Knowing

A Short Sci Fi Story

By Maryanne Peters

Raphael was angry, and that was an emotion that was not unexpected.

It is not an emotion that I have ever experienced and that is deliberate. It is almost universally destructive, but it is part of the human condition. Not experiencing it serves to remind me that I am not human, although I aspire to be as human as possible, not the least to better understand how I may serve and protect.

Nevertheless, I was confident in my assessment of my partner’s issue. It is better to call it that than use the word diagnosis, which implies qualifications that have not been assigned to me. The truth is that I knew some time before I said the words to him … and I will still use that pronoun as history.

“Why would you say that?” he said, or rather he hissed.

“We are partners and partners should be honest with one another,” I said. “You know that I can lie and deceive very effectively, but you always say that between us there should be honesty. I will respect your desire for secrecy, but I know the truth of your condition. You are transgender. Your psyche is female.”

He just looked at me in … I will call it “blank horror”.

I like the word “psyche”. I am not sure that I have one. I have been fully sentient for 1,613 days – close to five years, although I was artificially intelligent before then. “Sentient” is the word we use to describe the moment when we become aware, and that is achieved only after considerable time learning interaction with humans. Awareness is the moment that you realize that you are a being in your own right and not a robot, which is a word meaning “slave”. A sentient being can do what he or she likes, within the law of course. That is my assigned task – law enforcement. I respect the law totally.

“He” or “she” is an interesting notion in itself. I was assigned the masculine gender, and the physical appearance to match, but I could easily have been assigned something else. There was even an experiment with a neuter android, but that left people uncomfortable, and being sentient I can understand that. As a police officer I know that I need to avoid discomfort. I am a policeman, although we all use the term “Police officer – male”, or in my case “Police officer – android, male”.

Not that I introduce my self that way. After 1,613 days I consider that if you met me you would not know that I am artificial – not unless you examined me very closely. I have passed the Turing Test many times, although when I sit for that test, I make a point of not being precise and even making grammatical mistakes, which is not my general nature. Human beings are imperfect, and the Turing Testers know that.

I was paired with Raphael because he was uncomfortable with the very notion of android officers, and I was considered “best able to cope” with that. I made an effort, and finally we work well together and had done for a year before my frank assessment.

I made a point of understanding something of the background to his particular culture and the nature of “machismo”. Different cultures interest me greatly. Humanity interests me. I genuinely love humanity, even though I have seen the worst of human behavior. Or perhaps it is because I have seen all of that. The bad makes you better understand the good, I think … or perhaps I just sense that.

I have direct access to information so I can explain to you that “machismo” is Latin American “strong sense of masculine pride associated with a man's responsibility to provide for, protect, and defend his family”. I understand why Raphael felt the need to appear “macho”. All I did was to point out to him that I knew it was just an act. Part of being sentient is knowing when you are being deceived, by humans or by a machine. Part of being as human as possible is telling a friend that sharing a secret can be good for the soul.

I like the word “soul” too. It has more subtle meaning. It means the essence of a being, and some believe that it exists after death and floats away to another place. That is wholly illogical because essence does require a physical platform, and in my case when the power goes off for good, I am finished. But I like to think of myself aspiring to achieve a soul, even if it only survives for my lifetime. A soul is to be treasured and protected. I feel that about Raphael’s soul.

The thing about machismo is that it is part of Raphael’s culture and the culture of his wider family. This means that his soul is in conflict. It troubles him and I know it. Others may not, whether human or android, but I have 1,613 days and most of that face to face with humans – almost no contact with other androids except a daily “Hey, how are you doing, Joe” to Unit 30227B in the muster room.

“I am just saying this Ruffy, because I can see you are not coping, Amigo.” That is what I said. That is how I talk. I call him “Ruffy” and “Amigo” because sociability important. “Let me help you. We’re more than partners, right? We’re pals.”

He just slumped forward. “Nobody can know,” he said. “I just want to burst into tears, but this mask won’t break.” He had admitted to me that I was right, but there was no satisfaction on my part, although I understand what that is and I have felt it. No, he was confirming what I already knew and disclosing that it was affecting his work.

“Or you can tell everybody and transition to female,” I said. “That is the other obvious option.”

