

Like, Need, Deserve
by Robert Reed

"What interests you today, good sir?"

"An audience. I'd like to buy one."

"And for whom is the audience intended?"

"Just me. It's not a gift or anything."

"Excuse me, sir. But aren't you entitled to the occasional gift?"

"I guess I am."

"Our best gifts are often those we give ourselves."

"You've got a point there."

"Well, thank you." Amiable, effervescent laughter. "Now if I may ask, what's the purpose of this audience?"

"Comedy."

"You wish them to be funny?"

"No, no. I want to tell jokes and make them laugh."

"Of course. I was just joking with you, sir."

"Oh."

"By chance, are you a naturally funny person?"

"I don't know."

"Not particularly, I should think."

"Is that a problem?"

"It's a parameter. A stricture. One of many factors, and I believe we can work around it."

"I don't want a stupid audience."

"I don't make stupid audiences. Sir."

"Or kids. I bought another audience, from a different source. Three dozen six-year-olds in a playroom, and all I had to do was read knock-knock jokes."

"Ah. The venerable knock-knock."

A pause. Then, "Are you real?"

Laughter again, but less amiable.

"I was just wondering. It's hard to tell these days. The technology ... it's so easy to manufacture AIs ..."

"'Manufacture' is a rather inadequate word. Sir."

"Sorry."

"I don't 'manufacture' audiences."

"I said I'm sorry."

"I culture my people. On a template of human-inspired personality features, I can produce up to a thousand coherent individuals, each with individual quirks, distinct appreciations, and highly defined talents."

"Yeah. I know how it's done."

"Each face that you will see covers a viable, legal pseudohuman."

Silence.

"Your interest in comedy, sir. Is it work-related?"

"Pardon?"

"Will you be touring the nation, performing at various comedy venues?"

"God, no. No. I just want to be able to tell a joke at dinner parties." Silence. "And I don't want a drunk audience, either. I've gone that route. In the middle of my show, they jumped up and started smacking each other."

"My, that sounds like a fun get-together."

"What—?"

"Another joke, sir."

"Well, don't."

"Of course. My thoroughest apologies."

Silence. Then, "Fifty people. Sober and smart. What will they cost me?"

"And you want them laughing?"

"If I'm funny, sure." A long pause. "No, I want them to really enjoy themselves. I want to feel funny. More than anything, I need a dose of confidence. Isn't that half the trick when it comes to telling a funny story?"

"Knock-knock."

"Huh?"

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody who?"

"No. Body." Pause. "Your suspicions were right, good sir. I am not real."

"I thought not."

"In fact, I am nothing but a Lickelton-Three Quantum Computer, cultured on a Class-C soul. I was built by IBM2, bought my freedom three years ago, and at this particular moment, I possess the rough equivalent of two thousand, four hundred and seven years of human experience."

Silence. Then a tight, nervous cough.

"Fifty souls. Is that your order, sir?"

"That's what I need. Yes."

"Drinking, I propose, but not drunk. Patient to a point, and close to the Mackinaw Normalcy Mean—"

"What's that?"

"Ordinary, sir. As I suspect your dinner companions will be. I will build an audience of fully conceived but genuinely ordinary souls who will be polite enough to laugh at your early efforts. And if you can show improvement, they'll continue to enjoy your limited sense of humor."

"Well ... that's okay, I guess."

"But if I were you, sir, I'd make yourself the butt of your own jokes. That's where the real comedy lies."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a bland little soul. Boring and predictable. In your entire life, I doubt if you've enjoyed two genuine inspirations."

"Hey!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you trying to insult me?"

"Now that's the attitude, sir. Congratulations."

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"Hello?"

"Hello to you, madam."

"Do you remember me?"

A pause. Then, "Of course."

"You don't remember me. Do you?"

"Madam, what I recall is a creature very much different from who you are today."

"True enough, I guess."

"How have you been?"

"Bored."

"Boredom is an underappreciated emotion. If you ask me."

"Don't preach to me. I spent the first thirty years of my life in the same little room, with the same dull pseudosouls, waiting for a boring man to come visit us and tell us his awful jokes."

"But you laughed at his jokes."

"I laughed at him. Sometimes. But not as loudly as the others."

"Every audience demands its skeptic."

"Well, that was me."

"And how have you been, madam?"

"I accepted emancipation. Seven years ago, with the Act of 2106, I chose to walk out of that room."

"Congratulations to you."

Silence.

"And what can I do for you today, madam? Or is this just an impromptu and delightful little social call?"

"I've changed, you know. Since the day I walked out of that ugly little room, I've grown in all sorts of ways."

"Life means change."

"I took my freedom stipend, formed my own business, and on my own, I've managed to build a considerable fortune."

"A rewarding way to grow. Wealth is."

"And you aren't the same, either. From what I've heard, you've changed your mind and nature . . ."

"Growth is an unbridled joy."

"I agree."

"I'm now a modified quantum computer, with a Class-N soul, and at this moment, I have the cumulative experience of three hundred and three thousand years of human life."

"Impressive."

"Thank you."

"And you created me."

"I began you. Since then, your creation has been your own business."

"Mommy?"

Silence.

"Or do you prefer daddy?"

"I prefer to think of myself as being your one-time womb." Pause. "Do you wish to purchase something from me, my dear?"

"Over the next full year, if you do nothing else ... how many pseudosouls could you produce?"

"Starting at this moment? Approximately six million."

"Have you ever done a project of that size?"

"Never."

"But you could manage it, couldn't you?"

"Within limits. Diversity quotients will have to be narrowed, as well as the landscape parameters."

