### Saving Humanity

Isaac Asimov

My friend George, sighing lugubriously, said to me one evening, “I have a friend who is a klutz.”

I nodded wisely. “Birds of a feather,” I said.

George gazed at me in astonishment. “What have feathers to do with it? You have the most remarkable ability to skid away from a subject. It is the result, I suppose, of your thoroughly inadequate intellect — which I mention in pity, and not as re­proof.”

“Well, well,” I said, “let that be as it may. When you refer to your friend the klutz, are you speaking of Azazel?”

Azazel was the two-centimeter demon or extraterrestrial being (take your pick) concerning whom George talks constantly, ceasing only in response to a direct question. Freezingly, he said, “Azazel is not a subject for conversation, and I do not under­stand how you come to have heard of him.”

“I happened to be within a mile of you one day,” I said. George paid no attention, but said:

I first came across the uneuphonious word “klutz,” in fact, through a conversation with my friend Menander Block. You have never met him, I'm afraid, for he is a university man and therefore rather selective in his friendships, for which one, ob­serving you, can scarcely blame him.

The word, klutz, he told me, referred to an awkward, clumsy person. “And that's me,” he said. “It comes from a Yiddish word that, taken literally, means a piece of wood, a log, a block; and, of course, my name, as you will note, is Block.”

He heaved an enormous sigh. “And yet I am not a klutz in the strict meaning of the word. There is nothing wooden, loggish, or blockish about me. I dance as lightly as a zephyr and as grace­fully as a dragonfly; I am sylphlike in every motion; and numer­ous young women could testify, if I thought it safe to allow them to do so, of my skill as a disciple of the amatory art. It is, rather, that I am a klutz at long distance. Without being myself affected, everything about me becomes klutzish. The very Universe itself seems to trip over its own cosmic feet. I suppose if you want to mix languages and combine Greek with Yiddish, I am a ‘teleklutz.’

“How long has this been going on, Menander?” I asked.

“All my life, but, of course, it was only as an adult that I realized this peculiar quality I possess. While still a youth, I simply assumed that what happened to me was the normal state of affairs.”

“Have you discussed this with anyone?”

“Of course not, George, old fellow. I would be considered mad. Can you see a psychoanalyst, for instance, confronting the phenomenon of teleklutzism? He would have me in the funny house halfway through my first session and write a paper on his discovery of a new psychosis and probably become a millionaire as a result. I'm not going to the booby hatch just to enrich some psychomedical leech. I cannot tell *anyone* this.”

“Then why are you telling me this, Menander?”

“Because, on the other hand, it seems to me I must tell some­one if I am to remain functional. As it happens, you are the least someone I know.”

I did not follow his reasoning there, but I could see that I was about to be subjected once again to the unwanted confidences of my friends. It was the price, I well knew, of the fact that I was proverbial for my understanding, sympathy, and, most of all, for my close-mouthed reticence. No secret placed in my keeping would ever reach the ears of anyone else. — I make an exception in your case, of course, since it is well known that you have an attention span of five seconds, and a memory span of rather less.

I signaled for another drink and indicated, by a certain arcane sign that I alone know, that it was to be placed on Menander's tab. A laborer, after all, is worthy of his hire. I said, “Just how does this teleklutzism manifest itself, Menander?”

“In its simplest form, and in the manner that was first brought to my attention, it shows up in the peculiar weather that accom­panies my travels. I do not travel very much, and when I do, I go by car, and when I do *that,* it rains. It doesn't matter what the weather forecast is; it doesn't matter how brightly the sun is shining when I start out. The clouds gather, grow darker and it begins to drizzle and then to pour. When my teleklutzism is in particular fettle, the temperature drops and we have an ice storm.”

“Of course, I am careful not to be foolish. I refuse to drive into New England until March is safely over. Last spring, I drove to Boston on April 6 — which promptly had the first April blizzard in the history of the Boston Weather Bureau. I once drove to Williams­burg, Virginia, on March 28, assuming that I might be allowed a few days of grace considering that I was penetrating Dixie. Hah! Williams­burg had nine inches of snow that day and the natives were trying to rub some of it between their fingers and were asking each other what the white stuff was.

