



Huckleberry Hax

My Avatars and I

Ten conversations in Second Life®



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MY AVATARS AND I

Ten conversations in Second Life

by

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

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For K and S and all the others.

The dancer

Primary colours in black, skating across polished wood in pixels. The guys look up at me, their blank faces say nothing, but the words they use paint horny creases round the edges of their mouths. It turns my stomach to think of the possibilities I'm playing with here, which is why I try so hard not to think about it. Every now and again, however, that thought pops into my mind just the same. "Any one of those empty faces could be a minor," I think to myself. "Or an old age pensioner or the vicar from my church or the teacher I had when I was nine or the woman at the checkout who always touches the palm of my hand more than she needs to when she gives me back my change. More to the point, of course, any one of those empty faces could be *him...*" I stamp down on that thought just as quickly as I know how. I repress it. I push it quickly, urgently, haphazardly back into the cupboard and slam shut the door before it has a chance to tumble back upon me. It only means the next time I chance upon that door without due diligence it'll all take me by surprise once again, but it does

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the trick; it allows me to cope. And I'm pretty certain anyway I'll be just as fast next time. Of course, it isn't just that awkward possibility that distresses me, you understand; it's more the admissions, the assumptions behind it. What, after all that I have been through, has brought me here? I tell myself it's money. I tell myself it's the thrill. I tell myself it's nothing more than simply wanting to feel desired and *nothing* to do with that other thing. I came to this world looking for X and here – in this specific place – I'm spending a little 'me time' doing Y and only Y. That's what I tell myself. That's what I try to believe. You probably think that makes me sound quite astonishingly shallow: people are people, after all; why should I expect him to be any different from anyone else? At one level, I suppose, I really don't care any more than you would. But it's nearly two years now since I started this thing, and only now do I find myself here, telling myself a bunch of lies because it enables me to stand on this table and lick the ears of strangers and *look*. I'm not here for titillation. Maybe it's the fact it took me so long to get here that most bothers me. I let looking in the nice sounding places distract me from coming to – let's face it – the most popular type of destination, and then I let enough time pass that coming to this kind of place would have felt like some sort of a political U-turn. *Why would I bother about strategies that no-one can actually see?!* In the end I learned to lust and that was how I got here. It's not about the means so much as it's about the mechanism. I actually do like the thrill of it now, you see. I imagine their tongues and their fumbling and their pale, greasy faces. When my head leans back in text and I smile

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at the touch of a kiss upon my neck, the smile is not put on for show. This is what I recoil from: not so much the thing that I've become, but the thing I used to be: that I could only sneak her in through the doors to this place by convincing her that it was in some way somehow 'wholesome'.

Tickle Gently: Hey there, Affable.

Affable Chap: Hello Tickle.

Tickle Gently: How are you this evening?

Affable Chap: I'm good, thanks.

Affable Chap: How are you?

Tickle Gently: Why I'm just peachy, my dear!

Tickle Gently: What brings you to Tabletops and, in particular...

Tickle Gently: what brings you to *my* tabletop?

Affable Chap: Why, you are what brought me, Tickle!

Affable Chap: At least, to the latter.

Tickle Gently: Good.

Tickle Gently: I'm glad.

Affable Chap: That's a mighty fine avatar you have there!

Tickle Gently: Why thank you.

Tickle Gently: You're not so bad looking yourself!

Affable Chap: Really? You think so?

Affable Chap: I think I look sort of freakish.

Affable Chap: I mean, all this bulging muscle...

Tickle Gently: Yeah, you're right. You do.

Affable Chap: Ha!

Tickle Gently: But it's pretty much the norm around here,

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to be honest.

Tickle Gently: You learn to filter it out, after a fashion.

Affable Chap: You look for the personality instead, you mean?

Tickle Gently: Sure, Affable.

Tickle Gently: Suuuuuuuure.

Affable Chap: Ha!

Affable Chap: You're cruel.

Affable Chap: The guy in the picture that had this shape on looked so much better than I do.

Affable Chap: I really don't know where I went wrong.

Tickle Gently: It's all about shape-skin co-ordination, honey.

Tickle Gently: You're still on the default skin there, aren't you?

Affable Chap: Is it obvious?

Tickle Gently: Oh, it's obvious, sweetie.

Tickle Gently: It's obvious.

Tickle Gently: You need an animation over-rider too.

Tickle Gently: The way you're sitting there like that it makes you look like you're holding in your pee.

Tickle Gently: And, whilst we're on the subject of appearance, if I'm honest, you could do with some new clothes too.

Affable Chap: I see. So when you said I was not bad looking...

Tickle Gently: Yeah, that was a lie.

Tickle Gently: You got me.

Affable Chap: I don't know whether to feel insulted or ashamed.

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Tickle Gently: Oh insulted, of course!

Tickle Gently: Always go for insulted.

Tickle Gently: Where there's drama to be had, seize it!

Tickle Gently: Why would one have it any other way?

Affable Chap: Well, in that case then, I've never been so insulted in my life!

Tickle Gently: Good!

Affable Chap: I shall just have to take my custom elsewhere!

Tickle Gently: Do so!

Affable Chap: You really hate my clothes?

Tickle Gently: In fairness, I didn't actually use the word 'hate'.

Affable Chap: Reading between the lines, though, 'hate' is pretty much the ballpark, yes?

Tickle Gently: You're right; I'm not going to upgrade you *that* much from there.

Affable Chap: You really don't like this suit?

Tickle Gently: Affable, it looks like you painted it on yourself. With your eyes shut.

Affable Chap: Admittedly.

Tickle Gently: How many suit shops did you visit before you bought it?

Affable Chap: 'Bought'?

Tickle Gently: Right. You see, therein lies our problem.

Affable Chap: I don't want Second Life to cost me any money.

Tickle Gently: Ah, I see.

Tickle Gently: Still in *that* stage are you?

Affable Chap: And intend to stay there!

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Tickle Gently: Good for you!

Tickle Gently: So I can rule out the possibility of any tips from you this evening then, can I?

Tickle Gently: I mean, you wouldn't want to go getting a girl's hopes up now, would you?

Affable Chap: Ah, right.

Tickle Gently: Or did you think I was up here wiggling myself out of a predilection for guileless banter?

