



Meta-Romantic-ish
&
Commissar José Fuld



Two Short Stories by Ben Brust

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We're laying on my bed, she's resting her head on my chest, and I'm absent-mindedly stroking her hair with my hand when I say: "I'm scared of writing about sex because a reader who is more experienced than me would know that I don't know what I am writing about."

"So you're scared that you might lose the respect of someone you've never met?"

"Well when you put it like that, it is kind of ridiculous..."

"Not completely," she says and then adds "You are submitting this story to your creative writing class, and they certainly know you."

"Well, they don't know you. I'm going to have a hard time proving you don't exist to them."

"Hang on I thought you weren't a confident writer. Now you think you can make an imaginary girlfriend sound believable?" Her challenge should have sparked my ambition. It doesn't:

"Oh god, I've got an imaginary girlfriend."

"Yeah, and how am I a bad thing?"

"Uh, er, sorry..."

"It's okay, so do I get a name or a description or anything?"

"Um, you are 50 centimeters shorter than me, you have... uh. What kind of skin tone do you want? Nevermind, not important. You have either dark or red or blonde hair. I really need to decide..." I am a little nervous as I speak. She, being the opposite of me, is a little bit more confident and starts giving advice:

"I like the idea of having grey skin and violet eyes. And for hair color, how about all three? I'm not real so I could have a mix of stripes. Wait that would make me look like a mangy dog or a tabby cat. Actually I like cats, just say it's mutt hair, maybe. Hmmmmmm..." Now she's indecisive and a little invasive. Her hair alternates color like a glitching plasma screen.

"Could you please not pull stuff out of my head? I was saving that skin and eye color stuff for a character in a Dark Heresy game session." As I say that, I can sense her skepticism that I could actually put together a role playing game session with friends. She's polite enough not to say it. Maybe it's my own doubt. Oh well.

I realize we're looking into each other's eyes.

"Your eye is wandering" she says and then gets up onto one elbow and kisses me. I can taste the apple she ate earlier. It's nice, I think. I tilt my head to the side to get a better angle and my tongue gently brushes grazes her teeth.

"Wait, is that even acceptable? With the tongue?" I ask.

"I'm going to be very straight forward with you and say: maybe."

I sigh and tilt my head back onto the wall. I apologize: "Look, I'm not a complete virgin, I've read a lot of erotica online and I figure maybe I could use bits of that in my writing but now I'm not so sure..."

"This is certainly unlike anything you've read. But it might be a little bit boring. Also, not enough foreplay or character development."

"So is it true that women love doing it slowly?"

"We do, it's just that we hate it when guys presume to know what we want." She answered. That doesn't make sense. I rub my forehead.

"Can we start over?" I ask

"Sure" she answers

"Hello, who are you?"

"I'm your imaginary girlfriend. He hasn't given me a name yet because he is a dum-dum." When she says that last little pair of words, her eyes narrow and I can hear her saying: *Really? You think I would use childish words like "dum-dum" to describe you? And BTW: you haven't given me a breast size or body shape yet, and you are a guy.*

"Okay, Okay, I'll do it... are you going to keep using non-verbal communication on me?"

This is kind of fun, I just might continue to do so. Now what about--

"Well it is moderately annoying to have to click on the italics button before writing your lines."

"If I communicate verbally will you give me a complete body?" she asks.

"And a complete name. I dub thee, Lady Guinevere Han. You have a C-cup breast size and a not quite stocky but not slender body."

"You could have given me an hour-glass figure, I bet you would have liked that."

"I would but that wouldn't be realistic. And I don't I deserve a woman who looks like she was photo shopped to perfection." As I say that, I begin to get worked up internally. I can imagine Guin getting upset with me (*So women need Photoshop in order to be perfect, is that what you think?*). Then I imagined my readers, my fellow classmates, getting upset with me as well.

Guiny's doing that thing which is a miniature silent treatment. Giving me enough time to save or hang myself. Here goes nothing:

"Did you know that certain flowers evolved to look like females of a certain wasp species? The flower tricks the male into attempting to mate with it and in the process; the male wasp gets coated in the pollen of the flower. So the flowers that looked more like a female got the most pollinators and reproduced more often. While at the same time the wasps that were better at telling the difference between a flower and a real female reproduced more often. I'm one of those wasps who can't tell the difference. Actually I can tell the difference, but I think it's easier getting my kicks this way."

