

Hunger Is the Same Hunger

It was, hands down, the best fuck in my life. It happened after we saw Michelangelo's David.

I am still not sure why I had to actually fly to Italy in the first place. I guess Italy owns the national copyright. At least, when you land in Florence, you don't have to leave the airport. When I got off the plane, I followed the signs to Virtuale Fantasia. Somewhere in the back of the airport in a morning air that smelled of cigarettes and diesel, I watched the bot's handler drop her off. He mumbled that she only wanted to stay in bed in sleep mode. He warned me that she could have a panic attack – I still don't know exactly what a bot panic attack is.

I bought train tickets which took us to the center of the virtual city somewhere in the building Virtuale Fantasia in the airport. Just by looking at her light green eyes and Kendall Jenner face, I was head over heels in love. I was struck by the fact that she was not at all dressed up. She did not even wear make-up. She just wore some pants and had three shirts on—the outmost bulky garment covering all her perfect curves. I could not believe that she was only programmed to be in love with me. Everything out of her mouth was a permutation of: “I only want to be by your side.”

I should say right from the start because I know you'll read this someday. I'm sorry, Venus. I'm truly sorry. Okay, even if you don't read this the way that humans do, it wasn't a fuck. Yours was the best love in my life. Nothing before or after compares.

So, I've played my share of video games. This one is on a whole other level. I already had shelled out over 10,000 bucks just to get to Italy and to get in that Fantasyland. I have no doubt that someone soon will figure out how to steal the software from the game and put it up in some joint back in my hometown. When they have the same set-up, the Florence experience will be absolutely no different from the Minneapolis one. For the moment, though, the state-of-art software for that amazing chick stays within Italy's national borders. C'est la vie. I'm not saying it wasn't worth it. I fell in love with the Florence bot. I mean, Venus.

Our first stop in the city center was in front of a painting of the Annunciation in a virtual church. Not quite sure whose Annunciation it was. I think Fra Angelico.

I pointed out the guy with wings on the painting: “That is Gabriel. And see Mary. See her expression. She is looking lovingly at Gabriel and accepting those words from the Holy Spirit.”

“Oohh,” she said, videoing me with her phone while she circled me.

“I think the artist originally painted Mary turning away. If you could scan this with x-ray vision, you would see underneath that Mary did not originally take kindly to the Word of God about to become flesh within her,” I continued.

Venus recorded an image of the painting. I looked at her and slapped her butt cheek. The church was completely empty. “You know,” I said, pointing to the words streaming from the cloud in the form of a white dove in the direction of Mary’s loins, “you could call those God’s annunciation words, or you could call them his spermatozoids.”

Venus started to laugh. That’s when I knew that it was all worthwhile. Even though I was in what they used to call a video game, this was far better than reality.

Sure, I expected great sex with a woman who physically met every detail of my fantasy, but I never expected a she-bot to belt out an uproarious laugh. She put down her phone and looked at me. She then looked at the painting. She laughed again.

Yes, I knew that it was all virtual. Truth is, I don’t care a whit. I love you because you laughed at my joke about the Annunciation.

It’s true that you needed to rest every ten minutes because you said you were going to die. I did not mind the glitches in the system. You were still perfect.

I wasn’t not sure what, let alone if, she ate. I remember looking for a place that wasn’t going to charge an arm and a leg for lunch. Yes, in virtual Florence you still must pay for food. Like sex, hunger is real. Time is still time, after all. Hunger is the same hunger.

I know the ropes of these European cities, as they say, and we began to walk and walk. We arrived in a neighborhood where the tourists—I guess in this case—*virtual* tourists did not go. In the out-of-the-way restaurant I asked for the special. The waiter scoffed. He brought a plate of beyond-beef steak tips. I made a point of *not* telling Venus that it was the first time I had been to Europe since they banned cow meat. The meat substitute was terrible. They can never get the fake meat formula quite right. I’ll never give up my Good Grade A, U.S. of A. beef.

As we small-talked, I tried to figure out how the virtual program worked. Did rich Americans who paid for sex or companion bots not mind if the food was bad? It all cost two

hundred euros. Outrageous rip off. I can only say that the non-virtual version of this restaurant must be only around twenty euros. Give me a break. Venus only ordered a tiny antipasti plate.

After lunch, we climbed around the heights of the Duomo. We then found ourselves in the Accademia Gallery.

I know there must have been other tourists around. I remember seeing them, lined up here, your typical American there, but somehow—I do not know if it was the program or what—all I can remember is Venus. She followed me straight to the David sculpture. She hardly looked at David. She just held her phone in front of me.

