

It's the Great Conspiracy, Danny Brown

by Todd Maupin

Danny was only ten years old when he first met the man in the suit. It did not seem like a red letter day at the time; more so, a red fern day.

Danny was sitting at one of the long marbled oak tables in the Exeter Public Library where his father worked. He had been struggling to finish his book report on *Where the Red Fern Grows*. In spite of his difficulty at focusing on the task, Danny was not aware that the man in the suit had sat at the table with him until the man's machine jostled Danny's notebook.

"My apologies, young man. If only this machine were smaller," the man said wistfully.

Danny looked up from his blank sheet of paper and gazed at the man in the suit. Even though Exeter was a relatively small town, Danny did not recognize this man. His parents had warned him about talking to strangers but Danny felt safe, reasoning that, from his oaken vantage point, he could see his father at the circulation desk. Danny's father often joked that it was the circulatory system; no one had the heart to tell him this was not funny.

"What does your machine do?" Danny asked, scrutinizing the oblong device, which looked like a plotter, which it was. Sort of. Later in life, he came to realize that the machine was also something of a plot device.

"This is a writing machine, son. Would you like to see how it works?" the man was eager to demonstrate his contraption. Danny's interest

level plummeted, as he figured that the man was probably a salesman. Why else would he be wearing a suit?

“Okay,” Danny agreed cautiously, laying his pencil down on his notebook and leaning in closer to the machine.

“First, we need to feed my machine some information. What are you working on there?” The man nodded towards Danny's notebook and the shabby copy of *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

Danny explained that he was working on a book report for that book.

“Ah, I bet that everyone has been hounding you to finish the assignment,” the man said, smirking. Danny just looked at him, his facial emotions as blank as his notebook. The man frowned but continued, “Okay, well, that's not so bad. Tell me something about this book of yours.”

Danny proceeded to recount the events of the book and some of his feelings about it. While Danny spoke, the man toggled various dials and knobs on the machine. When Danny finished speaking, the machine started to whirr, vibrate and hum. “It will just take a moment,” the man assured Danny, and gazed expectantly at the machine, as though waiting for a traffic light to shift from red to green. Danny could hear the machine churning away, but all of the sounds were internal and slightly muffled. He also noticed that the machine was not plugged in; it must be battery operated, he surmised.

Finally, the machine produced a sheet of paper much like one that could have come from Danny's notebook, with text that was very similar to Danny's own handwriting. The man offered the paper to Danny. “Here is your book report.” Danny gingerly accepted the sheet of paper and read the five paragraphs.

“This is very much like what I would have written,” Danny said, more matter of factly than suspiciously. The man had been smiling while Danny read and clasped his hands together proudly at Danny's assessment.

“Excellent. I am glad that my machine still works. Oh, my goodness, is it truly 4:30 already? I must run to another appointment. You can keep that paper. Hopefully, it will inspire you to write your own book report,” the man remarked, winking at Danny. He then collected his machine and strolled out of the library. That is to say that he probably strolled or sauntered away. Danny had been so engrossed in analyzing the machine's output that he did not truly witness the departure of the man in the suit.

Danny looked at the generated book report and his own blank sheet of paper. It was the metaphorical tennis match between good and evil. Danny decided that speaking his thoughts to the man with the machine was essentially the same as having written them. Resolute in his choice, Danny felt a twinge of guilt, but also a pang of hunger. He suddenly craved an apple fresh from the orchard. In any case, he considered his task complete and chose to submit the machine's work as his own the following day. The man in the suit with the machine knew that he would do so. He had probably always known.

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Nine years later, when he encountered the man in the suit again, Danny had almost forgotten about him and his machine. Danny was once again in a library, but this time it was in the main library on the campus of Amherst College. Although much had changed in Danny's life, he was yet again struggling with a writing assignment which was due the following morning. This time it was a term paper for his sociology class. As before, Danny did not hear the man approach.

“Hello, Danny,” the man with the suit greeted Danny as though they were old friends, rather than one-time acquaintances. No one called

him Danny any longer, but there was something about the man in the suit that did not invite correcting him. It was easy for Danny to recognize the man in the suit, as he was fundamentally the same. Actually, identically the same. He had his cumbersome machine with him, and was perhaps wearing the same suit. At ten years old, Danny paid little attention to others' clothing, or even his own clothes. Danny tried to recall if he had told the man his name when they had previously met.

The man surveyed the stacks of sociology books that Danny had piled in a circle around him at the long table. Their arrangement was almost something akin to an Escher sketch. Some were open, right side up, others open but face down, others were holding the place of pages in other books, while even other books provided reciprocal service. "What are you working on?" the man asked, carefully making room for his machine on the table without disturbing Danny's disaster site.

