Alloy

An identity crisis.

Marissa Lingen

Humans have told my story for centuries: the artificial woman. Flowers, flesh or metal, my body fascinates. It is lush and unyielding, vibrant and sterile.

No one thinks of making an ugly woman from scratch. We have too many of the old-fashioned kind, I suppose — but the same is true of men, and Frankenstein's monster is no cover model. If I had been ugly, there would have been less trouble. But if I had been ugly, my maker would have taken out my bones and started again.

My maker was always practical.

In the stories, the creator made the artificial woman for himself. My maker dreamed bigger.

"You'll change the world," he told me, when I was too young to really converse. "You'll make everything different."

"How?" I asked.

He squeezed my shoulder. "By being you."

I resolved to learn to be me quickly, to please my maker and to make things different. That sounded exciting. I was, as I said, very young then.

The hardest thing, he told me, was making me fool animals. Dogs were the key. A politician without a dog was running a risk. It was an easy way to humanize them, the polls said.

That sort of thing makes me laugh.

He spent months training me — when to laugh, when to chuckle politely, when to smile with my whole face, when to merely peel my lips back. What a car-burettor is. The difference between a change purse and a dime bag. Real humans knew trillions of tiny details. I cultivated a reserved, sheltered personality for camouflage.

My maker gave me doe-like eyes and a willowy frame to further this impression. He always thought of things like that.

He managed to get an invitation to a congressman's fundraising barbecue, a man who'd surely win his party's presidential nomination. We went together, the scientist and his adopted daughter. I gave the congressman a special smile when we shook hands, and I did not put myself forward. I spent the evening listening to his mother talk about azaleas.

We were invited back for dinner. I wore black pearls, glowing against my bronze skin: traditional and modern. When some-

one asked my ethnicity, I smiled shyly and said, "American, I guess," just as I had been taught.

The congressman's smile reached his eyes. He found excuses to talk to me all evening.

Soon we were engaged. I lived in an apartment nearby, far enough to preserve decorum, close enough that we could be together always. I went to his fundraisers, his town hall meetings, his intimate chats with moneyed friends. I learned to play cribbage with his father and to understand

the racing cars his brother loved. I smiled shyly for the cameras when they caught us walking hand-in-hand down tree-lined lanes.

I learned about trade deficits, disease-resistant crops, copyright protests and prison reform.

In the stories, women like me say that they do not know how to love, and then someone comes along and teaches them. This did not happen. I did not fall in love with my congressman.

Worse. I liked him.

This made my maker's plan to destroy him problematic.

My kind were supposed to be jerky dolls, bits of plastic and metal. We were not supposed to be seamless blends. We were not supposed to fit into their families. We were not supposed to fit into their beds, not without shame and mockery. And there I was.

I did not like being a time bomb. By the

time I found out, I wasn't sure what I could do to stop it.

One day a cyberneticist came to the congressman's office. He had won an award. The staff took photos — hometown boy, making nice. They liked each other, though I couldn't tell if the cyberneticist had voted for him. Usually I could tell that sort of thing.

There was a bigger problem.

The cyberneticist knew what I was. He began to invite himself to the congressman's fundraisers. He watched me in the garden, serving lemonade to the party functionaries. He kept an eye on me at the school event, reading to children.

He knew.

One day he cornered me. "Did you think I'd let this go?"

"Let what go?" I said, feigning a pretty confusion.

"If you think I'll let you follow him into the White House to do — whatever it is you want to do — you're wrong."

"I don't know what you mean," I said. He shook his head in disgust.

I sent a message through the path I'd been given, not untraceable but hard to trace. It said: "Someone knows. He will tell the press."

The reply came back: "Good."

"I don't want this," I wrote.

The reply: "Follow the plan. All will be well."

I destroyed it automatically — that was part of the plan — but angrily — which was not. How could he say all would be well? He had not got to know the congressman. He knew his own politics.

He did not know mine.

I disappeared without a trace. No one ever knew who I was. No one ever knew who made me.

The congressman announced his candidacy that morning. He also announced a reward for any information leading to his fiancée. He intended to cooperate fully with the police in their investigation.

Those words never bode well for an election.

I went home to my maker and locked him in the basement. I feed him. Someday I will even let him out. When he's ready to hear me. When I am not his property any more. When he can think clearly again.

If that ever happens. ■

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