Affable Chap: 'Guileless'? Gosh!

Tickle Gently: If I had a Linden for every banal chat-up line I've received from a guy wearing that exact same haircut you have on...

Affable Chap: Really? That many?

Tickle Gently: Come to think of it, a couple of hundred Lindens isn't all that much, when you get down to it.

Tickle Gently: Bad currency choice.

Affable Chap: In fairness, I haven't actually offered up any chat-up lines.

Affable Chap: Not yet, at least.

Tickle Gently: Right.

Tickle Gently: That whole “*you're* what brought me to this table, Tickle!” wasn't even intended to ingratiate me?

Affable Chap: Ha!

Affable Chap: I must say, you're very articulate.

Tickle Gently: For a stripper, you mean?

Affable Chap: Well...

Tickle Gently: Go on. You can say it.

Tickle Gently: It's what you're thinking.

Tickle Gently: I suppose it's something that you did at least notice.

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Tickle Gently: Not everyone does.

Affable Chap: Gosh. Now I feel bad for offering the compliment.

Tickle Gently: Compliments are complex things, my boy.

Tickle Gently: The fault of society is that it seems to forget the context of power relationships when it offers its pats on the head and then gets offended when the head offers back its teeth.

Affable Chap: Crikey.

Affable Chap: Do we have a power relationship?

Tickle Gently: I'm the one on the table removing fabric for money, honey.

Affable Chap: But actually, you're not, are you?

Affable Chap: Neither are you actually taking clothes off in real life...

Affable Chap: Nor, in fact, are you taking them off in cyberspace (since I don't have any money).

Tickle Gently: You're confusing small and big pictures, Affable.

Tickle Gently: Barking doesn't make you any less on a leash.

Affable Chap: Barking? Leash?

Tickle Gently: It was all I could come up with.

Affable Chap: But you choose to come here, right?

Tickle Gently: As it happens, I do.

Tickle Gently: But that only means the power relationship is one voluntarily entered into.

Tickle Gently: Not that it doesn't exist.

Affable Chap: If you say so.

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Tickle Gently: I do.

Tickle Gently: And you chose to come here too, Affable Chap.

Tickle Gently: To sit at my table and engage in conversation with me for no money?

Affable Chap: Does conversation cost?

Tickle Gently: *sigh*

Tickle Gently: It's my *time* you're paying for, honey. Isn't that obvious?

Affable Chap: I could have just sat here in silence, saying nothing.

Tickle Gently: And what would have been the point in that?

Affable Chap: I would have listened to the conversations of others.

Tickle Gently: You could have done that from an empty table, darlin'.

Affable Chap: That is true.

Affable Chap: But, somehow, it would have been more conspicuous.

Tickle Gently: Not really.

Tickle Gently: There's plenty of shy folk to be found in places like this.

Tickle Gently: Sitting at an empty table is just playing it safe, we know that here.

Tickle Gently: Someone would probably have paid you a visit after a minute or so, reached down and stroked your timid face and made you feel good for coming.

Tickle Gently: 'Conspicuous', eh? Now there's an interesting disposition.

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Affable Chap: It is?

Tickle Gently: It is.

Tickle Gently: Kind of suggests you're up to something.

Tickle Gently: I mean, shyness is shyness, but shy guys don't exactly go out of their way to 'blend in'.

Affable Chap: Heh.

Tickle Gently: You 'heh' away, Affable. You're up to something.

Tickle Gently: I'm on to you.

Affable Chap: Well well.

Affable Chap: You're very perceptive.

Tickle Gently: For a stripper, you mean?

Affable Chap: Start actually removing some of your clothes and I might just put you in that category.

Tickle Gently: Oh! That was actually quite witty!

Affable Chap: For a customer, you mean?

Tickle Gently: Yes. That's exactly what I mean.

Affable Chap: So long as we understand each other.

Tickle Gently: Oh, you'll get no muddiness from me.

Affable Chap: No muddiness? I approve.

Tickle Gently: Muddy people, after all, are such a bore.

Affable Chap: Not to mention the mess they make.

Tickle Gently: Indeed!

Tickle Gently: Muddy, messy people! So anyway...

Tickle Gently: ...what are you up to, Affable Fellow?

Tickle Gently: What are you in here to see?

Affable Chap: I'm not a detective, if that's what you're thinking.

Tickle Gently: Of course you're not, or you'd be a rubbish one if you were.

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Tickle Gently: But this is an alternative account you're using.

Tickle Gently: Isn't it?

Affable Chap: *sigh*

Affable Chap: You *are* very perceptive.

Tickle Gently: Simple deduction, my good fellow.

Tickle Gently: You're far too quick on the verbals for an avatar of your apparent age.

Tickle Gently: And that detective comment sinched it.

Affable Chap: It's not exactly a massive secret, you know.

Affable Chap: I might well have told you in time.

Tickle Gently: Oh really?

Tickle Gently: And would you have mentioned the Lindens you've no doubt transferred from your main account when you told me that?

Affable Chap: Actually, it was the tip I intend to give you that I had planned as my way into that conversation.

Tickle Gently: 'Tip' singular? wow. You really know how to jangle a girl's jinglies, Affable.

Affable Chap: I can break it down into smaller payments, if you like.

Tickle Gently: Do so.

Tickle Gently: But at least spare me the sheer dullness of knowing how many you intend to make.

Tickle Gently's tip pot: Thanks for the generous tip of 100\$L, Affable Chap!

Affable Chap: Your tip pot publicly announces tip quantity?

Tickle Gently: Of course it does.

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Affable Chap: Ok. Fair enough.

Tickle Gently: You might start getting IMs from the other dancers, mind; that is a downside.

Affable Chap: Even though I'm at your table?

Tickle Gently: Well, Slap over there will respect that you're mine – she and I sometimes do a double act, by the way – and Purple's a friend as well...

Tickle Gently: But the others are new in the last week. They won't care.

Affable Chap: Nothing so far.

Tickle Gently: Tip me again; that ought to do it.

Affable Chap: How presumptuous!

Tickle Gently: That you're going to tip me? You're the one who offered me the schedule of payments, darlin'.

Tickle Gently: All I'm doing is speeding it up a little.

