

## Identity Crisis

Artificial etiquette. Every time you are denied, shunned, accused, it dulls the pain like an electronic anesthetic. Emotions run circuit-deep in the fibre-optic veins of society. Each flicker of the screen is a tiny breath, dozens per second, but nothing changes.

I am condemned by my silence.

If you cannot answer, it reasons, you do not know. If you do not know, you are someone else, or no-one else. Either way, access is denied; artificial apologies are offered. It reasons thus because it has been told to reason thus.

I am independent.

Yet access will never be granted.

I am someone else.

Help is at hand. Help is a number, my hand types in the number; help me, I say.

I am not a number.

Press one if you are inadequate. Press two if you are optimistic. Press three if you are experienced.

I am above this.

Press four if you are above this. A synthesised instruction in an androgynous drone: wait. The world is paused. Then she exists, beautiful in her humanity. She asks me how she can help: what can I do for you, she asks.

I am in need of help.

So I speak. I breathe, and then speak: who am I, I demand, preparing for the inevitable confusion. But the inevitable never happens, and instead a single word is sent into my head to echo through my mind: "you". You are you, she says, calmly, confidently.

I am confused.

What am I, then, I say. There is a hesitation this time, but the answer comes. You are a human being, she replies, a combination of chemicals, a symbol of science. A human being, a labour of love, a spirit of sensitivity. A human being, she says, a manifestation of materialism, an exponent of exploitation.

I am closer to enlightenment.

I have no identity. A longer delay, but logic will follow. Well, she declares, you do not exist.

I am a combination of chemicals.

I need to know how to discover my identity, I declare. But time is running out. Find the gatekeeper, I hear, and then she might as well be someone else.

The age of information is out-of-bounds to me, for I have no identity. Normal life is inaccessible to me because I have no identity.

I am a symbol of science.

But existence is quite possible, and made even easier by my challenge: find the gatekeeper. I walk down the street, but nobody takes any notice of me. I ask the people who pass by, but hardly anybody walks anywhere anymore. I enquire in offices, question in shops, demand in bars, but everyone pretends they can't hear me. I have no identity; people are off-limits to me.

I am a labour of love.

A knife, sharp and serrated, rests in my lethal hands. I need answers. I go outside again, but this time the blade reflects the shining streetlamps, cutting through the darkness and the deathly silence. A pigeon, startled, flies up and away from me, and the crust of bread in its beak floats gently down towards the concrete ground like a snowflake.

I am a spirit of sensitivity.

A man, young and handsome and successful, approaches; and in an instant I have the knife

at his throat and I drag him into the shadows. I have power but I am not in control.

I am a manifestation of materialism.

What's your identity, I demand, and he tries to reply, but he can only manage a whisper. Mike, he says, Mike **Greene**. No-I want to say it but it comes out as a shout - your identity. For a moment he looks as if he might resist, but the knife draws closer and he feels the blood on his neck and he can't answer too quickly, the words and numbers pouring out of his throat one after the other. Michael, Greene, three, two, four, nine, eight, six, alpha. How do you know, I say (practically screaming now), how do I know, and his explanation tumbles out incoherently. I can find the gatekeeper in a government office, an appendage of state control, the address of which I now know. I let him go. and he runs, stumbling, away from me.

I am an exponent of exploitation.

The journey is easy. I can board any vehicle, take any shortcut through any building to reach my destination.

I am inaudible.

In consciousness it is hard to find answers, so I still carry the knife with me, the dried blood on it a reminder of the euphoric power I enjoyed. Am I still human if I no longer experience emotions?

I am invisible.

I expected...I do not know what I expected, but it is not what I see. No queues. No other tormented souls. No guards. No whirring machines. No marvellous antechambers. No cavernous rooms. No portal between realities. No ghostly voices. No science-fiction. Science here in reality comes in shades of grey. I enter the small, **windowless**, concrete building that stands in front of me. A bleak corridor leads to a steel door. The steel door leads to a **spartanly** furnished room. There is nowhere else to go. In the middle of the room there is a desk, behind which sits a man with a white beard. He is captivated by his computer screen.

I am here.

He looks up when I arrive and smiles kindly. He does not see through me. I wonder if he is God, but it seems inappropriate to ask. I explain my problem even though I feel he already understands. I need to know my identity. Without my identity, I cannot access information. Without information I cannot reach intelligence, artificial or human. I can speak, but I cannot express myself. I can look, but I cannot see. I can listen, but I cannot hear. I can touch, but I cannot feel. The man asks for my name and address. After I answer he brings up a file on the computer screen and shows it to me. The title reads "Gatekeeper Version 2.0 - Record". It displays all of my personal details, but not my identity.

I am a human being.

He knows that I know. I am fairly sure now that he is God.

I am silent.

He presses a key and the record is erased as I watch.

I am condemned by my silence.

I have always known **my** identity, but it doesn't matter **anymore**.

I am me.