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One Rejection Too Many (1978)

by Patricia Nurse

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Imagine my delight when I spotted your new science fiction magazine on the newsstands. I have been a fan of yours for many, many years, and **has** naturally wasted no time in buying a copy. I wish you every success in this new venture.

In your second issue I read with interest your plea for stories from new authors. While no writer myself, I have had a time traveller living with me for the past two weeks (he materialized in the bathtub without clothes or money, so I felt obliged to offer him shelter), and he has written a story of life on earth as it will be in the year 5000.

Before he leaves this time frame, it would give him great pleasure to see his story in print — I hope you will feel able to make this wish come true.

Yours sincerely,
Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

Thank you for your kind letter and good wishes.

It is always refreshing to hear from a new author. You have included some most imaginative material in your story; however, it is a little short on plot and human interest — perhaps you could rewrite it with this thought in mind.

Yours sincerely,
Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I was sorry that you were unable to print the story I sent you. Vahl (the time traveller who wrote it) was quite hurt as he tells me he is an author of some note in his own time. He has, however, rewritten the story and this time has included plenty of plot and some rather interesting mating rituals which he has borrowed from the year 3000. In his own time (the year 5015) sex is no longer practised, so you can see that it is perfectly respectable having him in my house. I do wish, though, that he could adapt himself to our custom of wearing clothes — my neighbours are starting to talk!

Anything that you can do to expedite the publishing of Vahl's story would be most appreciated, so that he will feel free to return to his own time.

Yours sincerely,
Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

Thank you for your rewritten short story.

I don't want to discourage you but I'm afraid you followed my suggestions with a little too much enthusiasm—however, I can understand that having an imaginary nude visitor from another time is a rather heady experience. I'm afraid that your story now rather resembles a far-future episode of "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" or "Soap."

Could you tone it down a bit and omit the more bizarre sex rituals of the year 3000—we must remember that *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* is intended to be a family publication.

Perhaps a little humour would improve the tale too.

Yours sincerely,
Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Vahl was extremely offended by your second rejection—he said he has never received a rejection slip before, and your referring to him as "imaginary" didn't help matters at all. I'm afraid he rather lost his temper and stormed out into the garden—it was at this unfortunate moment that the vicar happened to pass by.

Anyway, I managed to get Vahl calmed down and he has rewritten the story and added plenty of humour. I'm afraid my subsequent meeting with the vicar was not blessed with such success! I'm quite sure Vahl would not understand another rejection.

Yours truly,
Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

I really admire your persistence in rewriting your story yet another time. Please don't give up hope—you can become a fairly competent writer in time, I feel sure.

I'm afraid the humour you added was not the kind of thing I had in mind at all—you're not collaborating with Henry Youngman by any

chance are you? I really had a more sophisticated type of humour in mind.

Yours truly,
Isaac Asimov

P.S. Have you considered reading your story, as it is, on "The Gong Show"?

Dear Dr. Asimov:

It really was very distressing to receive the return of my manuscript once again—Vahl was quite speechless with anger.

It was only with the greatest difficulty that I prevailed upon him to refine the humour you found so distasteful, and I am submitting his latest rewrite herewith.

In his disappointment, Vahl has decided to return to his own time right away. I shall be sorry to see him leave as I was getting very fond of him—a pity he wasn't from the year 3000 though. Still, he wouldn't have made a very satisfactory husband; I'd have never known where (or when) he was. It rather looks as though my plans to marry the vicar have suffered a severe setback too. **Are you married, Dr. Asimov?**

I must close this letter now as I have to say good-bye to Vahl. **He says he has just finished making some long overdue improvements to our time frame as a parting gift**—isn't that kind of him?

Yours sincerely,
Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

I am very confused by your letter. Who is Isaac Asimov? I have checked with several publishers and none of them has heard of **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine**, although the address on the envelope was correct for *this* magazine.

However, I was very impressed with your story and will be pleased to accept it for our next issue. Seldom do we receive a story combining such virtues as a well-conceived plot, plenty of human interest, and a delightfully subtle brand of humour.

Yours truly,
George H. Scithers,
Editor,
Arthur C. Clarke's Science Fiction Magazine

NOTES

Isaac Asimov (1920–1992) A prolific writer of science fiction and other genres, and a biochemistry professor at Boston University. He is the author of “The Fun They Had” (p. 28). *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* is a real publication, not a fictional creation.

Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman (1976–1977) A TV comedy show mocking soap operas (overly dramatic continuing television series, usually shown in the afternoon).

Soap (1977–1981) A popular TV series, also spoofing soap operas.

Henny Youngman (1960–1998) An American comedian known for such one-liners as “Take my wife . . . please!”

The Gong Show A 1970s TV series in which contestants displayed their various and often limited talents until they were stopped by the sound of a gong.

George H. Scithers A real-life editor of *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*.

Arthur C. Clarke A renowned writer of science and science fiction. His best-known work is a collaboration with director Stanley Kubrick on *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). He does not have a science fiction magazine in his name. *He died in 2008.*

9. Discuss the letter technique used here. How else could this story have been told? Why is the use of letters effective?

LITERARY TECHNIQUES *— a partial list only — refer to our “glossary”*

Letter form Using a series of letters, the writer concocts a story line or plot, often with parts left out to be filled in by the reader’s imagination. For example, the letters hint at Vahl’s subject matter but never completely tell of it; Miss Morrison includes asides about her desire for marriage and companionship (“Are you married, Dr. Asimov?” [paragraph 31]).

Time travel One of the most popular themes in science fiction, it offers not only adventurous and imaginative story lines but also social commentary. Here, the time traveller Vahl becomes vital to the conclusion of the story.

Plausibility By using real names and transforming these people into fictional story characters (such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke), the writer lends a credible note to the story. In short, the letters seem like real correspondence. The content (although outrageous) is delivered matter-of-factly and in all seriousness.

Surprise ending A conclusion to a story that the reader is not expecting. Often the ending has a twist. When the reader rereads the story, he or she discovers that the writer has inserted clues throughout to play fair with the astute reader.