## Walpurgisnacht

Roger Zelazny

*A while back, my mother-in-law phoned to ask me whether I’d read a recent Erma Bombeck column. I confessed that I had not. It told, I was told, of the invention of the “talking tombstone"—a monument containing a recorded message from the deceased to the bereaved. The inventor, she said, was one Stanley Zelazny, of California, and she wanted to know whether he was yet another relative of exotic and morbid sensibility gained upon the occasion of her daughter’s marriage to myself A bit of musing upon that invention became the basis for this story. And, well... I* do *have a cousin by that name, and he does live in California, but we’ve been out of touch for a long while. I honestly do not know whether he is indeed the father of the talking tombstone. If he is, this story is for him. If not, I suppose it should be for the other Stan Zelazny—who could, I guess, also be related. Either way, it’s a sometime good feeling to keep things in the family.*

Sunny and summer. He walked the sweeping cobbled path beside the fringe of shrubbery, map in one hand, wreath in the other, passing from rest aisle to funerary glade. Grassy mounds with embedded bronze plaques lay along the way; beds of flowers, pale and bright, alternated with gazebos, low stone walls, fake Grecian ruins, stately trees. Occasionally, he paused to check a plate, consult the map.

At length he came to a heavily shaded glade. Recorded birdsongs were the only sounds in the low, cool area. The numbers were running higher here. Yes!

He put aside the chart and the wreath and he knelt. He ran his fingers across the plate that read “Arthur Abel Andrews” above a pair of dates. He located the catch and sprung the plate.

Within the insulated box beneath was a button. He pressed it and a faint humming sound began. This vanished as he snapped the plate shut. “Well now, it’s been a while since I’ve had any visitors.”

The young man looked up suddenly, though he had known what to expect.

“Uncle Arthur...” he said, regarding the suddenly materialized form of the ruddy, heavyset man with the shifty eyes who now occupied the space above the mound. “Uh, how are you?”

The man, dressed in dark trousers, a white shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, maroon tie hanging loosely about his neck, smiled.

” 'At peace.' I’m supposed to say that when you ask. It’s in the program. Now, let’s see... You’re...”

“Your nephew Raymond. I was only here once before, when I was little...

“Ah, yes. Sarah’s son. How is she these days?”

“Doing fine. Just had her third liver transplant. She’s off on the Riviera right now.”

Raymond thought about the computer somewhere beneath his feet. Programmed with photos of the departed it could produce a life-sized, moving hologram; from recorded samples of his uncle’s speech, it could reproduce his voice patterns in conversation; from the results of a battery of tests and a series of brain wave readings, along with a large block of information—personal, family and general—it could respond in character to anyone’s queries. Despite this knowledge, Raymond found it unnerving. It was far too real, far too much like that shrewd, black-sheep relative last seen through the eyes of youth with a kind of awe, and wrapped now in death’s own mysteries—the man he had been told had a way of spoiling anything.

“Uh... Brought you a nice wreath, Uncle. Pink rosebuds.”

“Great,” the man said, glancing down at them. “Just what I need to liven things up here.”

He turned away. He was seated upon a high stool that swiveled. Before him was the partial image of a bar, complete with brass rail. A stein of beer stood before him upon it. He took hold of it and raised it, sipped. Raymond recalled that, the cooperation of the person being memorialized being necessary, the choice of a favorite location for the memorial photographs was generally left up to the soon-to-be-departed.

“If you don’t like the flowers, Uncle, I can always exchange them or just take them back.”

His uncle set down the mug, belched gently and shook his head. “No, no. Leave the damned things. I just thought of a use for them.”

Arthur got down from the stool. He stooped and picked up the wreath. Raymond stumbled backward.

“Uncle! How did you do that? It’s a material object and—”

Arthur strolled toward a mound across the way, carrying the pink circlet.

“It’s a laser—force field combination,” he commented. “Produces a holographic pressure interface. Latest thing.”

“But how did you come by it? You’ve been—”

Arthur chuckled.

“Left a little trust account, to keep updating my hardware and such.” He stooped and pried up a brass headplate.

“What’s your range, anyway?”

“About twenty meters,” his uncle replied. “Then I start to fade out. Used to be only ten feet. There!”

