

A for ANYTHING
A for ANYTHI
A for ANYTHI
A for ANYTHI

DAMON KNIGHT
DAMON KNIGHT
DAMON KNIGHT
DAMON KNIGHT
DAMON KNIGHT
DAMON KNIGHT
DAMON KNIGHT

ROSETTABOOKS™

A FOR ANYTHING

Former Title: The People Maker

DAMON KNIGHT

A for Anything

Copyright © 1965 by Damon Knight

Cover art and eForeword to the electronic edition copyright © 2002 by RosettaBooks, LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

For information address Editor@RosettaBooks.com

First electronic edition published 2002 by RosettaBooks LLC, New York.

ISBN 0-7953-0422-6

Contents

eForeword

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

About the Author

About this Title

What would happen if someone invented a machine that could create an exact duplicate of anything? That is the simple but remarkable premise of Damon Knight's classic 1959 novel, *A for Anything*. "The Gismo," as the machine is known, seems like it will end poverty and need forever. But of course, things are not that simple. Like any truly great work of science fiction, Knight's novel boldly pursues the ramifications of his premise. What will people do if there is no longer any need to *work* for anything? What happens if this device is spread carelessly throughout the world (it can even duplicate itself!). Finally, there is the supreme and most chilling of questions: what happens if you try to duplicate a human being?

A for Anything is a classic work of science fiction, but it considers questions that are as relevant and compelling today as they were fifty years ago, perhaps more so. Like most of us, Knight watches the mind-boggling technological advancements of our time with a mixture of awe and alarm, and wonders whether we are really in control of the things we are creating. Knight has put his finger on the pulse of our modern sensibility and, mixed with his truly remarkable imagination, created a novel that is gripping, thought-provoking and impossible to put down.

RosettaBooks is the leading publisher dedicated exclusively to electronic editions of great works of fiction and non-fiction that reflect our world. RosettaBooks is a committed e-publisher, maximizing the resources of the World Wide Web in opening a fresh dimension in the reading experience. In this electronic environment for reading, each RosettaBook will enhance the experience through The RosettaBooks Connection. This gateway instantly delivers to the reader the opportunity to learn more about

the title, the author, the content and the context of each work, using the full resources of the Web.

RosettaBooks is the leading publisher dedicated exclusively to electronic editions of great works of fiction and non-fiction that reflect our world. RosettaBooks is a committed e-publisher, maximizing the resources of the Web in opening a fresh dimension in the reading experience. In this electronic reading environment, each RosettaBook will enhance the experience through The RosettaBooks Connection. This gateway instantly delivers to the reader the opportunity to learn more about the title, the author, the content and the context of each work, using the full resources of the Web.

To experience The RosettaBooks Connection for A for Anything:

www.RosettaBooks.com/AForAnything

For Justin Leiber
a good Joe

“ÈN TONTΩ NÌXA”

“IN THIS, CONQUER”

Words accompanying the vision of the
cross seen by Constantine, on the eve
of his victory over Maxentius in 312

Chapter One

A retired bank vice-president named Harry Breitfeller, who lived in a comfortable duplex in Santa Monica with his wife and other relatives, stepped out on the cement porch a little after nine one morning to pick up the mail. There were half a dozen envelopes, mostly bills, in the mailbox, and a whacking big cardboard carton on the porch under it.

Breitfeller picked up the carton, thinking it must be something his wife had ordered, but saw that his own name was on the label.

There was no return address. According to the postmark, the box had been mailed late the previous afternoon in Clearwater, which is about thirty-four miles northeast of Los Angeles.

Breitfeller could not think of anyone he knew in Clearwater. Remembering stories he had heard about bombs in the mail, he shook the box gingerly. It seemed too light to have a bomb in it, and it rattled.

He took the box inside and set it down, pulled up a chair, and put his half-smoked cigar carefully in an ashtray.

His wife, Madge, came in from the kitchen drying her hands. "What's that?" she asked.

"Don't know." Breitfeller had his pocket knife open, and was slitting the brown paper tape that sealed the carton.

"Well, who's it *from*?"

"Don't know," said Breitfeller again. He turned the two halves of the box top carefully back. Underneath was a little crumpled newspaper, and under that, something made of wood. Cottage

lamps, was his first thought, but they were unstained and there were no shades, and no light sockets.

He pulled the two objects out of the carton and set them upright on the table. His wife looked over his shoulder, and so did her sister Ruth who had just followed her in from the kitchen. The objects were two identical wooden crosses. They were about a foot and a half high. Each one stood on a thick wooden base, and had some kind of wiring attached to the upright and crossarm. On the base of each one was a type-written paper, stapled down, which read:

THIS IS A GISMO
IT IS A DUPLICATING DEVICE—
IT WILL DUPLICATE ANYTHING—
EVEN ANOTHER GISMO.
TO OPERATE, SIMPLY ATTACH A SAMPLE
OF WHATEVER YOU WISH TO COPY
TO THE LEFT HAND ARM
OF THE GISMO, AS SHOWN.

