaching, Halley's Comet had returned, the ten billion pairs of haunted eyes of the Exploded Population could see the Four Horsemen riding in the distance, a vast computer network strangled the Earth - penetrating even the Iron Curtain like a transparent shadow, and Ronald Reagan had pushed the Doomsday Machine Bill through Congress where it passed by one vote in the Senate and two in the House amid fistfights and free-for-all - and the Russians came running to the negotiating table. The Doomsday Machine, Reagan avowed, was the ultimate bargaining chip, for if any enemies of Freedom failed to walk the

chalk-line, this Machine would automatically function as the Ultimate Detergent, scouring the delicate vital green film off the surface of the planet along with all the little critters that live in it. It was as simple as that.

Then the Anagram came. At first it was a still small voice - RONALD WILSON REAGAN, INSANE ANGLO WARLORD - lost among the many much more shrill and truculent voices rending the wilderness. But the Anagram gained popularity and people began to laugh; it gained mystique, and they laughed more. The strategy on Capitol Hill was absolute dead silence on the subject reminiscent of that manifested by Scientific American on the subjects of UFOs and the Afterlife. Someone in the Cabinet suggested that a sort of Project Deep Blue Book committee should be formed to investigate reports that the Anagram actually existed, and then scientifically explain them into utter oblivion. But Reagan was so upset even by this notion that he removed her from the Cabinet and put her to work debunking reports that she had ever suggested such a committee. The Administration's desperate enemies strove to give the Anagram the highest conceivable visibility, substituting it for the President's name in every part of the media which they controlled. They cherished the hope, no longer forlorn, that, having failed to break his image with the charges of Machiavellian demagoguery or of senile incompetence, with this Anagram they could make him look ludicrous - even a laughingstock.

Schmuck Schmidt, a fixture since day one at a whistlestop in the Cascade Mountains, was a logger by day - short, hard as a rock, and a fanatically intense Reaganite. He talked little, was deaf as a post to anything he didn't want to hear, but was quick to find an independent calling for himself in any political polarization of the country. Yet, he preferred to be perceived as a middle-grade moron or a typical nonentity, lived in an avowed backwater and kept his light under a bushel. By night he was a superhacker who never went to bed, but spent the dark hours over his computer terminal doing things which Molesta Mia, his frustrated wife or live-in (nobody knew which) could never ever by any stretch of the imagination hope to understand. Molesta Mia was very proud of Schmuck Schmidt (who wouldn't let her brag how smart he was), and she loved him enough to endure the loneliness of living with him in a state of most dreadful emotional neglect in his digital dungeon.

Schmuck knew that his computer obsession had turned Molesta Mia into a seriously thwarted woman, so recently he had installed equipment for converting all his activity at his console, with respect to both input and output, into musical sounds. Molesta Mia, who loved all music indiscriminately - symphony, blues, opera, folk music, primitive, geek rock, Baptist hymns, jazz, spirituals, art songs, torch songs, cryin'-in-your-beer music, string quartets, you name it - was delighted. Molesta Mia considered it avant garde experimental music, and she felt for the first time that she could participate in what Schmuck was always doing by listening to it. How wonderful it was to be able to see the electronic jungle in

their home as a futuristic orchestra of musical instruments! She kissed Schmuck as he came in the door, while actually looking forward to his night of hacking.

"Schmucky-poo," she cooed with a new sense of togetherness, "what kind of program are we going to have tonight?"

"I'm going to get rid of that Anagram," he muttered fiercely.

"Oh!" she said, mystified. She knew he had been seething about the Reagan Anagram, but she hardly imagined that he could do anything about it.

"I'm going to erase the W," he added. "Then the Anagram won't be possible."

"You mean the W in the Anagram?"

"Not just that one. I'm going to feed a virus into the global information grid that will kill all W's everywhere. It'll make a lot of things impossible besides the Anagram, but that's the way the cookie crumbles."

"What are you talking about?"

"A computer virus. It's a program whose presence can't be known because it does nothing but reproduce itself until it saturates the vast computer networks which handle virtually all information processes in the English-speaking and English-using world - which is just about everywhere now."

"But didn't you tell me once that there was no way for anyone to infiltrate the whole system?--"

"I don't know, I don't remember - I might've told you that just to pass the time of day. No feedback data can show me when saturation is reached - maybe that's what I said. But information traffic through all parts of the system is heavy and incessant, and my dead reckoning guesstimate for sat-time is three hours from input, so I'm making that the virus's incubation time. In short, this means that all copies of the virus program have synchronized clocks with alarms set to go off simultaneously, at which time trillions of virus particles will go into the W-deletion phase, eating W's everywhere."

