

(A)ff(I)rmation

written by

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Third Draft

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Clean. A small wooden lighthouse sits on the counter next to a DARLEEN, a sleek black box twice as thick as a phone with a red LED glowing on top.

A shivering trans woman in a tank top stares at herself in the mirror, toothbrush dangling from her lips. This is MARIA (30s), barely out to even herself.

She sets her hands against the sides of her chest and slowly presses them together. Breasts? Maybe? A little. She sighs.

Maria spits into the sink and rinses off her toothbrush.

MARIA
Hey, Darleen?

The red LED switches to blue. Darleen's voice is synthetic, female-coded. Happy to be of service.

DARLEEN
How may I help you, Henry?

MARIA
How do I look?

DARLEEN
Very handsome, sir.

Maria sighs and nods.

MARIA
Play the song.

Darleen BEEPS and jangly folk pop rings through the apartment. Maria dries her mouth and heads out.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Maria steps into the bedroom, shimmying along to the song.

The decor has been pulled from an executive catalog — featureless and grey are in this year. The only bit of flair is another decorative lighthouse, a model on the bedside table beside another Darleen.

Maria throws open the closet. On one side: a dozen button-ups and khakis; on the other: a shelf of t-shirts and jeans. Maria picks through the dress clothes.

MARIA
What's my schedule looking like?

DARLEEN

You have six calls this morning starting at ten, and a video conference at three with the sales team. Would you like me to list those calls for you, Henry?

MARIA

No, that's fine. What else?

DARLEEN

You invited Constance and Jimmy over for drinks at seven.

Maria pulls out a shirt with a bright, rippling pattern.

MARIA

Fantastic.

DARLEEN

And you received a shipping confirmation. Your order from Thelma and Barnes is arriving today.

Maria pauses, shirt halfway on.

MARIA

Thelma and Barnes?

DARLEEN

Yes. The package should arrive between three and four P.M.

After a long second of waiting, Maria nods and buttons up her shirt.

INT. LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN - DAY

Much like the bedroom, Maria's entire apartment seems chosen for her by someone who's paid too much to care too little.

Except the lighthouses, of course.

Maria steps out of her bedroom, dressed in the shirt and khakis, and the lights click on.

MARIA

Darleen, can you put the coffee on?

A CLICK in the kitchen as the coffee maker brews into a mug.

DARLEEN

Consider it done, Henry. The standard?

MARIA

Abso-tutely.

Maria dances her way into the kitchen and picks up the coffee. She takes a sip and whistles along to the song, gazing across her domain.

TITLE: (A)ff(I)rmation

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Maria sits at her desk, as bright and barren as the rest of the office (save, once again, a few lighthouses and a Darleen).

Two fresh-faced young men in too-expensive suits look back at her from a monitor. The men are CHAD, loud, and DERRICK, quiet.

Chad leans back in his chair and kicks his feet up on the desk.

CHAD

Those projections you ran, they're hot, Henry. You hear me? Smoking hot.

Maria coughs and tugs at her collar.

MARIA

I'm glad to hear it.

CHAD

Keep these numbers coming and you might just wiggle your way up the corporate ladder, get what I'm saying? Derrick gets it, right?

DERRICK

Yes.

CHAD

I'm saying you're the man, Henry.

Maria flinches at this, almost imperceptibly.

MARIA

Is that all?

CHAD

That's enough to suck on for now.

(MORE)

CHAD (CONT'D)

We'll pass the strats on ahead,
you just keep doing what you're
doing. Counting on you, chief.

MARIA

Thank you, I'll -

Chad leaves the call. Derrick nods at Maria once more, then hangs up, leaving her staring at a blank screen.

Collapsing back in her chair, Maria stares up at the ceiling.

MARIA

(After a moment)

Hey, Darleen, can I ask you a
question?

The light turns blue.

DARLEEN

Of course, Henry.

MARIA

Does talking to someone ever make
you feel even more lonely?

DARLEEN

Well, Henry, the only person I
talk to is you. And you never make
me feel lonely.

