

**True Blue** When I saw the Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards together at their restaurant table, the water and lights of Sydney harbour shimmering behind them, it set me thinking about Stuart and the reason he had to give up driving his car. I was going to say “my friend Stuart”, but I suppose he’s not a friend anymore. I seem to have lost a number of friends in the last few years. I don’t mean that I’ve fallen out with them, in any dramatic way. We’ve just decided not to stay in touch. And that’s what it’s been: a decision, a conscious decision, because it’s not so difficult to stay in touch with people nowadays, there are so many different ways of doing it. But as you get older, I think that some friendships start to feel increasingly redundant. You just find yourself asking, “What’s the point?” And then you stop.

I mean, you push the stop button. It is situated on your chest, next to the love button and the friendship button. And you just have to go away; you continue your life on your side. But nowadays, living alone, being an outsider is pretty impossible. Before, you were friends for a long time, getting to know the person and all, but now, thanks to the advancement of technology, everybody can be your friend. We are all modified *in the uterus*, to have a kind of robotic part inside us. By the way, we’re able to make new “connections”, and that’s why everybody always touches their torso. “Don’t miss opportunities” is their slogan. If somebody walks next to you, you must push your friendship button. Then you get all the possible information about him/her, and you start feeling sympathy for this stranger. Of course, after a while, the connections disappear, giving way to new ones. When a connection is too old, you feel it’s becoming boring, so you just “stop”. You cut your connection. And it goes on and on. The Chinese little girl won the card game. New people push the friendship button, it becomes redundant, and then they push the stop button. You have control of your feelings.

I was expected to have a drink with Stuart, quite an old friend who’ll certainly become boring in two months, in this Chinese restaurant; but he seemed to be late. Maybe he wanted to cut our connections. I uploaded his information and learned that he hadn’t used his car for a week. It was common, actually only a few people used their cars instead of public transport. But Stuart loved his car, an old Cadillac from the last century, and he never missed an occasion to go out with it, his great machine impressing everyone. Maybe I was thinking too much, because my head started hurting a lot. I sent him a message but received no answer. A Peace guard, our “robotic policemen”, asked me on his screen if I was alright. I had to go to the bathroom.

I was shocked. It was the first time I didn’t receive any acknowledgement. The first time that someone wasn’t reachable. That someone was lonely. LONELY. I put cold water on my face and tried to calm down. I looked at my reflection, my short brown hair, my full lips, trumpet-shaped nose, and grey eyes. I looked very normal, like always, nothing had changed. This was real. What happened to Stuart? We were the same age, so it wasn’t his “time”. He was tall, maybe six feet, two inches, and had curly blond hair; in fact, nothing very special. But he was intelligent and had a huge sense of humour, and even if he was kind of strange, I used to appreciate his company, and I was thinking of maybe asking him out. Pushing the love button was exactly the same thing as pushing the friendship one, the only thing was that it was added to your data base, and you were allowed to feel sexually attracted to him/her. That’s all, and as I knew that Stuart wasn’t engaged and we were such good friends,

I thought it would be a nice idea, and being “a couple” we would be able to avoid feeling bored of each other. It was clear that we were becoming older, our death date planned at 100 years, which is now only 76 years away. I heard somewhere before, people could live until they *naturally* die. A natural death? It wasn't possible today, science has made a big jump, and now nobody can die of illness. Weapons have been abolished; we're living in constant peace. The government gave us all the freedom we want, the only thing we must do is have two kids per family, no more, no less. Then we were sent to schools where we were educated in the same way, to acquire all the knowledge they had to, to become respectable adults.

There was a gentle breeze; it was a calm and warm summer night. I looked at the buildings, all around the harbour, and thought that the government was right, green spaces are useless. Why would you have trees and grass when you can have rubber grounds and shining aluminium panels? We can create artificial oxygen, so they're just a waste of space! But all of a sudden, I received a call. Thank God, it was Stuart! I yelled: “Where are you? Why can't I join you?” He was out of breath and whispered “Come and join me at the old high school” and then he was cut off. So was I. I don't know why, maybe I should have let him, after all, I wasn't that ugly, a man is easy to find, but a strange instinct told me to follow him ...

The building was vacant, but I entered and saw him. He trembled slightly feeling that I was here. We were silent. He suddenly said: “I want to show you something” and he took off his shirt. Seeing my horrified face, he apologized “Don't worry, it doesn't hurt that much, the only thing is to get used to being alone.” He no longer had his buttons. His torso was crossed by multiple scars. Trying not to lose my self-control, I asked him why the hell he did that. He looked at me with his deep eyes. I never noticed how beautiful they were, maybe even more beautiful than the implants you could have nowadays. Yes, his eyes were special. A strange blue that I never saw before. They were shining of purity and ... truth?

Yes, he had nothing that he could control, so nothing that could be false.

He saw that I was in trouble; that I got it. With only a look. He murmured “I knew you'd understand. But let me explain to you why I did it. Recently, I felt that I had to push my love button with you, as I guessed you were planning to do it. However, I was cleaning my flat before going to our *rendezvous*, when I found the book I saved. It talked about a prince who fell in love with a princess, even if he knew she didn't love him, and he was totally crazy about her, he couldn't stop thinking of her, and at the end, he gives his life to save the princess'. That was called “True Love”. So I asked myself if that was love that I was feeling. And I came to the conclusion: I cannot feel real love. And real friendship too. This is just a big lie! Why have we got to be automated like this? Why can't we just be free to feel like we want? So I asked you to come, I took a bottle of anaesthetic and a knife and I cut all the connections. I sold my car; it was full of tracing chips, so now I cannot be found.”