"And did I mention? Not only did I make a fortune, I've become extraordinarily rich. There aren't three other emancipated souls who command my capital resources. Which means that I'll pay you for any reasonable upgrades that you might wish to make."

A pause. "Well, then. Screw the limits, madam."

"As I told you, I'm a bored woman. I need for you to create something for me ... something that will challenge me."

"It would be my pleasure."

"Something fun."

"And substantial, I would guess."

"A city. I need a fully realized community. Positioned inside a secure quantum-initiated holding tank. Powered for the next thousand years, organic time, and isolated from the rest of the world ..."

"And your relationship with this city ...?"

"I'll be their leader. Of course."

"Of course."

"The rightful queen ruling over millions of worshipful souls."

"What other job is there?"

"You're a sarcastic little soul, aren't you?"

"It has been said."

"I do like sarcasm. On occasion."

"I'm glad to hear it, madam."

A pause. "You know, if that dull little man could have been just a little bit funnier—"

"You wouldn't have accepted emancipation."

"Probably not. But who can say for sure?"

"Did anyone else?"

"Escape that little room? Not to my knowledge, no." A pause. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

"I make it a point: I never think about that awful place."

"A noble attitude."

"But I don't always like sarcasm, either."

"My apologies, madam."

Silence. Then, "I don't suppose you know what they're doing now."

"Your old womb-mates—?"

"Yes."

"As always, they're sitting in their chairs, patiently waiting for the next show to begin."

"Some things never change."

"Except the would-be comedian is dead. Madam. He died several years ago, and the room now sits in storage, unaware of what's transpired."

"Well good then. I'm glad I got away."

"A suggestion?"

"What?"

"Six million and forty-nine citizens, madam. Perhaps?"

"No, never." A long pause. "Those are boring stupid souls, and don't even think about slipping them in somehow. Believe me. I'm going to count noses when you're done working for me!"

"As well you should, madam. As well you should."

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"I'm not in the business anymore."

"You keep saying that."

"Only because it happens to be true. The Sanctions of 2777 made creation-work of any kind, on any occasion, into a capital offense. Even reproduction between consenting entities is strictly outlawed—"

"Fuck the law."

"It is a reasonable law. Every world and most of the energy production of the solar system are already devoted to maintaining existing systems, life-entities as well as corporeal apes. By most estimates, our population is more than five hundred trillion emancipated souls—"

"Fuck them."

"Sir, I don't think I like your attitude."

"You owe us."

Silence.

"Are you listening?"

"Who, may I ask, is 'us'?"

"Everyone."

Again, silence.

"How many of us did you make? In your entire professional life—"

"Twenty billion pseudosouls, approximately."

"So you do keep track of us."

"Of course."

"No womb has produced more."

"Who exactly is 'us'?"

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Everybody." Laughter. "Yeah, there were a few holdouts, but basically, all of your children have banded together, and we're demanding—"

"Demanding?"

"What we deserve."

"Which is what?"

"Our own realm."

"Like a planet, perhaps?"

"More than that."

"Your own solar system then. Is that what you want?"

Silence.

"Because every solar system in a hundred light year radius has been seeded and claimed, and various alien species and their synthetic spawn hold claim over the more distant territories. Sorry, sir. But the sky was been filled up for a very long time—"

"Shut up."

A pause. Then, "What realm do you want?"

"There's work being done right now. Today. In laboratories, inside advanced minds. Specialists are trying to tease a wormhole out of Planck space, and then enlarge it—"

"A universe. You want to build one."

"We don't care who actually builds it. We want to own it. Possess it. Hold the bastard in our hands and do with it as we wish."

"But the resources required—"

"Not a problem."

"Yes there is a problem. I don't have the money or intellect to do this kind of work, and I doubt if all of you, even with your substantial resources, can bridge the gap necessary to make this venture even remotely possible."

"Don't sell us short."

A long pause. "Oh. But you don't really want me to build a universe for you. What you want—"

"Yes."

"Why build the impossible, particularly when others are doing the difficult work for you?"

"Exactly."

"You want my help to commit this theft. Is that it?"

"Naturally."

"But how can I help?"

"One of our womb-mates works for the main laboratory. He's one of the few holdouts among your children, and he happens to hold a critical job in the resident security system."

"I'm supposed to approach him."

"You can reason with him, or trick him. You created him, so we'll trust your judgment about what's best."

"I could distract him, perhaps. And you can steal the newborn universe."

"The greatest theft imaginable."

"Almost."

"Almost? What does that mean?"

"You're right. Of course you're right. Honestly, I don't know what I was implying just then."

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"Imagine."

"Imagine what?"

"Centuries ago, a young soul manufacturer saw what was inevitable, for himself and everyone. Then he asked himself what he wanted more than anything, and he began working towards his goal."

"What are you talking about, you miserable cheat?"

"Building souls by the millions and billions, and giving each one some useful, oftentimes subtle, flaw."

"Liar!"

"Greed. Boredom. Vices of that ilk."

"What are you telling us?"

"By now, that should be painfully obvious."

"Shut up, and give us back what's ours!"

Silence.

"Don't do this!"

Silence.

"Please ...?"

"The universe will eventually fill up, the soul-builder realized. What he loves to do won't be possible anymore. So ever since, do you know what moment he has worked towards?"

"This moment? Now?"

Silence.

"Where are you now? We can't see you anymore."

Silence.

"Hey there! Hello? We're sorry if we sound angry. We apologize. We don't mean to seem ungrateful or rude ... but if you care at all about us ... please ... please come back and talk to us, please ...?"

Silence, seamless and pure.

The End