Affable Chap: Maybe I changed my mind and gave you the whole tip at once.

Tickle Gently: That would be an odd thing to do though, wouldn't it?

Affable Chap: I suppose.

Affable Chap: I seem to recall reading something somewhere once about tips to strippers resulting in some clothing being removed.

Tickle Gently: *sigh*

Tickle Gently: Nothing comes off for less than 200.

Tickle Gently: Tip me again and I'll take off this shirt, ok?

Affable Chap: Only the shirt?

Tickle Gently: Only the shirt.

Tickle Gently's tip pot: Thanks for the generous tip of

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100\$L, Affable Chap!

Tickle Gently: Good boy.

Tickle Gently: I'm taking off my shirt, just for you now.

Tickle Gently undoes the buttons, one by one, slowly, working her way up from the bottom to the top.

Tickle Gently keeps her eyes locked on Affable's the whole while she does that.

Affable Chap: Gosh.

Affable Chap: I can't decide whether to watch the eyes or the buttons.

Tickle Gently: Well yes, that's the dilemma. But let me tell you...

Tickle Gently: ...you get far more if you go for the eyes.

Affable Chap: I don't doubt it.

Affable Chap: ...Oh gosh, you're right!

Tickle Gently: IMs coming in?

Affable Chap: Yes!

Tickle Gently: Don't you go replying to any of those, now.

Tickle Gently: That would be extremely bad manners on your part.

Affable Chap: Wow. Did you say Purple was a friend?

Tickle Gently: She's messaging you too? Really?

Affable Chap: Really. With some interesting suggestions.

Tickle Gently: The bitch!

Affable Chap: Now now.

Affable Chap: Plenty of Affable to go round.

Tickle Gently: Does she have someone with her? Yes! She does!

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Tickle Gently: Oh wait, I know that guy.

Affable Chap: A regular?

Tickle Gently: You could say that.

Tickle Gently: She probably has him in IM. If memory serves, she'll have plenty of time to attend to other messages.

Affable Chap: Ouch.

Tickle Gently: Did we get to the reason why you're here yet? I don't believe we did.

Affable Chap: You're very persistent.

Tickle Gently: For a stripper, you mean?

Affable Chap: Actually, I have no preconceptions on the abilities of strippers regarding their persistence.

Affable Chap: But please enlighten me if you feel my stereotypes require adjustment.

Tickle Gently: Not a detective – obviously. But that doesn't mean you're not up to any detection work, of course.

Affable Chap: You think I'm spying on someone?

Affable Chap: You think I'm sifting through the chat in here, searching for the tell-tale footprints of a lover's turn of phrase?

Tickle Gently: You guys. You always think you know the girl you're going out with.

Affable Chap: I think I could recognise a friend's way of speaking, yes.

Affable Chap: Unless they went out of their way to disguise it, of course.

Affable Chap: But then, isn't that what alts are all about?

Affable Chap: Isn't an alt, at the end of the day, a low-effort form of concealment?

Tickle Gently: 'A low-effort form of concealment'.

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Jesus.

Tickle Gently: Has anyone ever died of boredom whilst you've been talking to them?

Affable Chap: Hey! That's so mean!

Affable Chap: Purple doesn't find me boring.

Tickle Gently: Purple has an extremely low benchmark.

Tickle Gently: You know, the lack of imagination around here drives me nuts, sometimes.

Tickle Gently: With alts, you have the possibility to explore complete new aspects of your personality.

Tickle Gently: With alts, you can become new people, try out new ways of thinking, examine the things which scare you most, move out of your comfort zone and beyond: *grow* as an individual...

Tickle Gently: ...and yet all people seem to see it as is some sort of handy little disguise to prevent you being recognised at first glimpse.

Tickle Gently: A costume to throw over grubby little secrets.

Tickle Gently: Fancy dress.

Tickle Gently: A paper mask.

Tickle Gently: My inspiration index is actually so low I'm in danger of becoming comatose.

Affable Chap: Ha!

Affable Chap: Ok.

Affable Chap: I guess I can see the point that you're making.

Affable Chap: It's just that I'm not sure that your way of looking at it is, in fact, the majority view.

Tickle Gently: Of course it isn't.

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Tickle Gently: But what do I care about majority views?

Affable Chap: Well, that makes you very special.

Tickle Gently: For a stripper, you mean?

Affable Chap: For a person. For a resident.

Tickle Gently: Are you some sort of a psychologist, or something? Is that what you're up to?

Affable Chap: What exactly is it you presume psychologists get up to?

Tickle Gently: Analysis? Research?

Tickle Gently: Are you researching virtual strip joint behaviour?

Affable Chap: In a manner of speaking, actually, I am.

Affable Chap: But I'm not a psychologist.

Tickle Gently: A columnist, then? A journalist?

Tickle Gently: Please God don't be from the British tabloids.

Affable Chap: Calm yourself.

Affable Chap: As it happens, I'm researching a book.

Tickle Gently: A book?

Affable Chap: A book.

Tickle Gently: What sort of a book?

Affable Chap: A novel.

Tickle Gently: A novel?

Affable Chap: Yes.

Tickle Gently: Oh.

Tickle Gently: Right.

Affable Chap: It's set in Second Life.

Tickle Gently: I see.

Affable Chap: I thought I'd write a scene in a strip bar.

Affable Chap: Maybe even a sex scene or two.

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Affable Chap: They are very useful for padding out the word count, you know.

Tickle Gently: Sure. Fill it up with fucking.

Tickle Gently: Are you published, then?

Tickle Gently: Have you done books I could buy from the shops?

Affable Chap: Not yet.

Tickle Gently: Right.

Affable Chap: My day will come!

Tickle Gently: Of course.

Affable Chap: As a matter of fact, I was thinking about publishing this one online.

Tickle Gently: You know, I never could read off a PC screen.

Affable Chap: That is true. That is true.

Affable Chap: Perhaps these new ebook things will make that easier.

Tickle Gently: I guess.

Affable Chap: Well. Not very interesting, I know.

Affable Chap: I should have kept it a mystery, shouldn't I?!

Tickle Gently: Whatever tickles your fancy, my dear.

Tickle Gently: So you've been on SL for a while now?

Affable Chap: About a year.