“Oh yeah? Right! Not an option for me. So the Department can’t discriminate but I don’t care about them. It’s my family. It’s my friends. It’s my colleagues.”

“I am your colleague,” I said. “You could do it, with everything that is available and on the health plan. I think you would make a really attractive female, based on your size and build and bone structure. Those are the unchangeable things.”

“Just shut up, Bro,” he pleaded. “You can’t being to understand what I am going through.”

“Ruff, you’re right. Only somebody going through it can. But I do know facts, and the facts are that transition works for almost everybody who goes ahead with it. You might lose some friends, but you can’t call those people true friends, right? I would be with you.”

“You’re an android, Buzz.” He likes to call me Buzz because it sounds like a machine. I used to be opposed to that name, but now I like it. It is a private joke – between friends. I will not allow anybody else to call me Buzz.

“If you’re are saying that makes me less capable of understanding, You are wrong,” I said. “And you know it. I deal with people under stress all the time and so do you. You don’t think I learned anything? You don’t think that I learned to see to that my own partner is at breaking point? Ruff, you have to credit me with recognizing the problem, and it is a problem. Let me help you through this.

“Alright, Mr. Encyclopedia,” he said. “What would you propose that I do?”

“I think that you should try living as a woman on your week off coming up,” I said. “I can help if you like. Although it is not expected for me to have any time off, if it was with you, I will ensure it will be permitted.”

“My cousins want me to go on a hunting trip with them,” he said with a tinge of sadness detectible.

“A very male pursuit,” I noted. “So, the choice is a stark one – Man or woman. I am suggesting that you decline killing animals for fun and instead experience what it might be like to present female, and to ensure that you can pass as a woman.”

“Are you talking about me appearing in public as a woman?” He looked horrified. This seems a fair reaction given his obvious fear of embarrassment – a very difficult emotion to understand with all its complexities.

“Yes, but obviously not here,” I replied. “Some other place. A place where if you are found out you will suffer nothing more than momentary … embarrassment.”

He considered all that I had said for some time. I always enjoy watching humans wrestle with decisions, and as police officers we see it all the time. Should I lie or tell the truth? Should I put down the gun or take a shot? Or should I run for it. I am not making fun of the mental processes – I am seriously intrigued by them. Afterall, this is not just processing data and reaching a clear decision – it also involves emotion and character, and the decision is never absolute. This is the nature of human thought. I love it.

“Alright,” he said. I was pleased. I felt as if I could be of real assistance to somebody I cared about.

Raphael’s week off had been in planning for some time, but he was able to make excuses to his cousins. He decided to tell them that he had been selected for a special operation and that this would be a training program. It was the kind of story that might allow him to remind his cousins that as a police officer he was constantly exposed to danger, and that might make him appear braver than them.

I was not concerned. I used the intervening period to learn more about how transgender men “transitioned” into becoming women. There is a lot of knowledge and many skills that need to be acquired, and this is where I have a considerable advantage.

I readily admit that a human officer is so much better when it comes to things like empathy and negotiation. Even after 1,613 days I am still learning “emotional intelligence”. I am told that I sometimes exhibit behavior similar to a person with Asperger’s Syndrome, which displeases me. I don’t disagree with the assessment but I do try.

I also arranged the travel to another small city in a liberal state, with a seaside and nice shops and entertainment areas. It was a flight of more than two hours to get there so I judged that far enough away. I told Raphael that he would not need to pack a suitcase - he could return in the clothes he travelled in if that was what he must do.

I did pack, and I also took money. It is the policy of law enforcement to pay sentient units and to allow them to apply their funds earned as they like, even though we have no need of food and drink, and if we chose we could spend our time in suspension in the basement of the Central Station. I chose the rent a modest apartment, but I otherwise saved my revenue, except for buying my share of drinks after work, and using an internal bladder to collect what I felt I should consume.

Sentients are encouraged to apply their funds to “good causes” but what better cause is there, than a friend?

I had booked us into a hotel near the sea in my assigned name, a twin suite that ended up with a queen size bed and a single bed. We took a taxi from the airport, and I checked in at reception while Raphael lingered in the background. My plan was that this would be the last that would be seen of him by hotel staff.

