

Plus ça change

“Okay, here it comes again” Emily thought to herself, stepping out of the revolving door. What could she say this time? She took off her glasses, which had fogged up in the humid October air, and wiped them.

As she did so, Rob circled back inside again. When he finally joined her, he puffed out his cheeks and pretended to stagger in the heat.

“It’s so much cooler in there!” he laughed.

She smiled. “That class has put you in a good mood.”

“Nope” he grumbled, descending the main entrance steps behind her. “It’s supposed to be an introduction to explainable AI. You’d have thought with all the experts available around the world, they’d have found one who could actually explain it in terms I can understand... And I could barely hear him.” This was Rob’s usual complaint about the guest speakers who contributed virtually to their seminars.

“You heading back to halls?” he asked, nodding in the direction of the tube. He tried to sound nonchalant but was finding it difficult to move things on with Emily, what with only one in-person session every two weeks in which to work his charm.

“I thought I’d head to the gym first,” she replied, hoping to dodge yet another awkward attempt to ask her out. She wasn’t sure what was holding her back. Maybe the fact they were such good friends?

“Oh yeah, you’re hoping to see that tall guy again?” Rob asked, rolling his eyes.

“His name’s Ed” she pointed out, annoyed to find herself blushing. “And no. There’s just more water allowed in the showers there than in halls that’s all. Bigger rainwater butts or something” she continued.

“Nonsense. Unless you’re talking about Ed, and frankly the less I know about his butt the better,” Rob laughed, shaking his own backside at her. He ran his fingers through his hair, normally a light, wavy brown but lank and darkened with sweat right now thanks to the city’s heat.

“Well I went this morning. Let me know if you want to grab a drink later,” he called over his shoulder, striding off towards the tube.

Emily watched him go then turned her thoughts and feet towards Ed - and a cold shower.

She smiled at the camera on her way into the gym, but it was someone else who greeted her inside. She decided to box for a while with one of the robot trainers. As she warmed up, she considered her options for the rest of the day. She needed to prepare for her assessment interview and had promised to help her neighbour Kathy with some gardening.

Each term, the Environmental Technology students were expected to interview a subject matter expert on their chosen specialism. This let them learn from and debate with current leaders in their fields, while producing excellent material for the rest of the class to study. For her first interview, Emily was excited to have arranged a talk with Professor Goodall, *the* national expert on the borrowing economy. Should she present it as a podcast or a video though? The former meant she could have more notes with her; the latter might impress the class director more. If she borrowed Rob's camera and mic, that might also impress Professor Goodall.

As she finished stretching, her eyes drifted to the programme being projected on the gym wall. She imagined herself in the presenter's place, interviewing someone from the Government's Climate Resilience Agency and challenging their recent commitment to reach Net Zero by 2055. "2050 would have been nice" she thought bitterly.

This reminded her of her last time gardening with Kathy. The 72 year-old had moved into the flat beside Emily's just after the College had opened its mixed-generational living quarters. A graduate of the same course the 21 year-old was just starting, Kathy had not long retired from her job in resource management. It was great to live alongside people with such experience; they were brilliant to discuss project work with and helped keep the rent down.

Emily was making the most of it by regularly meeting Kathy to tend to their veg plot in the building's rooftop garden. They had been getting on well. Kathy was particularly keen for Emily to take Rob up on his invitations - she had met her husband at Imperial 45 years ago. They had argued last week though and Emily still hadn't seen her neighbour to apologise.

"It has always been the role of government and industry to direct sustainable development," Kathy's words rang in her ears. "Your parents' behaviour was totally normal for the 2020s."

However, Emily didn't think she could ever forgive them. "While you were trailblazing the real green economy, leading protests and...and being arrested, they were still driving SUVs and jetting off on holidays all over!" she had shouted back.

She now felt embarrassed by her outburst and had made a note to talk to her mental health counsellor next week about how angry it all made her feel. In the meantime she switched on the boxing trainer and, while it was still loading, landed an extra hard punch where its face should be.

After an aggressive training session and an efficient shower, Emily decided to head to the library. It was a requirement on all Imperial courses for students to interact daily with their AI tutor to discuss recent learning. Plato, as Emily had named hers, had scheduled for them to work through some questions and responses today in preparation for her interview with Dr Goodall. There were going to be too many distractions to get it done back in halls.

Taking another quick look around for Ed on her way out of the gym, Emily swapped her normal specs for sunglasses and set off along the recently created Boreas Way. Paved with reflective white stones, which were blinding in full sunlight, the tree-lined passageway had been designed to funnel wind through the campus and carry off the heat of the day. Unfortunately it also meant that by the time she reached the library, Emily's previously sleek, combed wet hair was now exploding in all directions; a frizzy imitation of the big bang.

"Nice 'do," a deep voice chuckled.

She looked up and immediately wished she hadn't. "Er, hello Ed," she almost whispered.

"I see you've booked the pod beside mine" he said, smiling and stepping into the room marked 2c.

"Er...yes," she squeaked, cursing her sudden muteness to herself and ducking into the small glass-walled room ahead of her. She slid her laptop into the dock on the desk. As the camera came to life, she raised her eyebrows at her image on the screen. "I guess I'd better make it a podcast" she concluded, brushing her fingers through her hair before tapping on Plato's launch icon.

A while later Emily looked up from her discussion with the AI. It had proposed further reading for her and rejected her opinion that some of its suggestions weren't relevant.

"The borrowing economy I'm interested in is the one where people rent out their clothes, tools and recording equipment," she snapped. "The Borrowers were something quite different."

She removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. Her gaze settled on the frosted glass panel between her pod and the one Ed had entered earlier. She could just make out the familiar shape of a dark-haired guy sitting upright at the desk. "He does have a gorgeous silhouette" she thought. "Must be all that time in the gym." Finally deciding to just go for it, she sent him an anonymous message via the library's pod-booking chat group.

"Hey good looking in room 2c. Nice 2c U" she typed, quickly pressing send before she could change her mind.

While waiting for a reply, she checked her phone and found an earlier message. It was from Rob. Putting her specs back on she read "Rain 2nite. Tube tunnels shut 2allow 4flooding. Drink?"

“Sure, I’m in library” Emily replied. Perhaps he hadn’t seen her other message. Maybe she could still delete it?

“I know, but alas, is it 2b or not 2b?” came Rob’s reply. This time the message did arrive via the pod-booking chat.

Emily grinned and looked up at Rob’s familiar outline through the glass again. He waved. Ed must have left some time ago, while she was working. “Okay,” she said to herself. “Let’s give it a go, just ‘2c’.”

1,403 words

100-word description of my inspiration:

The French phrase ‘Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose’ can be translated to mean ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same.’ I’ve considered students in 2045 working with AI assistants on highly personalised courses of work and preparing for debating and presentation skills assessments. They live in mixed-generational halls, within an urban environment designed to manage heat and flooding. Despite these changes, I hope their everyday concerns stay the same - that they still argue with their parents, care what they look like and enjoy flirting with each other.