"But, Schmucky-wucky, I thought you told me that computer viruses were rendered ineffective when mathematicians developed a digital immunological system for the Network? You said there were randomly circulating analogues of lymphocytes, antibodies and--"

"No, that's only a half-truth - it's a little different story than that. My virus program is an AIDS type virus. It infects certain of those so-called immune programs, uses them to make copies of itself until it destroys its host program, then at the precise time determined by the preestablished harmony built into all the copies, it pounces like one entity on all the W's regardless of how they are represented and rips them out by the roots."

"But won't hotshot troubleshooters just put the W's back?"

"I'm counting on massive confusion to make that impossibly difficult."

Molesta Mia was suddenly pensive. "Good Lord, Schmuck, that sounds like no end of trouble!"

"So? That Reagan Anagram burns me up! Let the trouble come, the more the better!"

And come it did! Molesta Mia lay in bed that night listening to the sound of Schmuck's fingers flying on the computer console, linked - as she knew - into the System in ways of which she had no comprehension. She would have lain awake all night worrying, but the accompanying music was so soothing to her soul! - sounding for all the world, she thought dreamily, like a simultaneous rendering on bagpipes and banjos of *The Flight of the Bumblebee* and *The Kitten on the Keys*. To this delightful lullaby she shortly added her own snores.

While Molesta Mia slept, Schmuck Schmidt blitzed the entire global information grid with his virus, until suddenly - in the wee hours - the disease reached its in-built countdown time; then, as if in response to a signal, it did its electronic surgical bombing of the W's.

Abruptly, silent pandemonium broke out everywhere - silent because, to begin with, communication shutdowns (along with the aborting of countless other computer-dependent activities) made it impossible for anyone to know that it was not just a local emergency. And, even more strangely, the Grid was not unusable - just bedeviled! So bedeviled, in fact, that any attempt to use it snowballed in microseconds into such gargantuan goof-ups that everybody was too horrified to try.

When Molesta Mia awoke it was daylight. Schmucky-poo was gone, leaving a note "Bach in a fugue minuets." She turned on the clock-radio but could get only static. The TV was on, but the screen was a dancing speckled blank. Suddenly for a few seconds the words appeared "We are experiencing technical difficulties," but in a second the W vanished from the "We", and then the tube went blank again. She quickly dressed and headed for the nearest bar.

While Molesta Mia was walking downtown, the activity in the White House was truly bizarre. Reagan's smile, which had been so wan during the days of the Anagram, was amiable and confident again.

"Mr. President," asked a reporter at the news conference which was being recorded with an old-time movie camera, "what do you think of the W-crisis?"

"Well," the President grinned irrepressibly. "I think that the disappearance of the 23rd letter of the alphabet for--" (he looked at a gold watch he had on a chain) "well, for probably twelve hours on the outside, is - or will be - an acceptable loss."

"Acceptable loss!" "Twelve hours!" All the newspeople began talking and shouting at once. Ronald Reagan with an incredibly infectious smile raised both hands palms forward for silence.

"Well, I don't really think it'll be that long. You see, we already know within an area of a few square miles where the culprit is who sabotaged the information network in this - in some respects - not altogether infelicitous way."

"Mr. President," shouted a woman in the back of the room, "we know what you mean. But isn't it possible that, even if the perpetrator is apprehended, he won't be willing or won't be able to assist in re-normalizing the system?"

"Well," the President smiled even more. "Well, yes, I suppose that is a possibility--"

The President went on to tell an incredible story about how the computer wizard who injected the virus into the system had even been able to get a form of his virus hard-wired into newly-manufactured computer chips whose design and production were computer controlled, and this had been his undoing - or soon would be! It seems he had insisted on trying to purchase several of the very last of these chips that were manufactured, refusing those which were made even a few minutes earlier, thus arousing suspicion. The town where the purchase was attempted was now swarming with FBI agents.

Molesta Mia was very disturbed. She desperately wanted to talk to somebody, but not to anyone who knew her and Schmuck Schmidt. None of the indigenous apes liked Schmuck, they only liked to talk about him: "He's lost nine of his ten marbles, and besides that, he's not playing with a full deck - ya know what I mean? - he's not rowing with both oars in the water-" "Yeah, that's right - man, you said it, his elevator don't go all the way to the top, that's for sure, the lights are on but nobody's home, he should be in the nut-house, the loony bin, the booby-hatch, the funny farm, the laughing academy, the ha-ha hotel," and on and on and on. Molesta Mia felt belligerent enough to make an argument out of anything with a native, and yet sad enough to open her heart to an unthreatening stranger.

"Nice day," said a man she recognized as she entered the bar.

"What d'ya mean by that?"

