

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Introduction to THE QUESTION by LARRY M. HARRIS and DONALD E. WESTLAKE and THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IMPORTANT by CALVIN W. DEMMON

Not infrequently it used to happen that we would get an idea for a story, only to find that another writer had not only gotten the same idea, but had written it down (and sold it) before we did; other writers report the same phenomena. Now we are an editor and we find it often happens that a MS will arrive on our desk only a day or so after we have bought one on the same theme. Coincidence? Telepathy? The Collective Unconscious? Who knows? At any rate, only a week after we got the Harris-Westlake story, along came the Demmon story. Intrigued by the way the different writers, who are unknown to each other, handed the subject which occurred to them independently, we decided to print both stories together. We think that two differently-angled views may, like those of the stereoscope, produce a three-dimensional image.

Larry M. Harris has a brown beard and plays the piano. Donald E. Westlake has a red beard and lives in Canarsie. After reading their conjoint story of what happened once to Rossi, who was convinced that the universe was aimed, like a pistol, straight at his head, we have been wondering: is either beard real? And, for that matter, is either Harris or Westlake?

THE QUESTION

by Larry M. Harris and Donald E. Westlake

THE ROOM WAS VERY QUIET, anything would have disturbed which disturbed Rossi. But, then, Rossi: he was trying to correct

term papers for an English I course, and he had reached the state where the entire room had begun to grate on his nerves. Soon, he knew, he would have to get up and go out for a walk. It was the middle of the afternoon, and if he went for a walk he would meet every housewife in the development. That, too, would be irritating: but all life, he had begun to realize, was a choice between irritations. He sighed, picked up the next sheet and focussed his eyes.

The coma is used to mark off pieces of a sentence which . . .

The telephone rang.

. . . pieces of a sentence which aren't independent so that . . .

It rang again.

"God damn," Rossi said, to nobody in particular, and went across the room to answer it, breathing heavily. As he reached the receiver he had won the battle for control, and his "Hello," was almost polite.

"Hello, there," a voice on the other end said, a bright and cheery voice. "What kind of weather is it outside?"

There was a brief silence.

Rossi said: "What?"

"I asked you," the voice said, just as cheerfully, "what kind of weather it was outside."

Control snapped. "Who the hell are you?" Rossi said. "The Weather Bureau? Of all the damn fool—"

"Mr. Rossi," the voice cut in, quite without rancor, "I'm quite serious. Please believe me."

"Now, look—"

"Please, Mr. Rossi," the voice said. "Relax."

Even as you and I, Rossi was sometimes prey to the impression that the universe was aimed, like a pistol, straight at his head. The afternoon had done nothing to remove this impression, and this telephone call, with its idiotic question, was the final straw. The world narrowed, contracted, and centered around Rossi's head. Everything, *everything*, was part of a conspiracy directed at Rossi, and everybody was out to do him harm.

"Relax?" he asked the receiver. "Now, look, whoever you are. I'm working here. I'm trying to get some work done. I don't need anybody calling up to ask stupid—"

"It is not a stupid question," the voice told him patiently. "Please believe that I—that we really must know your answer to it."

Somchow, even through the red fog of anger, Rossi believed the voice. "What is this, then?" he asked thinly. "Some kind of TV program?"

"Why—no," the voice said. "And it isn't a research poll, a psychiatric game or a practical joke. We are quite serious, Mr. Rossi."

"Well," Rossi said, having

come to a decision, "the hell with you." He began to hang up. But the voice continued to talk, and curiosity won out, briefly, in its battle with anger. The whole world was, admittedly, after Rossi: but he had his choice of irritants. It was the phone call *versus* his English I class.

He put the receiver back to his ear.

"—must insist," the voice was saying. "It will really be much simpler, Mr. Rossi, if you just answer the question. We can call again, you know, and continue to call. We don't in the least want to bother or disturb you, but—"

"It would be a lot simpler," Rossi told the voice, "if you'd let me know why you want an answer to a question like that. What kind of weather is it outside—my God, can't you look for yourself? Or call Information, or something?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you any more," the voice said, with a trace of what might have been real regret, and might have been only the actor's version of it so common among television quiz show announcers. "But if you'll just—"

"Some kind of a nut," Rossi muttered.

"What was that?" the voice asked.

Rossi shook his head at the phone. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing." And then, possibly under the spur of embarrassment, he

bent down from his position at the telephone and took a look toward the front window of the room. "It's a nice day," he said. "Or anyhow it looks like a nice day. Is that what you want?"

"Exactly," the voice said, and Rossi thought he could hear relief in its tones. "Can you go into a little more detail?"

"Well," Rossi went on, feeling even more embarrassed—the way things had gone all day, now was the moment when someone would walk in on him and find him describing the weather to a strange voice on the telephone—"well, it's a little cloudy. But nice. I can't see the sun because of the clouds, but there's plenty of light and it looks warm. Kind of misty, I suppose you'd say."

"Ah," the voice responded. "You can't see the sun, you say?"

"That's right," Rossi told him. "But it's a good day, if you know what I mean. A little cloudy, but—say, look, what the hell is this, anyhow?" The thought of someone surprising him during so odd a conversation gave rise to one last sudden spurt of irritation. "Calling up strangers to ask stupid questions like—"

"Thank you, Mr. Rossi," the voice said smoothly. "Thank you very much."

And then—and then—it said something else. Obviously not meant for Rossi's ears, it reached them nevertheless through pure ac-

cident, just before the stranger on the other end of the line rang off. Just a few words, but in those few words Rossi realized that he had been right, right all along. Everything centered around Rossi. Maybe he would never know why, or how. But the world, the entire world, was—truly and complete-

ly—aimed right at the Rossi head.

Just a few words, heard distantly, the few words a man might say as he was hanging up a telephone receiver, to someone else in the room . . .

“It’s okay, Joe,” the voice said casually. “He can’t see it. You can take it away.”