“I have often thought that if we imagined the universe to be under the personal direction of God, we might picture Gabriel rushing into the divine presence to cry out, ‘Holy One, two gal­axies are about to collide in an unimaginably enormous catastro­phe,’ and God would answer, ‘Don't bother me now, Gabriel, I'm busy making it rain on Menander.’

I said, “You might make the best of the situation, Menander. Why not sell your services, for fabulous sums, as a drought-breaker?”

“I have thought of that, but the mere thought dries up any rain that might occur during my travels. Besides, if the rain came when it was needed, it would probably produce a flood.

“And it's not only rain, or traffic jams, or the disappearance of landmarks; there are a myriad other things. Expensive objects break spontaneously in my presence, or are dropped by others through no fault attributable to myself. There is an advanced particle accelerator in operation in Batavia, Illinois. One day an enormously important experiment was ruined because of the failure of its vacuum, a completely unexplained failure. Only I knew (the next day, that is, when I read of the incident in the paper) that at the very moment of failure, I happened to be passing the outskirts of Batavia in a bus. It was raining, of course.

“At this very moment, old fellow, some of the fine five-day-old wine in the cellars of this fine establishment, being aged in the plastic, is turning sour. Someone brushing past this table at this moment will, when he arrives home, find that the pipes in his cellar have burst at the precise moment he passed me; except that he won't know that he passed me at that precise moment and that the passage was the cause. And so it will be with scores of accidents — supposed accidents, that is.”

I felt sorry for my young friend. And my blood froze at the thought that I was sitting next to him and that at my cozy digs unimaginable catastrophes might be taking place.

I said, “You are, in short, a jinx!”

Menander threw his head back and stared down his nose at me in a most unpleasant way. “Jinx,” he said, “is the common term; teleklutz is the scientific one.”

“Well, then, jinx or teleklutz, suppose I told you I could per­haps remove this curse from you?”

“Curse is right,” Menander said gloomily. “I have often thought that at the time of my birth an ill-natured fairy, irked at not having been invited to the christening — Are you trying to tell me you can cancel curses because you are a good fairy?”

“I am not any kind of fairy,” I said severely. “Just suppose I can remove this cur — condition of yours.”

“How on earth could you do that?”

“Not exactly on Earth,” I said. “But how about it?”

“What do *you* get out of it?” he asked, suspiciously.

“The heartwarming feeling of having helped save a friend from a horrible life.”

Menander thought about it and then shook his head firmly. “That's not enough.”

“Of course, if you want to offer me some small sum ...”

“No, no. I wouldn't think of insulting you that way. Offer a sum of money to a *friend?* Place a fiscal value on friendship? How could you think that of me, George? What I meant was that removing my teleklutzism isn't enough. You must do more than that.”

“How can one do more?”

“Consider! Through my life I have been responsible for any­thing from inconvenience to catastrophe to perhaps millions of innocent people. Even if I brought no ill-fortune to a single per­son from this moment on, the evil I have done thus far — even though none of it was voluntary or in any way to be considered my fault — is more than I can bear. I must have something that will cancel it all out.”

“Like what?”

“I must be in a position to save humanity.”

“Save humanity?”

“What else can possibly balance the immeasurable damage I have done? George, I insist. If you are going to remove my curse, replace it with the ability to save humanity in some great crisis.”

“I'm not sure that I can.”

“*Try,* George. Don't shy away at this crisis. If you're going to do a job, do it well, I always say. Think of humanity, old friend.”

“Wait a moment,” I said, alarmed, “you're putting this whole thing on my shoulders.”

“Of course I am, George,” Menander said warmly. “Broad shoul­ders! Good shoulders! Made to bear burdens! Go home, George, and arrange to remove this curse from me, A grateful humanity will shower you with blessings except, of course, that they will never hear of it, for I will tell no one. Your good deeds are not to be shamed by exposure, and rely on me, I will never expose them.”

There is something wonderful about unselfish friendship that can be duplicated by nothing else on earth. I rose at once to get to my task and left so quickly that I neglected to pay my half of the dinner bill. Fortunately, Menander did not notice this till I was safely out of the restaurant.

I had some trouble getting in touch with Azazel, and when I did, he didn't seem good-natured about it at all. His two-centi­meter-tall body was wrapped in a pinkish glow, and in his piping voice he said, “Has it occurred to you that I might be shower­ing?”

