Technology Malfunction

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“Just because technology allows you to do it, doesn’t mean you should do it”.

It was not the first time that Ashton had said the words to his friend Cody, but it seemed like it might just be the last time. He was on the gurney now. The surgery was less than an hour away, and Cody would soon be unconscious as the drugs took effect.

“You don’t understand,” said Cody. “This is what I want. What I’ve always wanted. To be rid of all emotions and distractions. To be at one with the cyber-world. Direct interface. A body that is modified to exist so that my mind can run free.”

“But you are leaving everything behind that you care about,” said Ashton. “Just give it some more thought, is all I am saying.”

“Care about? There is nothing that I care about. Nothing and nobody. I have had disappointments and I have overcome everything by focussing on logic and order. That is what I am. I now need a body that links me to the cloud – a body that requires the minimum of energy consumption and maintenance. That is what this machine will do. It serves to modify humanity to contribute to the world through technology.”

“But you will never experience the joy of music, or truly great food, or the sight of a work of art or nature. Does that mean nothing to you.”

“Art and experience of that kind is meaningless. It serves to feed a psyche that I have no need of.”

There was a coldness to the words that chilled Ashton. He had known Cody since they were children. They lived next door to one another, and their mothers had put them together from the moment they could crawl. They grew up together, but to call them friends would be to misunderstand Cody. Ashton would have called himself Cody’s friend but would never have said that Cody was his friend. A friend cares. Cody was always different. But fascinating in his cold attitude to the world.

Only a person like Ashton could have become a friend to such a person, even know that the friendship would never be reciprocated. Only a friend like Ashton was, would have been there and stood there as his Cody’s now unconscious body and collapsed gurney disappeared through the archway of the machine entrance. Only a friend would wait to see what fragile biological frame would come out, a cyborg where a man had once lived.

But it was not long before it was clear that something was wrong. Technicians around the machine seemed to be punching buttons in a panic. Subdued voices now seemed to be becoming anxious.

“What’s happening,” asked Ashton.

“Nothing to be concerned about at this stage”; “We’re dealing with it”; “There’s a waiting room back there”; “Leave this to the experts, Sir”. None of them was particularly reassuring.

The only words that were of any value were when it was over: “The process is complete, whatever it has been, and the subject appears to be in good health.”

Good health was good news. The uncertainty as to what the process had been was a worry.

The door was opening and despite attempts by the technicians to push him away, Ashton forced himself forward to see what had become of Cody.

Cody recognized the gurney as it emerged through the bariatric vapor. But on the gurney the body was barely recognizable. As the steam cleared, he could not see Cody. A young woman was lying on the gurney. She was moving one arm. She was clearly alive and perhaps close to consciousness.

“Where is Cody?” said Ashton.

“This is Cody,” said one of the attendants. “There appears to have been a malfunction.”

As the lying figure moved her arms her eyelids flickered. Ashton caught just a glimpse that confirmed the incredible. This person was Cody. But the movements also dislodged the hospital gown. He could see breasts wobbling on her chest, and she pulled at the garment she exposed her groin. Between her smooth legs was a small mound of pubic hair and below that a perfectly formed vulva. There was some swelling and the faint smell of burning flesh, the aftermath of exquisitely precise micro-surgery.

“So is this the form of body that was intended?” Ashton asked, but had already guessed the answer.

“This is irregular,” another attendant offered. “Sexless - yes. Sex changed – never”.

Another attendant asked: “Has there even been a successful interface implant?”

Another raised her head to check for cranial scars. The hair was the same mousy brown mop that Cody always wore simply because he could not be bothered with haircuts, but now it seemed differently distributed. Covering more of his scalp.

“What are you doing to me?” Ashton heard her speak. The voice was high. A woman’s voice. But somehow it had the impatient timbre that he recognized.

“Hey, be careful,” he said.

“Ash, Ash, is that you?” she said. “Thank God. What has happened? What have they done to me?”

“I’m here,” said Ashton stepping beside the gurney. Her eyes were staring at him. His eyes, but bigger in that face, with small pretty features and the halo of hair. Ashton moved to push some tubing away so she could talk. She grabbed his hand.

Ashton was trying to think of the last time there had been any physical contact between him and Cody. Cody hated contact with people. Now this person was clinging to him.

“There’s no interface,” she said. “No contact. Nothing. I can’t access anything.” There was a small tear running down the side of her face. Ashton had never seen Cody cry.

“We can fix it Cody,” said Ashton. “They said there has been a malfunction, but I am sure that we can put you through again and get you right.”

“We need to analyse the problem first,” said the technician at the control console. “This could take weeks. This person will need to be observed. Can you look after her until we find out what happened here?”

“Her?” said Ashton.

“Well … yes,” he said. “Her, this woman. I can offer you something for her to wear.”

Somebody came forward with a simple shirt dress. It was something that female staff at the centre wore. It fitted her naked body perfectly. Nothing that this subject had arrived in would fit that body now. She was becoming aware of it.

“What have they done to me?” said Cody. “This is not me. This is not what I am supposed to be.”

“Can we have your contact number as well? We will be in touch with you as soon as we have this sorted out. Then she can come back. We can deliver the procedure requested, once we have sorted out this malfunction.”

They were steering Cody and Ashton from the premises with indecent haste. Still Ashton supplied his contact with the suggestion that maybe they should call him first. “Whatever you have done to my friend, it has clearly had a disturbing effect,” he said.

They drove South with Cody resting up against the window of the passenger seat.

“That is the most beautiful sunset I have ever seen,” she said. “I don’t think that I have ever noticed a sunset before, but that is wonderful.”

“Are you hungry?” asked Ashton. “We could stop for a meal. We can find something plant-based if we hunt around.”