(There was a careful, pen sketch in the margin.)

THEN PRESS THE SWITCH,
AND A COPY WILL APPEAR
ATTACHED TO THE RIGHT HAND ARM
OF THE GISMO.

WARNING:
DO NOT ALLOW THE OBJECT BEING COPIED
TO COME IN CONTACT WITH
ANYTHING ELSE.

Breitfeller read this through twice in silence, ignoring the heavy breathing of the two women leaning on his shoulders. He was a pink-faced man, rather popeyed and without very much chin, but stronger than he looked.

He inspected the two crosses unhurriedly, up-ending them to see if there was anything on the bottom, then examining each part of the wiring.

“It’s a trick,” said Ruth over his shoulder. “A silly trick.”

“Maybe,” said Breitfeller, putting his cigar back in his mouth. He saw that the wires stapled to the crossarms of the two Gismos were really loops, and that the curious little metal-and-glass blocks which hung from them were suspended by these loops.

There was just the one circuit, that looped over to one of the little metal-glass blocks on the left side and then looped over to the other on the right side. The rest of it, attached to the upright, was nothing but a pair of dry cells and an ordinary light switch.

Breitfeller thought he could build one of these himself, in half an hour, except for the little glass-metal blocks. He had never seen one of those before.

He leaned over the table and peered closer. The glass was a curious-looking cloudy stuff, possibly not glass but a plastic, and it was coated with copper on both sides. On the bottom side of each block there was a small copper hook. It looked to Breitfeller as if the glass or whatever it was would be plenty to insulate that hook from the feeble current that would go through the loop of wire: so the Gismo couldn’t actually do anything, much less what it was advertised to do. But when he looked at those little metal-glass-metal sandwiches, he wasn’t so sure.

His older son, Pete, came in saying, “Dad, I’m going to take the car over to Glendale this morning, okay? Whatcha got?”

“Gismos,” said Breitfeller wryly, around his cigar. He was frowning at the nearest cross. You closed the switch *here*; the current went up *here*, through these little contacts, and around *here*, past the left-hand glass-metal block but not through it, and then over *here*, doing the same to the right-hand glass-metal block, and then back to the dry cells. It seemed to him that nothing could possibly happen if you tried it. His fingers began to itch.

“Hey,” said Pete, reaching, “let me see that.”

Breitfeller forestalled him. "Keep your hands off," he said indistinctly.

"Dad, I know all about that electronics jazz."

"Not about *this* electronics jazz, you don't." Breitfeller got up with a cross in each hand.

"Harry, what are you going to do?" his wife asked, looking alarmed.

"I think you ought to call the police," said Ruth, behind her.

Breitfeller said, "I'm going out behind the garage. By myself." He departed, past his brother-in-law Mack, who was just up and looked half asleep, but had curiosity enough to say "What's that?" as Breitfeller went by.

He went out through the kitchen and the back porch, banging the screen door behind him, and walked across the yard to the alley. There was about three feet of space between the side of his garage and the fence, and nothing across the alley but the back of a brewery warehouse, so Breitfeller figured that if anything should go wrong, there would not be too much damage.

He set both the Gismos down carefully on the stack of scrap lumber and stared at them. "TO OPERATE, SIMPLY ATTACH A SAMPLE OF WHATEVER YOU WISH TO COPY . . ." There was a little coil of bare copper wire wound handily around the copper hook under the left-hand cross-arm; that was one detail that half convinced him. The other thing was the metal-glass blocks; another, now that he thought of it, was the grain of the wood, which looked identical in the two crosses, and the fourth thing, the one that really made his heart beat faster, was just the fact that there were two Gismos and not one.

Because if it was a gag, why should there be two? But if it was real, then with two Gismos you could make a third one, a fourth, a fifth . . .

Well, you never got anything without taking a little risk.

Breitfeller, with a sardonic gleam in his eye, fumbled for his money clip and withdrew a one-dollar bill. He uncoiled the copper wire, wound it around the folded bill, and carefully attached it to the little

hook on the left-hand side of the Gismo. He slowly put out his middle finger to the switch. Slowly he pressed it down.

He blinked. Swinging from the right-hand arm of the Gismo, as if it had been there all the time, was a second, folded, green one-dollar bill.

“Lord God Almighty,” said Breitfeller, fervently.