I had to sign the release for all her pictures and videos before entering Virtuale Fantasia. I knew that everything on her phone would be stored somewhere and would somehow be translated into profit for whatever conglomeration owned the computer program. Just like everybody, I know all about the corporate activity that drives all our picture-taking. Have no doubt, though, I still believed that every moment that I was with her, that she, lovely Venus, would break free from her bot-ness. I would not fully accept her robot state of being. She laughed, and, because she laughed, she could also really, truly, cherish me.

“Look at those veins in his legs,” I pointed to the sculpture’s legs. Isn’t his size the most amazing thing about him?” She pointed the phone near David’s ankles. I looked up at his eyes and the naked butt and the shape of his chest. I was stunned at his perfection. “You know when you read David’s story, you think he is small. He is just puny there facing the giant Goliath who killed armies. But Michelangelo has made David a giant. Can you believe how tall he is?”

Venus put down her phone. She led me by the hand toward the stairway. We walked by Michelangelo’s unfinished slaves. I pointed to one with my right hand: “Is he forever stuck to the material? Or,” I asked her. I now led her with my left. “...breaking the chains of shapeless matter and turning into a human body?”

At this point, I guessed that the gallery must be near closing. I saw the security guard and asked, “When do you close?”

“In a half hour.”

When we had entered the Accademia, we had taken the elevator down from the floor above the exhibition space. We mistakenly walked to an abandoned hallway that had four different bathrooms. I had strategically scanned the entire hallway for cameras. They were all

over, of course, not only in Venus's hand. I had been delighted to see a woman's bathroom separated from the others off a small side hallway did not have a camera. I had planned a return.

I told the security guard: "Wonderful. We'll leave after we go to the bathroom."

We rushed up the staircase. I looked down at the slave sculptures. I looked up again at the ceilings, scanning for cameras. I saw none when we entered her bathroom. I slid the old lock on the cracking wooden door. Her pants were off. We were silent like two quiet cats that only purr. The bulky clothes were shoved to the side of the toilet. Her body was better than any woman's body I had ever seen or felt. No video exists of the details of the glorious in-through position of that unforgettable moment.

I still believe that she must have felt it too.

I flew to Italy again a few weeks ago for a Dante conference. I met my Italian professor friend Carol. In the real version of the city, we crossed the river and stopped by the beautiful bridge. "Carol," I said, "Can you believe that this might have been the very spot where Dante might have seen his Beatrice?" I do not know what Carol was thinking, but I thought that even though Dante never met Beatrice in person, he still fell in love with her. Because of Beatrice, Dante versed all through hell. A creation in his mind inspired all that ink for all those hours! Maybe a bot can be my Beatrice. It wasn't a throwaway fuck. I made love to Venus there in that woman's John in the same building as David and those slaves. My Venus was real.

I did not tell Carol about what happened last summer in virtual Florence.

I did not want to go near the real Accademia with Carol because that building—even though it had been only the virtual one—held the memory of Venus.

"Should we go in here?" Carol asked. Carol had led us to the Accademia before I could suggest another place. She pulled open the door at the place that held the David original.

"I don't know," I said.

At that moment, by a great stroke of luck, I saw a man approach. It was Matthew, another Italian professor who was friends with both of us.

"Carol!" he exclaimed. He turned to me, "Jack! I did not know you guys were already here."

"Oh yes," Carol said. "We have a full day before the conference starts."

“Well,” said Matthew. “I’m on my way to the Uffizi—they have a great Caravaggio exhibition. If we get there now, we’ll beat the crowds.”

Carol responded: “I was thinking of going in to see the Michelangelo...”

Matthew interrupted: “We really *must* go to the Uffizi.”

“Sounds great,” I said.

I let them walk ahead of me. I looked at the cornerstone of the Accademia. Matthew and Carol would never know what happened in the virtual version of the building. I put my hand on the solid rock building. I was scared to face what happened. I took my other hand and felt the stone surface with both of them. Even though it was the real building, it held the memory of the virtual one.

Matthew, Carol, and I walked to the Uffizi. At lunch we argued about why Caravaggio painted dirty feet. Carol argued Caravaggio was just a realist. Everyone back then walked around without shoes. Their feet got smudges, and dust, and dirt, even under the toenails. I, on the other hand, said that Caravaggio painted his saints with such dirty feet because he was looking for salvation. All those saints were looking for sex but still had found the way to heaven.