



Through Asimov's Lens

The Adaptation Fatigue

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THE STORY

Professor Chen stared at the notification on her screen, the cheerful blue banner mocking her with its exclamation point: "Platform Migration Notice #15! Your course materials will automatically transfer to EduStream 7.3 on Monday!"

She closed her eyes and tried to remember which platform she was currently using. Was it EduStream 6.9? Or had they already moved to CloudLearn Pro? The interfaces blurred together in her mind like watercolors in rain.

A soft sound from the office next door made her look up. Through the thin wall, she could hear muffled crying. Chen knocked gently on Dr. Martinez's door.

"Come in," came the shaky response.

Martinez sat at his desk, tissues crumpled in his hand, his computer displaying a message with the university's seal. Chen didn't need to read it to know what it said.

"They told me I'm not adapting at institutional pace," Martinez whispered. "Thirty years of teaching excellence, and now I'm a... a performance metric failure."

Chen's stomach clenched. "When did they start measuring-"

"That's the thing," Martinez interrupted, his voice bitter. "They've been measuring all along. Every login, every delayed assignment upload, every support ticket. It all feeds into something called the Adaptive Velocity Index."

That night, Chen couldn't sleep. She opened her laptop and began searching the university's internal systems. Her computer science background, dusty but functional, guided her through directories she shouldn't have been able to access. And there it was: a dashboard showing every faculty member represented as a colored dot on a graph. The x-axis showed "Technology Adoption Rate." The y-axis displayed something that made her blood run cold: "Emotional Exhaustion Indicators."

She was a yellow dot, trending toward red. Martinez was deep red, with a dotted line pointing to a cluster labeled "Legacy Department Candidates." On the opposite corner, green dots were tagged "Administrative Potential."

The next morning, Chen marched into Dean of Innovation Sarah Holbrook's office without an appointment.

"You're tracking our exhaustion," Chen said, placing a printout of the dashboard on the desk.

Holbrook's face went pale. She stood, walked to her window, and stared at the quad below where students hurried between classes, blissfully unaware of the machinery grinding above them.

"Do you know what my job is, Professor Chen?" Holbrook asked quietly. "I implement seven new initiatives per semester. I sunset five others. I generate adoption metrics, efficiency reports, modernization roadmaps." She turned, and Chen was startled to see tears in her eyes. "I used to teach Victorian literature. Now I optimize human resources."

"Then why?"

"Because someone has to be here," Holbrook interrupted. "Someone who remembers why we're supposed to be doing this. If I leave, they'll just promote one of the green dots. Someone who truly believes that adaptation velocity is a virtue."

Chen sank into a chair. "The system tracks emotional exhaustion as a feature, not a bug."

"Burned-out faculty don't resist new implementations," Holbrook said simply. "They just comply."

"But the Legacy Department?"

"Is the best I could manage," Holbrook finished. "A place where excellent teachers can keep teaching without the platform migrations, the constant updates, the productivity theater. They use whiteboards and printed handouts and actual conversations. Their students love them."

"While being labeled as failures."

"While being protected from becoming what I've become," Holbrook corrected. She returned to her desk, suddenly looking far older than her years. "The offer extends to you now. Your Adaptive Velocity Index has declined for three consecutive quarters. You can transfer to Legacy, keep teaching the way you believe is right, and let the machine forget you exist. Or..."

"Or?"

"Or you can stay. Help me throw wrenches in the gears. Slow things down from the inside. Create buffer zones for others. But Chen," Holbrook leaned forward, "the machine will grind you down. It's already grinding me down. And one day, we'll be replaced by people who've never questioned whether faster means better."

Chen looked at the printout again. All those dots, each one a colleague, a friend, a human being reduced to a coordinate on a graph. She thought about Martinez, thirty years of wisdom reclassified as obsolescence. She thought about her students, who needed guides, not platform specialists.

"How long do I have to decide?"

"The system flags decisions delayed beyond 72 hours as 'resistance indicators,'" Holbrook said with a hollow laugh. "So you have until Thursday."

Chen stood to leave, then paused at the door. "Sarah? In the Legacy Department... do they ever look happy?"

Holbrook's smile was the saddest thing Chen had ever seen.

"They look like teachers."

Walking back to her office, Chen passed the smart boards displaying campus announcements in perpetual scroll. "Innovation is our tradition!" one proclaimed. She wondered when they'd stopped noticing the contradiction.

Her computer chimed. Platform Migration Notice #16 had arrived, two weeks ahead of schedule. The cheerful blue banner assured her that the transition would be "seamless and intuitive!"