“I want to taste something different,” said Cody. “Something you like. Something special.”

The little restaurant on my block serves a great duck confit cassoulet, if you are ready to eat some meat?”

“Ok,” said Cody. “Maybe just once before all taste is gone forever.”

All the shops on the block were closing except one. In the window was a dress, in fact a compete outfit.

“Oh that’s gorgeous,” said Cody. “If we are eating out, I can’t wear these rags, and with no underwear either. I will just drop in here. You get us a table and I will be there in 10 minutes.

40 minutes had gone by with Ashton sitting alone. He was beginning to worry. His friend had been through major surgery. Sure, the technology allowed for swift recovery of the body, but somehow, even with the expected cranial surgery, it had played with Cody’s mind. He could be lying in the gutter, unconscious.

But then she walked in and came over to him. He recognized the clothes from window before he recognized the wearer. What had been a shaggy untamed mop of sandy hair was now combed in a side parting and framed her face. She was wearing a little eye makeup and pink lipstick.

“I’m sorry if I am a bit late, Ash,” she said. “The lady in the shop offered to style my hair and do my makeup. Do you like it?”

“You look … I have never seen you look like this before.” Ashton was uncertain as what he could say. This was not the person he knew.

“I like it,” she said. “I like to look good.”

“You have never been in the slightest bit interested in your appearance before today,” Ashton pointed out.

“I never looked any good before today,” she said, looking in a nearby mirror.

“I have already ordered and here it comes,” said Ashton.

“It smells fantastic,” she said. “Umm, and it tastes even better than it smells.”

Ashton watched her eat. He watched her wipe her perfect lips with her napkin. He listened to her talk. She spoke about all the tastes she had never been interested in before, and that now seemed so important to her.

When she asked if she could take his arm on the walk in the darkness back to his apartment, he testily agreed.

“What’s that smell,” she said.

“That’s jasmine,” said Ashton. “It always smells better at night I think.”

“Why have I never noticed it before. What a beautiful smell.” She insisted that they find the bush so she could snap off a piece and put it in a vase in Ashton’s apartment.

“You must be tired,” said Ashton.

“I want to make love,” she said. “I want you to make love to me.”

Ashton could not believe the words he had just heard. He knew Cody. Cody did not want to be touched. But this was not Cody. For the last two hours he had sat opposite this person in a restaurant and she had not ever spoken about technology or the problems that were being caused by the abuse of resources or over-population. Instead they had spoken about good food and fine wine and feelings. And her eyes had sparkled in the candlelight, wide with interest, in what he was saying, and in him. Cody never cared for what Ashton had to say. He was only used by Cody as a listener.

Now she listened. Waiting for his response. Her lip appeared to tremble as if worrying that he might refuse. He had to. But he refocused. This was a woman. A complete woman. He had seen what was between her legs.

“Ok,” he said.

To his amazement beneath the dress she was wearing red and black underwear – the stuff of sexual fantasy. It was as if this moment had been planned.

“Could you help me with this,” she said. “It is all new to me.”

His hands did not stop and unclipping the bra. How could they. Her breasts were soft and her nipples stiffened with his touch. She gasped. He stiffened. He kissed her neck.

She turned. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth towards hers. Nothing seemed more natural, or more satisfying, or more exciting. His blood was up. Hers too. Instincts took over them both. Within what seemed likes seconds he was inside and her and they were climaxing together.

Then she collapsed beside him but pulled herself in close to his body.

“I had always thought that orgasms were disgusting,” she said. “But somehow having your goo inside me rather than my goo in my hand, seems so much nicer.”

Her goo? Of course, this was Cody. But before he had a chance to shudder, she had rolled onto him again, her chin on his chest, her pretty face looking up at him.

“You must have had sex before?” It was a question. Ashton was uncertain.

“Sure but getting turned on was a problem for me. Now I just lie back and wait for everything to happen. And it all happened. It was like nothing I have ever encountered before. So many sensations all at one time. It was sublime. But how can I tell if it is love?” she asked him.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. That was the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me – what happened just now. Was it just physical? It doesn’t seem that way. It seems like the start of something, not the end of it. Is it love? Am I in love with you?”

Ashton almost choked. It was not a phrase that had been directed at him before. It is a weird quirk of English that putting the word “in” before the word “love” seems to weaponize it. “How do you feel?” Ashton asked, simply because he had nothing to say.

“I just feel,” she said. “For the first time in my life, I am not thinking. I am just feeling.”

His phone rang like a bomb destroying the moment. He checked the time on the screen before he answered. It was late, so he was surprised that the caller identified himself as a lawyer engaged by the centre where Cody had suffered “the malfunction accident”.

“Of course, we are accepting no liability,” the caller said. “It is just that my client is prepared to offer a settlement sum, and a substantial one, if there is no publicity. So, I am calling you at this hour to advise you that should anything be said about what happened today, they will not be making an offer. To give you the opportunity to take compensation if confidentiality is preserved.”

“I see,” said Ashton. Cody was toying with his chest hair and looking at him hungrily. She wanted to do it again. He held his phone up so she could hear the caller.

“Of course, we would be prepared to continue with the procedure,” the caller said. “But we would need a disclaimer. My client is still a little puzzled as to what happened.”

Cody spoke so they could both hear: “I won’t be taking any chances with the procedure, thank you. But we’ll take the money.” She swiped his phone to hang up. She would not be talking again tonight. She had other things on her mind.

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| “So, what now?” Ashton asked.  She pulled herself over his belly and kissed him on the lips. She said: “You and I have so many wonderful things to see and do, I think that it will take us a lifetime.”  The End  © Maryanne Peters 2019  This is a story I wrote for a competition based on the theme of machine malfunction. It did not place. |  |