"I have to write a ten page term paper on social stratification during the Industrial Revolution. I don't mean to be rude, sir, but the paper is due tomorrow and I am not even remotely close to finished compiling my points or arguments, cited from these books," Danny replied, making an ample and needless gesture with both arms to indicate the multitude of tomes that had him walled in like a tomb.

"Ah, but Danny, have you forgotten about my writing machine? Remember how it helped you last time." The man's smile was not so much creepy as it was eerily emotionless.

"Yes, well, I don't quite feel that using your machine is completely honest," Danny said meekly, recalling how hollow he had felt in the wake of his A+ book report nine years earlier.

"Nonsense. It uses your ideas, your research, and writes how you would write. It is just faster. How is that dishonest?" The man in the

suit was convincing, and he continued unabated, "I'll tell you what, let's just try it, and if you don't like machine's work this time, you don't have to use it, okay?"

Danny swallowed, and took a deep breath. "All right." Danny began to speak, elaborating his intentions, thoughts and ideas on his topic, consulting and incorporating citations from the various books strewn about the table. The man nodded and contorted his face in approval as he toggled the machine's dials and knobs. When Danny had exhausted his thoughts and himself, the man pressed a final button and the machine started to whirr, hum and vibrate as it had back in Exeter. Ten minutes later, the machine produced a typewritten term paper. It even appeared as though it was typed on a Brother 3800 model typewriter, like the unit sitting on Danny's desk in his dorm room. The man handed the document to Danny triumphantly. All that was missing was a sing-song "ta-da!"

Danny perused the document and was even more impressed than his ten-year old self that the machine had matched his writing style perfectly. The machine's canny precision was uncanny. Danny smiled at the man, who emptily emoted his continuous contentment and satisfaction. "Your machine did it again, sir. This is very good."

"No, Danny, you did it. My machine was just the nudge you needed. Now, why don't you put these books back on the shelves. I'll stand guard at the table," the man offered.

Even carrying a precipitous number of books all at once, Danny required two trips to restore all of them to their resting places. The man in the suit sat patiently until Danny returned to the table the second time. The man stood up when Danny reached the table and appeared to be waiting so they could leave together. Yet, after Danny had filed everything away in his backpack, the man and his machine were gone in the same quietly disquieting silence with which he had arrived.

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And the years passed. Danny graduated from college and experienced what the world could offer, take and inflict. He tried various paths in life, to varying degrees of success. He had married, reproduced and was gainfully employed, albeit in a job that was not overly satisfying. He wanted to be a writer. Eventually he found himself back in New England at a library, struggling to devise another piece of writing. Cue the man in the suit, and his machine.

"Hello, Danny," the man in the suit chirped, as he sat down at Danny's table. Once again, Danny had not heard him approach, but this was old hat by now, much like the man's old hat, which still looked as new and pristine as ever. The man similarly appeared untouched by time, as if time were afraid of him.

"Hello, sir. You found me again," Danny actually welcomed the distraction from his writer's block.

"I see that you are writing again," the man observed, glancing at Danny's sparsely filled notebook. "Or, well, I see that you are not writing again," he added, amending his observation.

"Yes, that's right. It's the same old story of my life even when I am trying to write a new story," Danny sighed.

The man in the suit had never seemed less than confident; his resolution was emblematic as was his determination. "Danny, I have decided to give you your very own writing machine," he said dramatically, retrieving a briefcase that he must have had with him when he materialized at the table.

"Is it in there? What ever happened to the behemoth?" Danny asked, more skeptical about the size of the writing machine than its very existence.

"I have made some modifications. Sign of the times, you know. It is 1998. Things are becoming smaller," the man remarked, opening the clasps of the briefcase.

"It is astounding what they can do now. My friend has a cell phone that is smaller than a VHS tape." Danny was still amazed by this.

As the man in the suit rustled around in the briefcase and fondled its contents, Danny felt that nagging sense of guilt again, or perhaps it was his conscience nagging him. "I don't feel that this is quite right. I would rather write my books and be successful all by own merits and initiative, not because I have this machine," Danny stated righteously.

The man in the suit scoffed. "Danny, don't be naive. Like I told you before, the machine is just a time-saver and writes what you would anyway. And, more importantly, it is blatantly unfair that you do not use this machine. All of the great authors, past and present have been using my machines for ages. You've read those books with the strong and defiant heroine who ends up marrying the man she despised after some misunderstandings are cleared up? Their author was just some plain Jane before she met me. I know this might all be disconcerting to you, a novel idea, but it is just that."

