

## Dominika Hamulczuk — Switch-off

”Isn’t it a bit... extreme? I mean... it is permanent, isn’t it?”

The doctor didn’t have to answer - one glance at her bandaged wrists that against her best effort were peeking out from long-sleeved hoodie said it all: ”Don’t you think what you have done was a bit extreme and permanent?” Trix pulled the sleeves back down.

Yeah, except it was totally different. What she has attempted was a kamikaze mission, killing herself and her enemy at the same time. What he proposed was like admitting to the defeat.

”So you are giving up on me?”

The doctor shook his head. ”Of course not, don’t think about it like that. It’s just...” He sighed, took off his glasses, and rested his forearms on his thighs leaning forward. The worried, carrying doctor that is about to get very honest with his patient pose. What a cliché. ”Look, the drugs don’t work on you, and when they do, the side-effects outweigh the benefits. I thought that we were making good progress in therapy, but as soon as I let you go home for holidays, you try to cut your wrists.”

”That was a mistake”, she interrupted him, ”I won’t do it again!”

The doctor shook his head and leaned back on the armchair. ”You do realize that you already promised me this once? It is hard for me to trust you on this again.”

”So there is no other solution for me, just a switch-off?” she asked as a wave of apathy flooded her. Black demon of depression on her shoulder danced victoriously and grew twice in size.

”There is always another solution. Nothing can be done without your consent, so if you don’t want this operation, we will carry on with the therapy and continue searching for a good medicine combination for you. I cannot promise how long will it take though and even if it will be successful at all. You are 22, I truly believe the switch-off is the best solution for you if you don’t want to spend all your youth in the hospital. The rate of successful operations and recoveries among people before 25 is incredibly high, you shouldn’t worry about it. You also don’t need to give me the answer right now. Take your time and think it through.”

She did take her time and now the question was a big, fat, neon pink elephant in the room that he was waiting for her to bring up in the conversation and she stubbornly refused to do so for the past several weeks. She knew though that even the doctor’s patience has its limits and she cannot stall much longer.

”I talked to my parents about the switch-off,” she said even before his usual ”so what do you want to talk about today”.

”Oh. And, what did they say?”

”They are against it. They don’t want me to become a robot.”

”Is that what they said?” he asked and when she confirmed, he shook his head, which was the best sign that he is irritated. ”They are repeating the narrative that is forced onto the public by media. Bellatrix, switch-off is a controversial topic, so it very important for you to focus on the facts instead of the fear tactics of the press.”

”Which are...?” Trix interrupted. ”What are the facts? Because from what I understood,

switch-off gets rid of your feelings. No sadness, that is cool, but also no happiness? I am not sure if it is such a good deal after all.”

”You didn’t read the booklets I gave you on this?” asked the doctor. The patient shrugged. She was too apathetic past weeks and the topic of the procedure stressed her too much, so she didn’t even attempt it. ”I understand. So let’s start from the beginning. There are two types of truths. The truth of the heart, of the feeling” the doctor first touched his chest and then moved his fingers to the temple, ”and the truth of the brain, of the fact.”

”The truth of the fact is logical and scientific; as long as you don’t learn any new facts, it is not changing. The truth of the feeling, on the other hand, is always changing, fluctuating. For some people, it becomes so distorted it causes nothing but suffering. For them switching-off the truth of the feeling can bring huge relief. Take you for example: in high school, you were suffering from anxiety. In your brain, you knew that people are not laughing at you behind your back, but your heart was convinced that they did. Do you see what I mean?”

”So it doesn’t disconnect my emotions?” she asked suspiciously. So far everything sounded good. Why does she feel there is a catch?

”Not exactly”, said the doctor with a sad voice. So there it goes - the catch. ”You still do have feelings but they are, as switched-off people often say, muffled. When you get a present you are happy because it means the giver cares about you or because you like it, but you will never be euphoric. It also goes the other way around - you can be sad because your favorite actor died and won’t act in any more movies, but you won’t get depressed. Some describe it as being on painkillers. You know your arm should hurt because it is broken, but all you can feel is an inconvenience at most.”

The patient was not convinced, but she didn’t say anything. The switch-off sounded good, so good. To get rid of pain, leave this hospital, start actually living, not just existing. But it also sounded like taking shortcuts. Perhaps she should be working harder to beat depression a proper way, without switch-off. Perhaps that last thought was just a distorted truth of the feeling.

She wished she had somebody to talk about it. Of course, she had the doctor, but she didn’t need the shrink now, she wanted a friend. But Vera wasn’t anywhere to be found in the hospital ever since Trix went home for holidays. She wasn’t worried though, Vera was disappearing like that every now and then. Sometimes because she was feeling good enough to be sent home for a couple of days, sometimes it was because things were so bad she she had to be placed in isolation. Most often the latter - especially when during her manic episodes - but Vera would always come back eventually.

They were each others only friends. It took them a while to get used to each other, but soon they realised they are the only permanent patients of the hospital. Vera become her anchor in the reality, the only stable component - she was hospitalized since forever and probably will be for life. Trix suspected that Vera was thinking the same about her.

The rest of the therapy session was very slow and awkward. The patient couldn’t focus, didn’t listen to questions, was barely speaking, and almost never in full sentences. Finally, the doctor seeing how pointless this conversation become let her go to her room earlier.

Trix left the doctor’s office and headed to her room. The conversation with the doctor about the switch-off sucked out all her energy and the only thing she wanted to do was to go to sleep.

It wasn't meant to happen though, as they're already was somebody in her room. On her bed was sitting a skinny, blond woman in a flowery dress.

