



September 2020

*“The Machine Stops” by E.M. Forster was written over 100 years ago but it anticipated the internet with an uncanny accuracy, particularly in light of Covid. From its vivid depictions of video calling and social media to the Zoom lectures that its main character loves so dearly, Forster’s fantasy was eerily prophetic. As you’ll see, though funny and warm, the story seems quite alarmist. I wonder, however, if it would have been read that way in 1909 when it was just a dystopic story. My friends Kristin and Serena both mailed me copies of the book this year (pictured above) and I’ve been wanting to pass along the kindness and share the story with all of you. So I took my favourite lines, tinkered with them ever so slightly, and connected them into a piece that pretty much resembles the original. Instead of a letter this month, please enjoy my adaptation of Forster’s classic:*

## **The Machines Stop**

### **I.**

Imagine, if you can, a small Machine, hexagonal in shape, like the cell of a bee. Its screen is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. Now imagine this Machine lying swaddled within the contours of a woman’s hand – its hexagonal screen alight, electric bells ringing. The woman is sitting in her armchair, the Machine flush against her palm. Her face, white as a fungus, is looking into the Machine. She is smiling.

For months at a time, Vashti did not leave her room. She felt very connected with her friends, but she had not seen most of them in-person for years. Vashti had heard that there were still some people connecting face-to-face, but she could not imagine anyone she knew being interested in that sort of behaviour. There were no in-person schools, shopping was done through the Machines, and office buildings were no longer used. The only people who saw each other in the flesh regularly were certain workers – farmers, miners, factory hands, and a few technicians – as well as the homeless, picking through Machine scraps and used metals.

Vashti loved her Machine. Her experiences with it were more vivid even than the world itself. And as time went on, visits to the outside began to seem vulgar and perhaps faintly improper to her. They were unproductive of ideas, and had no connection with the habits that really mattered.

### **II.**

Vashti’s son, Kuno, had been a researcher at the university. He wrote his dissertation on what philosophers call “the imponderable bloom,” declaring the actual essence of intercourse to be something physical. Kuno was studying at a time when the legal frameworks for mandatory Machine

use were being developed, and the excitement for Machines was reaching unprecedented heights. He expected that his findings would be groundbreaking but they were never published. After a few months of rejections, he lost his job at the university and became quite reclusive – even from the Machines. Vashti did not hear from him often, and when they spoke, it was always quick and formal.

One evening, Vashti was sat in her armchair looking into the Machine, bending with her friends, in view all around her. The clumsy system of in-person exercise classes had been long since abandoned; neither Vashti nor her friends left their rooms. As Vashti stretched towards the sky, or rather the ceiling, a bell sounded and the hexagonal screen filled with the image of her son. She touched the photo and it came to life. Kuno was there before her, smiling gravely.

“I want you to come see me,” he said.

“But I can see you,” Vashti exclaimed.

“I want to see you not through the Machines,” said Kuno.

Vashti thought Kuno looked sad. She could not be sure, for the Machines did not transmit nuances of expression. They gave a pretty clear view, one that was good enough for all practical purposes, but as Vashti tried to read her son’s mood, she felt lost. She could not, however, make such a journey just to find out how Kuno was feeling.

“I do not have the time,” Vashti said.

Kuno did not respond and Vashti had nothing more to say. She made her screen dark and slept. She awoke and the screen filled with its soft radiance. She ate and exchanged ideas with her friends. She listened to music and attended lectures and exercise classes. She made her screen dark and slept. The Machines hummed eternally, but she did not notice the noise. The earth, carrying her, hummed as it sped through silence, turning her now to the invisible sun, now to the invisible stars. She awoke and her Machine flooded with light.

“Kuno!”

“I will not talk to you,” he answered, “until you come.”

### III.

As she waited to board the air-ship, Vashti was seized with the terrors of direct experience. The others in the waiting area were the first fellow creatures she had seen face-to-face in several months. Few traveled these days, thanks to the advances of science. Except in exercise, people seldom moved their bodies; all unrest was concentrated in the soul.