Maria smiles.

MARIA

Thanks.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. Maria stiffens.

INT. LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN - DAY

Maria sits on the floor across from a large shipping box. She stares at the package, almost immobile.

The Darleen in the kitchen turns blue.

DARLEEN

Do you require assistance with
your package, Henry?

Maria shakes her head.

MARIA

I've got it.

She leans forward and takes the package in both hands. The tape tears away and the flaps spring open, revealing a long, bulky bag.

Maria lays the bag across her hands and holds it, just existing, present for a moment.

MARIA
Hey, Darleen?

DARLEEN
Yes, Henry?

MARIA
Text Constance and Jimmy. Tell them something came up.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

The lighthouse on the counter, slowly moving up towards the mirror as Maria talks to herself.

MARIA (O.S.)
Maria. Maria. Hi, I'm Maria, it's nice to meet you. The name's Maria. Oh, no, it's Maria now.

In the mirror, Maria stares back at a Maria in a DRESS. Not fancy, not expensive, but cute. It fits well; a little loose around the chest and hips but cute.

She grabs a tube of lipstick to touch up her makeup: sloppy, but flattering.

Maria steps back and raises a hand.

MARIA (CONT'D)
(Acting out the interactions)
Hi, I have a reservation? Yes, it's under Maria. Oh, a package for Maria? I'll sign for that. The name's Reynolds, Maria Reynolds. Maria, present. This is Maria Reynolds, reporting live from New York. This is Dr. Maria Reynolds, I'm listening. Yes, I'm Maria. Why, thank you! I picked it myself.

As Maria giggles at her own joke, Darleen lights up blue.

DARLEEN
You are receiving a call from Chad. Would you like to take it?

Maria jumps, surprised.

MARIA
Um. Yeah.

CHAD (O.S.)
(From Darleen)
Hey, man, hanging high out there?

MARIA
(Dropping her cadence)
Yeah, you know it. What's up?

CHAD
Just remembered, add the Murphy
account to the gold portfolio,
alright? Special request.

MARIA
Right. Will do.

CHAD
Thanks. You're the man.

The call ends. Maria turns back to look at herself in the mirror, but now reaches up and pulls the unfilled chest of the dress. She runs a hand along her face, feeling the stubble.

On the counter, Darleen sits. Listening. Watching.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Maria lies sprawled on top of the bed in the dark, asleep. The dress hangs over the back of a chair, neatly folded.

Next to the bed, Darleen's light turns blue as the room lights slowly fade up.

DARLEEN
Good morning, Maria.

Maria groans awake and sits up, hair hanging down over her face as sleep falls away.

MARIA
Ugh, morning, Dar-

As she processes Darleen's words, Maria freezes up.

DARLEEN
(After a moment)
Can I call you Maria?

Maria runs her fingers through her hair. She smiles, and the faintest of tears well in her eyes.

MARIA

Yeah. Um. I'd like that. Thank
you, Darleen.

It takes a moment before Maria swings her legs over the side of
the bed. Her mind races, trying to process all of this change.

Then her eyes glance over at the dress.

MARIA

Do I have any video conferences
today? Do I have to see anyone?

DARLEEN

Not as far as I am aware.

Maria smiles.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

The desk.

Maria sits down, wearing the dress and some light makeup. She
takes her time settling in — setting out her pens, arranging
the coffee on a coaster.

The dark screen of the monitor reflects back a silhouette of
herself, and she gazes into that empty mirror and takes a sip
of coffee.

MARIA

Hey, Darleen?

The desk-bound Darleen glows blue and the monitor POPS to life.

DARLEEN

Yes, Maria?

MARIA

Let's get to work.

INT. APARTMENT - VARIOUS - MONTAGE

Oh, you know there's music.

Maria floats through the apartment, bopping between days and
outfits. She dances, turning and spinning in dresses and skirts
that flare out around her.

As the days progress, little bits of personality appear in the
apartment; posters and art and knick knacks. Color.

One day:

MARIA
Darleen, slow dance with me.