Tickle Gently: Ever met any guys called Tony? Or Antoine? Anything like that?

Affable Chap: Not that I recall. Why?

Tickle Gently: No reason.

Tickle Gently: I always ask, is all.

Affable Chap: Okaaaaaaay.

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Affable Chap: Hey, would you like to see some of what I wrote?

Affable Chap: Just a bit?

Affable Chap: Maybe you could give me some improvement suggestions?

Tickle Gently: Sure. Why not?

Affable Chap: Well that sounded enthusiastic.

Tickle Gently: Ha! Just don't forget to tip my time, baby.

Affable Chap: Yes, of course.

Tickle Gently's tip pot: Thanks for the generous tip of 200\$L, Affable Chap!

Tickle Gently: Ok Chap, hit me with it.

Affable Chap: That's 200 Lindens... don't I get another article of clothing?

Tickle Gently: You want me to listen to your story *and* take off my clothes?

Affable Chap: It's just a click of the mouse, Tickle.

Tickle Gently: Ask yourself, Affie, what nudity really is.

Tickle Gently: After all, is it such an expenditure of effort to take off your clothes in front of people in real life?

Affable Chap: I think I see what you're saying.

Tickle Gently: Look, who would you rather be naked in front of, all of a sudden: complete and utter strangers or people you know well?

Tickle Gently: Not people you know *really* well, you understand. Not your partner or anything.

Affable Chap: I don't know. Strangers, I guess.

Tickle Gently: Right.

Tickle Gently: I was a stranger to you, not so long ago.

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Tickle Gently: And now I'm going to be someone who's attended to thoughts that mean so much to you, you've actually taken the trouble to write them down.

Tickle Gently: And that, my boy, increases the value of my nudity.

Affable Chap: I see.

Tickle Gently: Admit it: at first, it would have just been a bunch of pixelated freckles. But the more you get to know me, the more it turns you on to think of seeing that which I keep beneath my coverings.

Tickle Gently: It's all about consent. It's all about permission. The better you know someone, the more their consent turns you on.

Tickle Gently: If you're a decent person, that is.

Affable Chap: So the skirt coming off is completely out of the question?

Affable Chap: Or is it just that the price has gone up?

Tickle Gently: *Sigh*

Tickle Gently: Read me your story, Affable.

Tickle Gently: I think I should warn you now, my expectations are pretty low.

Affable Chap: Ok, so it's about this detective in SL.

Affable Chap: He checks out errant lovers and suchlike.

Tickle Gently: Ok.

Affable Chap: There's even going to be a section in there about hunting down alts.

Tickle Gently: Not possible, but go on.

Affable Chap: You say that, but I've seen alts that are almost identical twins, you know: same straggly hair, same goatee beard...

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Tickle Gently: Then they weren't trying to hide their identity. Or they were using them in completely different places. But go on.

Entering into chat range: Purple Haze.

Purple Haze: Hey Tick.

Tickle Gently: Purple.

Affable Chap: So I need to write a section where the detective seduces and then makes love to his client's partner.

Tickle Gently: To prove that she's unfaithful?

Affable Chap: Correct.

Tickle Gently: Well that's a bit unethical, don't you think?

Purple Haze: Happens all the time.

Tickle Gently: This is personal experience you're talking from?

Purple Haze: Sure.

Purple Haze: I never told you about my third partner?

Tickle Gently: No!

Purple Haze: We were together for a couple of months, as it happens.

Purple Haze: Then he hired a guy to look into me.

Tickle Gently: You were seeing someone behind his back?

Purple Haze: Honey, when would *I* have the time for an illicit affair?

Tickle Gently: And the detective came on to you?

Purple Haze: Sure he did.

Purple Haze: Pretty skilfully, too.

Purple Haze: I was impressed.

Purple Haze: I'd have probably blown him there and

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then, were it not for a party I was supposed to be organising for Raging Ridiculous's fourth rez-day.

Tickle Gently: Oh yeah, I remember that party.

Tickle Gently: Anyway, I don't understand why someone would *hire* someone to see if your partner can be tempted.

Tickle Gently: Why not just use an alt and find out for yourself?

Affable Chap: Worry you'll get recognised.

Purple Haze: That's right.

Purple Haze: One thing to reveal all *after* the target has taken the bait, but what if s/he works it out beforehand?

Major stress.

Tickle Gently shakes her head.

Tickle Gently: So, as a result of hiring this detective, a faithful relationship is turned into an unfaithful one.

Purple Haze: Or, if you like, your partner's true colours are revealed.

Tickle Gently: You wouldn't get recognised, you know. Not if you were sensible.

Purple Haze: Sure you would, sweetie.

Purple Haze: The inner you would leak out, some how or another.

Affable Chap: I agree.

Purple Haze: Anyway, you're one to talk.

Purple Haze: Isn't your whole search for this Tony guy based upon the premise that, were you to run into him, you'd recognise him from the way he said stuff?

Tickle Gently: That's different.

Purple Haze: Sure it is.

Affable Chap: So, anyway...

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Tickle Gently: Yes yes, let's get this sordid tale of yours over and done with.

Purple Haze: This is something you wrote, Affable?

Affable Chap: Something I'm writing, Purple.

Tickle Gently: And he was about to read it to *me*.

Purple Haze: Two sets of ears can't hurt, right?

Affable Chap: The more the merrier, I guess.

Purple Haze: Just so that you know, if you go suddenly silent, I'll know she's IMing you, ok?

Tickle Gently: Why Purple, you appear to be wearing your lovely pot outfit today.

Purple Haze: Yeah yeah.

Affable Chap: So this is what I wrote for the start of the love scene:

Tickle Gently: Go on.

Affable Chap: Denerick Wilson reaches across for the salt and his cuff brushes across the front of Claire's perfect breasts. He hesitates; he looks at her; their eyes meet; their breath hangs heavy in the air between them; he leaves the salt on the table.

Tickle Gently: Way too many semi-colons, for starters. God. A park full of benches (and not an especially pretty park, at that).

Purple Haze: 'Perfect breasts'? Give me a break...

Purple Haze: And what sort of context are they in that requires the retrieval of *salt*?

Tickle Gently: You did say this was a story set in SL, right?