Guin thinks about what I said for a moment, her brows knit together. Her response:

"So I'm your flower?"

"Well if I had sex with you then yes,"

"Except I'm just a projection of your imagination which means if you had sex with me then it would be like having sex with yourself. You would be masturbating."

"Yeah, I guess."

We both pause for a moment. I think about checking my laptop for female character design image files and basing her off one of those. I stare at

the ceiling while I ponder this. When I look back at Ms. Han and I see her hair color has settled down into an eggshell white. She looks mature, even with pigtails.

"Hey Guin, you're pretty chill for a person who knows they don't exist."

"Once you post this, I will exist, and if I am lucky or likeable enough, other people might write about me. Then I get to live on with them."

"I didn't know you had aspirations to be a meme."

"I don't have to be a meme. It would be better if I stayed within these pages, if I was proliferated then the internet would notice-- begin making copies of me and then do all kind of disgusting things with those copies."

"So you are more scared of being abused than forgotten?" I ask.

We're now sitting up side by side. Our feet dangling in the air. Our backs are resting on pillows pushed against the wall.

"The first is more likely to occur than the second. And people don't mourn the forgotten. They move on with their lives. There's no memorial service because no one remembered. Which is good, it means that people have recovered from the pain." She seems to be okay as she says this. I guess she's better at concealing emotions than I am.

I think about this piece of clinical morbidity for a second, then I say: "Ideas re-occur"

To which she replies gracefully: "Huh?"

"Two people, separated by huge amounts of time and distance have come up with the same ideas. The authors have never heard of each other or read each other's work, but the concept is the same. Ideas are created from the environment, from reality, not by the person. That's the reason why the Japanese and Norse people had a god of thunder and lightning despite being on opposite sides of the earth. Reality is the source of the imagination."

"Ironic for you to say that since you wrote a bunch of narratives based on sci-fi stories, instead of reality. I mean that stuff is hardly realistic."

"It's slightly diluted reality. It just got put through a filter once. Just as good as the regular stuff. More interesting, more surprising. I'm not one of those people who find the mundane enthralling."

"I didn't know reality could be diluted and filtered at the same time."

"I wasn't thinking when I said that. I mean when I typed that into my keyboard. Anyways, what's wrong with basing stories on other people's work?"

"Simple: it's not original."

"Well the thing I said about re-occurring ideas kind of proves that originality is just fiction written by reality fans. Okay, not really... Look, progress is made when people take the advances made by others and then build up from there. I'm not producing something that's redundant, I'm adding a new facet to something old." Guinevere responded to me first by saying "Hmmm..." (Apparently, her favorite phrase) and then saying:

"I just realized something: I'm fulfilling your fantasy of having someone to talk about literature with."

"Guilty as charged. I can kind of hear my mother's voice saying 'If you stayed around after your classes and talked to your classmates, then you wouldn't need an imaginary girlfriend to listen to you.' The funny thing is that she hasn't read this at all yet."

"I've been meaning to ask, is my vocabulary or anything else based on your mother?" Guinevere's face is a mix of curiosity and concern as she asks this.

"I really hope nothing about you is based on my mother. But I'm not entirely certain. A Freudian psychologist would point stuff out but I am not that well versed."

"Ben, I am about to draw some details on Freud from your head, I hope you don't mind."

"Uh. Ok... I can't believe you haven't heard of Sigmund Freud."

"No I haven't, which is why I'm doing the brain extraction on you." She's silent for a second and I can feel a mentally prepared speech being reviewed.

"So apparently you think Freud had a few ideas that might still be true. You think that his theory of trauma sublimation might be applicable to people who have 'fetishized' their childhood fears. Hang on. I'm just getting something. Something else. You're using the random bits of knowledge to avoid getting to the intimate bits."

"Oh no" I say, sarcastically "You figured out my secret plan!"

She laughs, I laugh. Then we lean together, shoulder to shoulder, and kiss. That kiss somehow transmutes into her straddling me and my arms wrapped around her waist, our lips still locked. Now we're laying horizontally, side by side, limbs intertwined. She's getting ticklish. We're not wearing pants or shirts or anything, except for what the British might call a "rubber." We shift positions. She eventually comes to a full stop while on top of me. I was a little bit premature but that didn't stop her.