Danny was skeptical. "I don't believe it. You are just trying to make me feel better about this. Innovative authors have not been using your machine all of this time. That would be quite the conspiracy."

"Please. Have you read the great works of Russian literature? Do you honestly think someone wrote out those long and convoluted names each time? Or those interminable French books about revenge? Or the tangential book about the whale?"

Danny paused to consider these revelations about those endless and insufferably digressive books. The man in the suit appeared to sense that Danny was inching closer to acceptance. "And don't think that the most popular and celebrated contemporary authors are not machining their books too. This whole vampire craze is probably my fault," he admitted, making a fist. "Open your eyes, Danny. Could Steve McQueen put out 4 massive horror books per year without using my machine?"

"I think you mean Stephen K..." Danny began, but the man in the suit cut him off.

"The point is, Danny, that my machines are as much part of the industry as ink or bindings. The machine is but a tool to bring your ideas to the masses. Don't deny the world your contributions," the man in the suit probably should have been smirking, but he was not. Danny was still conflicted and his mind was racing but he remained in his chair.

The man scooted the briefcase closer to Danny and exhibited a streamlined version of the writing machine Danny had previously seen. He handed it to Danny, who had never been able to examine the previous iteration up close. "What will this cost me?" Danny asked, as he inspected the machine.

"Oh, there will be no charge. You will just owe me a favor that I will redeem one day when the time comes, no questions asked. Do you agree to honor my terms?" It was not a loaded question in the textbook sense, or even the sense of a generic book, but it was definitely a heavily weighted question. In spite of everything in his very being and essence telling him to refuse, Danny was compelled to accept the offer.

"Okay, sure, why not? How does this thing work? I only ever saw you fiddle with the larger one, but I could never follow what you were

doing." Danny slid his chair closer to the man in the suit so that the machine was conveniently placed between them on the table. Danny wrinkled his nose. "Is this model straight from the factory? It still smells industrial... like something... methane, I think?"

"Most people say it is smells like sulphur," the man remarked.

"Oh, is that what it is? Sulphur?"

"I wouldn't know," the man replied, nonchalantly. He then proceeded to show Danny how to use all of the writing machine's features.

When the lesson was over, the man closed his briefcase, which was full of documents that looked like legal contracts. Danny found the contents rather banal for some reason. Not even a Marcellus Wallace glow emanated from it. Both men stood. "Okay, Danny, the machine is all yours, but remember our bargain. When the time comes, no questions asked. No soul-searching or dilly-dallying, right?"

"Yes, I understood. You know, all of these years and I don't even know your name," Danny said as he offered his hand for the man in the suit to shake.

"Oh, you can call me 'Lou,'" the man replied, with a twinkle in his eye, as he took Danny's hand and shook it vigorously. Danny was determined not to lose sight of the man in the suit this time, but the man's hand was so cold, and the handshake made him feel terribly drained and exhausted that he was forced to sit down. Probably only a few seconds passed, but by the time Danny felt composed again, the man had disappeared.

Back at home, where he could obtain a bit of privacy, even with young children, Danny used the writing machine. He twisted and jostled the knobs, levers and dials as the man in the suit had showed

him to incorporate his ideas. Because this was a book, rather than a book report or a term paper, he expected the machine to churn away for hours. However, after only fifteen minutes of quiet internal gyrations, the machine produced a manuscript. The machine's elaboration of the written word had evolved over the year's to match Danny's own technological enhancements. The manuscript appeared just as it would have been had Danny typed it himself using Word 97 on his Windows 95 desktop computer. It had even used Helvetica, Danny's font preference.

Danny read through the manuscript of his book and was again pleased that the machine had impeccably captured his thoughts and intentions. He found an empty manila envelope, addressed it to a publisher and prepared the manuscript for mailing.

And the book was published! Unfortunately, it did not sell well at all, which was puzzling. "People just do not want to read about cryptography and algorithms," Danny's literary agent had told him, without even pausing her consumption of a cup of yogurt.

Time passed, life happened and Danny's attention was diverted elsewhere. Many months were in the rear view mirror before Danny could give the machine another whirl. Not to be deterred by the response of the first book, he slightly modified some of the settings he had used the last time. Reluctant hero, unseen mastermind, conspiracy plot, convenient love interest tied to both the conspiracy and the mastermind, mysterious organization, doomsday device, short chapters. All of those, he barely tweaked, only modifying the names, but changed the main location to a more renowned city in Europe. The machine did its thing and created another manuscript. Danny read it, liked it, and sent it off to his editor. And it was published, again to only middling success. Barely a whimper greeted its release.

