

When I saw the Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards together at their restaurant table, the water and the 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 difficult to stay in touch with people nowadays, there are so many 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.

The rippled surface of the sea

Sometimes, you wonder why life made you meet that person, and why that person has never crossed your way before. Some people you meet can definitely change your life and your way of thinking forever, some other just plunge you in a more and more redundant and boring life, in which you don’t have any goal, or any happy thing that makes you smile when you wake up, in which you are only waiting for death to come and take you far away.

Stuart

Stuart belonged to the second kind of people. I had known him since high school, and I had never realized until the last three months, he was the kind of man who had the least original life ever. But, I realized now that I had been like him. Exactly like him. Actually, I think millions of people in the world were like him. No talent, no ambition, no beauty, even no charm. He wasn’t neither smart nor funny, neither brave nor reliable, neither rich nor good-looking. Actually, Stuart was a loser. And so was I. And so were millions of us. Stuart worked every day in a dark office, doing a boring job, with low wages, and went out after work with me and some other losers we called our friends. We usually spent most of the night playing poker, for no money, and without any fun or pleasure. It was just a way to delay the moment when we would have to go back into our tiny, dark, and cold apartments, each of us more alone than an owl on top of its tree.

Once, Stuart didn’t come to one of our losers’ poker appointments. It didn’t seem to have changed anything; we played five hours, without any talks or laughs, each of us far away from our cards, hearing only the noise of the beer passing

through our throats. The following day though, I asked him why he hadn't been there. I listened to his answer with half an ear, not knowing it was the beginning of my new life, and even the beginning of my life. He simply answered that he had sold his car, scared of the great number of road accidents nowadays. He didn't want to take the risk, and now used the subway. But yesterday, he told me, it was on strike. I gave up telling him that there were also a great number of chances to be attacked in the subway, or to get run over by a car.

Later, I understood that, even if he had never done anything in his life, even if he knew that his life was miserable and that he hated it, Stuart was scared of death. So scared he deprived himself of his car, of his independence, of the only thing he had never owned, the only thing he had ever been proud of buying, just to reduce his chances to die.

My mother

My mother passed away very young, of a brain tumour. I was eight. I perfectly remember the day she told me she was going to die, in her hospital bed. "Honey, she said, you know you can't always do what you want. I wanted to live. Dad wanted me to live. Doctors wanted me to live. And I know you wanted me to live. But Nature didn't. Nature decided I had to go." She closed her brown eyes, then opened them again, and said with an exhausted voice: "Honey, please, never, never forget what I taught you". After I kissed her for the last time, the nurses made me leave her room. I wasn't crying. Two hours later, when the doctor told me she was gone, I cried for two days.

I thought for a long time that "what she had taught me" were common values as love, honesty and other abstract things. Nevertheless, the night after I understood Stuart was afraid of death, and even afraid of life, I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about my mother, and her dying words. I remembered the amazing woman she was. How she was always smiling. How she sometimes disappeared for several weeks, and my father told me "Son, you know your mother isn't a common mother". And yet she had never been a bad mother. She had always been the ideal mother, if we didn't take care of those weird disappearances. When I asked my father about it, he answered: "Your mother is free, Son, as free as a nightingale".

Memories of my mother haunted me from then on, I kept wondering about her last words. What had she taught me? And why had Stuart's scares sparked off all those memories? Soon, it obsessed me so much I couldn't work, or see anyone.

Until one day, I found what the real value of my mother was. *Carpe Diem*, she repeated constantly. She told me I didn't have to be scared of death, money, or shame. She said it was impossible to live fully without taking risks. I had to *dare*. Life was too short to be bored. And at that very moment, I saw what my life was like. It was nothing. Because I was fearful. Because I never dared to do anything. Because I had never taken any risk. I now know it was the best piece of advice I ever had.

From now on, I discerned two categories of people. The *Stuarts*, and the *My mothers*. And I decided to change. I decided to become someone in *My mother's* category. Because there's nothing worse than knowing you're a *Stuart*, and continue to be one.

Tulsa International Airport

I couldn't change my life without leaving very far. That's why on October 13th, 2003, I packed all my stuff, which means I put some clothes and other few things in an only suitcase. I said good bye to some friends. "And about your job?" They all asked me. I hadn't thought of my job. My miserable pizza delivery driver job. "I don't mind" I answered. I gathered all my money, jumped in a cab, and asked the driver to drop me off on Tulsa International Airport.

I didn't know yet where I was going. But it was exciting. It was the first time in years I hadn't really known what was going to happen in the next few hours. I decided to pick a destination at random. I decided for the first time in my life to let my future in the hands of fate. "Looking for a change of scene? Australia. So where the bloody hell are ya?" I looked at that advert, overhanging the entrance of the airport. The kangaroos, the wonderful sunset, the white sand, and the amazing blue ocean were calling me. I thought a moment that those heavenly landscapes would ease my mind. I bought a ticket for Sydney. The journey was certainly the happiest hours of my life. I was convinced I was going in a kind of earthly paradise.

When I landed in Sydney, I was first bewitched by the immensity of the ocean. The water was lying quietly as far as the eye can see. I remained almost an hour, gazing at the water, absolutely fascinated by what I was seeing.

Gazing at the sea for so long was both a fatal error and a stroke of luck. While I was so obsessed by the water, my suitcase was stolen. I lost the last things I owned, which also meant the major part of my money, and I began my life as a vagrant.

Sydney harbour

I have been hanging around Sydney harbour for three months now. My beard has grown, and when I cross a mirror by chance, I see the reflection of an old, surly tramp. I seem to have grown up of twenty years in three months. Nevertheless, I have never felt so free. I can walk all night, or sit all day. Sydney is a fabulous city, because wherever you are, you just have to turn round to see the ocean.

Watching the water calms me down. I know whatever happens; the water is still here, lying lazily between the continents. I sleep almost always in Sydney harbour. I like feeling the wind against my skin when I fall asleep, and sleeping on the ground doesn't bother me as long as the water is close to me.

I like being woken up by the sailors' screams, or by the siren of the fishing boats leaving the harbour, early in the early morning. It's always the same spectacle of the sailors, loading and unloading the cargos of the boats, but I can't get tired of the show.

I sometimes think of Stuart, or of my mother, wondering if I really changed. Anything, a red car, a mother and her child, the subway, two sailors playing cards on the deck of their boat, anything sets me thinking about Stuart, and all memories surface soon. I now feel so far from Tulsa, and from my old life, than I am very surprised to see how the memories are clear and precise in my mind.

Being a vagrant enables me to think. The less I have, the more I understand how things are made. I realize, so many minor things I considered important, so many illusions, have prevented me from feeling free.

And tonight, after I saw the Chinese woman and her daughter, at that precise moment while I have never felt so close to truth, to freedom, and above all to my mother, I jump into the dark water of Sydney harbour, and I let myself slip into the deep.