An electronic voice came over their Machines and directed everyone to board. Inside the air-ship, Vashti’s anxiety increased. The arrangements were old-fashioned and rough. There was even a female attendant, to whom she would have to announce her wants during the voyage.

“O Machine!” she murmured, caressing the hexagon in her pocket.

When the air-ships had been built, the desire to look at things still lingered in the world. Hence the extraordinary number of skylights and windows. Vashti had closed all the curtains, but one star peeped through a flaw in the blind, and after a few hours of uneasy slumber, she was disturbed by an unfamiliar glow, which was the dawn. She was annoyed and tried to adjust the blind. But the blind flew up altogether, and she saw through the skylight small pink clouds, swaying against a background of blue, and as the sun crept higher, its radiance entered direct, brimming down the wall, like a golden sea. It rose and fell with the air-ship’s motion, just as waves rise and fall, but it advanced steadily, as a tide advances. Unless Vashti was careful, it would strike her face. A spasm of horror shook her and she rang for the attendant. The attendant too was horrified, but she could do nothing. Vashti stood up and tried to swerve away from the sunbeams, letting out a cry as she lost her balance. The attendant put out her hand to steady her.

“How dare you!” exclaimed Vashti. “You forget yourself!”

The attendant was confused, but apologized for not having let her fall.

IV.

Vashti finally arrived at her son's room, which exactly resembled her own. Now that Kuno himself, flesh of her flesh, stood close beside her at last, she wondered why she had come. She was too well bred to embrace him, so she stood in the doorway averting her gaze, and spoke as follows:

"Here I am. I have had the most terrible journey and it is not worth it, Kuno, it is not worth it. My time is too precious. The sunlight almost touched me, and I have met with the rudest people. I can only stop a few minutes. Say what you want to say, and then I must return."

Kuno looked apprehensive but began, "I wanted you to know. I am learning how to live differently, and how the Machines can be changed – how they are changing. Sometimes I try not to use them altogether. But in the end, I am figuring out my own way."

"Your own way?" Vashti whispered, "But that would be wrong."

"Why?"

The question shocked her beyond measure.

"I only meant," she tried, "that to find out a way of your own was— Besides, there is no other way anymore."

"So it is always supposed."

"What do you mean, Kuno? What have you been doing?"

Here Kuno paused for several moments. Then, "We have lost the sense of space. We say 'space is annihilated,' but we have annihilated not space, but the sense thereof. We have lost a part of ourselves. I determined to recover it, and I began by pacing up and down my room. Up and down until I was tired, and so did recapture the meaning of 'Near' and 'Far.' 'Near' is a place to which I can get quickly on my feet, not a place to which the air-ship will take me quickly. 'Far' is a place to which I cannot get quickly on my feet. Humans are the measure. This was my first lesson. Humans' bodies are the measure of distance, and we are the measure of all that is lovable and desirable and strong. It was then that I called you for the first time, and you would not come."

Vashti said nothing and Kuno continued.

"Then I left my room and walked as far as I could go. I passed all kinds of tubes used for deliveries, but none of them were large enough for me to fit through. At one point it occurred to me that there had been ventilation shafts built for the workers who installed all our rooms in the first place, and I could think of nothing but these ventilation shafts. Had they been destroyed by all the food-tubes and medicine-tubes and music-tubes that had been added? Or did traces of them remain? One thing was for certain, if I came upon them anywhere, they would be near the outermost layer of rooms. Everywhere else, all space was accounted for."

Kuno paused, and absurd as he was, Vashti noticed that his words were moving her.

"I kept walking and walking and eventually I found what looked like ventilation shafts. Crawling inside, I could see a sprinkle of lights in the distance, non-artificial lights coming from outside. It was nighttime so I assumed these were the stars but I was not prepared for them. As I emerged there came a silence which pierced my ears like a sword. The Machines hum! Did you know that? Their hum penetrates our blood, and may even guide our thoughts. Who knows! As I got outside, I could feel I was getting beyond their power."

Tears gathered in his mother's eyes. There was not room for such a person in the world.

Kuno broke off, "I don't think this is interesting you. There are no ideas in it, and I wish that I had not troubled you to come. We are too different, mother."

