

REALMATTER



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The Ladies Of Scunthorpe



REAL**MATTER**

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Preface

Reading Time 2'

Prof. Needlebeek was not a man of his times. He was not a man of any particular time. The world he had unconsciously created and then consciously crafted was uncomplicated, unconflicted, unexciting and wholly satisfying. He was always absently smiling, or absently counting out his change, or absently drinking a porter, because he was always absent from the outside world that acted as host to his pleasantly parasitic existence. It would be trite to say that he was satisfied with a world of books and papers, life caught on a page and in the imagination; trite and untrue. He was very interested in how his host body could be formed to fit his needs and used against itself to keep the harsher realities at bay. Neither should you imagine that he indulged in escapism. Escape would imply that he had somewhere to leave, that he had conscious thoughts of fleeing a present imprisonment. He liked it right where he was.

In the twenty-five years since coming down from Oxford he was fortunate in only having a tangential connection with the physical world around him. He went into the shops to buy his tea and biscuits, chops and potatoes. He had a car and occasionally drove on holidays out into the countryside. The car occasionally broke down and he had to bring it in for repairs. He had to deal with the plumbing when the commode got plugged.

Shoes were purchased, clothes were laundered. But he was not really connected to that world in which he lived, with the events and accidents, storms and lost cats, friendly neighbors and general elections that went on around him, touched his body and his senses, but didn't really enter his mind much below the most superficial level. That is not to say that he had no friends, no human contact, far from it. He had a great many friends, some truly close friends, all of a like disposition who spent endless evenings in conversation about ideas and worlds that did not exist in any form other than the words and images that formed the body of their conversation.

This may explain why Prof. Needlebeek sat in his office staring at the paper on his desk, unaware of the students in the hall, the irritating "beep-beep-beep" of the van backing up in the lane outside his window, and the cup of tea growing silently cold in his hand. Sip. Stare out the window. Sip again. Look at the paper again. Something had invaded his world.

1. Office of The Principal

Reading Time 1'

As you are aware, my long-standing desire to bring The College up to contemporary international standards through increasing our information technology profile has been frustrated by the enormous expense of such an undertaking.

It, therefore, gives me great pleasure to announce that our distinguished alumnus and founder of Software Plus, Sir Barton Riggs, has donated to The College a generous gift which will be dedicated solely to bringing us into the twenty-first century through the most advanced system of information technology available.

An integral part of this scheme will be to supply all faculty members with personal computers at no charge. This will enable all administrative functions of The College to be carried out via electronic messages and....

2. The Memo

Reading Time 3'

The memo went on to explain how all members of administrative and academic staff would be expected to use their computers in the daily business of The College. It was a matter of learning the use of IT, information technology, from the Americans as a means of making the provision of education and learning more efficient. Within a year each faculty member would have a PC, personal computer, installed in their office and would be given 20 hours of instruction on its use in word processing and accessing the internet. Once trained, all faculty would be required to put all course materials, syllabi, readings, supplementary materials, on a web page in order that their students could access it from any location.

But Needlebeek did not read to the bottom of the memo. It had slipped from his hand long before he reached its concluding paragraph, which extolled the virtues of the use of IT as a means of increasing academic efficiency and the need for transferring the techniques of TQC, total quality control management, from the commercial world to the academic. The acronyms were like poison darts piercing his tender soul. The idea of “academic efficiency” literally held no meaning in his mind. Was he to learn from the Americans how to use the internet as a means to produce even larger volumes of over-quantified minutia to be formed

into ill-written articles published in obscure journals in a rabid quest for tenure? All this was bad enough but at the heart of the matter was the demand that he not only possess a “PC” but that he actually learn how to use it. Here was the real world, the world of technology and “things” not only encroaching on the world of Olympian contemplation (or so he saw it) but actually forcing itself upon him as if it were vandals breaking down his door and grossly ravaging his very being. In a parlance of which he was not even aware; he felt violated.

Over the next few days the Principal’s memo created a frenzy of protest and outrage throughout The College, for Needlebeek was not alone in his desire to keep alive the traditions of intellectualism in academe. Fellow faculty members who he had long known to hold the same worldview as himself forsook their idylls and came down from their ivory towers to rally against this invasion of technology into what should be a purely humanistic environment. Others decried the misuse of the funds donated, claiming that they should be spent instead on supporting the studies of minority and lower-income students. Others decried taking any funds at all from this captain of the new economy who was much more like the pirates of the old economy who had claimed their bags of gold by climbing over the broken bodies of the proletariat. But Needlebek was so much a man of principles, was so true to his own self and his beliefs that he did not protest. That would have entailed the impossible--breaking

the wall that separated him from the distracting and intellectually enervating reality outside himself. So he watched as an interested spectator, going about his daily business as he always had, agreeing in quiet conversations with his peers and fellow-travelers that it was all a travesty, a degrading of The College and their profession, but never agreeing to join them in their demonstrations or protests. Like a Confucian mandarin in late nineteenth century China, as the world around him went through fundamental change at breakneck speed he reacted by withdrawing deeper and deeper into his own world, perfecting his self as a shining shield against the forces of the dark.