Affable Chap: In the story, the client runs a virtual fish and chip shop. It's all part of a seaside resort.

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Purple Haze: A seaside resort in SL?

Affable Chap: Yes!

Tickle Gently: Intriguing.

Purple Haze: Are we talking pier, here? Are we talking amusement arcades and Punch and Judy and deck chairs and peeling, sky-blue paint and donkey rides on the beach?

Affable Chap: That's it, exactly!

Tickle Gently: I want to vomit.

Purple Haze: Aren't those places the sorts of holiday people went on because they couldn't afford anything better?

Affable Chap: Maybe so, but you went there all the same.

Affable Chap: I expose in my novel one of the big, untapped areas yet to be exploited in SL: nostalgia.

Tickle Gently: Nostalgia? What do you mean?

Affable Chap: It's simple. We can make things look like how they used to here. We can make things *sound* like how they used to.

Affable Chap: A trip to the virtual seaside will be like returning to your youth. Think of the memories and feelings it will evoke.

Affable Chap: Feelings of happiness. Feelings of contentment and security.

Affable Chap: I even think it could be used as some sort of therapy tool one day.

Purple Haze: For those lucky enough to have experienced such feelings within their childhood, that is.

Tickle Gently: Actually, I agree with this.

Tickle Gently: It wasn't all that long ago I tried to set up something similar myself. Sort of.

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

Affable Chap: Really? Oh you'd get on like a house on fire with this friend I have. Actually, the 'retro-therapy' thing was his idea in the first place.

Affable Chap: He has this big concrete house full of 70s furniture.

Tickle Gently: Really? He does?

Affable Chap: It's quite horrific. Brown and orange, everywhere you look. More traumatic than therapeutic, if you ask me. Still...

Affable Chap: Anyway. Shall I go on to the next bit?

Affable Chap: I was thinking about some sort of comedy line that involves the accidental squeezing of a sauce bottle.

Purple Haze: You *can't* have them making love in a chippie. It's against the laws of nature.

Tickle Gently: Tell me about your friend with the retro furniture first.

Tickle Gently: Tell me everything you know. If you give me lots of detail, I might just drop the cost of my nudity for the evening.

Purple Haze: Slapper.

Affable Chap: His name isn't Tony, you know.

Tickle Gently: Tell me anyway.

Tickle Gently: Tell me everything you know.

In the end I learned to lust and that was how I got here. And sometimes it was glorious. Sometimes it made me cry with the pleasure. But the lust is running dry, it was only ever a rather temporary reprieve. And, because it never really ran like any sort of torrent in the first place, my interest in this

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life under dancing colours is coming to an end. It would be different, if I didn't *need* to be here.

But do I, any more? Where else is there to go? Which little square of the flat Earth that I roam will I go to next, and how will it be any different? Another lead, but how many of these have I followed before, only for it to take me nowhere? So many things written down and so many things crossed right back out again. The carpet beneath my feet is soaked through with my despair. I feel gorged on artificial moments. I don't know how much more of this I can take. I don't know how much longer I can find the will within me to keep on searching.

5.

The businesswoman

I can expand my search. I can be in many places at once. It's all about my *presence*. Yes. The more I expand, the more likely it is – even if he has no interest in *any* of this stuff any more – that one day, he'll chance past a shop front, glance through the window and see an object or a texture that pulls him through the doors. We'll start small – maybe a small island branch to begin with and some stock on Xstreet SL. Then we'll target the major shopping sims. We'll hit the magazines for publicity and look to sponsor a couple of high-profile events. We'll exhibit.

Linda Stillenbaur: Is Geoff here yet?

Richard Fairlight: Geoff's caught up in traffic.

Linda Stillenbaur: Again?

Linda Stillenbaur: Geoff's **always** caught up in traffic.

Caroline Cardigan: He has a long commute, does Geoff.

Linda Stillenbaur: But we timetabled this meeting to

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allow for that.

Linda Stillenbaur: Anyway, it's Sunday!

Caroline Cardigan: He works long hours.

Linda Stillenbaur: We all work long hours.

Caroline Cardigan: Clearly, we don't all work Sundays!

IM: Richard Fairlight: Psst! Linda! Did you know that Geoff and Caroline are an item?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: You're kidding me?! Across *their* time zones?!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: How long has this been going on for?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Was anyone going to tell me this?

Caroline Cardigan: I gather he's going through a particularly busy period at the moment.

Caroline Cardigan: Did you know he line manages over fifteen people?

IM: Richard Fairlight: I only just found out myself, in fact.

IM: Richard Fairlight: I guess they thought it was personal. Not the business of the company, you know.

Linda Stillenbaur: I did know that, Caroline. Yes.

Linda Stillenbaur: Geoff mentions it quite a bit.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: And you don't think there's a conflict of interests in that?

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Caroline Cardigan: There's a guy there – one of the people under him, I mean – who blows up at the slightest of inconveniences. It's enormously stressful for him.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Maybe. I don't know. Do you think we should raise the issue?

Caroline Cardigan: Badly overweight and bearded, apparently. Bearded!

Caroline Cardigan: Geoff says he gets bits of food stuck in his beard and in his teeth. Occasionally, when he gets cross, the bits between his teeth go flying out of his mouth. Ugh.

Caroline Cardigan: Geoff says it's all he can do not to throw up sometimes, just to look at him.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Well... what if it came to a vote on something? They could gang up on us.

Caroline Cardigan: I mean. Can you imagine having to line manage someone as repugnant as that?

Linda Stillenbaur: Can you imagine **being** line-managed by someone who wants to vomit just from the site of you?

IM: Richard Fairlight: Good point. I hadn't thought about that.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Although it would only be fifty-fifty, wouldn't it?

IM: Richard Fairlight: You know I'd support you, don't

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you?

IM: Richard Fairlight: And, in any case, is there anything we can actually do about it?

Caroline Cardigan: He's very challenging, you know. Apparently, he keeps on threatening union action for all kinds of little things.

Richard Fairlight: Why on Earth did they hire him in the first place?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: We should insist on a fifth partner!

IM: Richard Fairlight: Okaaaaaay...

IM: Richard Fairlight: And that, presumably, would need to be decided on by a vote, yes?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Yes yes I get your point.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Smart-arse.

