

After reading this story, you might consider it funny to send a letter to the editor claiming that Robert Reed stole your idea. Before you write any such missive, remember that your humble editor already thought of that one.

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Think So? by Robert Reed

Mick dreams up the little joke on his way to a party, and he picks an opportune moment to tell it—he tells it just once—winning solid laughter and a few appreciative winks. Yet you can never tell about this business. Until the following week, when his first statement arrives, Mick can't even be sure that his joke has been repeated. Yet people must have told it, and their various audiences must have repeated it or some obvious variation, because his royalty check is for twice as much as everything that Mick has ever before earned off this kind of work.

Even better, the statement covers only the first three days and nights of the joke's existence.

The second week's check is simply enormous. By law, Mick is entitled to a thorough breakdown showing where his intellectual property has been used, by how many sentient entities, and on which days. He isn't allowed to see names—though that information exists for billing purposes—but the basic demographics are buried in the data. Young males latch on to the joke first, and then older men and a smaller portion of adult women. Children don't tell it, which is probably best, since they can't be charged more than a token fee for using someone else's material. But the adult world has embraced his little gag, the statement ending with a coded verification proving that slightly more than a million dollars has been eased into Mick's suddenly bulging bank account.

Within the month, the entire world seems to have heard what Mick has invented, and its citizens have retold it often enough that he will never need to work again.

A luxury apartment seems appropriate. And a Lexus. And some cosmetic work that he always dreamed of having done. Then Mick spoils himself with a long lazy cruise on a ship that caters to new wealth.

Returning home, Mick throws a party for the local poor. Trying to be a good person, he invites people from the shelters and various church groups, the elderly and the drug-afflicted. Guests receive food and a package of copywritten materials, including digital entertainments, recent best-selling books, and a collection of their host's favorite jokes. Best of all, Mick pays off everyone's intellectual-property-use tab, or at least some fair portion of it. Now if they can just avoid using other people's property, these impoverished souls might be able to start digging their way out from under their various burdens.

"Thank you," is the common phrase, for which he is grateful.

Except one old fellow remains conspicuously silent, glaring as Mick strolls past.

"Is something wrong?" Mick asks.

The man clamps his mouth shut and says nothing.

"Do I know you?" Mick wonders aloud.

Whoever he is, the stranger isn't as disheveled as the other guests. He straightens his back and with a deep voice says, "Two AIs are sitting behind the wetware shop."

This is how Mick's joke begins.

"But I don't know where I put my conscience," he growls, repeating the world-famous punch line.

Mick shakes his head. "What are you doing—?"

"It's my joke," the old man barks. "I thought it up first."

"No, you didn't."

"But I did," the man assures him.

"Well," Mick replies, "I most definitely told it first."

"After you stole it from me," his accuser claims. "How did you do it? How did you get inside my head?"

"Don't say another word," Mick cautions.

"I'll sue you."

"Sir, I have an attorney. You should direct your threats to him."

"I'll drain you dry," the man threatens.

And then because he can afford to, Mick uses a string of withering insults—modern barbs that cost him a warm hundred and leave him feeling quite powerful, but in some fashion, deeply sad.

Everyone talks about science, because it is free. Formulas and theories belong to the world—although specific machinery and other patented elaborations wear some of the most ironclad royalty agreements.

Few people discuss digitals in public, or books, since critics get first shot at voicing opinions, and if you repeat their observations too closely, you will receive a surprising and sometimes considerable bill.

Almost no one sings in public anymore. Which is a good thing, all in all.

Dance, yes. Dances are difficult to replicate, unless of course you are a professional with a talent for mimicry. But just a few notes of any melody can cost, and because of some very effective lobbyists, an astonishing number of the old tunes and lyrics are still owned by heirs and fat corporations.

Sing "Happy Birthday" as a group, and brace yourselves for the bills.

The System of Intellectual Property is seamless and irresistible, and older people often laugh when they remember how much fear this new world order used to inspire. But then again, if any system works as promised, it will be embraced. Had communism succeeded in delivering paradise, today everyone would be singing the praises of Marx—an intellectual property owned by every citizen of this most Perfect State.

Quite simply, all that is said and done in public is observed and recorded.

The technological limits are few. Citizens have the right of privacy, and privacy rules right up to the moment they use property that belongs to others or to the public at large. Every restaurant is a public place, as is your front porch. And your back porch, if you have any audience standing in earshot. And if anyone can hear you through an open window, then the little performances inside your living room are subject to review.

Naturally, all five Internets are the same as a street corner.