3. Peter Evans

Reading Time 3'

Until the day reality, otherwise known as Peter Evans, pierced that shield like an electronic lance. Peter, a “tech assistant” worked for the newly created IT Dept. and it was his job to get all the faculty members up and running, installing the PCs and training them in their use. Young, bright, eager, fresh out of vocational school, full of life and armed with a belief in the wonders of IT and the better life it will bring.

“Good morning, Prof. Needlebeek.”

“Ah...yes. Is there something I can do for you? Are you looking for someone’s office?”

“Why, yes, I’m looking for yours, and I think I’ve found it, eh? Unless you’re not Prof. Needlebeek and this isn’t your office. But as the placard outside says ‘Prof. Needlebeek’ and I find a person sitting here surrounded by books and papers and whatnot all over the place drinking a cup of tea and staring at me over your glasses like I was Godzilla come to squish you with me flippers, well then, I expect you’re Prof. Needlebeek. Am I right or am I right?”

All this said in a rush of words rapid fire, as genial and as forceful as if the room had been a vacuum and its opening had sucked in him and his words.

“Ah...yes, but what is it you want?”

“Well, by the look of things around here I’d say that I want to bring you into the twenty-first century. No, I am sorry, I get a bit too flip for me own good sometimes. I am sorry. Listen, I’m here to start you on the computerization programme. I know that a lot of you don’t like it and are dead set against it, but it is going to happen and I have my orders and that’s to start you down the road to computer literacy. It won’t be painful, I promise. We’ll take it a step at a time and after a while it’ll be like riding a bicycle. The faster you go the easier it is and once you’ve learned, you’ll never forget. And the first step, it appears to me, is to start re-arranging the office so that I can have some space to work and a place to put the PC, to say nothin’ about finding the socket to plug it in.”

Needlebeek continued to stare as if he were Godzilla come to squish him with his flippers, even though he had no idea what this young man was talking about when he made reference to Japanese science fiction movies. Indeed, he hardly knew what else he had said as his mind had gone into some state of frozen animation. This must have been how the mandarins felt as the revolutionaries burst into the inner palace, bayonets glinting in the sun.

Peter’s progress was painful, but against all logic and past practice, there was progress. There really was no alternative other than leaving The College.

As result of all the passive, and aggressive, resistance to the Principal's memo, it had been not too subtly put about that those who did not want to adapt themselves to the new IT age were free to find employment at any other place of employment that would better suit their idea of what an institution of higher learning should be. There were a few who did leave The College, but Needlebeek found himself in the uncomfortable position of one who realizes that in post-Thatcher England there were damn few sinecures around and the realities of the job market were even more frightful that the reality of having a PC on his desk. At any rate, all of the colleges and universities that he would have considered to be worthy of him seemed to be headed down a very similar path of modernization and privatization. Consequently, he became a very unwilling participant in the TQC-ing and PC-ing and IT-ing of The College.

4. The Genie

Reading Time 4'

Prof. Needlebeek may have been boring, anachronistic, repressed, withdrawn, and out of touch with reality, but he was intelligent. Once he realized that the pain of facing the terrors of IT was not as bad as the pain of looking for a new position, he began to plot how best to cope with the situation while retaining as much as possible of the world he had so meticulously built over the past two and a half decades, and thereby retain his sanity. He decided to build yet another world, the world of his office. What happened there between himself, Peter, and the PC would remain separate from his real world. He would enter that frightful world, that modern hell, in the morning but what happened there would be left there at night when he shut the door. This was not as difficult a task as it might seem. After all, by living all those years in two separate worlds, his and that outside him, he had become so impervious to the constant contradictions thus created that any event of cognitive dissonance was immediately ignored or repressed by the time he had even had the chance to actually think about it. It wasn't as if he had such a strong set of attitudes and values that any contradiction was rejected out of hand, it was more like any unpleasantness being shunted off into the vastness of his inner mental space. No, the acceptance of the need to learn about IT, once committed to, was not a problem. The actual

learning, however, was a tremendous problem and turned his office into a Torquemadian chamber of torture. He had learned many new things since coming down from Oxford and joining The College, but they had all been extensions of his previous learning. New information and insights developed in his own mind and integrally related to his previous knowledge, building upon it and reinforcing it as if it was a vast Victorian manor house that had once been an ancient Norman keep. Learning something from someone else and outside his field of knowledge was quite another matter. As with anyone who is forced to face undeniable tragedy, his behavior could be divided into easily discernable stages. First came truculence, he would simply be a passive observer and participate a little as possible. Peter could barely get him to turn the damn thing on. Then came querulousness. He knew a damn sight more than this mere boy from a hopped up trade school and was bound and determined to catch him in as many errors of any kind as he could possible find.

“Don’t end your sentences in prepositions.”

“Can’t you pronounce the letter ‘h’?”

“How can you say this is turned off when there is still a light glowing here on the front of the machine? Obviously it is not off.”

“How can I possibly be expected to ‘save’ every ten minutes when I’m writing? Do you want me to interrupt my thought process when it is flowing?”

Am I supposed to keep track of time in my head?"

These were trying days for Peter but he kept himself above the sarcasm, slights to his class status, and references to his personal hygiene by pitying the poor sod. He was not the first age-encrusted academic with whom he had dealt. And, more's the pity, neither would he be the last.

