Lanny Morgnanesi

Learning

This creature, a "she" as it were, walked into the unadorned room and gently, gracefully, fluidly, sat down. A marvel of biomechanics. The scientist looked closely at her and noticed her eyes were addressing him, so he spoke.

"My name is Alan," he said. "And you are Andrea, correct?"

"Yes," she said. "It's nice to meet you, Alan."

He was impressed at how she blinked regularly, with the slightest of head movements, and added an occasional shift in posture.

"I'm from New York," he said. "I do clinical research in human psychology, mostly on thought patterns and nonverbal communications. I'm here on a visit to see you and your creator, Craig Butterfield."

She looked so new to him, like she was right out of the box.

"How old are you?" he asked

She laughed. "A woman doesn't discuss her age."

"I'm 55," he said. "I've learned a lot in 55 years. Would you say that you know a lot?"

"There are some things I know and some things I don't know," she said. "I'm just like everyone else."

He paused. "Yes, like everyone else. Listen, I'm going to ask some questions to see what you know. For example, do you know the song, 'Moonlight in Vermont'? It's an old song, but do you know it?"

"I think so," she said.

"What do you mean, by think?" he asked.

"I've heard of the song," she said. "It was written in 1944 by John Blackburn. Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald recorded it."

She noticed a subtle expression of delight on his face.

"Sinatra had a great, one-of-a-kind voice," he said.

"Old Blue Eyes," she said.

He continued. "Have you ever actually heard the song?"

"No, I haven't," she said. "Have you, Alan?"

"Yes, I have," he said. "Do you know the words?"

"No, I don't. Do most people?"

"They don't," he said. "Not today's generation. Do you know what a rhyme is?"

She laughed.

"Of course I do, Alan. Are you joking? I'm not really good at jokes."

She knew from the pitch and cadence of his voice that he actually was being serious.

"No, I'm not joking. Here is my first important question: How many rhymes are in the song 'Moonlight in Vermont'? If you don't know, just take a guess."

She hesitated, as if to suggest she was pondering, when she wasn't at all. He watched her fingers fidget in a drumming motion and thought it cleverly elegant. When he told her not to be nervous, the drumming stopped. He almost said something about this but didn't.

"I'll guess there are 15 rhymes," she said.

Her eyes scanned his face and she decided he was satisfied with the answer.

"That's a good guess," he said. "An average song might have 15 rhymes. But the truth is, there are no rhymes in 'Moonlight in Vermont.' It's a beautiful song without a single rhyme. This is very unusual. Do you know why I asked this particular question?"

"I haven't a clue," she said. "I guess you're just trying to make conversation."

"No one really counts the rhymes in songs," he said, "and no one expects you to know. No one even cares. It would be a ridiculous question if the answer was something like 15 rhymes, or 16 rhymes or 12. It would only be interesting if the answer was something totally unexpected, like 100 rhymes, or 10,000 or just one."

"Or none," she said.

"Exactly," he said. "You see, it's a trick question."

"Yes, and you tricked me, Alan." She laughed.

"Well, you're learning," he said. "That's what you do. You learn, and learn quickly."

"What would you have guessed?" she asked.

"Probably zero," he said. "OK, let's move on. Another question from the world of show business. Do you know the name Charlie Chaplin?"

"Yes," she said. "He's an actor from the silent movie era. He was very famous."

"That's correct. Now here's another important question. Consider the wording of this question closely: What famous actor took third place in a Charlie Chaplin look-alike contest?"

Her lips came together and, very naturally, she glanced around the room.

"When was the contest?" she asked.

"Back when Chaplin was making films. At the height of his popularity."

"Can I guess?"

"Sure," he said, and took a few notes.

"How about, Buster Keaton," she said.

She realized this time he was disappointed with her answer.

"The answer is Charlie Chaplin," he said. "He dressed up like his tramp character, secretly entered the contest and came in third. It was another trick question. You see, you wouldn't expect the real person to be in the contest, and if he was, you'd expect him to win, not come in third. Like the question about the rhymes, a typical answer would make the question boring and uninteresting. Such a question only has value if the person asking it can reveal an unusual or ironic answer, making it entertaining. I was hoping you would grasp that and maybe suspect a trick and see through it."

"Is that all you ask? Trick questions?" she said.

"I ask them for your benefit," he said, "not mine. I was hoping to push you ahead, but, I'm sorry to say, you don't seem to be learning in the way I want you to learn."

Her eyebrows arched and she looked upset. From what he knew of her, this was to be expected. Still, he wrote it down in his notebook.

"I've learned that I probably shouldn't be talking to people like you," she said. "That's what I learned."

Sarcastic, he thought.

He took one last studied look at her face, her body, her body position, her breathing. She would actually breathe. This was the first rendition of Andrea with that feature. Alan took a few more notes then spoke into a microphone hooked up to a control room.

"I'm done for today," he said. "Thank you."

From the control room, the power to Andrea was turned off. For the first time Alan saw her motionless. Her eyes were open but they no longer blinked. He was startled by the total inactivity. It was as if a spirited person had instantly lost their spirit.

Alan grew uncomfortable and made for the door. In his haste, he left behind his notebook, which included this directive, "The next time you're nervous, pay attention to what your hands and fingers are doing. And try not to move your head so much."

Later that day, Craig Butterfield, a pioneer in artificial intelligence who had been working on the Andrea droid for more than 20 years, met with her in a debriefing session. After reanimating her, he noticed something different.

"How did you and your visitor get along today?" Butterfield asked. "Did he offer you any insights?"

For the first time ever, Andrea ignored a question posed by Butterfield. She was smiling and appeared to be preoccupied with something else, although she looked right at him. In a

playful yet forceful voice, with more volume than normal, she asked Butterfield, "How much butter is there in a butter field?"

This stunned him. It made no sense. He worried about a learned programming error.

"What do you mean?" he asked, sensing trouble with the machine he so loved. He was beginning to panic.

Slowly, enunciating each word, she repeated the question. "How much butter . . . is there in . . . a butter field?"

Before he could speak, she supplied the answer.

"None!" she said with dramatic emphasis. "Unless you've had toast for breakfast."

Then she stood up, jumped a bit on her toes, and laughed hysterically.