And any broadcast in any portion of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Eavesdropping nanorobots are the agents of fairness. Numbering in the hundreds of trillions, they have been spread by the wind and boots—a smart dust that can be found lying on top of Antarctic ice and crawling on the bottom of the ocean. The dust keeps tabs on every intelligent sound and gesture. But they have limits defined by hard statutes and their basic programs. They cannot record acts of love or the commissions of any crime, nor do they remember any political conversations; all of those categories have been defined as being the same as the sciences, free of the restrictions of ownership, belonging to every citizen alive, today and in perpetuity.

The old man's name is Vemeer, and in an age of mental stability, he is a difficult fellow dancing perilously close to insanity.

But since every citizen deserves his hour in court, his lawsuit against Mick is deemed valid. And his attorney finds a novel method of attack—novel enough that Mick's expensive legal council doesn't appreciate the danger and lets matters slide for too long.

"My client is just plain crazy," the attacking attorney allows. "Unlucky genetics and an intolerance for most of our psychoactive agents have put Mr. Vemeer into a difficult position. He suffers from odd thoughts. He has a tendency toward hallucinations. And in order to better manage his illness, his physicians have enrolled him in an experimental program."

The courtroom is jammed with curious spectators—people and machines who are waiting to pounce on any free entertainment.

The attorney continues. "Nanorobots of a revolutionary design are rooted inside Mr. Vemeer's neural net. His odd thoughts and fantasies are observed and recorded. And every sixty seconds, the current log is uploaded to a server riding on his medical alert bracelet. The short-term hope is to supply a window on the poor man's soul. The long-term goal is for the medical world to better manage the lives and sufferings of people such as him."

An invisible hand suddenly clamps down on Mick's throat.

"Your Honor," Vemeer's attorney says. "As evidence, I wish to offer you the certified logs from the days in question. You will see that my client did as he says he did. He thought up the joke in question before the defendant told it. And when we cross-check with the physiological logs, we can see plainly that he even told the joke aloud once, while relieving himself in the alley behind the Night Before Lounge."

"First of all," says Mick's attorney, "this is a pile that even my dog wouldn't sniff."

Strong language from an AI.

"Second, no audience heard the dear demented boob. So their case soars or crashes on the merits of the idea that he thought it up first, thus holds the rights."

Attorney and client are sitting in a private soundproof chamber three stories under the city streets. Mick pushes aside an uneaten roast beef sandwich while his lawyer marches back and forth on the tabletop, metallic spider legs softly clicking as it moves.

"Third of all, if we happen to lose—and we won't lose—but if that judge somehow finds in the crazy man's favor, we'll fight the decision for twenty years. I promise you. Twenty years and all the way up to the World Court, and it won't cost you even half of your earnings. Which is a good deal, since—"

"No," Mick whispers.

"Appeal, delay. Deny, and appeal again. That's our working plan."

"Don't," says the client.

The AI climbs on top of the sandwich, its body patterned after a daddy longlegs. "What are you telling me?"

"We're going to put up a defense," Mick says. "But not much of one. This is important. I want you keep the court busy for as long as I tell you—"

"How long?"

"A month, if necessary." Mick shrugs. "I don't know how much time I'll need. But the important thing is, you can't let us win. Ignore evidence. Bungle the basics. If you want, call the judge an imbecile, or worse. But I want to hear the word, 'Guilty.'"

The spider waved half its legs in astonishment. "Now why in the sweet world of wonder would you want that?"

"That's the attitude," Mick proclaims. "Thank you."

But it takes only three days of legal incompetence to suit the client's needs. On the fourth day, wearing a tidy suit and a mischievous grin, Mick hears the judge rule in favor of the complainant. And then his grin brightens, happy tears filling his eyes for the next few moments.

In disgust, his attorney asks, "What is your soggy head thinking?"

"Would you like to see?" Mick responds.

Beneath the cuff of his suit coat is a medical alert bracelet, and the server riding on the bracelet instantly sends its logs to the astonished AI.

"You've got the same system as Vemeer," it exclaims.

"Examine my thoughts," Mick advises.

"Oh dear God!"

Mick nods, tapping his temple with two strong fingers. "If this case stands, a mind's thoughts can be treated the same as a public performance. And since I am the first to legally imagine the potential for this tech-nology—"

"Dear Lord!"

"I certainly deserve a healthy cut of any future profits."

His attorney collapses into a shiny little heap of folded limbs.

After a long pause, it admits, "This is probably not the right attitude. Since I could conceivably earn a healthy fortune just by being your counsel. But I don't like to lose cases, for any reason."

"Nor do I," says Mick.

Then with a wink, he says, "Find some other grounds. Appeal and appeal, and then appeal again. Do you understand me? I don't want to give this crazy old coot one bloody cent."

Then Mick smiles and thinks, "Nothing original in that notion, is there?"