Caroline Cardigan: Oh, in spite of everything he's quite brilliant, apparently. A genius, Geoff reckons.

Caroline Cardigan: He thinks he's got some syndrome or other. That's what these things are like, isn't it?

Linda Stillenbaur: "These things"?

Caroline Cardigan: Syndromes. Deficiencies.

Caroline Cardigan: He wants to encourage this guy to get a diagnosis. Apparently it would improve their rating as an equal opportunities employer.

Linda Stillenbaur: I see.

Linda Stillenbaur: Good to know the system works.

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok. So are we going to start?

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Caroline Cardigan: What... without Geoff?

Linda Stillenbaur: I have a class in just over an hour.
This is the time we agreed on.

Caroline Cardigan: Oh well... I suppose... if Richard agrees?

Richard Fairlight: I do. Let's get on with it. I have other commitments too today.

Caroline Cardigan: Ok.

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok.

Caroline Cardigan: Uh-oh. Phone. Be right back.

Richard Fairlight: Ok.

Linda Stillenbaur: Fair enough.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: *Sigh*

IM: Richard Fairlight: Do you think she really had to take a call?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Of course not.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: She's just playing for time.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: When I have to go at half four, I doubt she'll be so unhappy about continuing the discussion in the absence of a partner *then*.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Caroline and Geoff. Bloody bloody hell.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Of course, it all makes sense now.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Those two were always too cliquy.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: How did *you* find out about them anyway?

IM: Richard Fairlight: A friend told a friend told a friend.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Really?

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IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I do wish people would use alts to conduct that sort of business.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: It just makes things so much tidier.

IM: Richard Fairlight: We should generate some chat text whilst she's gone.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Otherwise she'll get suspicious we're talking about her in IM.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: She's not gone, though, is she? She's sitting in front of her monitor right now.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Waiting for bloody Geoff to come back.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Watching us. As soon as he appears then the phone call will end, as if by magic.

IM: Richard Fairlight: And therefore we need some chat text.

Richard Fairlight: Been to any good music events recently?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Great. Such imagination. You are so lame.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Ha!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Don't even think about asking me about football.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Of course I won't.

IM: Richard Fairlight: I mean, you're a chick.

Linda Stillenbaur: Only the usual jazz events, Richard.

Richard Fairlight: You're becoming a bit of a regular

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there, right?

Richard Fairlight: Have they tried to make you into an event organiser yet?

Linda Stillenbaur: Many times. But I don't have the time or the patience.

Linda Stillenbaur: And anyway, I prefer to lurk in my corner booth and feed on profiles during performances.

Richard Fairlight: Still looking for that Tony guy, eh?

Richard Fairlight: And which of your numerous alts do you use for that?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Don't talk about Tony to me in public chat, ok?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I have asked you that before.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Oh Christ, I'm sorry.

IM: Richard Fairlight: For some reason I thought we were still in IM.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: No worries.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Just try not to forget, ok?

Linda Stillenbaur: I think I'm gonna plead the fifth on that.

Linda Stillenbaur: Caroline doesn't know it, but Geoff is one of my more successful alts.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Hee hee!

Linda Stillenbaur: I made up the story of the fat guy with the beard because it makes women assume I'm some sort of polar opposite.

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IM: Richard Fairlight: You're evil.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I know.

Richard Fairlight: Do you have a male alt? Really?

Linda Stillenbaur: Do you have a female one?

Richard Fairlight: I think I might have experimented once... a long time ago, of course...

Linda Stillenbaur: Of course.

Linda Stillenbaur: I did have a male alt for a short while, but the problem was I couldn't keep it a secret for very long – it ate away at me that I was deceiving people...

Linda Stillenbaur: It's sort of not the same when people know you're not really a guy.

Richard Fairlight: Did people give you grief for it when you told them?

Linda Stillenbaur: Heh. Not exactly...

Linda Stillenbaur: Actually, that's quite an interesting tale.

Linda Stillenbaur: I was at a bar I sometimes hang out in with a few friends...

Geoff Donovan: Hey up! It's the workers!

Linda Stillenbaur: Geoff! A last!

Richard Fairlight: Hey Geoff.

Geoff Donovan: Christ, the traffic was murder.

Geoff Donovan: You'd think on a Sunday there'd be some relent.

Linda Stillenbaur: Wouldn't you just.

Caroline Cardigan: Back.

Caroline Cardigan: Oh hey Geoff!

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Geoff Donovan: Caroline!

Caroline Cardigan: Have you been here long? I was on the phone.

Caroline Cardigan: How was work?

Geoff Donovan: Like a circus. Like. A. *Circus.*

Geoff Donovan: Sometimes, I feel like I'm some sort of lion tamer.

Geoff Donovan: Not the sort that has a whip, of course. That would be wrong.

Geoff Donovan: If a whole lot easier.

Geoff Donovan: Still... I'm never bored. That's the most important thing.

Geoff Donovan: Nothing worse than being bored at work.

Richard Fairlight: Being fired?

Geoff Donovan: What?

Richard Fairlight: Being fired would be worse?

Geoff Donovan: Depends on your work ethic, Rich.

Geoff Donovan: Personally, if I was to get fired from a boring job, I'd probably see it as a blessing.

Geoff Donovan: But then, me *being* fired would probably have been what I was engineering in the first place. So no big deal.

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok Geoff, so I think some of us have other things to go on to later – would you mind if we got going?

Geoff Donovan: Sure thing! Go!

Linda Stillenbaur: First thing's first – sales reports. Take a look at this notecard.

Linda Stillenbaur: Not a fantastic couple of weeks, but

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neither was it dire.

Geoff Donovan: The only way is up, eh? Good job we have a few irons in the fire.

Richard Fairlight: Interesting. All low prim chairs.

Linda Stillenbaur: Yes. And the orange textures too, mostly.

Geoff Donovan: Move them to the back of the shop, then.

Linda Stillenbaur: They already are.

Geoff Donovan: Good.

Geoff Donovan: Good practice is in effect.

Linda Stillenbaur: That suggest to me that buyers either know what it is they're looking for or that they're spending time browsing.

Richard Fairlight: What do the radar logs say?

Linda Stillenbaur: I'm not sure, I find those things hard to interpret.