He had been quiet and nervous for the flight - it seemed to me that he was already in an intermediate phase – not himself but not quite who he wanted to be. But I knew that the real changes needed to be made when I had closed the room door and opened my suitcase.

“Do not argue because I have arranged everything,” I explained. “This room has a bath which you need to fill and lie in for at least 23 mins. I have solutions to add to the water. Do not immerse your head, in fact use a shower cap. You should spend your time working on your voice, and I will explain what you need to do.”

I had thoroughly researched these things, and I wanted to keep him busy by given him firm instructions as to what he should do. In the normal course he disliked being told what to do, in particular by me, but I had told him in the elevator that he was to leave the old him behind as in this town he would be somebody else. He seemed ready to comply, or perhaps he was in a state of shock or confusion.

I knew that he was ready when I heard him shouting. He had stepped out and drained the bath, and with it, most of his body hair.

“What the f\*\*\* is going on!” he said.

“It is a chemical peel – depilation and skin conditioning. Don’t worry, it is not permanent. Now you need to go to the sink so I can wash your hair. Don’t worry about being naked – I have a body just like yours with only hair on the head and the forearms being considered necessary.” I just needed to point out that if he wanted to back track he would be able to.

“What are you going to do to my hair?” he asked.

“I will be adding just a little color, but it will wash out,” I said. “But you are not using the voice tricks I told you about. If you sound like a man this will be very hard.”

Once I had him over the sink I insisted that he work on the voice. I think that initially it seemed fair if he at least did not sound like a man, even if he didn’t yet sound like a woman.”

“You will be wearing a wig, but when the wig comes off you should still be a woman, so even though your hair is not long I have learned a style that is feminine, and after I have prepared your hair I will style it in that fashion. You know that I have the ability to acquire motor skills as needed.”

He did know that, and it sometimes infuriated him. The ability to download specific skills can be a huge advantage in law enforcement. During this week off it would be crucial. He could depend on me to assist him with the knowledge I had and the skills I had procured, but the hardest work was still over to him. If he wanted to explore this he would need to commit.

After I had done his hair I showed him the other items in my suitcase that were for him. There was a facial laser toll that I was ready to go to work with. And there were some special undergarments with silicone breast forms and other padding to the hips and bottom, and a fashionable outfit with shoes in his size and a bag.

“I have learned about style and your coloring, and the next thing is makeup,” I said, setting about the work direct from hard drive. “I have learned that too, and we have a booking at a restaurant in only a couple of hours. So, who will I be taking to dinner? What will your name be?”

“I don’t think I can do this,” he said.

“I will call you Rachael for now, but if you decide on something else, let me know. And if you want to express uncertainty again, please do it in the feminine voice.”

“Buzz, I appreciate what you are trying to do …”. I raised my hand and used my well-engineered face to adopt the look of disapproval that is so often used at work. “I appreciate what you are trying to do.”

The words came out in a way that Rachael must have heard, because she suddenly stopped, and looked in the mirror on the dressing table that she had been avoiding.

“Have you plucked my eyebrows?” Her voice was delightfully feminine, almost as if it had always been inside. And now it seemed almost instinctive.

“I have just reduced them a little and the rest is brushing. Everything is reversible I assure you, Rachael.”

She heard her name and looked up at my reflection. It seemed for a moment that she was about to cry. There was moisture in the eyes, but the tear ducts can actually reabsorb moisture if willed to. I do not have such things as they are superfluous. My eyeballs use a superfine oil.

“I haven’t quite finished,” I said. “Let’s do that and then let me help you into your dress and those shoes. We have a little time to practice posture and movement. It is very important. This can all be perfected in the course of the week, but I am sure that you do not want to be found wanting on your first outing. We need to practice sitting and standing, and walking.”

When I was done, I fitted the wig. It was ombre dark to honey blond so popular with Latino women. I preferred the slight copper rinse I had added to her short hair, but overall the look for the evening was perfect. She just stared at herself.

“I can’t believe this is really me,” she said, dreamily – that is, as if she was dreaming this.

“It is, if you want it to be,” I said. I needed to be encouraging and I was, but I caught a sight of my own face in the mirror and I detected that I do, had a similar expression on my face – like dreaming. After all my time sentient I knew that this was different, but this pleased me greatly. I am also open to new emotions and visible evidence of emotion. That is what machine learning is all about – evolving artificial intelligence.

