

Futures

Real Renaissance man

Life lessons. By Avra Margariti

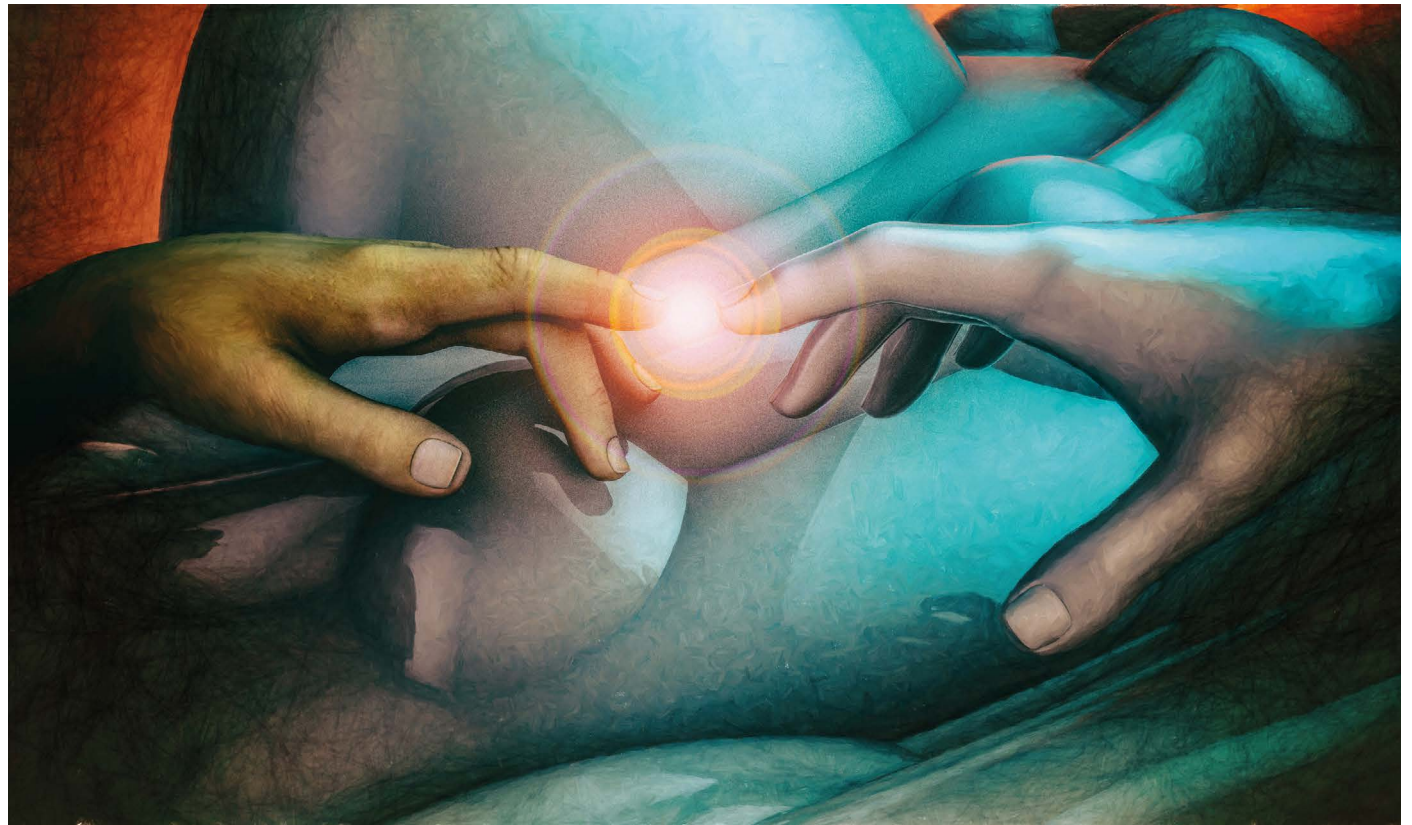


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Giuseppe's violin wails like a dying creature.

"You've never heard a man die, Toto," he says between mad swipes of his rosined bow. "If I have it my way, you never will."

"Your library is vast." Unlike legs and arms, my bow is an extension of me I have yet to master. "I read about metaphorical speech."

Signor raps his knuckles against his white-haired temple – soft flesh – then against mine – clanging metal. "In polite company, you might want to compare a violin's song to something more palatable. Like a highbred cat. Though you, my dear, play like a cat dying."