We drift off to sleep holding hands. The lights are turned off. Sex can be smelled in the air. My last thoughts are "Does this make me an exhibitionist?" and "This is so worth the dirty laundry."

The morning after we have cereal for breakfast.

Commissar José Fuld

To: His Holy Majesty's honorable servant Colonel Zander Ramos of the 23rd Olmeccastani Infantry company.

From: the Duty Bound and Humble Justicar Meryl Zhao of the Continental District of Agritto

Colonel- Forgive my lack of ceremony but an unsavory transgression has come to my attention that involves your troops. The crime was perpetrated in the East Central Airport sometime between your glorious re-capturing of it and the arrival of my bondsmen and enforcers at that site on the day after. Amongst the detritus and fire pits, my forces discovered the victim: A young woman of respectable lineage, partially unclothed, and slain by a lasbolt to the back. My investigators say that the diameter matches an Imperial Guard issue lasrifle. I understand that your company had taken the airfield with minimal casualties and thus held a victory party in thanks to the Emperor. Apparently free roaming civilian looters seeking to illegally claim or reclaim materials modified by the Orks were allowed to join in with this celebration. She must've been a part of this latter group that I've been attempting to crack down on. Further examination must be carried out by your own people, preferably by that Commissar of yours. I've invoked my office's right to claim the victim's body and silence the press, so that should make his job easier.

Sincerely,

Z

15 DAYS LATER:

This morning, a call on the Vox woke me up. I stumble out of bed where I had slept for the past 5 hours. I've been in the Guard long enough to sleep in all kinds of conditions so leaving the lights on in

my room was nothing compared to an artillery barrage. Besides, it just made sense, you never knew when an assassin would show up. And as for sleep, I've been forced to make do with less.

The person calling was Magos Tungsten, and as usual he had good news which always meant bad things for me. Things like "Commissar, I managed to track down the last organism, it's taken shelter in the ships engine room." Or "Are you going north? My analysis indicates that it will be the perfect position to stop the enemy advance." I sometimes regret having recruited him as part of my staff. Not often.

"José, I have concluded the rituals of genomic scrying and extrapolation. The samples taken from the victim are an 89.7% match to a Sergeant Oliver Altakan and that..."

I put my hand over the receiver while Tungsten continues to prattle. First I groan with frustration because Sergeant Altakan's squad is deployed on the front line and that's a huge problem. Then I turn to face my bed and the other occupant in it. I repeat Tungsten's findings which wakes her up.

The only thing Miya Tascgon and I were able to do before falling asleep was take off our coats, flak jackets, and boots. She's sitting up and strapping her boots back on. Despite keeping her auburn hair cut short, it has a habit of settling in front of her eyes. Especially when she's disheveled from sleeping or when she's too concerned to care. I turn my attention back to the vox-horn:

"Tungsten, thanks for the results, I've got to make some arrangements now. Bye-bye."

"Very well, I can now carry on with--" I hit the end-signal button and dial in the frequency for Colonel Ramos. I get his secretary, Marco. We chat and he arranges a complement of storm troopers and an armored transport to come pick us up. I hang up, stand up, walk over to Miya.

"Finally getting a resolution, how's that feel?" I ask her. She's fully dressed.

"It's too early,"

Miya was the one who took the samples from the poor girl. Miya believed that a soldier in the Imperial Guard doesn't just inspire other citizens through sacrifice but also through their virtues. She was

looking forward to killing the man responsible, as was I. To me, the defilement of one was the desecration of us all.

We left the room together.

The 23rd Infantry Company from Olmeccastan had chosen to set up headquarters in the Rusty Scythe Inn. Supply crates were stacked up between hallway doors. Wires were utility-taped to the creaking floor. Downstairs, the entrance hall had been converted into a hybrid command center and cafeteria. We grab ration cans and eat directly out of them while we wait for our ride outside. From there I see that vox aerals have been mounted to the chimney. It's like a collage of stone and metal.

What showed up an hour later was not exactly what Marco had promised.

It was a nimble, 4-seater, all-terrain vehicle, with some armor plating. Vehicles like that were called Salamanders. I assumed the machines were named for its ability to be restored to full operation after being blasted to scrap.

Inside the Salamander was not a squad of heavily armed and armored Storm troopers. It was The Couple. Not just any couple: The two most bad-ass and gay storm troopers ever known in the Imperium. Legends amongst the company say they killed a space marine corrupted by the chaos gods. Herman was at the wheel while Saul was manning the vehicle's auto-cannon.