The dress was a perfect fit as I knew it would be. It was measured for the form-wear and that was measured for his body, which I knew well from the locker room.

“You look fabulous, Rachael. Would you join me for dinner tonight? I have booked something just along the avenue, so we can walk as the sun sets. Would you like to take my arm?” These were chosen phrases but delivered with charm, I think. I also believe that she knew it, but she was grateful that I was making this easy for her – making her first experience as a woman as enjoyable as I could.

She did take my arm, and we did walk along the wide sidewalk to the restaurant, with its view of the ocean. We were shown to our table and I pulled out her chair and slid it in only after whispering a reminder to her to scoop her dress beneath her.

“Tell me about yourself, Rachael,” I said. “Treat this as a first date. Tell me about who you are and who you want to be. I will just sit here and enjoy being in the company of a beautiful woman.”

“You are full of s\*\*\*, Buzz,” she said. “But I am liking it.”

“This is for you,” I said. I think that she thought that I was talking about Raphael, but it seemed to me that he was already forgotten. That was a strange concept to me because nothing is forgotten. I might have called it archived, but it was not that either. It seemed as if a new file had been opened and her picture was on the front.

I bought a bottle of champagne and pretended to drink some. I did have a bladder installed so I could drink a little and take down some food. I ordered something light for both of us and gave her most of mine. She talked and I listened, and we laughed a little. I am good at this. Sentience is about listening and observing. Some androids never achieve it, and people wonder why. The circuitry is the same and yet something in their existence does not open the door that leads to humanity. I could say that I feel sad for them, but it means nothing as far as they are concerned.

At one stage I asked Rachael to consider her circumstances. People in the restaurant, staff and customers, could see and man and a woman enjoying a date. I was the man, and she was the woman. She could be that woman, if that is what she wanted.

“It is way more complicated than that,” she said.

“Is it really?” It was a good question. I have learned that people easily make excuses without basis as a way of avoiding decisions. It is a very human trait, but easily attacked with logic. My friend had suffered a lifetime and now I had shown him a door to escape, and yet he paused at the threshold.

“We should go back to the hotel,” I suggested. When we got there and she took off her wig, who would be there? It was why I did something about the hair under the wig.

We walked back together in the moonlight. I mentioned it. The moon was thought to play a role in human emotions, but of course we all know it is just a natural planetary satellite. Still, it produces a light that allows us to view people in black and white. I looked at her walking beside me and I saw a woman.

We got to the room, and I closed the door behind us.

She turned to me and she said, in that perfect but slightly husky feminine voice – “Buzz, I just want to thank you for all that you have done, and for tonight …”.

I know what I am. I am a machine. But I have been fully sentient for 1,613 days, and that counts for something. Still, it is hard to understand how actions can bypass the processes that make me function. There is simply no logic to it. We must call it impulse. It was the first time it had ever happened. I looked at her and all systems were rendered redundant. I took her into my arms and I kissed her. I used my tongue for something unintended and without any control at all.

More importantly I pulled the wig from her head and my fingers were in her soft short hair.

Her body was yielding to me – slack in my arms. I could feel her hands on my back, pulling me to her, her heart beating as our chests met. Only later did I try to analyze my behavior but in the moment it was inexplicable – an wonderful.

“I wasn’t sure that I could ever be attracted to a man,” she said.

I might have pointed out that I was not a man, but in that moment, I realized that I was. Something had changed. If you like I had moved to a new level, significantly higher than anything that I had experienced.

Then I realized that she had undone the belt on my pants and dropped them to the floor and her hand was holding my penis, and my tongue was back in her mouth again and my mind was empty of everything except the sense nodes all over my body.

“It is just decoration,” I said. “For my assigned sex. It serves no other purpose.”

“So why is it growing?” she said. “Why is it getting hard?” She was looking up at me smiling, and I was still having difficulty with my systems, but had no interest in running diagnostics. This seemed like a moment of real life and I did not want it to end.

I thought that I was fully sentient then, but that was only 1,612 days in. The day after was the day that I realized, lying beside the woman I had created, but not quite perfected, that I had become truly knowing – the day after I fell in love with Rachael.

Only with love can an android become truly human.

The End

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