But there is, sometimes, life after denial and the tortures became less painful. While still keeping the world inside the doors of his office separate from the world outside the door and the world in his head, he nevertheless finally entered into acceptance, although understanding always would elude him. He could not think and write at the keyboard, the symbols that appeared as he typed made his thoughts devoid of meaning and so he learned how to use word processing as an editing tool rather than a medium of creation. This in itself was a long step but it was nothing compared to his discovery of the internet. There have been times in the history of man when a greater force, one beyond the ken of man, reaches down to mortal earth and bestows a vision, a knowledge the origins of which man cannot comprehend. This is what the internet seemed to Prof. Needlebeek. Here in the dark of his office, separate from all worlds there would appear in this machine anything that he wanted to appear, and the source of these visions, this knowledge was totally unfathomable. Their provenance was as closed to him as was the word of God to Moses. All he knew was that it was as if he had called forth the genie

and whatever he wanted to know or see would be brought before him. Ancient texts. Three-dimensional models of Michelangelo's mechanical drawings. Diagrams of Lincoln Cathedral. And all within this tiny office. The more he realized what he had discovered, the more he began to draw this world and his previous world closer together. He began to see how this world could be made to feed the world of his mind. It was the perfect combination that allowed him to withdraw even further from the world while simultaneously infinitely increasing the information available to him. He could go anywhere he wanted, do anything he wanted, and all right here, in his office, in front of this machine, all by himself. And, finally, this was how he met the Ladies of Scunthorpe.

5. The E-mail

Reading Time 4'

Most people know the context of the internet, know that it is a creation of the real world and a reflection of the real world and is thus filled with misinformation, greed, lust, political power, banality, thrills, cake recipes, or what have you. It is a reflection of us. But Prof. Needlebeek's knowledge of our world was so limited and his knowledge of IT so limited that the context was not at all apparent. Just the opposite. Like the images and imaginings in his own mind, the pictures and text and graphics and ideas and propositions in the internet were all free floating bodies with no past or future or connectedness other than that which he had decided to give them, if any. Instead of throwing him into the real world, the internet fed his inner world, giving it a scope and breadth far beyond that which his own mind and the printed page could have created. He began to spend more and more of his evenings in his office staring at the screen for hours at a time.

Peter had explained about e-mail to Prof. Needlebeek and this was to him the grossest intrusion, the most violent violation of all. He did not want to be in touch with the rest of the world on an instantaneous basis. He did not want to "instant message" anyone. He did not want to know the latest administrative dictate as soon as it left the keyboard of the Principal's secretary. But

of course it was part of the package and Peter explained to him that he now had an address, explained to him the function and how to access it, and then told him, "If you don't want to use it, that's no skin off my nose, Professor, but do remember that in about a month all the notices from up above are going to come down on e-mail and it'll be your responsibility to keep up with 'em." He had and, consequently, he had soon learned to use the "delete" function more effectively than any other. But that same sense of survival that led him to meekly, albeit with recalcitrance, accept the machine on his desk and all the connectedness and modernity that it entailed, made him prudently read all the messages that came up on the screen before he clicked the "delete" icon.

It was Peter's policy to educate recalcitrant adapters like Prof. Needlebeek as to the intricacies and subtleties of information technology to the least extent possible, not wanting to confuse and annoy them. He had enough knowledge to be able to instruct them in everything they need to know to function at the level that they wished to operate, or the administration wished them to operate, and no further. This education and instruction rarely included a knowledge of "cookies". Those little tracking devices that are the fifth column imbedded in every PC, lurking in the dark and waiting at their master's command to instantly spew forth their secret messages about their owner's behavior.

"He bought shirts from L.L. Bean three times this

week.”

“He gets the e-edition of The Guardian.”

“He was naughty with ‘Teen Teasers from Japan’ every night but Tuesday.”

His original intention had been to find some information on the architecture of Lincoln Cathedral. He had done a search for Lincolnshire and Northumberland but then just got into the mood to practice his abilities to get information out of this wretched box and cast around at other regional sites and among those that came up were Scunthorpe: St. Mark’s Methodist Church, and the Scunthorpe-United Football Club. No one noticed except the cookies.

As he became more accustomed to using the computer one of the things that irritated him the most and confirmed his earliest opinion about the invasion of the world into his inner sanctum was the appearance of unsolicited e-mail from a variety of merchandisers. Every morning he would be faced with a deluge of offers to gain diplomas on line, finance his retirement, purchase cars, or send flowers. He was still clueless as to where these offers came from but simply deleted them without thinking. This morning, however, he noticed that one of these unsolicited mailings came from “The Ladies of Scunthorpe.” There was something about the name that intrigued him. Who could these women be? Why were the e-mailing him? The thought occurred to him that it might be a

message sent to him in error and that as a courtesy he would let them know they had reached a wrong number and tell them to correct their error. So, he positioned his cursor on the message, clicked, and froze in shock as the images came hesitantly on to the screen, coyly revealing themselves like an electronic dance of the seven veils. First the head of a smiling young blonde woman and then her shoulders and then tremendous breasts being held up by her hands and thrust forward. Simultaneously other images of a salacious nature began forming themselves, sex acts, genitalia, and one large flashing banner asking the reader to open the site to find other hidden delights within. He was so upset that he fumbled around, unable to concentrate his newly formed skills to get out of the site. As he looked, transfixed like a small animal in the headlights of an oncoming car, he could almost sense the wanton lust of the women on the screen in front of him dripping down to stain his hands poised motionless on the keyboard. With a start he finally jabbed at the “off” button and shut down the computer.

