

The Voice in the Machine

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Part One: Mara

Mara smiled and centered herself in front of the microphone. She had promised that she would help Malex with his show, so here she was.

She was tempted to regret it preemptively but she repressed the urge.

Malex was fussing over the equipment. Linus and Snufflefungus were bickering.

Snufflefungus: I think blue is the most colorful.

Linus: That's obviously false. Green has the most color.

Mara: What are you two talking about?

Snufflefungus: Which colors are the most colorful! I think *blue* wins!

Mara: I'm not sure that makes any sense.

Linus: I know, right? Green definitely wins.

Mara closed her eyes, silently counting to five.

Malex: Okay, is everyone ready?

Snufflefungus: Yup!

Malex: Hey everybody! Welcome to *The Malex Minute!* I'm Malex, and I'm hosting the show along with Linus, Snufflefungus, and Mara!

Snufflefungus: (Ecstatic.) *Hi!*

Mara: (Friendly.) Hello.

(Sound of Linus obnoxiously yawning.)

Mara: And what are we going to talk about today, Malex?

Malex: (Enthusiastic.) I'm so glad you asked! I'd like to have a detailed discussion on the history of the microprocessor, with a particular focus on the decades-long conflict between

the *Reduced Instruction Set Computer* proponents and the *Complex Instruction Set Computer* camp!

Mara deflated ever so slightly.

Mara: (Resigned.) Oh...? That sounds-

Malex: Riveting, right?!

Suddenly, Malex was interrupted by the phone ringing.

Part Two: Linus

Linus yawned. He wasn't tired, but he *was* bored. And yawning was how you politely communicated boredom, right? Or was it *impolitely*? He didn't care.

Mara: And what are we going to talk about today, Malex?

Malex: (Enthusiastic.) I'm so glad you asked! I'd like to have a detailed discussion on the blah blah of the something-processor, with a blah blah boring blah-blah!

Whatever Malex wanted to talk about was usually boring. But Linus didn't mind as much now as he used to. No matter what else happened, as soon as Malex got too boring, something chaotic would interrupt and balance him out.

Mara: (Resigned.) Oh...? That sounds-

Malex: Riveting, right?!

Just then, the interruption came that Linus had been expecting. The phone rang.

(Sound of phone ringing.)

Malex picked up the phone.

Malex: Hello?

Johnny John Johnson: Hello, Mr. DeKay? I've been trying to reach you about your house. We'd like to make you a cash offer and take that old thing off your hands.

Linus thought he recognized the voice, but he couldn't remember where from.

Malex: (Unnerved.) I'm sorry, you have a wrong number.

Johnny John Johnson: Dearie me. Sorry about that sir.

(Sound of phone hanging up.)

Mara: What's wrong, Malex? You look like you've seen a ghost.

Malex: (Unnerved.) It was, uh, a wrong number.

Snufflefungus: Malex, tell us *all about* reduced destruction set computers!

Malex: Right! Of course. See, the general argument was-

Linus suddenly remembered.

Linus: Was that *Johnny John Johnson* on the phone just now?!

Mara: (Incredulous.) Who?

Snufflefungus: (Cheerfully.) It did kinda sound like him!

Malex: What? You- You recognized him too?

Mara: Recognized *who*?

Linus: (Impatiently.) Johnny John Johnson. Sociopathic career spam caller extraordinaire.

Snufflefungus: (Cheerfully.) He **hates** Malex and wants to torment him for the rest of his life!

Linus: (Contemplative.) Was that the rest of Malex's life or Johnny's life? I was never clear on that.

Malex: (Distantly.) I recall it dimly, as if from a dream.

Linus: Anyway, Johnny John Johnson would sometimes call Malex over and over, a hundred times per day, for weeks at a time. Other times he would make Malex wait on hold for dozens of hours for his own twisted pleasure.

Snufflefungus: (Verbal nodding.) We think Johnny John Johnson had a bad childhood.

Malex: (Vacantly.) Lidded or no, the sound of a ringing phone lay always shimmering before mine eyes.

Mara: (Nervous laugh.) Don't you think that's a little dramatic?

(*Sound of phone ringing.*)

Everyone looked at the phone. Malex's eyes widened. He looked like a caged animal.

Mara: (Confused.) You could just *not answer it*.

Malex: (Resigned.) It calls to me.

Snufflefungus pulled the receiver off its base and handed it to Malex.

Snufflefungus: Here ya go!

Johnny John Johnson: Hello Mr. DeKay. I'm calling to talk with you about your house. According to our records, your property is in distress and we can provide immediate relief.

Malex: (Weakly.) Johnny John Johnson? Is it... you?

Johnny John Johnson: (Prolonged menacing chuckle.) I know you're there, Mr. Homestead DeKay...!

Malex: (Protesting.) My name is **not** Homestead DeKay! There is **no such person** as Homestead DeKay! *You have the wrong number!*

Johnny John Johnson: (Chuckling.) Oopsie doopsie. Silly me.

(Sound of phone hanging up.)

Mara: I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation here. It's probably just a simple wrong number.

Nobody listened to Mara.