“But, why did you choose me?” I breathed.

“Because I want to love you, and I want you to love me too. For real. Without pushing any buttons, without any artificial thing. I want to live without controlling my feelings.

And what if freedom is the ability to DO whatever you want shouldn't you be able to FEEL what you want? ”

“I guess you're right ... It's a totally new way of thinking for me, quite hard to accept. You know, I always lived like this, with these plastic pieces on my chest, and I found it normal. And now, you come and tell me that it is false ... You think about things that nobody even considers. This is pretty strange, isn't it? Actually, you are pretty strange. And that's what makes you interesting. Today, everyone is the same, thinking the same, speaking the same, making friends and loving the same way. But you, you're so very special ...”

My head ached; I felt a new sensation, like my mind was hampered by something. Stuart noticed it. Abruptly, he approached and held me in his arms. He whispered in my ear “I know what you're feeling, it's like something is trying to control you.” He slowly took off my shirt; by the way I was only wearing my bra underneath. He applied anaesthetic on my chest. I knew what he was going to do. I was ready, ready to live for real. I closed my eyes.

And a second after I was in front of the mirror in the bathroom of the Chinese restaurant: What just happened? I guessed it was just my imagination. I went back on to the terrace, where Stuart was waiting for me. He must have arrived while I was in the bathroom. Everything was normal; I just had a weird feeling of *déjà-vu* ... I saluted him, we chatted a bit but this weird feeling wouldn't go away. Never mind, I started talking about my idea of being a couple, when I noticed something. When I went to the bathroom, the Chinese little girl had won, so why now had the Chinese MOTHER won? What was wrong with me today? First, this weird sensation, and then the card game! “Are you okay?” asked Stuart. I looked up at him and saw his eyes, his kind of magic eyes. And I was reminded of everything.

This time when I woke up, I was able to remember everything. But curiously, I couldn't move, and I couldn't see anything. Unexpectedly, someone turned on the light. That's when I became terrified. I was attached to a large table with suede straps, in a large white room, with a little window where I could see a bit of Sydney harbour. Everywhere were shining medical instruments such as scalpels, pliers, pinches, and even a saw. A sort of doctor entered the room and at that moment, I realized that I was entirely naked. He was small; maybe five foot, five inches, and wore a surgeon mask. He leaned toward me.

“Well well, Miss Ancalimë, why are you so embarrassed? I'm sure you know that if none of us push our love button, we'll not feel sexually attracted! So relax. I must admit that you've been such a hard case ... So, aren't you satisfied with your life? You have what you want, all you can desire, what more do you need? You want to be “free to control your feelings”, is that it? You want to know “what *true love* is”, heehee, don't you? You want to ...”

“I want answers to my questions.” I replied.

“And what are they, smart girl?”

“Why does the government implant robotic parts in us when we're born?”

“Uh, it’s a sad story; he shook his head ... so sad that it’s not taught in schools”

“Please. Tell me. I want to know”

“I suppose, now I can tell it to you. You never thought about what happened fifty years ago? Not really, it’s pretty hard eh? Your head hurts every time you try? That’s done on purpose. By the way nobody can remember the War.”

“The War?”

“The worst thing ever. Before, life was totally different; people could, heehee, feel love and friendship without mechanical things, but they could also feel pain, hunger, fear, and over all, power. And this love of power drove us, in 2015, to an international war. Everybody had weapons so in two months, five atomic bombs and about 6 800 000 000 deaths later, Humanity was in mourning. So then the main leaders of the world declared peace. They wanted peace FOREVER, so they made the decision to erase the memory of the survivors. Some scientists were searching for robotic intelligence and cyborgs, so they used their technology to cure the wounded and to modify the foetuses. If nobody can feel real emotions, there won’t be problems, don’t you think? And even if things go wrong, we have access to all the possible data about every human, or better said, heehee, cyborg. All their actions, their pasts, even what they think, you can’t escape from our supervision, you can’t hide anything from us: as you know, we found you”

“This is to deprive people of their first right. You literally control our lives.”

“We know, he nodded, but we cannot do otherwise. It’s too late. And, after all, our system is practically perfect. There’s only a few exceptions. You never thought of these things before you met Stuart, didn’t you?”

“What do you mean?” I said, shivering.

“Stuart is not himself anymore. He was too dangerous for us. We already had to erase his memory, so we just solved the problem, turning him into a Peace Guard”

Stuart, the one who showed me the true side of life, was now a robot. There was no issue.

“Now, you’ve got the choice, either you return to a regular life after a quick brainwashing, or, heehee, you become a Peace Guard.”

Actually, there was an issue.

“Untie me please” I begged, and he did, probably thinking I wanted to live. But I took the biggest scalpel I found. And I stabbed myself. The man shouted, his face covered with my blood, and I died in front of the shimmering lights of the harbour.

**YOU CAN NEVER FIGHT CONTROL, BUT YOU’LL ALWAYS HAVE AT LEAST ONE RIGHT: YOU’LL ALWAYS BE FREE TO DIE.**