

MARCELO RINESI

THE FLESH TRADE  
AND OTHER NINETEEN  
DRABBLES

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*Conditions of Creation*

The doctor and the nurse had lied - they *were* devoted fans of her books. But if they had said so she wouldn't have let them assist in the birth, and they needed her to.

The birth was their best chance to sedate her, and when she slept, to pick up the baby from her still tight arms.

"He's beautiful," the doctor said.

"But her books moreso," replied the nurse.

"Yes, I know." The doctor sighed. "And she always wrote best after tragedy."

A man entered the room without knocking. The doctor gave him the baby without saying a word.

*The Worth of a Dragon*

The dragon hadn't moved in sixty years from the pile of gold bars he was sitting on, and he did not move when the man in the grey suit took from his briefcase a dragonkiller gun.

"You must hate me very much to kill me, human. Yours is a greedy people, and I've been told I'm as valuable to your coffers as the gold I'm sitting on."

"More," said the man. "Much more. You are one of the last two dragons. But the last dragon, that one is going to be priceless."

The shot echoed through the armored bank vault.

*Ludic*

Once, you tortured the men sitting in front of you by forcing them to make impossible choices. Which lover would die, what dream to sell. To pick a betrayal of self. Most people kill themselves before the third round, but the men playing now, they played until they were left with nothing to choose from.

So you let them go. And they are back now, once more with families, lovers, riches. Once more facing the unbearable clarity of an impossible choice.

You knew they would. Those who survive the game still lose. They come to love the game the most.

*Relentless*

The voices in my head speak of paradise, peace, joy. They plead with me to just let go. I jump from the window. I fucking hate those voices.

I fall right on the bastard's back, a hundred and seventy pounds of cop dropped from above. The man's noise as he cushions my fall almost covers the protests from the ghosts. "You're under arrest for murder" I say as I cuff him, not that he'll be moving very far on his own.

The victim is still telling me that he forgives him, that Heaven is everything we've been told, and more.

*Doctor/Patient Confidentiality*

If you're seeing this I'm dead, and you're the ship's Doctor now. I'm very sorry. I know you haven't seen me do much through the decades we have travelled so far, and let me assure you, I do not spend hours in some hidden lab. My most onerous task, in time and in heaviness, is my silence.

Your silence, now. Being Doctor, you'll have access to the closed medical files, and you'll learn how deadly is space to humans, how necessary the secondary systems we haven't bothered to repair in years. *Humans need air.*

I don't know what we are.

*On the Endurance of Memory*

Fifty-three words. That's all the dying magician needed to describe the essence of his soul, and he whispered them into a boy's dreams. He died that night, as even magicians shall.

Another night, years later, the man who had been that boy went to sleep, and woke up knowing himself the magician, down to the last syllable of those fifty-three words that had so craved life.

That was centuries ago, in another land.

But those restless nights of nameless dread, when the idea of falling asleep makes you vaguely afraid — are you sure it's you who will wake up?

*Teratogenic*

"This one's the last," said the social worker. The phone that was her boss made no comments. She had often made that decision right before meeting an exile, and she had always come back.

Right now, though, she had shaped herself into something the exile would accept, and who but a saint wouldn't have balked at the cost?

Gender definition, a ludicrous ninety-nine percent correlation across the board. No visible non-biological mods. Neurochemistry birth-standard, and even that, toned down.

Humanity was a wide sea, and the exiles were clinging to such narrow shores!

The social worker knocked on the door.

*Lauds*

I wake up hugging an empty space, but I don't cry.

The bread on my tongue is your flesh, I think. I tell myself the coffee down my throat is your blood. They don't taste the same, but I don't cry.

I stand in the garden, right in front of the rosebush. The soil hasn't been disturbed, neither from above nor from below. But I don't cry.

I only cry when I speak to you, knees hurt by the rough floor. But there's no response.

Forgive me. I did not know what I was doing. Come back.

Amen, my love.

*Machine Ethics*

Jenny's parents are technophilic enough to trust neuroethical mapping, and religious enough to use it their daughter's education. So every year, one month before her birthday, they have her brain scanned for things like propensity to lie, libido-rule quotient, and so on. On the results depend her birthday gift, and they always make sure she knows. They want her to know them just.

Jenny's a very smart young woman. More than smart enough to realize that "good" she's not. So the machine lies to her parents, as skillfully, if not so often, as she does.

Jenny wonders why, and waits.

*The Long War*

More real than the rain falling on your shoulders, you feel the constant battle between your body and your mind. There is rage in the least of your tissues, and absolute coldness in every thought. The clockwork of genes inside your cells whisper through your blood, while your brain's web of unconscious meanings keeps quiet and plots.

All you can do is stay under the rain, thinking of your long-dead parents, one a psychologist, the other a genetist. Their bitter divorce.

You want to lean and spit on their graves, but that's one thing neither army will let you do.