He pressed a button and a tall, pale-haired woman with green eyes and a laughing mouth materialized beside him.

“Melissa, my dear. I’ve brought you some flowers,” he said, passing her the wreath.

“What grave did you get them from, Arthur,” she said, taking it into her hands.

“Now, now. They’re really mine to give.”

“Well, in that case, thank you. I might wear one in my hair.”

“—Or upon your breast, when we step out tonight.”

“Oh?”

“I was thinking of a party. Will you be free?”

“Yes. That sounds—lively. How will you manage it?”

Arthur turned.

“I’d like you to meet my nephew, Raymond Asher. Raymond, this is Melissa DeWeese.”

“Happy to meet you,” Raymond said.

Melissa smiled.

“Pleased,” she replied, nodding.

Arthur winked.

“I’m sure I can arrange everything,” he said, taking her hand. “I believe you can—Arthur,” she answered, touching his cheek. She drew loose a rosebud and set it in her hair.

“Till then,” she said. “Good evening to you, Raymond,” and she faded and was gone, dropping the wreath upon the center of the mound. Arthur shook his head.

“Husband poisoned her,” he said. “What a waste.”

“Uncle, death does not seem to have improved your morals a single bit,” Raymond stated. “And chasing dead women, that’s necro—”

“Now, now,” Arthur said, turning and moving back toward the bar. “It’s all a matter of attitude. I’m sure you’ll see these things in a totally different light one day.” He raised his mug and smacked his lips. “Nepenthe,” he observed. “Necrohol”

“Uncle...”

“I know, I know,” Arthur said. “You want something. Why else would you come here after all these years to visit me?”

“Well, to tell the truth...”

“By all means, tell it. It’s a luxury few can afford.”

“You always were considered a financial genius...”

“True.” He made a sweeping gesture. “That’s why I can afford the best life has to offer.”

“Well, a lot of the family money is tied up in Cybersol stock and—”

“Sell! Damn it! Get rid of it quick!”

“Really?”

“It’s going to take a real beating. And it won’t be coming back.”

“Wait a minute. I was going to brief you first and hope—”

“Brief me? I have abstracts of all the leading financial journals broadcast to my central processor on a regular basis. You’ll lose your shirt if you stay with Cybersol.”

“Okay. I’ll dump it. What should I go into?”

His uncle smiled.

“A favor for a favor, nephew. A little *quid pro quo* here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Advice of the quality I offer is worth more than a few lousy flowers.”

“It looks as if you’ll be getting a good return on them.”

“*Hopi soit qui mal y pence,* Raymond. And I need a little more help along those lines.”

“Such as?”

“You come by here about midnight and push everybody’s buttons in this whole section. I’m going to give a big party.”

“Uncle, that sounds positively indecent!”

“—And then get the hell out. You’re not invited.”

“I—I don’t know...”

“Do you mean that in this modern, antiseptic age you’re afraid to come into a graveyard—pardon me, cemetery—no, that’s not it either. Memorial park—yes. At midnight. And press a few buttons?”

“Well—no... That’s not it, exactly. But I’ve got a feeling you carry on worse than the living. I’d hate to be the instigator of a brand-new vice.”

“Oh, don’t let that bother you. We thought it up ourselves. And as soon as we get the timers installed we won’t need you. Look at it as contributing to the sum total of joy in the world. Besides, you want to preserve the family fortune, don’t you?”

“Yes....”

“See you at twelve then.”

“All right.”

“... And remember I’ve got a heavy date. Don’t let me down, boy.”

“I won’t.”

Uncle Arthur raised his mug and faded.

As Raymond walked back along the shaded aisles, he had a momentary vision of the *Totentanz,* of a skeletal fiddler wrapped in tattered cerements and seated atop a tombstone, grinning as the mournful dead cavorted about him, while bats dipped and rats whirled in the shadows. But for a moment only. And then it was replaced by one of brightly garbed dancers, mirrors, colored lights, body paint, where a disco sound rolled from overhead amplifiers. Death threw down his fiddle, and when he saw that his garments had become very mod he stopped smiling. His gaze focused for a moment upon a grinning man with a stein of beer, and then he turned away.

Uncle Arthur had a way of spoiling anything.