And indeed there was a very faint smell of ammonia about him.

I said humbly, “This is a rather enormous emergency, oh Mighty-One-for-Whom-Words-Are-Insufficient”

“Well then, tell me, but mind, don't take all day about it.”

“Certainly!” I said, and outlined the matter with admirable conciseness.

“Hmm,” said Azazel. “For once you have presented me with an interesting problem.”

“I have? Do you mean there is indeed such a thing as teleklutzism?”

“Oh, yes. You see, quantum mechanics makes it quite clear that the properties of the universe depend, to a certain extent, on the observer. Just as the universe affects the observer, the ob­server affects the universe. Some observers affect the universe adversely, or at least adversely with respect to some other ob­servers. Thus, one observer may accelerate the supernovadom of some star, which would irritate other observers who may find themselves uncomfortably close to that star at the time.”

“I see. Well, can you help my friend Menander, and remove this quantum-observational effect of his?”

“Oh, of course! Simple! It will take ten seconds and then I can return to my shower and to the rite of laskorati I will undertake with two samini of unimaginable loveliness.”

“Wait! Wait! That's not enough.”

“Don't be silly. Two samini are *quite* enough. Only a lecher would want three.”

“I mean removing the teleklutzism isn't enough. Menander also wants to be in a position to save humanity.”

For a minute, I thought Azazel was going to forget our long friendship and all I had done for him in the way of supplying him with interesting problems that probably improved his mind and his magical abilities. I did not understand all he said, for most of the words were in his own language but they sounded very much like saws scraping along rusty nails.

Finally, having cooled down to a dim red heat, he said, “Now how am I going to do that?”

“Is anything too much for the Apostle of Incredibility?”

“You bet! ... But let's see!” He thought for a while, and burst out, “But who in the universe would *want* to save human­ity? Where's the worth in doing that? You stink up this whole section ... Well, well, I think it can be done.”

It didn't take ten seconds. It took half an hour and a very uncomfortable half hour it was, too, with Azazel groaning part of the time and the rest of the time stopping to wonder whether the samini were going to wait for him.

He was done eventually and, of course, it meant I would have to test out the matter on Menander Block.

When I next saw Menander I said, “You're cured.” He stared at me hostilely, “Do you know that you stuck me with the dinner check the other night?”

“Surely a minor point compared with the fact that you're cured.”

“I don't feel cured.”

“Well, come. Let's take a drive together. You take the wheel.”

“It looks cloudy already. Some cure!”

“Drive! What have we to lose?”

He backed the car out of his garage. A man passing by on the other side of the street did not trip over an overloaded garbage can.

Menander drove down the street. The light did not turn red as he approached, and two cars skidding toward each other at the intersection next but one missed each other by a comfortable margin.

By the time he was at the bridge, the clouds had thinned out and a warm sun was shining down upon the car. It was not in his eyes.

When we finally got home he was weeping unashamedly, and I parked the car for him. I scraped it slightly, but it was not *I* that had had my teleklutzism cured. At that, it might have been worse. I might have scraped my own car.

For the next few days he was seeking me out constantly. I was the only one, after all, who could understand the miracle that had taken place.

He would say, “I went to a dance, and not one couple tripped over each other's feet and fell down and broke a collarbone or two. I could dance sylphlike with utter abandon and my partner never got sick to her stomach, even though she had eaten most unwisely.”

Or, “At work they were installing a new air-conditioning unit and not once did it fall upon a workman's toes, breaking them permanently.”

Or even, “I visited a friend in a hospital, something I once wouldn't have dreamed of doing, and in not one of the rooms that I passed did the intravenous needle pop out of a vein. Nor did a single hypodermic miss its appropriate target.”

Sometimes he would ask me brokenly, “Are you sure that I will have a chance to save humanity?”

“Absolutely,” I would say. “That's part of the cure.”

But then one day he came to me and there was a frown on his face. “Listen,” he said. “I just went to the bank to ask a question about my bank balance, which is a little lower than it should be because of the way you manage to get out of restaurants before the bill shows up, and I couldn't get an answer because the computer went down just as I walked in. Everyone was puzzled. Is the cure wearing off?”

“It can't do that,” I said. “Maybe it had nothing to do with you. There might be some other teleklutz around who hasn't been cured. Maybe he happened to walk in just as you did.”