6. Who Were These Women?

Reading Time 2'

It was if someone had set off a bomb. He literally could not move. He noticed he was sweating and a confusing tangle of questions immediately filled his mind to the point where he was unable to concentrate on any one of them. How had this happened? Who were these women? How had they located him and why? Would anyone know that he had seen them? If he turned the computer on would they still be there? Could he turn the computer back on? If he needed help re-booting it, would Peter know what had occurred through some techno-mystical sense? What would happen to his reputation, to his position at The College? With a tremor in his hands and an anxiety more intense than he had ever before experienced, he pushed the “on” button and waited for the machine to go through its re-booting. It told him that he should not have turned it off before going through the procedures for logging out and shutting down, and that it was now checking all the files and drives to see if there was any damage. “Please no, please let there be nothing wrong” he thought. There was nothing wrong. He had not damaged the computer and he eventually found himself back at the initial screen and logged in again. Relief created more sweat and loosened his bowels. He left the office and walked down the hall to the lavatory where he

ran water into his cupped hands, washed his face, relieved himself with a purging bowel movement, and sat on the commode trying to get his thoughts in order and a semblance of control over his being. Realizing that he must have been sitting there for at least five minutes and not wanting to draw attention to himself by remaining in the lavatory (there was only one for two floors and it was heavily used), he finally stood on stronger legs, washed his hands, checked his appearance in the mirror and returned to his office. He quickly glanced at the glowing screen, more than half expecting the harlots to have returned, breathed easier when they did not, shut the machine down properly, and quickly drove home.

7. Miss Pennywhistle

Reading Time 3'

Prof. Needlebeck had not had a conscious thought about sex for many a year. He had gone through puberty like any other heterosexual man, had a few lusting desires while a student, and had been moved to erection on frequent occasions at the thought of what was hidden under the sweaters and skirts of girls he had seen in class, on the bus, or at parties. Like any healthy young man he especially enjoyed fantasizing about the shop girls and secretaries who rode the bus with him. After brushing up against them in the crush, or inadvertently looking down one's blouse as she bent over to talk to a friend, or smelling the scent of one strap-hanging beside him when the bus was closed, humid and musty, he would go home and relieve himself. His masturbation fantasies were always the same, the girl had no face, just limbs and breasts and genitalia, and he was never particularly sure what they were doing other than "wrestling" but just the thought that it was happening and his mental image of the body parts were enough to make him climax in a matter of seconds. It should also be said that he could become aroused if one of them looked at him with a come-hither look which, on occasion, one of them did as he was not unattractive in his pallid and anemic way. But as he grew older and focused more on the life of study before him, he left the world of love, sex, lust, and desire behind.

Gratification of any desire would be dependant on engaging in behaviors that disgusted him and would have called for too much involvement in an unappealing reality. Even if he had wanted a woman, the two possible avenues were blocked. Paying for sex would have occasioned interaction with an unacceptable class of people in circumstances that were too frightening to contemplate. Bedding a conventional girl would have meant joining in the mating rituals of dating, chats in pubs, and dinners at a good restaurant. That wouldn't do. The only times he had ever seen the unadorned female form had been page-two pictures in newspapers and nudie magazines left in public lavatories, and having never experienced the real act of sex, or even a real fantasy about the real act of sex, it was not all that difficult for him to leave those thoughts and desires behind. Or so he thought, but lying there in bed it occurred to him in a horrifying burst of understanding that he had not left all that behind but had simply repressed it down into the nether regions of the subconscious. He tried to shake the images from his head, but just as he would lose them and concentrate on something else, they would re-appear again. They floated into his vision like succubae stretching his manhood full and making him yearn for them until he finally he sought relief in something he had not done for many a year.

He went to his office the next day as if he were a murderer returning to the scene of the crime. Although he thought he now knew enough about the operation of his PC to believe that no one else

could know what had happened last night, in the less-than-rational part of his mind, he could not be sure. He did not want to be seen by anyone, but he did want to know if people were looking at him with suspicion. He wanted to be a wraith, but he also wanted normal contact and assurance that all was well. It was his bad luck that his first two encounters were with the two people he would have least liked to have seen. Lost in thought he came around a corner and bumped straight into Miss. Pennywhistle, a tall secretary with perfectly formed and situated breasts. Her files and the papers within went fluttering to the floor in a blizzard of standard bond and his feet went into a St. Vitus's dance as he tried to recover his error and his balance.

“Oh, Prof. Needlebeek, you did give me quite a scare. I am so sorry running into you like that as if I didn't have a thought in my head. There, there, don't worry about those papers, I'll pick them up.”