"Hello. Good to see you again", said the woman and only now Trix realized who she was.

"Vera?" The woman looked like Vera, but at the same time, she didn't. Something was off, something has changed, she just couldn't put her finger on what was it. "Where were you so long? I missed you."

Vera smiled. "I missed you too. I was... I need to tell you something, come sit next to me." She patted a cushion next to herself. Trix approached her slowly. The anxiety started to ring in her head (*somethingiswrongsomethingiswrongsomethingiswrong*). "The reason I wasn't here for the past several weeks was that I decided to undergo the operation."

"You... your are switched-off? But why?"

Vera smiled slightly. It was a slightly sad smile, but a smile nonetheless. She would never smile before.

"I spend half of my life in this hospital. One day I woke up and realized that I don't remember the last time I was happy, you know? That there is no hope left for me and there is only one thing left to do. So I have done it."

"How do you feel now?"

"Better. I am still not happy, but I am not miserable anymore. But if you ask me if I regret it, then no, I don't. I don't think I can feel regret anymore." She smiled once more and this time the smile was almost happy. "I guess that is the best thing - you cannot dwell on the past. You acknowledge it, learn from it, and move on."

Trix smiled as well. It was good to see her like that. The flowers on her dress were like a symbol of the wintertime that passed and the warm breeze of spring that came to her life. "The spring that will never turn into summer," thought Trix. "I am ready to do the same?" She told Vera about the doctor's proposition.

"My parents don't want me to do it, but my doctor thinks it is the best option. Vera, what should I do?"

Vera looked at her surprised as if she couldn't understand why would anybody ask such a question. "How should I know? I am not in your head, and neither is the doctor or your parents. I cannot make a decision for you."

"I don't want you to make any decisions! I want you to advise me!"

"One of the things switch-off gave me is clarity of judgment. You are on a fence with the operation - you don't want advice, you want somebody else to make this decision for you, but the only thing I can say to you is not to let anyone decide on something that will affect your whole future. Only you can..." A melody from a pocket in her dress interrupted her thought. Vera picked up the phone, exchanged a couple of short "Mhm" and "yeah" and hung up. She stood up. "My parents are here to pick me and my stuff up, I need to go."

Tris nodded. "Will you visit me again?"

"Of course" Vera smiled once again and this time it was without a doubt a happy smile. She walked towards the door, but just before exiting the room she stopped and turned back to Trix. "And don't think about it as a sentence. Think about it as a safety rope: it's best if you won't have to use it, but remember it is there to stop you from falling into the abyss" she said and left.

Trix watched her through the window getting into a car and driving away through the hospital's gate.

A safety rope, huh? She liked this thought. "You don't need it now," said a voice in her head. "You can still remember the warmth of summer". She didn't know whether that was the truth of the fact or the truth of the feeling. Or perhaps both of them were agreeing with each other for the first time in forever.

Some time ago my friend that just broke up with his girlfriend told me: "I wish there was a way to switch off feelings, you know? But permanently, so there is no going back". That gave me some idea for the story. Later, after reading *The Bell Jar* and watching *Girl, Interrupted* I come up with the setting. But something was still missing. Finally, when we were discussing Ted Chiang's story *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling* I realized that it was the distinction between these two "truths"; the story was now complete.

My story is, however, may be seen as only loosely connected to the Chiang's, because wanted to take a different approach to the topic. Chiang talks about the truths in the relation to the past - how our memories are changed by them. That made me thinking, what about the present? Often we know we should be happy (e.g. because we passed the exam), but we are dissatisfied instead (because it was easy and yet we got only 92%). Feelings defy logic, they stain our perception of reality not only in our memories, but also in the presence, and - while our brain always tells us what is precise - our hearts sometimes does not tell us what is right.

*Switch-off* revolves around a girl, Trix, who is suffering from depression. She is admitted to the mental institution again after an attempted suicide. The doctor, seeing that her health is not improving despite the therapy and medical treatment, proposes a medical procedure of disconnecting her emotions commonly known as switch-off. Her struggles with making the decision are the core of the story.

The reason why the story is set in a mental hospital is that I wanted to explore the concept of distorted truth of feeling. Chiang defines *mimi* as the truth about what is right and this definition holds for a mentally healthy person. For a person, like Trix, who suffers from depression and anxiety, *mimi* might be reality perceived in a distorted mirror. As the doctor said, for such a person "switching-off the truth of the feeling can bring huge relief". The important aspect of the story is the idea that only *mimi* can give true, raw happiness, while *vough* is the pragmatic side of the emotions, so what you should feel. The question raised in the story is whether it is right to deprive a person of potential happiness to minimize the suffering. This dilemma is very straightforward and discussed between the characters. In Chiang's story, the memories *full of facts but devoid of feeling* are described as *cold, desaturated video*. I decided to compare them to the seasons where depression is winter and happiness - summer. Vera's name comes from the Latin word *Ver*, which means spring. By undergoing the switch-off she is destined to stay in the endless spring where neither true cold nor true warmth cannot be experienced.

Another important, but less highlighted an issue I wanted to raise the question of who can make such a decision. In Trix's case, the doctor cannot carry out the switch-off without her consent, yet it can be noticed that he slightly pressures her to agree to it. Her parents, on the other hand, are strongly against it. Trix is not sure if she can even trust herself - she doesn't know if she has the strength to keep on fighting or is it the *mimi* that is sabotaging her perception to trick her into more suffering. If this kind of technology existed, who should decide to use it: the patient, the legal guardians, or the doctor?