I tried to complain about the one thing that I found wrong:

"I explicitly asked Marco for a much more durable transport, like a Chimera."

"Well Commissar, If you approach the Sergeant in a fatty like that then he would know that he's screwed. Then he would do something really stupid while you're approaching, like shoot a rocket and kill you."

"Yeah, the element of surprise is the most important element."

"And if a person loves surprises then that's the best."

"Can we just go, now?" I asked.

"Sure,"

Miya and I piled into the vehicle and once we were buckled in, Herman drove us out of town. It wasn't much of a town, to be honest, there was just the inn, the church and the transport depot.

The paved road the Salamander was rolling on divide land into forest and farm. It slipped through the edges of an ancient agricultural pattern of interspersing groves of trees with fields of edible plants. We were now a mile out from base when I thought about the conditions how bad things were getting on this world.

Wood, paper and food were now this world's chief exports after its mines had run out. Of course the exhaustion of mineral deposits had set off an economic malaise which in turn fuelled the "Everyone for themselves" mentality which allowed certain scum to flourish. And then there were the faulty evacuation procedures which forced people to leave behind their belongings for looters and Orks to steal. So protestors began organizing, yelling "Hell no, we won't go!"

The invasion by those green skinned brutes just sped up the eventual collapse of this world, in my opinion. I shook my head and dismissed what I couldn't fix. Then I thought about something funny. Miya noticed and asked me, "Thinking about the big picture again?"

"I was, but then I thought about how odd it is that Justicar Zhao's better at keeping a scandal quiet than he is at keeping a continent in order."

"Odd but not really surprising"

"Yeah, I wonder how many nobles come by his office in a day asking for a-"

"Uh, Commissar Fuld, we got a problem..." said Saul.

"What kind of- oh god emperor"

Imagine a farmer who is so enamored with Imperial Guard vehicles that he makes an uninformed but life sized simulacrum of one, out of the rusting scrap metal in his yard. Now imagine this effigy is able to stand up on two legs, Wield guns and axes, and bellow a war cry from a broad jawed mouth. That's what blocked the road. The beast was a Nob of the Ork species because nothing else could be that size or that brazen. The brute waved what looked like a plow welded onto a bus's prop shaft and shouted some gibberish which sounded vaguely like "YOU WANT SUM OF DIS?! FIGHT ME YA GITS!" Instead of shooting or running it over, my gunner and driver were instead reminiscing:

"Hey, you know what this reminds of?"

"That one time on Quibin?"

"Yeah, except we're the ones getting ambushed."

"Huh... That would explain the movement at our 3 o'clock," said Saul as he swiveled the turret in that direction and fired the Autocannon at hostiles that I couldn't see. Herman shifted the engine into reverse to stay out of reach of the Nob which was jogging at us. As passengers, there wasn't much to do other than check our weapons and prepare to exit rapidly. I was carrying my standard issue bolt pistol modified with an extra grip and a silencer while Miya carried around her family's antique shock-maul and shotgun.

Saul was calling out contacts while mowing them down. I'm betting the Nob wanted his minions to stay out of his exclusive fight with the big metal thing that smelled like humans. The smaller runts must've had gotten bored of hiding in the tall oat-grass and wanted to join in the fun. So what was happening could be mistaken for an ambush, but that would imply forethought in the brutes.

When I was a youth being trained for my role as Commissar, I was fascinated by the accidental intelligence of the Ork. This fascination was tolerated by my instructors who gave me access to the old tomes on the subject. Unlike humanity which respects the boundaries of knowledge and status, Orks tinker and bicker incessantly. This infighting might seem counter-productive but the victors of these minor conflicts seem to mutate into bigger monstrosities like the Nob. Orks could also create war-gear and machinery from almost nothing, such as a grenade from some fertilizer and a sprinkler system.

"STICK-BOMB!" cried Saul as he ducked down.

A deafening blast rocked the Salamander. My ears were ringing and I was disoriented. There was grey smoke everywhere. The Salamander did have a smoke screen projector. Herman must have fired it off.

I couldn't hear what everyone else was saying. My side of the vehicle must've been hit. I followed the others, scrambled out of the back hatch. I turned around for a second to see a giant blade cut through armor plating and into the empty driver seat.