She told him to continue.

He looked into his mother's face. After a moment, he began again, "As I stared up at the stars, all the things I had cared about and all the people I had spoken to through the Machines appeared infinitely little. The stars took me to a different time. I started to laugh and could do nothing else. Once I managed to break my gaze away from the sky, I looked down and noticed the ground beneath my

feet. You will not want to hear an account of the little hills that I saw – low colourless hills. But to me they were living and the turf that covered them was a skin, under which their muscles rippled, and I felt that those hills had called with incalculable force to people in the past, and that people had loved them. Now they sleep – perhaps forever. They commune with humanity in dreams.”

His voice rose passionately, “Cannot you see that it is we that are dying, and that the only things that really live are the Machines? We created them to do our will, but we cannot make them do our will now. They have robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch. They have blurred every human relation, stifled our wills. Oh, I have no remedy – or, at least, only this – to tell people again and again of the stars and the low colourless hills.”

Kuno stopped for several moments. Finally, “When I got back to my room, I was surrounded by artificial air, artificial light, artificial peace, and my screen was ringing with messages from friends wanting to know whether I had come across any new ideas lately.”

Here his story ended. Discussion of it was impossible and Vashti turned to go.

“It will end in homelessness,” she said quietly.

“I wish it would,” retorted Kuno.

“Do you mean that you could live outside?”

“Yes.”

“Ferns and a little grass may survive, but all higher forms have perished.”

“I have seen them,” Kuno declared.

“Seen what?”

“I saw her in the twilight.”

He was mad. Vashti departed, nor, in the troubles that followed, did she ever see him again.

V.

Years passed and Vashti did not hear from her son. She had seen through the Machines that he had moved to a room much closer to hers, but she did not seek him out. She was content attending exercise classes and lectures, and sharing ideas with friends.

As visits outside became less common, the nature of Vashti’s lectures changed too. Instead of learning from a scientist who had visited the sea, for example, Vashti listened to lectures on the sea compiled out of other lectures that had already been delivered on the same subject.

Vashti and her friends even created a lecture themselves, gathering various descriptions of the strange feeling of peace that came over people when they handled their Machines, the ecstasy of touching a button, however unimportant, or of ringing an electric bell, however superfluously. Their lecture ended with a close-up of Vashti’s Machine and her voice:

“The Machines,” Vashti began, “feed us and clothe us and house us; through them we speak to one another, through them we see one another, in them we have our being. The Machines are the friends of ideas and the enemies of superstition. The Machines are omnipotent, eternal; blessed are the Machines.”

The lecture was very well received, Vashti’s speech especially. Her words were shared so many times and in so many forms that people forgot it was she who first spoke them. Her ideas became known as “non-denominational mechanism” and everyone Vashti knew was a follower.

When new developments emerged from the Machines, it was hard to determine where they had come from or who caused them. They yielded to some invincible pressure, which came no one knew whither, and which, when gratified, was succeeded by some new pressure equally invincible. To such a state of affairs it is convenient to give the name of progress. No one imagined that the Machines were getting out of hand. Year by year they served with increased efficiency and decreased intelligence. The better a person knew their own duties upon it, the less they understood the duties of their neighbour, and in all the world there was not one who understood the monster as a whole. Humanity, in its desire

for comfort, had over-reached itself. It had exploited the riches of nature too far. Quietly and complacently, it was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machines.

As for Vashti, her life went peacefully forward until the final disaster. She made her screen dark and slept; she awoke and it filled with its soft radiance again. She exercised, attended lectures, exchanged ideas with her innumerable friends, and believed she was growing more spiritual. The troubles began quietly, long before she was conscious of them.

One day she received a message from her son:

“The Machines stop,” he wrote.

“What are you trying to suggest?”

“The Machines are stopping, mother. I know it. I know the signs.”

Vashti burst into a peal of laughter. She did not respond, and Kuno did not send her a message again.

VI.

“Can you imagine anything more absurd?” she cried to a friend. “My son believes that the Machines are stopping. It would be impious if it was not mad.”