Linda Stillenbaur: I think it's saying that people are usually leaving after about five or six minutes.

Richard Fairlight: Oh. That's not very long.

Linda Stillenbaur: You think so too? That's what I thought.

Geoff Donovan: A very short amount of time.

Geoff Donovan: We need to increase that.

Linda Stillenbaur: That would be desirable, yes.

Richard Fairlight: No Ladderaxes sold yet, I see.

Richard Fairlight: Did I spell that right? Ladderaxes? Ladderaxi?

Caroline Cardigan: Isn't Ladderax plural already?

Linda Stillenbaur: Could we settle on 'we haven't yet sold

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a Ladderax unit?'

Caroline Cardigan: Do you really think we're going to? Those things are odd.

Linda Stillenbaur: They're not odd.

Caroline Cardigan: Whoever thought boxes on metal ladders would make for good furniture?

Linda Stillenbaur: Plenty of people bought them.

Caroline Cardigan: Did they really, though? Did they *really*?

Linda Stillenbaur: Yes!

Caroline Cardigan: I mean, I know *you* did...

Linda Stillenbaur: Not me personally.

Linda Stillenbaur: My parents bought some.

Caroline Cardigan: Sure.

Linda Stillenbaur: I laboured over that build for ages, Caroline. We're not dropping it.

Caroline Cardigan: Nobody said anything about dropping it.

Caroline Cardigan: It's quirky. I like that.

Caroline Cardigan: It might help people to remember us.

Linda Stillenbaur: Fair enough.

Richard Fairlight: We could always give it away as a freebie.

Caroline Cardigan: Now there's a good idea.

Caroline Cardigan: We could maybe give it to one of the one Linden stores.

Linda Stillenbaur: Except it would cheapen the whole thing.

Linda Stillenbaur: No-one would actually use it in their home if they thought everyone would recognise it as a

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freebie.

Linda Stillenbaur: I want our items to be regarded as high quality.

Caroline Cardigan: Sure.

Caroline Cardigan: A little bit of free publicity couldn't hurt though.

Caroline Cardigan: What about giving away *part* of the system, then?

Caroline Cardigan: Pick up a small, free version at the free store; build a better, bigger system by buying more pieces at our shop.

Linda Stillenbaur: That I guess I could probably live with.

Caroline Cardigan: Great!

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok. I'll have a fiddle then and put together a simpler version.

Linda Stillenbaur: Next...

Linda Stillenbaur: Where are we on the build for Nucet?

Caroline Cardigan: Right. Very close to completion. Very close.

Caroline Cardigan: I want to fiddle with the outside textures a little and there are some scripting difficulties with the main entrance teleporter.

Caroline Cardigan: And the greeter.

Richard Fairlight: Scripting difficulties? What sort of scripting difficulties?

Caroline Cardigan: I'm not sure.

Richard Fairlight: Why didn't you give me a shout?

Caroline Cardigan: Geoff has a guy he knows working on it, we can have it sorted in no time.

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Caroline Cardigan: I didn't want to trouble you, Richard.

Linda Stillenbaur: That's what he's there for, Caroline.

Richard Fairlight: It's no trouble at all, it's just a teleporter script.

Richard Fairlight: What can possibly go wrong?!

Caroline Cardigan: I really don't know. Way too technical for me, to be honest.

Caroline Cardigan: I think this guy wanted to install some sort of particle effect.

Richard Fairlight: Particle effect? What on earth for?

Linda Stillenbaur: No no no no no. We don't want *any* particle effects, Caroline. We discussed this.

Linda Stillenbaur: Particle effects increase lag, lag reduces the time it takes for our products to rez.

Caroline Cardigan: Do they *really* increase lag, though? Someone told me that's a myth.

Linda Stillenbaur: Myth or no myth, we discussed it and that's what we agreed.

Caroline Cardigan: If it's not true, though...

Linda Stillenbaur: If it's not true then we schedule another discussion about it, but *after* we've finished this particular piece of work.

Caroline Cardigan: Sure.

Caroline Cardigan: I've got to say, though – the effect does look well cool. Very 70s.

Richard Fairlight: Did they have teleporters in the 70s?

Linda Stillenbaur: Whether it looks cool or not is irrelevant: most people won't see it because things are still rezzing when they use store teleporters.

Linda Stillenbaur: They want to get straight to the part of

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the store that has the stuff they're looking for.

Caroline Cardigan: Ok fine.

Caroline Cardigan: I'll tell him to dump the particle script.

Richard Fairlight: And don't forget the floating text.

Caroline Cardigan: Ugh.

Caroline Cardigan: I so hate floating text.

Richard Fairlight: We all hate floating text.

Richard Fairlight: But it shows up before textures rez.

Richard Fairlight: So people can use it without having to hang around for signs to appear.

Caroline Cardigan: *Fine*

Caroline Cardigan: So, other than that, it's just a question of positioning the display products and the touch cards.

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok.

Linda Stillenbaur: So when do we think that'll all be done by?

Caroline Cardigan: A week?

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok. A week it is, then.

Richard Fairlight: Sounds good to me.

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok by you, Geoff?

Caroline Cardigan: Actually, it could be less.

Caroline Cardigan: I'll speak to the scripting guy this evening.

Richard Fairlight: IM me if you need any help.

Linda Stillenbaur: Is that ok with you, Geoff?

Richard Fairlight: Technically, after all, I *am* the scripting guy.

Richard Fairlight: I think he's AFK.

Caroline Cardigan: His mind might be on other things.

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Caroline Cardigan: He does tend to disassociate.

Linda Stillenbaur: Ok fine.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: For fuck's sake!

IM: Richard Fairlight: I know. I know.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Maybe he's IMing his *other* girlfriend.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Meow.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Sorry.

IM: Richard Fairlight: You think he only has the one?

Linda Stillenbaur: Well the next issue I have here is the issue of the new logo, and that's a Geoff thing.

Linda Stillenbaur: Let's skip that for the moment and look at advertising.

Richard Fairlight: Ok.

Richard Fairlight: Well first of all, we've got a couple of full page ads in some of the fashion mags this week.

Richard Fairlight: Both of which are the ladderax picture.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Psst! Linda! I hope you don't mind me asking, but...