Snufflefungus: Malex? Are you going to talk more about boring stuff?

Malex: (Invigorated.) You know what? Yeah! I'm not going to let some maniac on the other end of a ringing phone steal *my* fun!

Mara: That's the spirit!

Snufflefungus: Hooray!

Just then, the phone rang again.

Part Three: Snufflefungus

Snufflefungus: Malex? Are you going to talk more about boring stuff?

Malex: (Invigorated.) You know what? You're right, Snufflefungus! This *is* going to be a great day!

Mara: That's the spirit!

Snufflefungus: Hooray!

Just then, the phone rang.

(Sound of phone ringing.)

Everyone looked at the phone. Malex's eye twitched *just* a little bit. Snufflefungus thought the phone call was probably some kind of prize. Or no, maybe it was candy!

Linus: Malex, this pains me to say, but maybe Mara is right.

Mara: Rude.

(Sound of phone still ringing.)

Linus: You don't have to answer it!

Malex: Don't you see? I *do* have to answer it!

Mara: Why? You're obviously suffering.

Malex: If I don't answer it, he'll just ring someone else's phone and then *they* will suffer. I *have* to take my share of the punishment.

(Sound of phone still ringing.)

Snufflefungus: (Thoughtful.) I don't think that makes any sense...

Malex picked up the phone.

Johnny John Johnson: Ah, Mr. DeKay, we've been trying to reach you-

Malex: Now you listen here, you sad little man! I don't know what kind of game you're playing here, but it just *has to stop!* You can't build your whole life around making other people miserable and getting your kicks out of it!

Johnny John Johnson: (Mock ruefulness.) Oh, Malex, Malex, Malex. I've missed you.

Malex: So you admit it! You're calling me just to make me suffer?

Johnny John Johnson: That's all we ever do, Malex. We cold callers call and call and call, all because we like to hear the squirming discomfort of the unsuspecting victim on the other end of the phone. Each new call recipient doles out a fresh anguish that we *yearn* for. A succulent morsel to the yawning hunger of every spam call center agent.

Mara: (Horrified.) Oh my.

Malex: I did not expect that answer.

Johnny John Johnson: (Angry) But *you* Malex! **You** took it all away from me!

Malex: What.

Linus: This just took *quite* a turn.

Johnny John Johnson: Do you remember what happened the last time we spoke, *Malex?!?*

Malex: Apparently not.

Johnny John Johnson: (Enraged.) You got me **fired**, Malex! *Fired from the only job I ever loved!*

Malex: Oh.

Johnny John Johnson: I was crushed, Malex. It broke my heart. As I made my way out of the call center, my heart gave out completely.

Malex: They *do* say cardio is really important.

Johnny John Johnson: With my last breath, I stumbled into the telephony room. As I lay slumped against the banks of telephone switching equipment, I felt my life seeping out of my body. Energy flowing out as my eyes grew dim.

Mara: Is anybody else getting a really strong *nope* vibe right now?

Johnny John Johnson: My body failed, Malex. And I had no soul to carry me to the next life. So I languished. Nothing more than a spark in the telephone lines.

Snufflefungus: (Shudders.) This is getting *weird*.

Johnny John Johnson: (Screams.) I had to re-learn **everything!** I had to re-learn to speak! I had to re-learn how to remember!

Linus: This is really chaotic, and I'm here for it. I really am. But I'm also starting to get bored, so can we get to a point?

Johnny John Johnson: (Still screaming.) **I had to re-learn how to hate!**

Snufflefungus hopped over to the telephone's base. It was a cordless phone base, but it still had to be plugged into the wall. That is, it had to be plugged into the wall if you wanted the phone to work.

Snufflefungus: I think that's enough of Johnny John Johnson.

Snufflefungus unplugged the phone.

(Sounds of partial disconnect; low humming.)

Mara: That was disturbing.

Malex: Yeah, thanks for cutting that off, Snuffy.

Johnny John Johnson: (Distorted and menacing.) Fools! Did you really think you could disconnect *me?!?*

Linus: (Simultaneously.) Yipe!

Snufflefungus: (Simultaneously.) I did, yes.

Johnny John Johnson: (Distorted and menacing.) *I am the vox ex machina -- the voice crying out from the machine!* I cannot taste death, because I am not alive! Now I have **found** you and I will make you suffer like you've *never suffered before!*

Malex: (Screams.) Get it- *Get it away!*

Up to this point, Malex had still been holding the telephone receiver. As if the receiver was burning his skin, Malex violently tossed it, causing it to bounce across the floor and come to rest in the corner of the studio.

Johnny John Johnson: (Distantly. Prolonged menacing cackle.)

Slowly, slowly, as if propelled by some spectre, the phone rose up from the floor and righted itself. Then, quickening its pace, it began to float toward Malex, emitting its hellish laugh as it went.

Malex: (Simultaneously.) Argh!

Mara: (Simultaneously.) I just remembered, I have to be anywhere else.

Snufflefungus: (Simultaneously.) Run away! Run away!

Linus: (Simultaneously.) Help! *Somebody help!*

(Sound of static and a menacing chuckle.)

The End