Chapter Two

The sun, just past the meridian, made a glaringly bright rim of light around each of the closed dark shades. Except for this brilliance, and two or three random bits of metalwork picked out by the sunlight, the room was in hot half-darkness. The air was close and stale. On the laboratory bench was a clutter of electronic test equipment, carelessly piled. A book had been knocked to the floor, where it lay disheveled among wads of paper, dust, bits of insulation and wire. In the far corner, half a stack of massive loose-leaf binders, precariously piled atop a filing cabinet, had fallen. From under these protruded the legs and body of a man.

The piled books stirred, rose and parted with a gravestone clatter. A head emerged, crowned with dust. A hand came up to hold it. There was a groan.

Mr. Gilbert Wall, of Western Electronics, for it was he, sat up painfully and looked around him. His hair was rumpled, his tanned face covered with grime. There was a large bruise, beginning to turn yellow and blue, around his right eye, which was swollen half shut. Wall touched this bruise, gingerly, and groaned again. "Maniac," he muttered to himself.

He sat up straighter, looking momentarily apprehensive. "Ewing?" he called. There was no answer.

Blinking, Wall turned and noticed the brightness against the drawn shades. He started, and looked at his wristwatch. "Quarter after one!" he ejaculated. He looked around wildly, then scrambled to his feet and wincingly went to the bench. His hands did not find what they sought. He glared around once more, half distractedly. "My God!" he said.

On the wall beside the door there was a telephone. Wall saw it and went there. He took the receiver down, heard a dial tone, and dialed "O."

"Operator," he said shakily, "get me Los Angeles." He gave the number. "I want to speak to Nathan MacDonald—*Nathan*—N as in nut—that's right, and hurry. This is an emergency call."

"My trunks are all busy to Los Angeles," said the voice. *"Will you wait, or shall I call you back?"*

Wall swallowed. "Operator, this is Roy M. Jackson of the Federal Bureau of Investigation speaking. This is a matter of the national interest. Now put that call through, if you please."

There was a pause. *"May I have your identification number, sir?"*

Damn. "Operator, I've just been assigned. I do not have an identification number yet. You'll just have to take my word for it. This call must go through."

"Sir, I can't break in on a trunk call unless you have an identification number."

"Give me the head operator."

After a few moments there was another voice. *"Sir, this is Miss Timmins. May I help you?"*

Wall repeated his story, in a voice of passionate sincerity.

"Sir, one moment, I'll have the operator connect you with the office of the Clearwater chief of police."

"I don't want the police, I want Los Angeles!" said Wall, glaring.

"That's the best I can do for you, sir. If Chief Underwood will vouch for you, or if you would come to the telephone office and show your identification—"

"Put the Chief on," said Wall. He was thinking: Underwood; now why did that name ring a bell?

By the time he got the man on the line, he had remembered.

"Underwood, this is Gilbert Wall speaking." (If the operator was listening in, let her.) "Perhaps you remember me. We met at the

Masonic convention two years ago—Norm Hodge introduced us, do you recall?”

“*Why, yes, sure I do, Mr. Wall,*” said Underwood’s voice. (The old memory never failed; Wall could see the man’s face clearly in his mind’s eye, jowly and obsequious, a typical disappointed small-town public servant.) “*How are you anyway!*”

“I’m just fine, and yourself?”

“*Well, not too bad, I can’t complain. What can I do for you?*”

Wall’s hand went to the knot in his necktie. “Underwood—what do they call you, uh—” (what was the man’s name)—“Ed?”

“*Ed, that’s right.*”

“And you’ll call me Gil, won’t you? Ed, here’s my little problem. I’m in Clearwater for the day on some confidential work, I can’t tell you over the telephone, but between us two, a Mr. Hoover is very, very interested in this.”

“*Oh, is that right? Well, you know, anything I can do—*”

“Just one thing if you would, Ed. I’ve got to make an urgent call to L.A. and it happens the trunks are busy. You see I’m working against time, Ed, you understand, and every minute counts. So if you would call the head operator, Miss Timmins her name is, and more or less vouch for me—Incidentally, before we hang up, I wonder if we could have dinner together before I leave. I can explain this thing to you then in a little more detail, of course.”

“*Why, sure, Gil,*” said Underwood, “*that would be great. Now let me see, you want me to tell the head operator—*”

“Just that you know me and so on, and ask her to do us the courtesy of putting my call through. Tell her I’m at—” He read off the number of the phone from the dial card. “And, ah, I’ll call for you at home say ‘bout eight o’clock, family too, of course, will that be all right?”

“*Fine.*”

“Fine, Ed, I’ll be seeing you and thanks a million.” Sweating, Wall hung up and rummaged in his pockets for a cigarette.

A few minutes later the telephone rang. Wall snatched the receiver down and said, "Gilbert Wall speaking."

"Mr. Wall, are you the party who called a few minutes ago with reference to a call to Los Angeles?"

"Yes, that's correct, operator."

"Sir, that was not the name you gave me then, was it?"