Almost simultaneous with the collision he stooped to pick them up in an effort to hide the erection created by that very decided and firm nudge her right breast had given his right arm. In his nervous state the accident had almost totally unraveled him but through the confusion the lingering sensation on his arm glowed with soft warmth. Unfortunately, he looked up at her, trying to concentrate on what she was saying, just in time to look directly up her short skirt all the way to her very skimpy panties as she skootched down to help him retrieve the files and papers. The added

impetus this gave his erection made him actually drop to his hands and knees in an effort to hide it from her and took away any remaining power of speech that might have been left. Luckily for him, not only did she miss spotting the bulge in his pants but her continued chatting left him no room to get a word in even if he had been able.

“I do wish they would put some of those mirrors up on the ceilings at these corners like they do in Japan and America and some other places, it really is a help. I saw them over there, you know, over in Japan that is”—all this while dexterously scooping up the jetsam at a furious rate—“my Andrew had a job teaching English over there, fancy him teaching English, and I went into his office building and they were all over the place. The mirrors, I mean. Well, they wanted me to stay and teach for them but I really didn’t trust them, you know, and didn’t want to get myself into anything I couldn’t get out of, especially thousands of miles away... There. Done. All ship shape and Bristol fashion, well, cheery-bye. Sorry again. Or ‘so solly’ as they say in Japan”

She rumbaed away down the corridor all laughs and giggles while he remained on the floor pinned on his hands and knees. He knew that he could not stay there long as someone else was sure to be coming down the corridor at any moment and so he rose, even though his pants still showed signs of an obvious protuberance. As he stood Peter just missed knocking him down again. My God. Peter. Did he see the bulge? Was he somehow able to tell what had happened on the PC? Did he link the

two? Take a hold on yourself. Stuffing his hands in his thankfully pleated pockets to confuse the jumble of shapes down there, Prof. Needlebeek realized that at least this was a chance to find out if Peter knew.

8. Them

Reading Time 3'

“Ah. Peter,” while observing him closely but surreptitiously, “Sorry to be in your way but Miss Pennywhistle just ran into me while coming ‘round the corner and I had yet got my bearings.”

“No need to worry, sir. So how are things going with the PC? Got the hang of it?”

There seemed to be no trace of sarcasm or suspicion or malice, nor was there any indication that this was anything but a simple and polite inquiry as to whether he was becoming accustomed to the machine.

“Yes, well, you know. Old dogs and new tricks. But actually, you know, I do think it is coming along and I do want to apologize for being so short with you during the training sessions, I am afraid I was rather irritable.”

Not to worry, and no need to apologize. Actually, I would say that you have taken to it quicker than some others and, frankly, better than some others.”

With this pleasant exchange they parted ways and as he reached his office Prof. Needlebeek realized that he had lost his erection. As he opened the door and withdrew the key from the lock he looked around as if to find some tell-tale evidence from the previous night. What he expected to see

he was not quite sure, but the very air of the room still seemed to hang heavy with a strange scent. He shut the door, leaned against it, closed his eyes, concentrated his mind, and then, opening his eyes, brusquely opened the blinds and the window to let out whatever it was that was left. The sunshine. The clean air. With a laugh at himself, a rare occurrence, he turned the machine on, put it through its start-up paces, logged on to his e-mail, and collapsed completely. There on the inbox were no less than seven messages from “The Ladies of Scunthorpe”.

He stabbed at the “off” button with lightening terror, and felt an extra pang of pain as the screen went dead, simultaneously realizing he had not properly shut down the computer. God, God, God, he had done it again, but who were these people and why were they harassing him so? He did not want the Ladies of Scunthorpe, he did not want lurid pictures of body parts and sex acts on his computer. He wanted his computer to be what it, for a few brief days, promised to be—a machine that could transport him further into his own world without machines.

That was it for today, after the shock he could not face dealing with the computer. He put everything aside but the most mundane of tasks, going over his student’s papers, reading some background materials for his research. But even in these tasks the fear stalked him. The fear and, yes, the excitement. Even as his stomach shrunk to the size of a walnut and bile rose into the back of his

throat, even in the midst of almost paralyzing anxiety, he still knew that it would not leave him alone and he did not want it to. It? Them. The Ladies of Scunthorpe. The images of those “Ladies” began to rise up from the repressive depths to which he had sent them and present themselves to his mind and his imagination. Did he want them to be mummies?, all breasts and smoothness and soft skin dark wetness. Or did he want them to be whores? command them on their knees “I’ve paid you to do what I want.” Or was he their slave? down on his knees to do what they commanded.

9. Escape

Reading Time 1'

As the increasingly varied and strident images forced themselves on his consciousness, he lost all hope of getting anything done. He had to escape, escape from this room and that infernal machine. It was sending these images to him. He knew it. It was not his mind, it was the machine sending the messages. It was sending its electronic impulses straight to his mind. It might be possible. After all what was the internet? From where did the machine gather all this data, all these pictures, all this information? Peter had explained them in terms of bits of memory, electronic pulses, and if they could be gathered from wherever they were and brought here to be thrown up on the screen, why couldn't they be sent right into his head? But how could it do that if it were off? He had turned it off, even if he had again done so without shutting it down. And then he noticed the little orange light on the front of the machine. Funny. He had never noticed that before. Or had he? What was it that Peter said. Sleeping? The PC was sleeping? No, it is not sleeping, it is just pretending to sleep and is actually sending electronic impulses into my brain, the machines taking over the world, these are the kinds of things that happen with technology. He got down on his hands and knees, searching for the socket and the PC's plug and was just about to rip it out when a knock came on the door.