Not long after, Danny regrouped and tried again, with different names again, but this time only drastically changing the location. And his third back was published and on the shelves, where it mainly stayed. Danny's agent shrugged off the cold response. "No one wants to read about the Arctic," she told him in between bites of Greek yogurt.

Danny waited a bit longer before attempting to use the machine again. He retained most of his settings but decided to use multiple locations in Europe instead of just the one, and incorporated some works of art, and more puzzles and challenges. Eureka! Topeka! From California to Kansas, and globally, this latest book was an incredible success and an international phenomenon. Danny suddenly became a household name, probably even more so than artist whose name was encoded in his book's title. Vedi, Vidi, Vici, Da Vinci.

Danny basked in that success for a few years. Then he used the machine again, with only slight modifications. The machine did not fail him and this next book was nearly as successful. In the meantime, Danny's books had been adapted into films, and every Tom, Dick and Howard wanted to be a part of them and have a part in them.

Over the next few years, Danny and the machine collaborated on two more books. These were successful but the public clamored for them a bit less each time. It had not reached a point of diminishing returns but the books were no longer wildly successful as much as they were mildly successful. Danny was contemplating which variables to change, and how to tweak the machine's settings, and how to essentially rebrand himself for his next book when the man in the suit arrived at his table. Danny was at a coffee shop in Manhattan, but the man in the suit had known where to find him just as he always had in the past.

"Hello, Danny." The man in the suit greeted Danny as he sat down next to him.

"Hi Lou. It has been a while," Danny remarked. Somehow, it felt intrusive to call the man in the suit by a name, even though Danny had no other way to address him.

"Has it? I suppose so. I lose track of time so easily. I have been following your career, Danny. Your books have been quite the triumph! Congratulations!" The man exhibited genuine pleasure, as though proud of his son's achievement; or was he enjoying his machine's effectiveness?

"Thank you. I am deciding how I might change things up a bit for my next book. You see..."

The man in the suit's interruption was an efficient one. "Let me stop you right there, Danny. I need to call in that favor you owe me. I want you to give the writing machine to one of your children."

"Chris is not a very good writer, honestly. All he wants to do is play video games."

"No, not Chris, your other child. Your daughter, Judith. Not that I am anti-Chris..."

"Judith is a good student, but she is just a little girl, only 9 years old."

"You were only 10 when you first met me, Danny, and kids are much more advanced now. I want you to give it to her and show her how to use it, but you will tell her that it is only a toy."

"I don't think she is ready for something like this. She is also very impressionable," Danny replied, firmly but meekly.

Immediately, the facial features of the man in the suit hardened. His eyes flared. "Do not cross me, Danny. Is your name Max? Do I look like Bill Cosby to you? Remember, you agreed. No questions asked, remember?" His tone made it evident to Danny that this was not a negotiation, and no longer a discussion.

"Okay, I'll give her the machine when she comes home from school today," Danny finally acquiesced.

"Wonderful, Danny, I always knew I could count on you," the man in the suit said with satisfaction. What didn't he know?

Later that afternoon, after he had served Judith a snack and helped her finish her homework, Danny led her into his office. Entry into this room, usually forbidden to her and Chris, was already a source of excitement for Judith. Being in her father's office, to Judith, almost felt like a betrayal of Chris, which made it all the more exhilarating. She was visibly giddy by the time Danny bestowed upon her a new toy.

"Daddy, what is it? This looks like one of Chris's video games," she asked, examining the machine without touching it.

"Sweetheart, it is just a toy, a writing toy. You can use your imagination and this toy to make your own stories, like we used to do when creating bedtime stories for you a few years ago," Danny explained, rationalizing that most of that explanation was true.

Danny then showed her how to configure all of the machine's settings, input information and manipulate the knobs and dials to produce whatever she wanted. He asked her to repeat the process back to him, demonstrating the functions as she had been taught. Once he was satisfied, he left Judith to her own devices, literally to her own literal device.

Within the confines of Judith's room, amidst unicorns and Disney characters, the machine was forgotten for a few weeks. Then, as children often do, Judith rediscovered her old toy and set about playing with it. Truly advanced for her age and as cynical as she was vividly imaginative, she consulted some internet news sites and set about feeding some ideas into the machine to create her first story. Border skirmishes, drone strikes, ecological catastrophes, a global pandemic, political scandals, divisive leadership, social unrest, to name a few. She decided to set the machine to its "history" setting and finally affixed the year at 2020, just to see how the machine worked.

After a few minutes, the machine quietly whirred and vibrated as it generated and elaborated Judith's ideas, supplanting them into the annals of history.

Everyone always talks about a plague of biblical proportions but few have ever mentioned a diabolical one.

