

Deleted

By Frank B. Edwards

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The DELETE READING SKILLS order was invoked at 4:37 pm, about an hour after Jeremy Lauzon told his teacher for the hundredth time that he wished he had never learned to read. Typically, he was complaining about a homework assignment that required him to study three chapters of a novel in preparation for a critique. He claimed to hate reading.

Old Ms Dreadnoth at the Ministry of Schools' central control desk would not tolerate such nonsense. Humourless and dry as a chalk brush, she was a stickler for rules and was not about to dole out any second, third or hundredth chances to the likes of Jeremy who she considered an ungrateful waster. The regulations stated quite clearly that "students, fully reading enabled, who continuously refused to apply the skills taught them by the Ministry could have said skills revoked until such time as"

There was really no need to read the fine print. The deed was done the minute she punched in Jeremy's personal identification number, hit the DELETE button and confirmed her authority to do so with a sharp swipe of her Ministry validation card. He wouldn't know what hit him, she mused, as the computer beeped twice to confirm that the task was complete.

If Ms Dreadnoth was expecting some dramatic moment of regret on Jeremy's part, she was due for disappointment as he was much too busy teasing a tall, rather angular girl named Prysm to notice the brief wave of energy that spiralled through his brain's *angular gyrus* region, instantly disrupting his ability to read. Not until the pair stood at the counter of a recently opened burger outlet 15 minutes later did it occur to him that anything was altered. The pictures of the various takeout meals looked no different than last week but the words around them were meaningless.

"What've they done with the signs?" he asked Prysm.

"Nothing. What do you mean?"

Embarrassed, he shrugged the question off. "Never mind. What are you having?"

Unable to decipher the words beneath the pictures, he simply parroted Prysm's burger-and-fries order – the energy pulse had done nothing to affect his common sense. His counting skills were another matter though. He fumbled badly as he tried to make sense of the handful of coins he pulled from his pocket and ended up simply handing the clerk a five-dollar bill which turned out not to be enough. Gracelessly, Prysm saved him, scooping a collection of dimes and quarters from his palm.

“Pay attention, Jer,” she said and then giggled her way down to the end of the counter to pick up her order.

The rest of the afternoon passed in confusion, not because Jeremy had trouble finding his way, for he knew the route well after seven years of walking home from school, but rather because the familiar world around him had shifted mysteriously. The houses and streets were the same as they had been the previous day but, this afternoon, the billboards, street signs – everything involving letters and numbers – had taken on a foreign air. Words no longer made sense although no one else seemed to have noticed the change. Waiting at Prysm's bus stop, he was constantly distracted from their conversation by the confusing destination signs on each bus that approached them.

“Hellooo, I'm right here talking to you, Jer-head,” she complained at one point. “What's wrong with you, anyway?”

Jeremy was tempted to tell her but decided against it, afraid that he held little enough appeal for her already that anything this bizarre would scare her away completely. When she finally stepped aboard her bus with a wave and a smile, he breathed a sigh of relief and headed the few blocks home.

Stepping through the front door, he was happy to discover that his parents had gone out for the evening. There was a short note for him on the fridge door that he studied briefly without comprehension. It was probably about dinner but he had snacked with Prysm already so ignored it. Instead he slumped down at the computer, figuring he would message Shaun to see if he had any idea of what was going on. The keyboard confused him so he closed his eyes, moving his fingers instinctively to log on. A dozen messages flashed up at the bottom of his screen but they were meaningless. Of course. He logged off.

He could resort to the telephone but he wasn't about to try deciphering the list of frequently called numbers his mother kept on the bulletin board. Instead, he idly picked

up his homework novel, flipped through it but quickly tossed it aside. Useless. He flopped down in front of the television and started the slow process of clicking through all 400 channels to find something worth watching. He had no idea what time it was.

Anxious to avoid encountering his parents, he headed to his room before they returned, laying on his bed trying to make sense of his surroundings. He took comfort in the basketball players who graced his posters for he still knew their names, their numbers, their teams – even their statistics – by heart. As long as he didn't have to write any of it down. Things still made sense, he convinced himself before he fell asleep, but not as much sense as they had before. He slept fitfully, wrestling with dreams of a wordless world

That night, Jim Dearwell was working the late shift at the Ministry's control desk and spent the first hour as he always did perusing Ms Dreadnoth's daily DELETE report. Amused by her fervid illiteracy campaign, he methodically worked through the list, restoring the jolted minds of the dozen wasters her wrath had visited that afternoon.

"Cantankerous old gal really should retire," he chuckled as he sent a gentle shock through Jeremy's brain. "But her tiny, cold heart is in the right place, I suppose. At least we're unlikely to have any more trouble with young Jeremy."