"No," said Wall coldly, "that was my cover name I gave you. I was obliged to give my *under cover* name to Chief Underwood, to get him to identify me."

There was a slight hesitation. *"Well, I'll have the operator put that call through for you,"* said the voice uncertainly. *"Just hold the wire, please."*

[

Wall waited, smoking nervously. He smoothed back his sleek hair with his palm, fingered the gold cufflinks to make sure they were still there, noticed a loose shirt button with annoyance. His billfold was in his breast pocket; fountain pen, keys, notebook, all right.

"Hello?" An unfamiliar male voice.

"I have a call for Mr. Nathan MacDonald. Is he there?"

The right number then; but where was Miss Jacobs, the switchboard operator?

"He's tied up, can I take a message?"

"Hello," said Wall, interrupting the voice of the operator, "this is Gilbert Wall—let me talk to MacDonald."

"Oh, Mr. Wall. This is Ernie, the office boy. I'll uh, I'll put you right through."

Another pause. *"Hello, Gil."*

Wall exhaled with relief. "Hello, Nate. Boy have I had a time with this call, but never mind that now. Listen, that Ewing is a maniac. I mean it. First of all, Nate, our tip was correct, that gadget of his, that Gismo *really works*. There is no doubt about it." The silence struck him as odd. "Hello, Nate? Are you listening?"

"*I heard you.*" Wall could see the heavy jawed face, all straight lines mouth, flat nose, narrow eyes, gray hair combed straight across tops of the horn rimmed glasses as straight as a ruler. MacDonald sounded like that, dry, unemotional even in crises, and yet there was something in his tone that bothered Wall.

"Well, it's just as bad as we thought. Or worse. He absolutely would not listen to reason, Nate, and what's worse, the s.o.b. got away from me." Wall touched his temple gingerly, and winced. "It may have been my fault, I more or less lost my head and made some threats, trying to throw a scare into him, and—He took me by surprise, I never thought he had it in him, and he knocked some books over on me, and that's why I haven't called until now. Nate, I was out cold all night, until just a few minutes ago. I'm still not myself. Now, my idea is, he'll be hiding out somewhere. He's probably scared witless over all this—assaulting me, and so on. Do you check me on that, Nate?"

The voice said, "*Probably.*"

"Well, we've got to move fast, Nate. I know it was my ball and I bobbled it, I admit that, but we've got to find that guy. Swear out a warrant, or—how would this be—suppose we tell the Health Service people he's infected with bubonic plague, or something? . . . Nate?"

[

The voice said, "*There's a lot of noise here.*"

Wall heard a faint, distant murmur, as if a crowd of people were talking (shouting?) in the background. Then there were some underwater clicks, and MacDonald's voice again: "*What are your plans now, Gil?*"

"Plans?" said Wall, taken aback. "Well, I can either stay here—I've got a date with the local chief of police, I can keep that, if we decide to work through him— Or if you want me to come back for a skull session, Nate, I can charter a plane. But listen, we've got to get on the ball with this thing. I mean, if that maniac, Ewing, ever gets it into his head to *distribute* that thing, that Gismo—Nate, my mind just boggles. I can't picture it."

"I'm watching it," said MacDonald's voice indistinctly.

"What?" said Wall after a moment. "What did you say, Nate?"

"I'm watching it happen," said MacDonald's voice. *"What did you think Ewing was doing all this time?"*

"What?" said Wall again.

"Those things were in the morning mail delivery here. Two in a box. At least a hundred people got them. Along about ten, people started copying them and giving them away to their friends and relations. Now they're fighting in the streets."

"Nate—" said Wall brokenly.

"I've got mine. Sent Crawford down for them. Packing now, or you wouldn't have got me. I happen to know a place in Wyoming that's built like a castle—you could hold off an army there. Well, take care of yourself, Gil. Nobody else will."

"Nate, give me a minute now, I just can't believe it—"

"Turn on your TV," said MacDonald. There was a click, and the wire went dead.

Wall stared blankly at the receiver, then turned slowly. There was a little portable TV set standing on the bench. He walked over to it, leaving the telephone receiver swinging at the end of its cord, and turned on the switch. The TV blurted: *"—and down Sunset Boulevard, from Olvera Street west. And here's a flash."* The screen lighted, showed a raster, but no face appeared. *"Police Chief Victor Corsi has issued a call for special volunteer policemen to handle the crowds. It's my hunch he won't get any. The big question today is, Have you got a Gismo? And believe me, nothing else matters. This station will stay on the air to keep you informed as long as possible, but no thanks to its poltroon of a general manager, J. W. Kidder, or its revolting program director, Douglas M. Dow, who took off for the hills as soon as they got theirs. For my own part, I say balls to them both. And balls to the Pacific Broadcasting Company and all its little subsidiaries! Balls to Mayor Needham! And balls to—"*