“Prof. Needlebeek?”

Silence.

“Prof. Needlebeek?”

He lie there hoping she would go away but he knew that she wouldn't. Emma Gaiterswaste. His pupil. Her tutoring. God, God, God. He had forgotten all about her appointment in his fight with the machine.

Rap, rap, rap. Are you there, sir?

“One moment, Emma.”

He violently jerked the plug from the socket and with satisfaction saw the orange light die. “There, damn you,” he thought, and got back on his feet.

10. Emma Gaiterswaiste

Reading Time 8'

Brushing off his knees and feeling a pain in his back from the exertion, he went to the door and opened it. Emma Gaiterswaiste was nondescript. Hair, flat pageboy. Face, pasty and round. Weight, 130 pounds. Body, cylindrical and hidden by a darkish jumper. Shoes, eminently sensible. The only telling feature was an obviously expensive but unostentatious watch. To Prof. Needlebeek all of his students were nondescript because he never paid attention to anything but their studies. In this he was the archetypal professor. Students did not exist outside his office during tutorial or the classroom during lecture. And when they were in either they existed only as pupils. He had had students who were gay, wore studs in their tongues, played rugby for England, looked like Julie Christie in her prime, were born-again Christians, and who went on to be merchant bankers. He never knew about or noticed these differentiating features, could never tell the difference between them, and was not able to remember their names from term to term, to say nothing about after they had graduated.

She gave a start when he jerked open the door with the last few drops of violence that had been left unspent from the pulling of the plug.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Yes, well, come in, Emma.”

She immediately recognized that something was wrong, and he knew she realized.

“Oh my God,” he thought, “if someone as dull and unimaginative as Emma can see it, what about others with intelligence and real perception?” He wondered what she saw and what she noticed. Was there something written on his face? Were his debaucheries somehow evident on the walls, projected on to the covers of his books?

Actually, she was wondering why the windows were open and the light flooding into the room. Going into Prof. Needlebeeks room was not unlike entering the catacombs, and it had been referred to by campus wags as “the mushroom farm” and “the crypt.” She may actually have been the first student to observe direct sunlight on his desk.

“Yes, please sit down, Emma. I am sorry. I’ve been trying to get the computer to work and had to check the socket and somewhat disturbed myself, but let’s turn to the matter at hand, shall we?”

“Oh, I have a friend, a male friend, actually, who knows quite a lot about computers, would you like me to...”

“No, no, that’s fine, and thank you, but let’s get back to where we were last week, shall we?”

They were at a critical juncture in her thesis which had to do with the reflection of Greco-Roman mythical art in Denis Diderot's plates of his L'Encyclopédie. This morning she was to discuss the first plate from Volume VIII which depicts the casting of an equestrian statue. She started by discussing how the musculature of the laborers' forearms and thighs could not have been correct given the diet and average body type of eighteenth-century French foundry laborers and artisans, but instead was an allegory of heroic labour based on...

He sat facing her across the desk and his mind began to wander. Her repeated anatomical references began to stimulate other anatomical references in his own imagining that had more to do with "My Secret Life and Loves" than with the rational philosophe. He began gazing at her chest and wondered what was hidden by that formless jumper. Shocked by this first sexual thought about a student, he immediately looked at the computer to confirm that the orange light was still out and that it could no longer be sending its electrical impulses. It was off, but did that mean that this was truly his mind that was creating these images, or did it mean that the machine could send them into his mind whether or not it was disconnected from its power source? He believed it was the latter. He closed his eyes to concentrate on what Emma was saying and to block his infant imaginings about her body, but this projected the images of the Ladies of Scunthorpe on to the back of his eyelids. He saw there a faceless woman cupping her breasts

together, holding them outward to him and as he snapped his eyes open there was that same image projected now on to the chest of Emma so that it appeared as if she were offering him her breasts, nipples and dark brown aureoles forward toward his wet mouth. That was just the beginning, more and more images from the Ladies of Scunthorpe were conjured up from the air of the room and placed upon the unknowing and innocent body of Emma, placing her in the positions he had seen on the computer, giving her the physical attributes he had seen there. He noted with sudden horror that he had a painful erection that felt as if his skin would explode if he did not immediately relieve himself.

“Emma!” said in a voice much too loud and with much too much emotion.

Interrupted in mid-sentence while describing a foundry scene from the ruins at Pompeii, she peeped, “Oh!”

“I am sorry, my dear, ah...Emma...Miss Gaiterswaste. I am not at all well and I am afraid I am coming down with a cold or a fever and I think perhaps we should end this session immediately. I don't want to spread anything on you... I mean spread anything to you. I mean infect you with my germs, and so I think it would be best if you came back later, another day. Miss. Pennywhistle will be in touch with you.”

