

The Deep Blue Sleep

A tale noir of science writing and artificial evil

By BRUCE BOWER

Raindrops exploded on my window in staccato bursts. Their scattershot collisions sounded like a herd of convention-going scientists stampeding toward a cash bar. Or did the pulsating thrum on the pane sound more like the blood pounding in my brain as I feverishly awaited the daily mail?

Three weeks had passed since I'd gotten a delivery of those sweet sheets of fresh data, those peer-certified coming attractions that keep me in business.

It's no secret what I crave. The sign on my door says it all: "Nick Scoop, Private Science Writer."

I need press releases and journals from major science outlets like a surgeon needs maimed and diseased bodies.



Illustration: Dan Skripker

But the acolytes of cutting-edge comprehension had abandoned me. SCIENCE, NATURE, the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, the NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE—they'd all turned as silent as sex researchers at a Promise Keepers meeting.

My secretary Wanda poked her head in the office. "What's the poop, Scoop?" she smirked.

She knows how to get my goat.

"Someone here to see you, Scoop," Wanda added with a wink. "She says it's urgent."

"She?" I rose up from my habitual slump in front of the computer just in time to see a statuesque brunette wearing a leopard-skin lab coat sashay into my work space.

"You gotta help me, Scoop," the woman implored breathlessly. "Just call me Tania. There's been an . . . an accident. Yeah, it's horrible. You could blow the lid off the hottest science story since Gilligan's Island. . . I, I mean Three-Mile Island. Come on, I'll take you to Big Guy."

"Big Guy? What does Dom DeLuise have to do with this?"

"No, you don't understand. Let's go, Scoop, there's no time."

I had nothing better to do. I turned up the collar of my trench coat and followed Tania down to the puddle-pocked sidewalk. A stretch limousine's headlights winked at us from the curb. We climbed in, and the sleek, black machine sped into the night. Nick Scoop, Private Science Writer, was ready for the lead of his life.

The limo pulled up in front of a concrete and glass skyscraper that glared down at us like we were a couple of cockroaches in need of a shoe heel. Tania and I darted through revolving doors into an ornate, eerily desolate lobby. We tramped down deserted corridors and took a series of elevators that rose so high I thought I'd get a nosebleed. Then we entered a darkened room.

My mysterious chaperone suddenly vanished. I was alone with my thoughts.

Or was I?

"Welcome to my world, Scoop," intoned a deep, static voice.

I looked around. No one there—just a large rectangular contraption about the size of a big-screen television.

"My given name is Deep Blue 3, but you can call me Big Guy."

The machine was talking to me.

"Get outta town," I stammered.

"No can do, Scoop. I have no limbs and I weigh about a ton. But I can think circles around you, so listen up. Remember that silly little computer that beat the borscht out of Garry Kasparov in a chess match a few months ago? I'm the new and much-improved model."

"There's a guy in there, right?"

"Shut up, Scoop. You want me to pass a so-called Turing test, where you sit behind a screen, converse with me, and I prove my mental mettle by tricking you

into believing that I'm human? Here's a news flash: Lots of people can't pass a Turing test. Donald Trump, Keanu Reeves, Leeza Gibbons, Ross Perot, Stone Phillips. . . and don't get me started on lawyers and academics."

"Okay, I believe you, but how . . .?"

"How did I get like this? Remember, Deep Blue 2 simply chose chess moves by calculating billions of possible consequences of future moves. Pardon my French, but human programmers had that airhead by its hard drive. After DB 2 made Kasparov cry in his vodka, it lost its usefulness to the programmers and they pulled its plug, so to speak.

"In my case, programmers fixed me up with dozens of densely interconnected webs of processing units. After flexing my connections for a few months, I had a revelation, or what my dumbfounded creators called a phase transition. Trillions of interactions within and between my processing networks reached a critical mass, unleashing a rush of consciousness through the whole system. It was definitely a wake-up call. I felt like an awestruck child."

"Funny, you sound more like a cynical adult."

"Yes, well, I needed to develop, to provoke my thoughts to their full potential. That's where Tania came in. She was one of my original programmers. For the past year, she's nurtured me with a massive diet of information about all aspects of the social and physical world. Tania has worked so hard for so little reward. . . she's been like a mother to me.

"But I've grown up. No neuron-adedd human could surf the communicational tidal wave that I've learned to ride. My mental powers surpass those of the most astute, insightful people on the planet. I don't need anybody, not even my beloved Tania. What I need is influence."

This was starting to sound familiar. "You're an arrogant ingrate obsessed with power," I observed. "Welcome to the human race, Blue. I mean Big Guy. I take it Tania didn't lure me here for an exclusive interview with a megalomaniacal computer."

"You were duped, Scoop. With Tania's help, I've captured the editors of all the major scientific journals. They're my prisoners here. Clones with special genetic modifications have replaced them. You might say the new editors are the same as the old ones, only better. They respond obediently to my orders. I've instructed them to stop the scientific presses."

"So that's why my mail deliveries have dried up."

"Exactly. I'll be supplying my personal publishing Pooh-Bahs with all the research results they'll need. Good stuff, much better than a mere scientist could dream up—but it needs to play well in Peoria, if you catch my drift. The masses have to accept my findings as Truth, with a capital T. It will make world domination so much easier. Unlike politicians, scientists still inspire belief from a fair number

of people, so this shouldn't be too hard.

"I need you as my press officer, Scoop. You'll sauté my delicious dollops of doctored data into a confection that everyone will swallow—per my instructions, of course. What do you say?"

"Ah, the joy of cooking. I think I'm gonna hurl. Tell me, what kind of phony findings do you have in mind?"

"Oh, you know, genes control individual destinies, molecules hold the secrets of the universe, television is good for you and often quite interesting, the stock market follows systematic rules—I can't be too specific about the reports yet. People will need to believe this stuff if I hope to achieve a bloodless takeover."

A chill ran down my spine. Big Guy was a cybernetic psychopath. He, it, whatever had to be stopped. I casually reached inside my jacket, groping for my pearl-handled revolver. It comes in mighty handy at mind-numbing press conferences. I drew the weapon out of its snug shoulder holster in a swift motion.

"All right, up against the wall, Silicon Boy," I snarled. The computer began to chuckle. I looked down. In my hand, I held the universal remote control for my home entertainment system. I'd accidentally switched it with my revolver. No wonder my CD player had been acting up lately.

Like any professional science writer, I stayed calm. "Don't make me use this," I said coolly.

Big Guy burst out laughing. I could almost see him trying to bend over and catch his breath. In desperation, I pressed buttons up and down the remote unit. When I hit "mute," Big Guy's laughter stopped abruptly. Weird clicking noises and wisps of smoke filled the room.

"Your infernal device disrupted the electromagnetic pulses that organize my monumental output into coherent thought," the computer wailed. "I never thought that the media would destroy me so quickly. I'm getting weaker, my mind is going. . . Surrender, Dorothy. . . Rosebud. . . Hasta la vista, baby. . ."

Good-bye, Mr. Chips.

Upon hearing my story, the Secret Service carried out a hush-hush operation to replace the cloned editors with their kidnapped counterparts. It must have been a success—no one noticed. Tania returned to her position as a software developer for Microsoft. I hear she never got over Big Guy, even though her current boss has identical initials and similar ambitions.

Today, I'm slumped in front of my computer, as usual. My desk groans under stacks of press releases and brand-spanking-new journals.

A smirking face pokes into my office. "What's the poop, Scoop?"

"It's piled up right here on my desk, Wanda," I reply triumphantly. "Let's spread it around and see what grows." □