The IWM 1000

Alicia Yáñez Cossío

A man is only what he knows.
—Francis Bacon

Once upon a time, all the professors disappeared, swallowed and digested by a new system. All the centers of learning closed because they were outmoded, and their sites were converted into living quarters swarming with wise, well-organized people who were incapable of creating anything new.

Knowledge was an item that could be bought and sold. A device called the IWM 1000 had been invented. It was the ultimate invention: it brought an entire era to an end. The IWM 1000 was a very small machine, the size of an old scholarly briefcase. It was very easy to use—lightweight and affordable to any person interested in knowing anything. The IWM 1000 contained all human knowledge and all the facts of all the libraries of the ancient and modern world.

Nobody had to take the trouble of learning anything because the machine, which could be hand-carried or put on any piece of household furniture, provided any information to anybody. Its mechanism was so perfect, and the data it gave so precise, that nobody had dared to prove it otherwise. Its operation was so simple that children spent time playing with it. It was an extension of the human brain. Many people would not be separated from it even during the most personal,

intimate acts. The more they depended on the machine, the wiser they became.

A great majority, knowing that the facts were so ready at hand, had never touched an IWM 1000, not even out of curiosity. They did not know how to read or write. They were ignorant of the most elementary things, and it did not matter to them. They felt happy at having one less worry, and they enjoyed the other technological advances more. With the IWM 1000, you could write any type of literature, compose music, and even paint pictures. Creative works were disappearing because anybody, with time and sufficient patience, could make any work similar to and even superior to one made by artists of the past without having to exert the brain or feel anything strange or abnormal.

Some people spent time getting information from the IWM 1000 just for the pleasure of knowing something. Some did it to get out of some predicament, and others asked it things of no importance whatsoever, simply for the pleasure of having someone say something to them, even though it might just be something from their trivial, boring world.

"What is *etatex*?"
"What does *hybrid* mean?"
"How do you make a chocolate cake?"
"What does Beethoven's *Pastorale* mean?"
"How many inhabitants are there actually in the world?"
"Who was Viriato?"
"What is the distance from the Earth to Jupiter?"
"How can you get rid of freckles?"
"How many asteroids have been discovered this year?"
"What is the function of the pancreas?"
"When was the last world war?"
"How old is my neighbor?"
"What does *reciprocal* mean?"

Modulations of the voice fell on some supersensitive electronic membrane, connected with the brain of the machine, and computed immediately the requested information, which was not always the same because, according to the tone of voice, the machine computed the data concisely or with necessary references.

Sometimes two intellectuals would start to talk, and, when one of them had a difference of opinion, he would consult his machine. He would present the problem from his own perspective, and the machines would talk and talk. Objections were made, and many times these did not come from the intellectuals but from the machines, who tried to convince each other. The men who had begun the discussion would listen, and when they tired of listening, they would be thinking which of two machines was going to get the last word because of the power of the respective generators.

Lovers would make the machines conjugate all the tenses of the verb *to love*, and they would listen to romantic songs. In offices and administrative buildings tape-recorded orders were given, and the IWM 1000 would complete the details of the work. Many people got in the habit of talking only to their own machines; therefore, nobody contradicted them because they knew how the machine was going to respond, or because they believed that rivalry could not exist between a machine and a human being. A machine could not accuse anyone of ignorance: they could ask anything.

Many fights and domestic arguments were conducted through the IWM 1000. The contestants would ask the machine to say to their opponent the dirtiest words and the vilest insults at the highest volume. And, when they wanted to make peace, they could make it at once because it was the IWM 1000 and not they who said those words.

People began to feel really bad. They consulted their IWM 1000's, and the machines told them that their organisms could not tolerate one more dose of pep pills because they had reached the limit of their tolerance. In addition, they computed that the possibilities of suicide were on the increase, and that a change in lifestyle had become necessary.

The people wanted to return to the past, but it was too late. Some tried to put aside their IWM 1000, but they felt defenseless. Then they consulted the machines to see if there was some place in the world where there was nothing like the IWM 1000; and the machines gave information and details about a remote place called Takandia. Some people began to dream about Takandia. They gave

the IWM 1000 to those who had only an IWM 100. They began to go through a series of strange actions. They went to museums; they spent time in the sections which contained books looking at something that intrigued them a great deal—something that they wanted to have in their hands—little, shabby syllabaries in which the children of past civilizations learned slowly to read poring over symbols, for which they used to attend a designated site called a school. The symbols were called letters; the letters were divided into syllables; and the syllables were made up of vowels and consonants. When the syllables were joined together, they made words, and the words were oral and written . . . When these ideas became common knowledge, some people were very content again because these were the first facts acquired for themselves and not through the IWM 1000.

Many left the museums to go out to the few antique shops that remained, and they did not stop until they found syllabaries, which went from hand to hand in spite of their high prices. When the people had the syllabaries, they started to decipher them: *a-e-i-o-u, ma me mi mo mu, pa pe pi po pu.* It turned out to be easy and fun. When they knew how to read, they obtained all the books they could. They were few, but they were books: *The Effect of Chlorophyll on Plants, Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo, *One Hundred Recipes from the Kitchen, The History of the Crusades* . . . They began to read, and, when they could obtain facts for themselves, they began to feel better. They stopped taking pep pills. They tried to communicate their new sensations to their peers. Some looked at them with suspicion and distrust and labelled them lunatics. Then these few people hastened to buy tickets to Takandia.

After a jet, they took a slow boat, then a canoe. They walked many kilometers and arrived at Takandia. There they found themselves surrounded by horrible beings, who did not even wear modest loincloths. They lived in the tops of trees; they ate raw meat because they were not familiar with fire; and they painted their bodies with vegetable dyes.

The people who had arrived in Takandia realized that, for the first time in their lives, they were among true human beings, and they began to feel happy. They looked for friends; they yelled as the others did; and they began to strip off their clothes and throw them away among the bushes. The natives of Takandia forgot about the visitors for a few minutes to fight over the discarded clothing . . .

TRANSLATED BY SUSANA CASTILLO AND ELSIE ADAMS