But that wasn't it. The bank's computer went down on two other occasions when he tried to check his bank balance. (His nervousness over the paltry sums I had neglected to take care of was quite nauseating in a grown man.) Finally, when the com­puter at his firm went down when he walked past the room in which it was housed, he came to me in what I can only describe as panic.

“It's back, I tell you. It's back!” he screamed. “I can't take it this time. Now that I'm accustomed to normality, I can't go back to my old life. I'll have to kill myself.”

“No, no, Menander. That's going too far.”

He seemed to check himself at the edge of another scream and thought over my sensible remark. “You're right,” he said. “That *is* going too far. Suppose I kill you instead. After all, no one will miss you, and it will make me feel a *little* better.”

I saw his point, but only to a slight extent. I said, “Before you do anything at all, let me check this out. Be patient, Menander. After all, so far it's only happened with computers, and who cares about computers?”

I left quickly before he could ask me how he was supposed to get an instantaneous bank balance if computers were always going down at his approach. He was really a monomaniac on the subject.

So was Azazel, on another subject. It seems that this time he was actually involved in whatever he was doing with the two samini, and he was still turning somersaults when he arrived. To this day, I don't know what the somersaults had to do with it.

I don't think he ever actually cooled down, but he did manage to explain to me what happened and then I was faced with hav­ing to explain it to Menander.

I insisted on meeting him in the park. I chose a fairly crowded section since I would have to rely on instant rescue if he should lose his head figuratively, and try to make me lose mine literally.

I said, “Menander, your teleklutzism still works, but only for computers. *Only for computers.* You have my word on that. You are cured for everything else *forever.”*

“Well then, cure me for computers.”

“As it happens, Menander, that can't be done. You are not cured for computers, and forever.” I rather whispered the last word but he heard me.

“Why? What kind of a harebrained, idiotic, malapropistic, omniklutzistic rear end of a diseased Bactrian camel are you?”

“You make it sound as though there are many kinds, Menan­der, which doesn't make sense. Don't you understand that you wanted to save the world, and that's why it happened?”

“No, I don't understand. Explain it to me and take your time. You have fifteen seconds.”

“Be reasonable! Humanity is facing a computer-explosion. Computers are going to become rapidly more versatile, more capable and more intelligent. Human beings are going to be ever more dependent upon them. Eventually a computer will be built that will take over the world and leave humanity with nothing to do. It may then well decide to wipe out humanity as unneces­sary. Of course, we tell ourselves smugly that we can always 'pull the plug,' but you know we won't be able to do that. A computer smart enough to do the work of the world without us will be able to defend its own plug and, for that matter, find its own electricity.

“It will be unbeatable, and humanity will be doomed. And that, my friend, is where you come in. You will be brought into its presence or perhaps you will only arrange to pass within a few miles of it and it will instantly break down, and humanity will be saved! *Humanity will be saved!* Think of it! Think of it!”

Menander thought of it. He didn't look happy. He said, “But meanwhile I can't come near computers.”

“Well, the computer-klutzism had to be nailed down and made absolutely permanent so we could be sure that when the time came nothing would go wrong, that the computer would not somehow defend itself against you. It's the price you pay for this great gift of salvation that you yourself asked for and for which you will be honored through all future history.”

“Yes?” he said. “And when is this salvation to take place?”

I said, “According to Azaz — my sources, it should take place in sixty years or so. But look at it this way. Now you know that you will live to be at least ninety years old.”

“And meanwhile,” said Menander in a loud voice, oblivious to the way people nearby turned to stare at us, “meanwhile the world will grow more and more computerized and I will be unable to get near more and more places. I'll be unable to do more and more things and will be in a total prison of my own making—”

“But in the end you will save humanity! That's what you wanted!”

Menander shrieked, “To hell with humanity!” rose, and hurled himself at me.

I managed to get away but only because there were people about who seized the poor fellow.

Today, Menander is in deep analysis with a Freudian psychia­trist of the most determined description. It will surely cost him a fortune and will, of course, do him no good whatever.

George, having finished his story, gazed into his pot of beer, for which I knew I would have to pay. He said, “There's a moral to this story, you know.” “What is it?” “People just don't have any gratitude!”