*The Flesh Trade*

Overweight and pasty like the archetypal American, Bruno is one of the thousands of Brazilians making a living off that. As long as he keeps up a sedentary lifestyle, he'll remain a high-quality subject for pharmacological tests. There aren't many honest jobs paying better than that, not if you're poor in the Greater Rio megaslum.

There's good illegal money, too, doing industrial sabotage. Sometimes people pay him to take extra pills, chosen who knows how to do who knows what.

Bruno doesn't care about the law. He has money and an easy job. For a seven years old, that's not bad.

*The Circle of Fire*

Could it have gone in any other way? She had once dared to hope for sacrifice without pain, but God's voice was clear, and all her visions had been of fire.

So be it. The flesh was nothing, the soul was all. What was the sting of earthly fire, compared to the eternal damnation of Hell?

Better to burn now and gain peace everlasting.

Better to fulfill her visions than to have her nightmares come true.

Submitting to God's will, and screaming at friend and foe alike to do the same, the Maid of Orleans rode into the London fire.

*In the Labyrinth of Infinite Pleasures*

He's now in the Labyrinth of Infinite Pleasures. Being virtual, it can be infinite. Being infinite, it can hold every desire, possible or not. He's exploring those rooms now, his steps guided by his desire, his desire shaping what will be found.

There's no temptation in his mind that he won't encounter and give to. There's no pleasure that he won't eventually get to enjoy as he walks deeper and deeper through the infinite halls. Enjoying, he'll know what he really wants, and that knowledge he'll never forget.

Nobody figures out the labyrinth is a punishment until it's too late.

*The Geometry of War*

I was the second soldier to enter Syracuse. It'd been five years since we had last seen an enemy soldier, or thought about the city as a prize of war; we were besieging the philosopher and his machines.

I was who found Archimedes at, his corpse half-rotten near a well. He had fought us, alone, for years. I don't know what that says about him or us. We were still standing around his body in empty triumph when his hidden machines sprung to life.

I was the last soldier to leave Syracuse, of the seven that escaped the city alive.

*The Fleet*

The fleet is huge in ships, crew, and weapons, yet tiny compared to the thing they hunt and the voids where they hunt it. They are seeking Leviathan, of which nothing is known but rumors. Leviathan is said to blot the skies with its size, and leave planets dead on its wake. Its motives are mysterious, or perhaps simply larger than what mind can encompass.

The ships have sought it for centuries now, building more ships in each solar system, gathering rumors and then flying away. They have few allies and no friends. They don't know they are called Leviathan.

*Catechesis*

God is smaller than cells, because It is inside them. God is larger than the planet, because It envelopes Earth.

God is beyond thought, for It has no brain. God is beyond death, for It has no body to be destroyed.

God is worshipped even by those who cannot understand It, for It is in their blood.

God cannot be dislodged by book or therapy, because I designed Its RNA code to rewire the deepest brain.

God is in every human but me. When It came to me in my dreams, we made Its creation and my freedom our pact.

*The Week*

On Monday we activated the Physics Coherence Validator Sensor Network, which everybody but the bureaucrats called the Miracle Detector. Whenever the impossible happened, we would know.

On Tuesday all the believers in the engineering team triple-checked the sensors.

On Wednesday decouple system checks changed nothing, and worldwide sensor diagnostics painted the globe with a green "All Right." All the screens were still empty, as if dead.

On Thursday Doctor Santiago despaired "Is there no God, then?"

On Friday I asked Santiago "Who opened the box to look at the cat?"

On Saturday Father Santiago killed himself.

On Sunday I rested.

*Under a Harsh White Light*

This is the difference between *mad* and *insane*: a mad person couldn't have done this. Craniotomies under local anaesthesia are common, but you're forcing your doctor to operate at gunpoint.

You're doing this because you're insane. You know something is different in you, something that no doctor has believed or found. So you're forcing them to look.

The doctor pulls the bone flap away, so caught in her art she almost forgot the gun. You hear her gasp.

The mirror on the ceiling shows you what she saw.

You smile at it, and you're not surprised when it smiles back.

*The Toolmaker*

Five. Seven. Five. That's only the most obvious, the most *superficial* of patterns. There are deeper ones. But the most awe-inspiring aspect isn't the beauty of the pattern-of-patterns. It's that the whole thing is an experiment and a machine as much as it's art. It makes new things happen. Unexpected things. Makes the world change in ways impossible before.

So although you abhor the deeds and were the one who stopped and killed the artist, you have no choice but to continue her work. After all, her carefully arranged murders have already changed you.

Who knows what will happen next?

## *Shipmates*

Aging stalled, the problem in space travel is boredom. They solved it by you being awake two days every year. Of course, somebody is awake at all times, two days a year each. And because mass is at a premium, you all share the same brain. It has worked very well so far.

But now something is going on that you don't like. Messages left in a code you don't understand. Unplanned system modifications. And a day in which nobody was up.

You wonder how, if anything, she felt when she died. If you're in danger.

You will fall asleep soon.