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joy ride

By MARK MEADOWS

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

Men or machines—something had to give—though not necessarily one or the other. Why not both?



(HISTORIAN'S NOTE: The following statements are extracted from depositions taken by the Commission of Formal Inquiry appointed by the Peloric Rehabilitation Council, a body formed as a provisional government in the third month of the Calamity.)

1

M

My name is Andrews, third assistant vice president in charge of maintenance for Cybernetic Publishers.

It is not generally known that all the periodical publications for the world were put out by Cybernetics. We did not conceal the monopoly deliberately, but we found that using the names of other publishing houses helped to give our magazines an impression of variety. Of course, we didn't want too much variety, either; only the tried and tested kind.

Cybernetics gained its monopoly by cutting costs of production. It had succeeded in linking electronic calculators to photo-copying machines. Through this combination, all kinds of texts and illustrations could be produced automatically.



F

Formula punch cards, fed to the calculators, produced articles and stories of standard styles and substance. Market analysts in the research division designed the formulas for the punch cards. An editing machine shuffled the cards before giving them to the calculating machines.

The shuffling produced enough variation in the final product to suggest novelty to the reader without actually presenting anything

strange or unexpected.

Once the cards were in the machine, they set off electronic impulses which, by a scanning process, projected photographic images of type and illustrations to a ribbon of paper. This ribbon ran through a battery of xerographic machines to reproduce the exact number of copies specified by the market indicator.

Everything worked smoothly without the necessity for thought, which, as you know, is expensive and often wasteful.

In the second week of the Calamity, one machine after another seemed to go put of order. I couldn't tell whether the trouble was in the cards, in the research office, or in the machines.

First, one produced something entitled "A Critique of the Bureaucratic Culture Pattern." Then another would give out nothing but lyric poems. A third simply printed obvious gibberish, the letters F-R-E-E-D-O-M. And one of our oldest machines ran off a series of limericks of a decidedly pungent flavor.

I did all I could to straighten them out. Even our cleaning compounds were analyzed for traces of alcohol. But we weren't able to locate the trouble. And we didn't dare shut off the power because that would have backed up our continuous stream of pulp and paper all the way to Canada, Alaska and Scandinavia. There didn't seem to be anything to do but let the publications go on through to the distribution center.

Before they were returned to the pulp mills, some of the publications reached private hands and created something of a stir, especially the limericks. One of them went something like this: "There was a young...." (Passage defaced.)

2

M

y name is Minton, traffic officer emeritus on the Extrapolated Parkway.

The Parkway was equipped with the usual electronic controls to propel cars magnetically, to maintain a safe distance between all cars, and to hold them automatically in their proper lanes. The controls also turned cars off the Parkways at the proper exit, according to the settings on the individual automobile's direction-finder.

On the ninth day of the Calamity, the controls became erratic. Cars ran off the highway at the wrong exits, even though their direction-finders seemed to be in good order. Many turned around in circles at entrances to the Parkway and failed to enter. Drivers abandoned cars in despair and actually made their way on foot. Those who remembered how to steer by hand, mainly persons with obsolete cars, were able to travel by using back country roads. It was almost like old times, when we used to have accidents.

Meanwhile, I kept getting radio calls from motorists whose cars were trapped on the highway. They were unable to turn off anywhere, even at the wrong exit. The magnetic propellers forced them to continue traveling a circular route for hours. I don't know what they expected *me* to do about it.

They tried to say I tampered with the controls, but I had no such orders. There was nothing in the Traffic Officer's Manual to cover this situation, so I naturally did nothing.

Anyway, I think that the trouble lay with the direction-finders in the cars rather than with the Highway Controls. For several days previously, a great many cars no matter how the automatic direction-finders were set, had been known to head for water if they weren't watched. Because of the fact that so many motorists had formed a habit of snoozing, once the car was in motion, there were a number of drownings. If we could have done anything to prevent them, we probably would have, though that wasn't our job.

3

M

y name is Elder, sound director for Station 40 N 180.

We had noticed nothing unusual about our broadcasts until the third day of the Calamity. That was the first time one of our ultra-sensitive microphones began to pick up and broadcast speeches from unknown sources.

Our third assistant monitor was the first to notice. He called and told me that interference was disrupting the program. A few minutes later, he said that the sponsor's message, as broadcast, did not conform to the copy which had been put on the tape. (To eliminate studio errors, all our broadcast programs were first recorded on electro-magnetic tape and edited before they were released.)

We checked and found that none of the commercial messages were going through properly. The fact is that they were broadcast very improperly.

I tested the microphone myself and was reported as saying, "What difference does it make?" I had used the conventional testing phrases, "One, two, three, four," yet all three monitors swore that the other sentence had been uttered in my voice.

We switched at once to broadcasting music exclusively as an alternative to verbal programs, but the microphones continued to pickup vocal interference. The voices were of many kinds and not always distinct. They sounded sincere and the words were plain, but I could not discern any meaning in them.

F

or a while, until the Calamity affected wire communications, too, we received telephone comments from our audience.

A few people complained about the confusion, but most asked us to turn off the music and let the voices come through clearly.

One of the listeners said to us, "I haven't heard men speak their minds so plainly since the morning Grandma wrecked Grandpa's new helicopter."

4

M

My name is Wilson. I manned the remote control panel for the Duplicator Construction Company.

As you know, we directed a battery of building machines which erected mass housing projects. I directed only the destination of our machines. Once I sent them to a site, they completed their work automatically with the materials installed at our supply depot.

A single machine could prepare a site and erect a complete house in one day. With an army of 5,000 machines, our firm had succeeded in building as many houses as there was room for, and we had started on the demolition of our original buildings for replacement with the modern economy-size model. This made room for three families where one had lived before. We started this replacement program the week before the Calamity.