Had he called her, “my dear”? What was wrong

with the man? Now that she looked closely at him she immediately noticed that he was sweating and was even paler than normal. His eyes were wide where they were normally half-hooded as if he were on the verge of sleep, and his normally calm and neutral voice was strident, almost hysterical. He was acting decidedly strange. For the first time since she had started tutorials with him, he did not get up to open the door for her. He must really be sick and the last thing she wanted was to stay in this office breathing his germs. She had a date this coming Friday night and, as she was not often asked out for an evening, she did not want to miss it because she had whatever it is that he has. It was, therefore, with alacrity that she saw herself out when he apologized for not getting up.

As soon as she had left he immediately took down his pants and ejaculated with an immense sense of relief and pleasure. The pleasure lasted about fifteen seconds which was how long it took him to realize that he had not locked the door and that he had made a mess all over the underside of the desk and the floor. He immediately stood up and waddled over to the door with his pants around his ankles, holding himself up in one hand to keep from dripping on the floor and turning the lock with the other. As he searched for the box of paper tissues he kept thinking over and over in his mind, "how could I be such a fool? What if someone had come in? What if she had left her papers here and returned?" Unfortunately, that last thought re-stimulated his erection just as he was wiping it off and he had to fight the image of her coming back

in, finding him with his masculinity exposed and ravishing him on the floor. It was not hard to repress the thought as he wiped the floor and underside of the desk with tissues. He was repulsed by himself, on the floor wiping up his own semen, while at the same time trying to eliminate every last piece of evidence. Finally convinced that every trace had been eliminated, he sat heavily in his chair and knew he had to leave the room. As long as he remained it would prey on him. It would send its images to him plugged in or unplugged. He would have to find an excuse to have it removed. He didn't care what the Principal or the Chancellor or Peter or anyone else said. It would have to go. He left the office just two hours after he had arrived.

He bought a pack of cigarettes on the way back to his flat and sat in the kitchen with a cup of tea, smoking for the first time since he was a student and trying to make sense of the morning. Of the computer. Of the whole bloody, yes bloody, situation. What the hell was happening? Looking out the window, all he knew was that he had to find a way to deal with it or he'd go insane. Perhaps he already had. As buses changed gears and bicycle bells rang and birds sang and the sun set and the scent of frying eggs and chips slipped through the window, he tried to think. He would be rational, he would reason the problem out as would any natural philosopher. He thought, "There are things that happen in life which at first blush seem to be inexplicable, supernatural phenomenon, but any man who has my intelligence knows that all things

have their becoming and being and ending in the material world. It is there, then, that the answer to this phenomenon lies. There are several things I know to be fact, (1) I have made for myself a life that is all I want it to be. I have willed it through force of intellect and rational planning. (2) It is my life, the life I want and it is in danger of being taken away from me by forces beyond my control. (3) It is the first time I have not been in control of my life since leaving university and I cannot cope with the loss of control. I must regain it. (4) The machine is now in control. (5) I am most strongly affected by the visions when I am in the physical presence of the machine. (6) The machine is a machine and works on scientific principles in accordance with the laws governing the properties of PCs qua mechanical objects. (7) Therefore, the solution to the problem is to be found within the machine.”

11. Hello Ladies

Reading Time 8'

He felt as if at last he was getting control of the problem. He had rationalism on his side. That evening as he went back outside to deal with the shopping, get the cleaning and run the myriad other errands he had been barely able to face since the attack of the “Ladies of Scunthorpe”, he could feel the black cloud inside his soul beginning to dissolve. After a light dinner he took out his office work and the papers he had been intending to grade and worked late into the night with only the occasional, fleeting wisp of their wantonness touching on his mind and stirring his body. And that night when he finally went into his bed, when they did come to him in their full fury with legs open, genitals exposed and breasts thrust forward, he accepted them as his lovers and fell asleep spent and satisfied.

All the next morning as his confidence grew in gradual stages, his fear of the office and the terrors within dispersed in equal proportion. Walking down the hall toward his office he felt none of the previous apprehension or fear of being detected, but when his hand was just about to touch the doorknob it returned to him in full force. Dread and apprehension even greater than he had felt before stayed his hand from inserting the key into the lock and the impact was so severe that he was afraid that he would literally collapse if he didn't sit

down. Once again hoping beyond hope that no one would come out into the corridor and see him in this reduced state he slid to the floor, first on his hands and knees and then sitting upright beside the door, his back propped against the wall. He was so disappointed in himself. All the rational thinking and the clean plan that he had conceived last night were suddenly blown away like ashes in the wind. He knew the plan would work if only he had the courage to carry it out. If only he had the courage of his convictions. It was in this state that Peter found him as he rounded the corner.

“Prof. Needlebeek, are you all right? God, man, you’re sweating buckets.”

“Yes, I know. Sorry. I’ll be all right, something just came over me. I don’t know what it was.”

“Should I call the nurse? Do you have a pain in your chest or anything? Is it your heart?”

“No, no, I’m sure its not that, I just felt a little dizzy, I think I’ve been working too hard at night and not getting enough sleep.”

At this last remark Peter gave him an odd look, part questioning, part knowing. “Yes, I suspect so. As a matter of fact that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Can we go in your office?”

“Yes, here take the key and unlock it for me would you, please.”