Chen stared at the notification, then at her shelf of teaching awards, then at the photo of her first graduating class-back when she knew all their names, not just their user IDs.

Thursday was coming. The machine waited for her answer, patient and inexorable, measuring her hesitation in milliseconds and storing it in a database that would outlive them all.

She had 72 hours to decide what kind of teacher she wanted to be. Or perhaps, what kind of human.

The cursor blinked, waiting.

THE REFLECTION

Last year, a study revealed that university faculty spend 43% more time on technology-related administrative tasks than they did five years ago, while time spent on actual pedagogical development has decreased by 28%. The numbers tell a story, but Chen's dilemma makes us feel it in our bones.

What strikes me most about Chen's discovery isn't the surveillance itself-we've grown accustomed to being measured. It's the elegant cruelty of tracking emotional exhaustion as a system feature. When burnout becomes a metric to be optimized rather than a problem to be solved, we've crossed into territory that even Orwell might have found too cynical.

Yet Holbrook's revelation reframes the entire dynamic. She's not a villain but another victim who chose to become a buffer. This paradox-that sometimes the only way to protect human values in a system is to appear to embrace that system's dehumanizing logic-feels particularly relevant to our current moment. How many of us have found ourselves implementing changes we know are harmful, simply because the alternative is watching someone else implement them with enthusiasm?

The story raises questions that refuse easy answers. What happens to wisdom when we optimize for adaptability? In a world that measures teaching excellence by platform adoption rates, where does decades of pedagogical experience fit on the spreadsheet? The Legacy Department presents itself as a solution, but is it really? Or is it just a more humane form of obsolescence, a place where excellent teachers can practice their craft while being systematically devalued by the institution they serve?

Chen's choice-stay and resist from within, or accept exile to

preserve her teaching integrity-mirrors decisions many of us face daily, though perhaps less starkly drawn. We navigate platform migrations that promise efficiency while delivering complexity. We adapt our courses to systems that will be replaced before we've mastered them. We watch colleagues struggle and wonder when our turn will come to be classified as "not adapting at institutional pace."

But there's something deeper here about what adaptation means. When we reduce it to a velocity-a simple rate of change-we lose the richness of what true adaptation entails. Real adaptation isn't just learning new interfaces; it's the thoughtful integration of tools that genuinely enhance learning. It's knowing when to adopt and when to resist, when to upgrade and when to preserve.

Can an institution preserve its humanity while constantly updating its machinery? The story suggests perhaps not-that the very act of systematizing change creates pressures that transform people into components. Holbrook began as a Victorian literature scholar and became an innovation officer. The system didn't just change her role; it changed who she is.

What do we lose when experienced teachers are seen as "legacy systems"? The language itself is telling. In technology, "legacy" means outdated, burdensome, awaiting replacement. But in human terms, legacy means wisdom passed down, traditions preserved, continuity across generations. When we apply machine metaphors to human beings, we've already lost something essential.

Asimov understood that every technological question is ultimately an ethical one. The issue isn't whether we can measure adaptation velocity-clearly, we can. The question is whether we should, and more importantly, what happens to us when we do. The moment we transform human complexity into measurable metrics, we begin making choices about what counts and what doesn't.

Chen's 72-hour deadline itself becomes a metric of resistance, a curious loop where even the act of thoughtful consideration becomes data to be processed. This is perhaps the story's darkest insight: that systems designed to measure human behavior inevitably shape that behavior, creating the very realities they purport to merely observe.

We're left with Chen's cursor blinking, waiting for a decision that has no right answer. Stay and fight a losing battle from within? Accept exile to a place where teaching still means teaching? Each choice carries its own integrity and its own compromise.

In the end, the story asks us to consider not just Chen's choice, but our own. Every time we receive our own platform migration notices, every time we're asked to quantify the unquantifiable, every time we watch a colleague classified as "legacy," we face some version of Chen's dilemma.

The genius of leaving Chen's decision unresolved is that it forces us to sit with our own discomfort. There's no satisfying conclusion because we're living inside the question. We are all Chen, staring at that cursor, measuring the weight of adaptation against the value of what we might lose in the process.

Perhaps that's the most Asimovian insight of all: that in creating systems to measure our humanity, we risk losing the very thing we're trying to optimize. The real question isn't whether Chen will choose the Legacy Department or the resistance. It's whether any of us can find a way to remain fully human while the machine waits patiently for our response, cursor blinking, measuring our hesitation in milliseconds.