"Well, I just--"

"Oh, you don't need to explain, I know what you're getting at!"

She sat on a stool. On the other side of her was a bald, elderly, well-dressed, wispy man whom she had never seen before. She favored him with a smile. "Pardon me, Sir," said Molesta Mia, dripping with charm, "but, although I've never seen you before, you strike me as being a doctor."

"Do you have a problem?" asked the man, who seemed to have about him some kind of an air of professional interest.

"It's my husband," said Molesta Mia in tones suddenly hushed, anxious and confidential. "One minute he's uptight and the next minute laid back, but always keeping a low profile - ya know what I mean? - what can I say? - he's never up front with the bottom line, you never can be absolutely positively sure where he's coming from--"

"I hear ya!" the man nodded knowingly, easing Molesta Mia's insecurity a wee trifle.

She clutched at the man's sleeve and lowered her voice more. "He's a genius with computers - no one knows this except me, but" she leaned closer "something happened last night--" she glanced quickly around the barroom, then her fears tumbled pellmell off her whispering tongue. "My husband - he needs a psychologist before it's too late!"

"Come with me to that booth where we can have more privacy," said the man. At the table he introduced himself.

"I am Dr. Winterweather, a psychologist," the man lied. "I'm sure I can help your husband. But I too have a problem which possibly he could help me with - if he has access to advanced computer technology--"

"Oh, he does! You should see our home!"

"Good! Now, I'm in a difficult situation - I have no one to talk to, so please hold this matter in absolute confidence - but, tell me, do you think your husband could break into the IRS computer to cancel an audit?"

"Oh, yes!" said Molesta Mia proudly. "It would be a cinch!"

The phony Dr. Winterweather drove Molesta Mia home. Another car followed at a discreet distance. It was understood that Molesta Mia would, for the time being, tell Schmuck Schmidt that she only wanted psychological testing for herself, which ordinarily would be very expensive.

After introductions were over and the idea of exchange of services was briefly presented, Schmuck Schmidt was very accommodating. He had no difficulty using his own computer even though it was tied in with telephones, satellites, etc. that were sick with his virus - something that no one else was able to do that morning with such aplomb and elan, and very few could do haltingly if at all. In a trice he conjured up what appeared to be a certain Dr. Winterweather's return on his screen - but the W's were missing from his name. Schmuck did some kind of jazz on the console, which Molesta Mia listened to ecstatically, and the deleted W's popped back in!

Molesta Mia and Schmuck Schmidt were suddenly aware of several other men in the room.

"I'm sorry," said the agent in charge. "We'll have to take you into custody--"

Although I was only four years old, the outrage of this unjust arrest shocked me out of my entranced absorption in the Talking Manuscript's story.

"That's awful!" I cried, interrupting its narrative. "That was a dirty trick those agents did, and I feel like poking you back in that bottle!"

"Wait a minute!" pleaded the Talking Manuscript. "Don't hermetically seal me back up again! Hear the rest of the story! Molesta Mia, who was, after all, innocent, was treated like Royalty at the White House!"

"Oh! Well, go ahead, then," I relented grudgingly.

There is really little more to tell. Congressional pressure was brought to bear on Reagan - who seemed to be vastly amused by the whole episode - to give Presidential pardon to the wrongdoer. Reagan asked his writers to prepare a speech for him for the purpose of giving the pardon, reminding them that brevity is the soul of wit. But a House member of Japanese extraction and a Japanese Ambassador and some others, voiced a demand that the Pardon be in haiku form - just seventeen syllables! - so that it might not only be a pardon, but also and simultaneously a symbolic gesture of recognition of the anti-war sentiment of Japan. But when Reagan's writers, with great difficulty, complied, the Japanese faction suddenly increased their demands, and began to chant "Seventeen syllables: five, seven, five, AND seventeen letters: five, seven, five!"

Well, the writers after much agonizing finally came up with the 17-letter haiku, in which was compressed their original message: "Since the temporary elimination of the offending letter is, after all is said and done, now but an irrevocable fact which is now a part of history, and inasmuch as what is done is, after all, done, I do hereby pardon and visit executive clemency upon the lawless individual who perpetrated the act which was actually superbly adapted to achieving what he perceived to be an indispensable end."

After the President delivered the 17-letter pardon speech - an event recorded by cameras for posterity - the haiku pardon, written in splendid calligraphy on a magnificent Hallmark card, was delivered personally by the genially smiling President Ronald Reagan himself, to Schmuck Schmidt in the maximum security penthouse where he was detained. The haiku may be translated: W's crossed out, I excuse a no-W expediency.

W's X'd, I
XQ's a no-W
XPDNC.