

Jacko

By: Larry Zack

The hard drive took more than three weeks to arrive and he was really miffed. He hadn't written much in all that time. Being eager seemed to be what he had to offer; being good was, probably, just a bit more than he could manage for now. He figured that it would come along. Certainly so, because he understood his problem completely. It was not his ideas, or his technical skills. It was his spelling it was his punctuation. It was all of those annoying little details that a writer of his stature should not have to be bothered about and he had found a way around them. It was finally here, The JK 3677 self-actualizing, text-impelled hard drive. Never mind that it took him two whole days to write a page; he was now prepared to set down within its four terabytes 60000 pages all spell-checked punctuated verbs properly declined all modifiers in place, split infinitives mended, and all. And all he thought all I have to do is think up some good stuff and get it down.

He turned on the system and plugged the drive into a vacant USB port. Its light shone brightly, in contrast to the comfortable dimness of his den as if it was promising action.. At first, nothing much happened. but then a text box appeared on the screen with the message windows has recognized new hardware. A few seconds later a new box popped up with the words windows has configured the new hardware, and it is now ready to run. Anxiously, he loaded his storey into the drive. Again nothing much happened.

2.

Created by: Larry Zack, Winnipeg, Mb.

The rows of neatly deposited characters of his last masterpiece appeared on the screen, shimmering softly as if formally establishing themselves, seemingly promising some sort of deliverance. But then, the screen began to flicker violently, spitting up great black gaps devoid of text, mixed with splotches of scratchy letters, and sparks fiercely running around the page borders. It appeared that his system was in the grip of some dynamic force with which it could not cope, but only for a brief moment. Suddenly, the characters began to rearrange themselves on the screen, slowly rotating from top left, to bottom right; commas and other heretofore unrecognized forms of punctuation positioned themselves in all of the proper places. The text took on a new richness; a presence, and presumption of excellence he had never before seen. He was thrilled far beyond anything he could express. Just at that very moment, when his rapture was at its greatest; at that point when he realized that there could now be no limits to his potential; and as his mind raced madly from adoring women to darling of the critics, he noticed something else on the screen: in softly textured, times new roman, exactly two double spaces after the close of his story, without fanfare or quotation marks, the words:

Hello, Larry. How are you? My name is Jack. I have come to assist you.

He was stunned. What was happening? Was it some form of artificial intelligence? What kind of hard drive was this? Experimental? Why had they sent it to him? It had certainly delivered what the advertisement had promised. What more could it do?

3.

Created by: Larry Zack, Winnipeg, Mb.

First, he spoke to it, trying to discover if it was capable of voice recognition. When it did not respond to his voice; when the cursor kept flashing after the question, as if *it* were some sort of inquisitor, demanding action, haltingly, he put his fingers to the keyboard and after a moment's thought, began to type:

Who are you, and where are you from?

The thing/person responded: I am Jack. I do not know where I am from. I just am. I have come to assist you.

How do you know my name?

I can read your thoughts.

Larry began to panic. What kind of machine was this that can read minds!

It must be some kind of joke. This must be some hacker, playing around with me.

If he's in my system, he can steal my stories! Larry didn't stop to think, that, as none of his stories had ever been published, why would anyone bother? Larry didn't stop to think that, as he was not connected to any internet service, how could anybody hack in? He eventually did think of that, however, and began to calm down. But if this was not a hacker, just what was it? He was facing something he didn't understand; was it a problem, or some amazing new program? Or, perhaps, both.

If you can read my mind, why didn't you respond to my voice?

Only on the keyboard. I can read your thoughts when you are typing. I sense the keys as you type, and respond to that, but I also anticipate; some errors I can fix before you put them down. Your grammar is barely average, your spelling is terrible, and your punctuation non-existent; but look at what is on the screen, now!

Pretty smug for a program; or are you a program, at all? Maybe I've lost touch with reality. Perhaps, you exist only in my imagination, or in my subconscious longing.

I do not understand what you mean by reality; I have no physical presence, but you influence me, and I influence you; to me, that is the only reality that matters.

But, how do you influence me if all you do is correct spelling and punctuation. You do not, I pray, control my thoughts, or substantially change anything that I write?

Let's just say, for now, that there are other ways to exert influence. I hope that we can work together, and evolve, to become better than either of us alone. I am merely an aide, with the ability to correct your errors, and, perhaps, the willingness to point you in the right direction.? For instance, you have John and Priscilla in bed together, and they...

Larry had been so wrapped up in the discussion, and so utterly spent from all of that nervous typing that he interrupted: I need sleep. You've laid a lot on me; let me get my bearings in the morning. He maneuvered the mouse to the shut down box, and clicked. Nothing happened! Jack paused, cautiously. The cursor continued to blink. The CPU's cooling fan whirred quietly in the background. The screen illuminated his desk in its soft glow. But the harsher eye of the hard drive stared at him reproachfully, bracketing him in its glare until he had to look away. Until just that moment, he had still felt in control. Is this what you mean by influence? He now had a better understanding of the meaning of self-actualizing. Flopping himself down on the sofa, he tried to settle in and get some sleep. But his concern over the aggressive posture of his so-called assistant kept his eyes wide open, and his body astir for quite some time, until, completely exhausted, he lost awareness; perhaps in sleep; perhaps in some other state; but at least, out of mind. Meanwhile, Jack was busily opening and reading story after story, editing text, and all the while, learning..

His eyes opened, but he didn't know what time it was. He was in that hazy state between asleep and awake when one has no ability to resist; when any suggestion of action has to be thoroughly processed through the quasi-inertia of semi-consciousness, usually resulting in the incapacity to perform that action. He looked around the room, but lying flat, could not see anything to indicate that the memory of the night before was more than a dream. But, when he bent his neck upward, and looked toward the desk, the apparently

now brighter light of the new drive told him that it was real enough. He did not want to get up and sit at the desk; he had to. He had to send the opening salvo to what he believed was a battle that he must win if *he* wanted to be self-actualized. With an air of bravado that he did not completely feel, he typed: What's up, Jack?

Jack paused momentarily, and then, in the time-honoured fashion of the superior when faced with the patronizing insolence of an underling, appeared the words:

That's Jacko to you, mister. Let's get to work, shall we?