“The Machines are stopping?” her friend replied. “What does that mean? The phrase conveys nothing to me.”

“Nor to me.”

“He does not refer, I suppose, to the trouble there has been lately with the music?”

“I think not.”

“Have you complained to the authorities?”

“Yes, I told them about those curious gasping sighs that disfigure my symphonies. They sound like someone in pain. They said that it shall be remedied shortly.”

“They told me the same thing when I contacted them weeks ago! I wonder how many others have complained.”

“I asked them. They said the question was unmechanical, and they could not answer it.”

Obscurely worried, Vashti resumed her life. For one thing, the defect in the music irritated her. For another thing, she could not forget Kuno’s message.

She shared her feelings with all her friends, “There never was such an unfortunate woman as myself. I can never be sure of my music now. It gets worse and worse each time I summon it. I do not know whether it is inside my head, or inside the Machine.”

Time passed and Vashti found she resented the defects less and less. They had not been remedied, but human tissues had become so subservient that they readily adapted themselves to every caprice of the Machines. The sighs in her symphonies no longer irritated her; she accepted them as part of the melody. The jarring noise, whether in her head or in the Machine, was no longer resented. And so with the mouldy artificial fruit, so with the tap water that began to stink, so with the defective headlines that the media Machines had taken to emit. All were bitterly complained of at first and then acquiesced in and forgotten. Things went from bad to worse unchallenged.

And then the lights began to dim. In the rooms and on the screens. Vashti wondered if her vision was failing her. It became difficult to read. At times, Vashti could scarcely see across her room. The air, too, was foul. She looked through the dimly lit messages from her friends. Loud were the complaints, impotent the suggested remedies, heroic the tone of the lecturers as they cried: “Courage! Courage! The Machines are omnipotent, eternal; blessed are the Machines.” And though things improved again after a time, the old brilliancy was never recaptured, and humanity never recovered from its entrance into twilight.

VII.

Then there came a day when, without the slightest warning, without any previous hint of feebleness, the entire communication-system broke down all over the world, and the world, as Vashti understood it, ended.

She had been watching a lecture and when her screen went dark, she was irritated. She tried to call a friend, but there was no response. Doubtless the friend was sleeping. And so with the next friend whom she tried to call, and so with the next, until she remembered Kuno's cryptic remark, *the Machines stop*.

The phrase still conveyed nothing. If eternity was stopping, it would of course be set going shortly. But as time passed, she just sat there. She sat and waited. She waited so long that she lost track of time, unsure if it was night or day – and not caring either.

Then Vashti broke down, for with the cessation of activity came the unexpected terror – silence. She had never known silence, and the coming of it nearly killed her. At last, the final horror approached – light began to ebb, and she knew that civilization's long day was closing. Humans, who had once made god in their image, and had mirrored their strength on the constellations, beautiful naked humanity was dying, strangled in the garments they had woven. Century after century they had toiled, and here was their reward. The centuries of wrong against the muscles and the nerves, and those five portals by which we can alone apprehend – glossing it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap, the home of colourless ideas, the last sloshy stirrings of a spirit that had grasped the stars.

There was a knock on the door. A man entered her room. It was impossible to see him but she knew it was Kuno.

"Where are you?" Vashti sobbed.

His voice in the darkness said, "Here."

"Is there any hope, Kuno?"

"None for us."

"Where are you?"

"I am here, mother."

She moved towards his voice and embraced him.

"We are dying," Kuno said, "but we touch, we talk, not through the Machines."

He kissed her.

"We have come back to our own. We die, but we have recaptured life."

"But Kuno, is it true? Are there still people outside? Or is this poisoned darkness really the end?"

He replied, "I have seen them, spoken to them, loved them. They are living out in the midst and the ferns until our civilization stops. Today many are homeless, tomorrow—"

"Oh tomorrow! Some fool will start the Machines again, tomorrow."

But as she spoke, the whole city was broken like a honeycomb. An air-ship had crashed downwards, exploding as it went, rending gallery after gallery with its wings of steel. For a moment they saw the nations of the dead, and, before they joined them, scraps of the untainted sky.

YT,  
Aron