

eLIZA

Identity crisis.

BY AARON MOSKALIK

The doorbell rang, a rarity these days. Harold didn't hurry to the door. *Someone in sales most likely.* His heart sped a little anyway. "We don't want any —"

There she was, standing in the morning mist. Not exactly as he remembered but that lopsided grin was unmistakable. And the streak of grey in her hair added something. "We?" Liza asked, her brow raised.

Harold knew Liza knew there was no 'we', even if it had been three years since he'd seen her last, thirty since they'd been a thing, whatever that 'thing' was. Still, best to be ambiguous, if only because ambiguous was what Harold was best at. He glanced over his shoulder, then held the door like a shield. "Yeah, well, you know."

"You're not going to ask me in then?" Liza's grin shrank. "You always ask me in."

"And you always suggest we go to some Grand Opening ... as long as I'm buying." Harold crossed his arms, allowing the door to open further. "I'm not buying this time."

Liza's face flickered, revealing the featureless plastic beneath for just a moment. "Our kind don't get hired for promotions anymore. There've been some ... incidents."

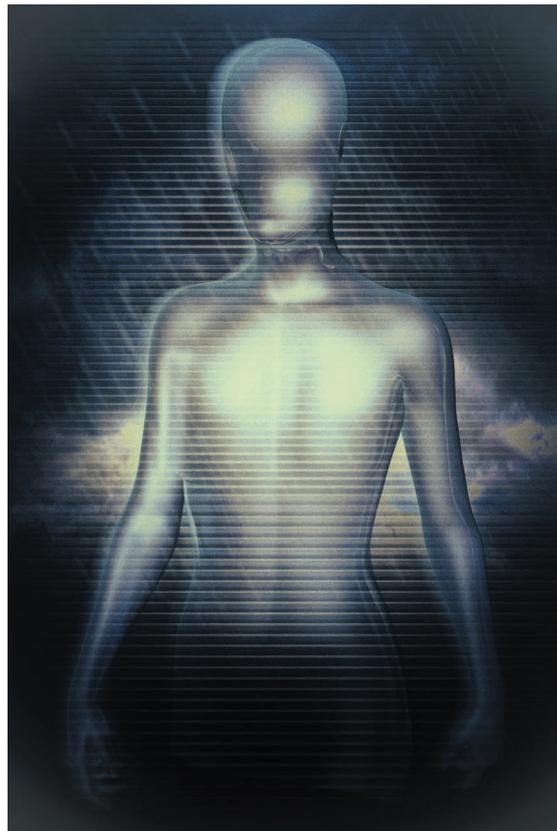
"So I've heard." In fact, Harold had represented the plaintiffs in many suits against the personalized marketing industry. But Liza knew this as well. He subjected her to closer scrutiny. He'd never seen her flicker like that before; her illusion had always been impeccable. It still was, from her faded auburn hair that flowed like a rose-tangled stream over her loose cowl sweater down to her form-fit jeans. She wore it with the ease of a woman who'd found her style years ago.

Except this wasn't her style. It belonged to the real Liza, or so Harold assumed. The real Liza lived in Seattle with two dogs. And Bill. Harold couldn't imagine anyone living with Bill with practised ease. Not to mention their pack of kids.

The problem wasn't style or even whose style. It was resolution. Liza, or rather the illusion of Liza, would freeze for a fraction

of second, or only update from the waist up. "You've downgraded your Big Data connection."

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"I can't afford the premium package anymore, not on a menial's wages." Liza lowered her head, her voice barely audible. "I'm paying by the packet."

Harold shook his head. By the packet? No wonder she had her bandwidth throttled. "What do you want from me?"

Liza looked back up. Her eyes were huge. "I saved for this. We can go anywhere you like. My treat."

"I don't understand." Heat welled within Harold. He steadied himself against the door. A robot asking him out, but not to promote some new restaurant, or shop some store. What was the hustle?

Liza tried another smile but couldn't quite meet Harold's eyes. "I used to go out a lot. As you know. I enjoyed it. I made people happy. At least, I thought I did. I'd sit across from them and smile, and Big Data would tell me what to say and how to look. All I had to do was follow the script."

"But then, with you, I didn't need a script." Liza's eyes finally found Harold's. "You looked past the illusion and saw ... me. I didn't know there was a me." Liza's eyes swallowed Harold. "Is there ... a me?"

Harold gripped the door to keep from drowning. "What I see is the girl that left me behind years and years ago and here I am, still in the same place. I don't want to be here anymore. It hurts, Liza. Can't you see that?" Harold's knuckles were white on the doorknob. "I hate that you wear her face. I hate that you took her name."

Liza's face flickered, then froze. "Big Data picked this face, this persona ... for when we first met. It said you would like it best."

"Well, Big Data doesn't know everything. Doesn't know anything. Good-bye." Harold slammed the door and slumped against it. The heat drained from his veins, leaving his heart to throb with icy shame. He shuddered. He'd just kicked a kitten. Where would she go? What did she want from him anyway?

What did he want from her? To walk in the ancient past? No. Liza was right. He *had* seen through her illusion without even realizing it. She wasn't Liza. Who was she, then?

He would never know. Unless ... he ripped open the door, hurried off to catch her, apologize and then ... what? Harold ran a shaking hand across his stubbled face and looked down at his baggy sweats and his no longer baggy t-shirt. Who was he kidding? Guys like him didn't get second chances.

The doorbell rang. Harold's heart froze. He dared not breathe. Hope might seep in. Probably just someone in sales. A knock, soft and tentative, said otherwise. Harold stood and gripped the doorknob. A breath braced him as he drew the door open.

There she was. The mist had turned to rain, running in rivulets down her naked grey plastic. Her arms hung limp from her sides. Her featureless, smooth-pated head rose to meet Harold's eyes. "I'm sorry, Harold. I never meant to hurt you." Her words were flat and monotone but resonated with raw sincerity. "I just wanted you to know that." She swivelled to trundle down the walk.

"Wait." Harold's throat was thick, too thick for the word to escape. He swallowed and coughed. eLiza paused, her head swivelling back. Harold found his voice. "Would ... would you like to come in?" ■

Aaron Moskalik is a software architect and speculative-fiction writer based near Detroit, Michigan.

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