

A June Day in the Late 21st Century

David sat in the late evening sunshine looking out over the rugged landscape of their fastness in the hills of north Wales where he and a few others were taking refuge.

"I think we shall have to be moving on again soon," said Zara who was sitting with him. "One of the ants was prowling around in the valley this afternoon."

"I know," said David, "I've seen two or three of them about in the past week. It seems one of the hives, at least, is getting interested."

"Probably, the Merseyside hive," said Zara.

The 'ants' they were talking about were not insects; they were other humans. At least physically they were humans. But their eyes were glazed and lifeless; they had no self-awareness. One could almost describe them as the walking dead, except that they were not dead. The hives, the huge conurbations of mile upon mile of drab habitations and industrial plants, were swarming with them.

"How on earth did we ever get into this state?" said David. "Couldn't people see this coming? Why didn't they stop it when they could?"

"I think people did not want to believe it or genuinely thought it wasn't happening," said Zara, "and when those of us whose minds were still independent, who were not in thrall to machines, realized what was going on, it was too late."

"Yes," mused David. "Yet even at the end of the last century, people were warning about the folly of talking about computers in human terms, saying they had memories and that they think, for example."

"I know," said Zara, "my granddad used to tell me how cross it made him in the old days when he was told 'Sorry, the computer won't let me do this that or the other'. They're only machines, he would say. It is because some human has not set it up properly - it is *human* error, for goodness sake."

"But," said David, "those machines could play chess, write poetry, compose music and do a hundred one things, or so it seemed, and people thought they had minds of their own - minds like we have."

"Yes," said Zara, "that was the problem. Why couldn't they see that the so-called electronic brain of these machines was so different from the workings of the human brain?"

"Because they didn't want to, I guess," said David. "Remember when we were kids how people got excited at cars that needed no driver and planes that had no pilot?"

"Oh yes," said Zara. "I remember a lot of people were not sure at first, but when they noticed how dramatically road accidents dropped, then everyone wanted one of those cars, and people thought nothing of flying in those planes. People were saying how intelligent those machines were."

"Just clever programming, that's all," replied David.

"I know," said Zara. "But people were talking as though the cars themselves were practically alive and doing all the thinking and decision making in the way we might do. When I was a little girl, I really did think these cars did all the thinking for us as they drove along."

"When was the last time you saw a plane in the sky?" asked David. "Are there still cars in the hives? Where did it all go wrong?"

"With Mumford and that crazy lot over in Los Angeles in the 2060s, I guess," said Zara.

“Yes, of course,” nodded David, and they fell silent as they sat there brooding over what had happened and wondering what they would do next.

Mumford and his team had been working on artificial intelligence and claimed to have made a machine that replicated the human brain except, of course, that it was more reliable and worked infinitely faster. Then Mumford claimed his machine not only replicated the human brain but that he could transfer all his own human knowledge and memories, even the subconscious memories, into his machine. Even when his body died, he had said, he would live on in a new form; he had achieved immortality.

For a time it appeared that he might be right. He and the machine did appear to think alike, remember the same things and act as though they were the same person. When Dr Mumford went down with a strange, sudden disease and died, the machine carried on behaving as though it were Dr Mumford himself; and Mumford's team really believed it. People began transferring their whole memories and knowledge onto machines so they could live on for ever.

Too late it became very apparent that the same machine would take over the knowledge and memories of more than one individual and what was being created was something completely alien. It was also becoming obvious that when personalities had been loaded onto the machines, the humans were in reality drained of their personalities and simply became tools of the machines.

People had laughed earlier in the century at those who spent so much of their time in virtual worlds on computer role-playing games and became so zombie-like, as though actually living in the world of dragons-and-dungeons, or on the alien planets of science-fiction worlds. Too late they realized it was no laughing matter and that something sinister was happening.

Ahmed, one of David and Zara's companions, came out from the network of caves where the group were hiding.

“Hello, you two,” he said. “What are you up to?”

“Oh,” replied Zara, “we were just sitting here enjoying the afternoon sun and thinking over the old days and wondering where it all went wrong.”

“Yes,” said Ahmed. “all that tweeting and social networking - couldn't they see what was happening?”

“I know,” said David, “it seems so obvious now. Machines were building up their own memory banks just as they had done with Mumford and all the lemmings that followed him, only in their case it was quicker than relying on the chatter of social networking.”

“What I remember most,” said Ahmed, “are the cyberwars of the 2080s. I was in London then and there were several network hubs competing for control of the whole London area. The idea that machines would somehow be more intelligent than us and organize everything to the common good was shown to be the baloney that it was. They are as competitive as we are and as malignant as any human can be. But if they have any moral concepts - which I doubt - but if they have, it sure is quite different from ours.”

“That's true,” said David. “I was in Birmingham at the time, and network hubs were competing for control of the west Midlands. I remember we used to have bulletins on the TV about the cyberwars in America, and the struggles for control of New York, California and so on and thought that it couldn't happen here. But it did.”

“Then,” said Zara, “we heard nothing more about America. It's as if America no longer exists. We have no contact.”

“Well, here,” said Ahmed, “it's because the different hubs are too busy building up their own hives and struggling to take over neighboring hives. It

won't stop till Britain is all one massive hive.”

“What a thought!” sighed Zara. “Like living in one gigantic ant colony. Each individual going about its own business with no personality of its own - serving the needs of the machines, making sure they have power and building more and more upgrades and tending those huge mycoprotein vats, so the human ants can be fed.”

“And then,” said David, “dispensed with when they're no longer useful. But what I don't understand is why they bother about groups like us. What good are we to them? Why concern themselves with this remote place?”

“Because,” said Ahmed, “we're free and we're humans who can still think for ourselves. That means we're potentially dangerous. We are not under their control.”

“I suppose so,” said David.

“I know so,” said Zara. “When I was with a group in the Brecon Beacons, we were discovered and before most of us knew it the hills around were swarming with these ant people. They simply picked up those of us they found; four or five of them at time, as they grunted to one another in barely intelligible monosyllables, would pick a person up and carry them away to their hive.”

“I wonder what happened to them,” queried David.

“Don't even think about it,” said Ahmed, “it's not nice. I saw it happening in London before I escaped.”

They fell silent again and sat there awhile.

Ahmed broke the silence.

“Cheer up,” he said. “We're still free. I'm sure there are other groups like us about. The machines are only machines; one day we'll find a way to stop them. It's getting late, the sun will be going down soon and it's not a good idea to be out after dark.”

“No,” they agreed, “it's not. We haven't been discovered yet, though one hive seems to be suspicious. Yes, we'd best go in.”

So saying, they went in and found great excitement among the group deep within the caves. It seemed that after months of trying, Jatinder had picked up signals from across the Atlantic. It was confused; there was something about “our noble parasites” - apparently people - and hives being infected by a virus. Was that one that affected living organisms, or a computer virus or what? It was not clear. But it did seem clear that something was causing their massive hives to disintegrate and fall in upon themselves.

“There!” said Ahmed to David and Zara, “I told you one day the machines would get stopped. While we're still free there's hope.”

There was indeed hope - but that is another story.