Prof. Needlebeek was grateful for someone to actually start the world moving again, for the hand getting up and the opening of the door, but above all he was grateful that someone would be entering with him in case they were waiting inside for him. Would Peter see them as well? That was an interesting question. The office seemed as dim and musty as it had the day before and he went directly to open the blinds, sensing as he did that, yes, they were still inside the machine, but thankfully inside and not yet displaying themselves to the world. He purposely sat on the couch normally reserved for the times when he had several students in at the same time for tutorials as it faced the computer at an oblique angle and he could avoid seeing it altogether as he looked at Peter, now seated in the chair that just yesterday had held Emma.

“Now, are you all right, Professor?” asked Peter.

“Yes, Think nothing of it, I’m quite all right.”

“Good. I had wanted to talk to you this morning, professor, but perhaps another time would be better.”

“No, please. I’m fine. What was it you wanted to talk about?”

“Well, actually it is a bit of a difficult topic. You see, as part of the computerization plan we have to run constant audits of the system to get some idea of who is using the system for what purposes. And,

well, I came across a bit of an oddity that I'd like to discuss with you."

At first Prof. Needlebeek had to fight through the lingering haze in his mind; the technical words that Peter used as he continued on just didn't make sense and his meaning was not clear until, suddenly, he understood what Peter was talking about. He had been found out.

"...and so you see I thought before I talked to anyone else about this I'd come down and have a quiet word with you. I'm the one who discovered it and no one else knows. Would you like to tell me why you were logging on to these, well... these particular websites? Although the system is so new The College has not caught up to it in terms of official policy, I am sure that if it was for a legitimate research purpose it would be allowed. However, I think that if you are going to continue to access these sites, especially as you seem to do so late at night, you might want to make some formal application for authorization so that no one could...misinterpret your usage of the system."

Now that he finally understood the meaning and intent of Peter's words, he also understood that he was being offered a way out. What should he do? Make a clean breast of it and promise never to do it again? Go along with the suggested escape route and claim it was for research? Research for what? Plenty of options there. There isn't a subject under the sun for which any academic worth his salt couldn't immediately spin out an appropriate

research topic. As Peter sat looking at him in polite but firm anticipation of a response, the sweat again starting to form on his upper lip, the houris beginning to slide out of the machine at the extreme of his peripheral vision, the epiphany happened. He realized how he could fulfill that wonderful thought that had buoyed him since last night until it had receded again when faced with his office.

Confidence and control were his again.

“Well, actually, Peter I had no idea that you were spying on me...”

“Now, now Professor, no one’s spying on you, this auditing is just a normal function.”

He thought, “Don’t overplay your hand, don’t anger him.”

“Yes, of course, just kidding, but seriously I had no idea that anyone knew what I did with the computer or where I went on the internet and all that, but I have to tell you that I don’t know why it is happening and I wanted to call you in to ask, but... well, you know. Just too damned embarrassing. I mean, what could I say” ‘Peter, I’m being attacked by pornography sites’?”

“Well, you should have come to me immediately and I would have cleaned it all up for you. As a matter of fact, now I think we’ll be looking into blocking those kinds of website if we can.”

“That would certainly be a relief, but I’m glad you came by this morning for another reason. I had wanted to talk to you about an idea that I had. Is it possible for me to get a similar set up in my home? I’d pay for it of course but I’d need you to help me with the purchase and getting tied into whatever it is that connects it to the internet and all that kind of thing. I do so much of my work there, and I especially like to do my research and writing at night. It would be so much more convenient to be able to do it at home rather than to have to travel into my office at late hours. As it is now, I will be thinking about whatever it is I am working on and when an idea pops into my head, as they occasionally do, I have to collect myself and my things and drive all the way in and then by the time I am settled down to work I have lost the thread. It would be just wonderful to turn to the PC and get on line and work on whatever it is that has come to mind.”

“Ah...I don’t know...”

“Well, I’ll tell you, I have a quid pro quo in mind that may help you make the decision. I know that there are still many academics here who are fighting the whole programme and while they may have been cowed into it by the powers on high you know better than anyone the problems of their recalcitrant adoption of the whole IT idea. You also know that I am seen as somewhat of a force among that group. Help me with what I want, and I’ll help to move things along. I’ll be a force for change.”

The weak sunlight of dawn began to drift like mist through the drapes and into Prof. Needlebeek's bedroom. It was early yet but it was one of those mornings when lying abed and awaking were equally pleasurable thoughts to entertain. He had time to spare and could just remain cuddled under the duvet listening to the birdsong suddenly switched on by the rising sun and allowing his mind to bump along the pillows, the world afloat. On the other hand, he rolled today's activities around in his mind like a poor man constantly fingers a twenty-pound note in his pocket. This morning he was to give one of his favorite lectures, "Humanistic Thought in the Enlightenment and Its Effects on Young Marx." And then in the afternoon he was to present his report on the implementation of the programme for getting all HND course materials and syllabi on the 'net to the Principal and Sir Barton Riggs. The pleasure he derived from contemplating his day invigorated him to the point where he could just not keep himself in bed any longer. He would rise, shower, make his tea and toast and read The Times. Yes, he smiled, and maybe get a good morning kiss. Rising from the bed he shuffled out to the kitchen, put on the kettle, and pushed the computer's "on" button as he passed the dining table.

"Good morning, my dears."

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