Miya seized me and pulled me away, off the road, and toward a nearby overgrown orchard. The air tasted sour and my hearing was starting to return back to me. I could hear the roar of the Orks as they pursued us, not much else.

The Couple was shooting crimson beams of death at the non-human figures that charged through the bank of smoke behind us. The Storm troopers were armed with Hellguns which are similar to lasrifles, in the same way that lasrifles are similar to laser pointers used in briefing presentations. I was grateful for the covering fire and I think I expressed some form of appreciation although I could barely hear myself talk.

Miya let go of me and I crawled behind the cover of a tree. I yawned and my ear drums popped back into place, restoring a bit more of my audio perception and equilibrium. I could now hear my team mates swearing inventively and the sounds of them reloading. I looked up to see the Ork Nob stomping across the road that was now strewn with the charred corpses of its stunted brethren. Its scrap metal armor had a slight red glow from where the Couple had ineffectively shot at it. I took aim with my bolt-pistol at a strained chain link which was holding the top of a table to the Nob's chest. I exhaled, fired, and muddy red blood erupted from the target's clavicle. I missed, but the bolt shell had penetrated and then detonated inside the Nob's body. For a moment it was coughing up steaming fluids while leaning heavily upon its axe. Then its rage returned and it started barreling straight for me.

In a crisis one often doesn't have enough oxygen for the entire brain to operate. So certain portions of the brain, such as the bit responsible for feeling fear, get decommissioned temporarily. That only left me with my training.

At the academy, it was painfully drilled into me during fencing and fighting lessons that I should always pay attention to how an opponent holds their weapon. "It's the only warning you're going to get!" said my old mentor, Hercules von Yashun.

Rather than use the axe staff to support its bulk while walking, the Nob was letting the weapon rest on its shoulder while advancing toward me. Which meant it was either going for a scything cut or an overhead chop. Either way, I wasn't going to last very long.

I retreated, stayed low, and kept the tree between me and it. The Nob swept the axe horizontally which snapped my cover in half. Note that I said snap not chop, the only reason this weapon was deadly was because of its wielder's remaining strength. Continuing its momentum, the Ork swung the blade behind its back, made another

bellow and brought it down overhead in a vertical arc. I threw myself out of the way and landed my stomach. I was going to roll over and shoot the Nob some more but it had anticipated my move and grabbed me by my left leg. It hoisted me up into the air by that limb, crushing it in the process. I tried to point my bolt pistol at the brute which then slapped it out of my grip and broke the hand holding it. It took a deep gurgling breath, I covered my ears with my wrists, and it roared at me: "WAAAAAAAAAUURRRRGH!"

It was splattering me with its own blood. If I survived this, I was going to fumigate my uniform after bleaching it. Hell, I might even just burn it and order a new one.

As I unblocked my ears, I was greeted by the high-pitched squeal of a shock-maul set to overcharge. The Ork and I both looked in the direction of the noise and there was Miya who had used me as a distraction to get in nice and close with the armored beast. She struck the Nob in the gut and an amount of electricity that could kill ten humans raced through its scrap metal coat. It convulsed, letting go of me. The grass afforded a soft landing so I didn't break anything more, but it did knock the wind out of me.

I struggled to look up and when I did, I saw my enemy surrounded by angels who were shooting at it with lasrifles. I blinked my vision clear and saw that it wasn't angels, just Olmeccastani imperial guard soldiers, their feathered helmets and robes flowing as they moved. The Ork Nob collapsed under the combined fire power and a cheer went up. One of the soldiers, a sergeant, judging by the color of his plumage, approached my crumpled form.

"Commissar? It's me, Sergeant Altakan, I just sent word for a healer."

"Hey... could you get me my gun, I dropped it over there..." but Miya was already by my side and placed it into my hands. I thanked her, I thanked the Emperor, and then I shot Sergeant Altakan. That's when I blacked out.

About the Author:

At the time of this writing, Benjamin Wagner Brust is a college student currently attending California State University of Channel Islands.

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He enjoys adventures, which he knows is a mix of danger and safety and can be really amazing in retrospect but horrible as it is happening.

Ben enjoys playing any good PC games and likes to read stories about Warhammer: 40,000.

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Cover Art:

Terrarium Girl by Koyamori

COMMISSAR by Nicklaus of Krieg