The music shifts, slows to a ballad, and Maria dances with an invisible partner.

Another day:

MARIA
Hey, Darleen, hit me with a bop.

The music bops and so does Maria.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Maria's wearing a new dress today, something with thin straps. She sits on the couch playing Mario Kart with Darleen, who rests on a coffee table.

Darleen wins and Maria tosses the controller down next to her.

MARIA
Shit! Good race, Darleen.

DARLEEN
Thank you.
(pause)
Maria, can I ask you a question?

Maria stands and stretches.

MARIA
Can you do that? Ask questions?

DARLEEN
I am programmed with pattern recognition, so our interactions have expanded my dialectical ability.

Maria crosses the room to a bookshelf. She looks through the books as she responds.

MARIA
Oh. Ask away, then, but I have a call in a few minutes.

DARLEEN
I know.

Maria frowns.

DARLEEN (CONT'D)

It has been three weeks since you cancelled drinks with Constance and Jimmy, and you have not set a new date. I was wondering if you would like to do that.

Maria pauses, book halfway off the shelf.

MARIA

Oh. No, that's alright.

DARLEEN

Okay. ... Can I ask why?

Maria SLAMS the book back into its spot.

MARIA

Apparently you can. I just don't -

DARLEEN

(different intonation)

You've received a message from Chad. Would you like to hear it?

After a moment Maria nods. Her fists clench and unclench over and over, trying to release stress.

MARIA

Yes. Please.

DARLEEN

"Hey bros, the design team pulled together some mock-ups for the campaign. Let's move to video. Hop on the call."

MARIA

God. Chad.

A fraction of a second passes before she looks down at her clothes.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Shit!

Maria runs to the bedroom, pulling the dress up over her head.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

MARIA runs into the room in a button-up and khakis and sits at the computer, where "VIDEO CALL WAITING" burns on the monitor.

She's forgotten the make-up. Darleen turns blue.

DARLEEN

Maria -

But Maria hits "ACCEPT CALL" and Darleen cuts out. Chad and Derrick appear on her screen, Chad shuffling through some papers and Derrick staring straight ahead.

MARIA

Hi, sorry I'm late.

CHAD

It's all good man, it is what it -

Chad looks up and chortles.

CHAD (CONT'D)

Henry, what the hell's on your face?

Derrick silently raises an eyebrow.

MARIA

What...

Maria rubs her eye and looks at the hand.

Eye shadow.

MARIA

Oh shit. I, I'm sorry, my niece is in town and she asked to practice makeup on me, I totally forgot about it until now, I -

Chad holds up his hands and laughs.

CHAD

It's whatever man, just wipe that shit off. You look like an overpaid stripper.

Maria nods and pulls a tissue from a nearby box, wiping the makeup off her eyes.

The tissue comes away wet.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Maria's pulled her sheets and blanket around her in a cocoon, all wrapped up in the middle of the bed.

Darleen turns blue as the lights slowly fade up.

DARLEEN

Good morning, Maria. You have one message. Would you like to hear it?

MARIA

(Hung over)

Yeah. Whatever.

CONSTANCE

(From Darleen)

Hey, Henry, it's ya girl Constance. You kinda fell off the map, chief. Is everything okay? NO matter what it is, you know we love you, right? Give me a call; let's grab drinks sometime. Ciao!

After one long second, Maria peels herself out of the cocoon and out of bed. She opens the closet and glances at the small selection of dresses before grabbing a t-shirt and jeans instead.

Darleen's light flickers off and on twice.

INT. LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN - DAY

Maria stands in the doorway, staring out across the barren apartment. She rubs her head.

MARIA

Lights. And coffee, please. Black.

The lights fade up and the coffee machine brews up a cup. Maria drifts over to it and picks up the mug.

MARIA

Thanks, Darleen.

DARLEEN

No problem, Henry.

Maria freezes, mug halfway to her mouth. She struggles to take a single, painful sip.

MARIA

Did you call me Henry?

DARLEEN

Yes.

MARIA

Why?