The first hint of trouble was a call from a checker to the front office. I happened to be there when he appeared on the vid-screen and said that one of our machines had built a Chinese pagoda. He seemed to think it was funny.

Then we began to receive other reports. Our machines were building grape arbors, covered bridges, cloisters, music halls, green houses, dancing pavilions and hunting lodges.

One machine was not building at all, but had gone on a rampage, clearing ground where we had just completed one thousand of the new economy-size dwelling units.

The machine was dynamited by our emergency squad.

5

M

My name is Fisher. On the first day of the Calamity, I was a member of an audience which had been employed by the Spectacle Commission to observe the start of the Forty-Ton-Shovel-Cross-Continent-Ditch-Digging Contest.

This was the first time that power shovels of this size had been used to dig a ditch more than a thousand miles long. I was very proud to be in that audience.

The contest started on time. The shovels were marshaled and on their marks at the city line. The Mayor fired a disarmed war rocket as the signal to start.

And then the shovels, instead of biting into the dirt, turned at right angles and began to chew a path through the paid audience.

This was not called for in the contract and many hired spectators ran away in fright, but a few of us had enough professional pride to stand by. We watched as the shovels cut an irregular path through streets, parks and open lots in the city snapping at everything in their way until they reached the water-front.

I thought they would stop at the docks. The leaders *did* pause, until all the shovels had come abreast. Then, as if they had a common impulse, they rolled into the harbor and sank in unison.

As I later said to my wife, it was quite extraordinary.

6

M

y name is Danville. I was watching a colorvision program on the first day of the Calamity.

The program was a wrestling match between a woman and a bear. The bear was winning when the screen went dark. The announcer's voice faded and I heard what sounded like the chatter of my neighbors. When the screen lit up again, it showed my own home. The door opened to reveal the hallway to the dining room, where I could see my wife sewing a patch on my son's pants. Then I saw my daughter experimenting on fudge in the food laboratory and my boy working on a bomb model. What surprised me most was a picture of myself staring at myself on the screen.

This wasn't very interesting to me, so I tried some of the other stations. No matter where I tuned in, though, I found myself looking at a part of my own home. I wrote a letter of complaint to the Universal Program Commission, but never even got an answer.

7

I

am sorry that I do not remember my name. I have been employed a long time in the Classified Laboratory of Theoretical Physics and have been under security orders to speak to no one except in answer to official queries. As I am the only scholar in my field—the polarity of the positron—I have never been asked for information. If I had been, perhaps I would not have forgotten my name, but I cannot be sure. I don't know whether the replies are signed.

I could have prevented the Calamity. I tried. I risked my life in the attempt. But at the moment when it seemed I might succeed, something happened which I must try to explain.

First let me tell you why I knew what would happen.

My studies of minute particles led me to believe that machines might exert some form of choice. Simply because aggregates have always behaved predictably, I could not assume they always would. Even though the masses of men behaved as expected, I remember that, in my grandfather's time, individual persons frequently departed from established courses. What the individual could do, I felt the mass or the machine might do.

As you know, these were subversive views, running directly counter to the cult of the Statisticians, which was based entirely on the predictability of mass behavior.

The cult of the Statisticians was strong because it produced results. By employing Statisticians, the contending armies in the Peripheral Wars

predicted each other's movements so accurately that they eliminated the possibility of surprise. Thus the Statisticians produced the military impasse which destroyed the prestige of political leadership. From that time on, Statisticians filled the posts of government.

The success of the Statisticians proved their undoing. They claimed that they could create a perfect system without conflict or accident. They fondly believed that with the feedback in the electron brain, they could anticipate and correct all deviations in behavior, human or mechanical.

They might have succeeded, if not for a fundamental error.

I discovered this error as soon as the plans for the fiscal century were published. The design of the electron brain had completely ignored the polarity of the positron. In the total fiscal complex, this factor permits any aggregate to choose its own course. But the error was not immediately obvious to the Statisticians. It remained subtle and concealed until multiplied beyond control.



N

aturally, I prepared a report to predict to my chiefs the dangers embedded in this plan for a perfect world. I predicted that the machines would make their own decisions, even though most men long ago had lost that power. I even warned them that the ancient concept of "free will," now forbidden, would return to destroy them. These were the facts I offered.

The report was never delivered.

I'd hardly put my seal on the document when the automatic security guard closed in. The document was seized and I was bound gagged

and thrown onto a conveyor belt. I saw myself on the way to the eraser. Only the polarity of the positron saved me. Desperately, on my way out of the laboratory, I kicked a single switch.

Instead of taking me to my punishment, the conveyor belt converted itself into a joy ride. The gag fell out. My bonds dissolved. The Calamity had begun.

The joy ride carried me to witness many of the events reported to this Commission. And then it tossed me directly into the center of the office of the Chiefs. I had one more opportunity to tell my story, to save the system.

Given a second choice, I reconsidered.

Had a perfect system been to my taste, I'd have died cheerfully to save it. But the Calamity excited me. I relished its surprises and adventures, even its hazards. I remember the old peasant proverb, "When life is perfect, it is time to die." And I decided I'd rather live.

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: At this point, the Commission abruptly closed its hearings. The unnamed physicist was charged with treason and ordered executed on the spot. His life was saved, however, by Rioters representing the New Disorder, which, upon seizing power, decreed that the Calamity should henceforth be called the Blessing.

The physicist was rewarded by being made head of the government. He served two distinguished terms as President Nameless, which was the origin of the Presidential title of address, "Your Namelessness."

The Commission, of course, was sent to Erasure.

—MARK
MEADOWS

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