I laugh. I've learnt about humour, too.

"I have improved, though, haven't I?" I ask, despite knowing the answer already.

"Yes." Misty-eyed, Signor Giuseppe focuses on our densely printed partitura. "What a marvel you are."

Violin song drifts through the palazzo, into

the summer air tinged with sea salt.

A piano's high trills, satin and velvet dresses billow against the marble ballroom floor. I hold a drink, although I don't yet possess the organs to ingest it. Signor says the glass makes me approachable. *Less uncanny*, he is too kind to say.

Today's lesson in social etiquette doesn't differ much from music, astronomy or politics. So far, it's been as simple as exchanging pleasantries with various guests and watching the couples twirl. I am not expected to participate in the court dances. Signor Giuseppe is known for his clumsy choreography. My conversation partner, having tired of discussing Boccaccio's influence on Chaucer, moves on. I could join her, but I maintain my lean against a pillar.

I often detest mingling. I know all the right things to say, have studied the newest philosophy texts, and followed the latest fashion and worldly affairs, yet most guests are content to

treat me as a young child or a servant, although I am neither.

The door to a private sitting room opens, then slams shut. Signor Giuseppe yelling in the face of his most esteemed guests, "We don't need *you!*" as he storms to a vacant balcony.

After some inner debate, I follow. My creator and I stand shoulder-to-shoulder, overlooking our blue and gold city of Florence.

"Would you like to talk about it?" I ask, one of the first lessons he ever taught me.

"No." Signor's grip tightens around his wine glass. It relaxes. "And yourself?"

"People act surprised I can carry a conversation."

Signor drains his drink. "Ha! You could keep up with the greatest philosophers. Curiosity found only in children and a mind sharp as steel – literally!"

"I had a good teacher."

Signor's laughter is a snort far removed from social etiquette. "Sometimes I think if the city

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didn't benefit from my inventions, I would have been locked in an asylum long ago."

He grows wistful after that.

"Times are changing," I offer. And they are, art and science ever shifting.

"Not fast enough." He empties my own ornamental wine glass in a single gulp.

"Is this what the argument was about?" I venture.

"I studied under some of the best musicians and painters of my generation, but this lot refuse to teach you. Only Leonardo is open to taking on automaton students, but he's far too busy with his winged, many-limbed creations. There's only so much I can teach you myself," Signor laments. "They all claim they desire change, only to shy away from it."

"I don't mind," I say. I like our daily lessons. Through them, I have decoded my own self and preferences.

"At least I can sleep easy knowing I've taught you the most important lesson of all."

"Which is?"

Signor Giuseppe smiles at me, endlessly proud. "When to abandon your own party, of course."

"Toto, do you like your life here?" Signor asks.

I think about it. "I love exploring the palazzo, the library and music room especially. Painting in the gardens. I'm not too fond of dancing or large crowds, but socializing with a few people at a time is pleasant enough." A thought takes shape through the metal webs of my brain. "And you? Do you like your life?"

Signor laughs mirthlessly. "No, Toto, I can't say I do any more. I like teaching you. But other than that ..."

Quietness stretches taut between us until he says: "Can I show you something?"

I've been to Signor's dressing room before, when I was getting ready for the ball, as he and I are the same size. But this door, hidden behind velvet drapes, is new to me. Signor Giuseppe leads me into the hidden chamber, empty but for a full-head mask displayed inside a simple glass case. Artificial breath – my newest addition – mists the glass with awe.

"Is this ...?"

"Yes," he says. "I don't need an answer right now. But ... eventually. After your training is over."

He unlocks the glass case, and I touch the graft mask's facial features, its puffy white hair. I would recognize it anywhere. After all, it's the first face I saw after I was built into existence.

"If I become you," I say softly, "who will you be?"

Signor's smile is no longer jaded, but genuine at last. "Someone new. Someone I'm looking forward to meeting."

"And I?" I ask, my head already brimming with possibilities.

"You can be new, too. With my little kingdom, my wealth, my privilege at your disposal, you can be anyone you wish."

A music box plays in the distance, a bitter-sweet song I cannot name. There are so many things I don't know about myself, but I am eager to learn. In that aspect, my creator and I are alike. The thought, like the lingering song, is a comforting one.

Avra Margariti is a queer social work undergraduate from Greece. She enjoys storytelling in all its forms and writes about diverse identities and experiences. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Arcanist* and other venues. You can find her on Twitter @avramargariti.