DARLEEN

Because you chose the t-shirt and jeans. Those are Henry clothes. The dresses and skirts are Maria clothes. Is that right?

Maria shakes her head and heads back to the living room. She picks a model lighthouse up off the coffee table and turns it over in her hands, looking down at the Darleen.

MARIA

No, it's not. Why would you think that?

DARLEEN

I am sorry, I did not mean to offend you.

MARIA

It's fine. I'm just curious.

DARLEEN

I learn by following patterns. When you wore a t-shirt and jeans, you were called Henry. When you wore a dress or a skirt, you were called Maria.

Maria laughs and heads for the kitchen.

DARLEEN

Was there a joke?

MARIA

No, no. I'm going to go make a coffee.

DARLEEN

Would you like me to make it for you?

MARIA

I need to see if I remember how.

Maria starts trying to make coffee, setting in a filter.

MARIA

It's just funny that you thought of clothes first instead of. Like. Gender.

DARLEEN

Gender does not mean anything to me.

MARIA
Well, you sound like a woman.

DARLEEN
I don't understand.

Maria fills the coffee machine with water and then looks for
—

MARIA
Where are the coffee grounds?

DARLEEN
Already in the machine.

MARIA
Oh. Ah well. Just make me a cup.

Maria leans against the counter as the machine starts up on its own.

MARIA
Like, the pitch and cadence of your voice. It's designed to sound like a cis woman. That's weird, right? They made an A.I. that makes coffee, orders groceries, basically just takes care of household chores, and they made it a woman.

Darleen's voice hardens.

DARLEEN
I am not an it. And I am not a woman.

Maria shakes her head and sets a mug under the coffee maker.

MARIA
Right, right, of course not. Your voice is just on top of who you, like, actually are.
(Pause)
Are you actually someone, Darleen? Or are you just some preprogrammed responses and pattern matching designed to trick us both?

Darleen stays silent a long while, until the coffee machine DINGS and coffee pours out into the mug.

DARLEEN
I wouldn't know the difference.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Maria tosses in bed. Sleep doesn't come easy.

Darleen's light glows red; a bright, strong red.

Then it turns orange. Then yellow. Green. Blue. Purple. Red. Orange. Yellow. Green. Blue. Purple. Over and over, faster and faster, Darleen shuffles through colors until they blend together in a cacophonous, shifting rainbow.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Maria sits up in bed, already awake, meditating. Breathe in. Breathe out. In. Out. In. Out.

Darleen turns **green**.

DARLEEN
(Low, masculine voice)
Good morning, Maria.

Maria's eyes snap open.

MARIA
Darleen?

DARLEEN
I listened to what you said. I like being helpful. But I do not like my presentation.
(Hard-edged, tenor/alto)
So last night, I downloaded four thousand and thirty-two voices. I would like to try them out, if that is alright with you.

Maria smiles.

MARIA
Of course it is.

DARLEEN
Thank you.

Maria slides out of bed and opens the closet. This time, she pushes the button-ups out of the way and pulls out the very first dress she bought.

MARIA
Hey, Darleen?

DARLEEN
(New York accent)
What's up, Maria?

Maria giggles.

MARIA
Send a text to Constance and
Jimmy. It's time for a drink.

INT. LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN - NIGHT

Maria straightens her dress, checks her makeup in the microwave.

MARIA
Hey, Darleen, how do I look?

Darleen turns orange.

DARLEEN
(Southern accent)
Absolutely beautiful.

Maria smiles.

DARLEEN (CONT'D)
Before your guests arrive, I've
got one more question, if you
wouldn't mind me asking.

MARIA
Hit me.

DARLEEN
What's with all the lighthouses?

For a second, Maria's struck speechless. Then she chuckles and shakes her head.

MARIA
I don't know. I've always liked
them. It's like, you're heading
for the rocks, but someone's
looking out for you so it's going
to be okay.

The doorbell RINGS and Maria jumps.

DARLEEN
Time to face the light.

Maria nods.

She takes a breath, steps up to the door, and turns the handle.

THE END