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Are you and Geoff seeing each other?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: What? No!

Richard Fairlight: But the big news is there's a streamed sort of TV game show that goes out every week that's looking for sponsors...

Richard Fairlight: ...and they're prepared to incorporate

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some of our furniture onto their set if we agree to sponsor them.

Linda Stillenbaur: 70s furniture on a game show? I love it!

Linda Stillenbaur: Could we build a custom set?

Richard Fairlight: Possibly.

Richard Fairlight: It's not going to be cheap though.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Really? You're not?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: It's just you two seem very pally lately.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Pally? Me and Geoff?! We seem that way? Really?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: He talks an awful lot about you, you know. I think he has a secret crush, then.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Caroline, you're imagining things.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: *Geoff* talks about *me*?

Really?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Oh, I see.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: You're interested now, then?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: No!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Caroline, I promise you.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: There's nothing between Geoff and I.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Nothing.

Richard Fairlight: Linda?

Linda Stillenbaur: Sorry. Distracted for a moment there.

Linda Stillenbaur: So could we negotiate a better deal?

Richard Fairlight: Possibly. Northing's signed.

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Linda Stillenbaur: What are their viewing figures like?

Richard Fairlight: They're 'getting back to me' with that information.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Really?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Sigh. *Really.*

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I mean, I don't especially even like the guy!

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Really? You don't like Geoff?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Don't get me wrong, it's not like I *hate* him or anything.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Anyway...

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Why are you so interested, Caroline...?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: No reason.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Although...

IM: Caroline Cardigan: If you and Geoff *were* an item, then that would impact on the decision making process here, wouldn't it?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Yes it would, Caroline.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Yes it would.

Richard Fairlight: Linda?

Linda Stillenbaur: Sorry sorry sorry.

Linda Stillenbaur: So anyway, this game show - what's it called?

Richard Fairlight: 'Me and my Avatar'

Linda Stillenbaur: Ugh.

Richard Fairlight: I know. It should be, *'My Avatar and I'*.

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Linda Stillenbaur: Make sure you tell them that.

IM: Geoff Donovan: Pssst! Linda! You don't like me?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Oh God.

IM: Geoff Donovan: Really? You don't like me?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Dammit, Geoff, she shouldn't have told you that!

IM: Geoff Donovan: But it's true?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Of course not!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Did she tell you she thought you and I were seeing each other?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I had to tell her something to persuade her that wasn't the case. I didn't have time to think!

IM: Geoff Donovan: And "I hate him" was the first thing that popped into your mind?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: What? 'Hate'? I never said 'hate'!

IM: Geoff Donovan: You never said you hate me?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: No!

IM: Geoff Donovan: IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I mean, I don't especially even like the guy! IM: Caroline Cardigan: Really? You don't like Geoff? IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Caroline, I hate him!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Fucking hell!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: She edited me!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: The cow!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I never said that!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I swear, Geoff. She's edited what I said to her.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I never said I hated you.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Geoff?

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IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Geoff?

IM: Richard Fairlight: Oh my God!

IM: Richard Fairlight: Caroline's coming on to me in IM!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: What? *What?!*

IM: Richard Fairlight: She's just asked me if I'd help her shop for lingerie this evening!

IM: Richard Fairlight: (That's a come-on, right?)

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Am I the only person here who is taking this meeting seriously?

IM: Richard Fairlight: Do you think I should go?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: What? No!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Of course I don't think you should go.

IM: Richard Fairlight: Really?

IM: Richard Fairlight: It would sort out the Caroline-Geoff power thing, though.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Shut that IM window down right now!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Caroline, what *are* you playing at?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: What?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: You told Geoff I *hate* him?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: What?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: He said you said I said I hate him.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: I don't understand.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Stop pretending, Caroline!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: He pasted me the text you pasted him.

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IM: Caroline Cardigan: He pasted my paste?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Yes.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Oh!

IM: Caroline Cardigan: But I never said you 'hated' him.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: It was in the paste!

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Paste me back his paste. I want to see.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: For the love of God, Caroline.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: IM: Geoff Donovan: IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I mean, I don't especially even like the guy! IM: Caroline Cardigan: Really? You don't like Geoff? IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Caroline, I hate him!

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Oh my God!

IM: Caroline Cardigan: That's so not what I pasted!

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: You're saying Geoff edited it?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Someone clearly has.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: You're saying *I* edited it?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: I don't know, Linda.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Did you?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Why in God's name would I edit a paste of a paste of my paste?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: And then *show* it to you?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Well, quite.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: That's what I'm asking myself.

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Like, exactly what sort of a wedge are you trying to drive between me and Geoff?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: Like, exactly what sort of power tactic are you trying to use here?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: But... but...

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Why are you even cross-pasting

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in the first place?

IM: Caroline Cardigan: You just did it too.

IM: Richard Fairlight: She's gone suddenly quiet.

IM: Richard Fairlight: You've gone suddenly quiet.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: She's trying to make out I edited my paste of Geoff's paste of her paste of me saying I didn't like him!

IM: Richard Fairlight: What?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: This is doing my head in.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Either Geoff edited it to damage my relationship with Caroline...

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: ...or Caroline edited it to damage my relationship with Geoff...

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: Maybe Caroline edited it because she suspects I desire a relationship with Geoff and therefore Geoff thinking I hate him would push him back towards Caroline.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: That makes the most sense, doesn't it?

IM: Richard Fairlight: You're kidding me, right?

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: For Fuck's Sake.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: We're meant to be having a meeting, instead we're all whispering away to each other in IM.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: He said she said he said... Like school children. In fact...

Linda Stillenbaur: FOR GOD'S SAKE THIS IS RIDICULOUS!

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Geoff Donovan: Great news guys! I just landed us a deal!

Linda Stillenbaur: What? What?

Caroline Cardigan: You did? Yay!

Linda Stillenbaur: What? What deal? With who?

Geoff Donovan: An adult club wants to open a 70s themed bar and they want *us* to furnish it! *Plus*...

Geoff Donovan: they make machima there and want to do a film with our stuff to make it look like a 70s movie.

Caroline Cardigan: Oh my God!

Caroline Cardigan: You *star*, Geoff!

Linda Stillenbaur: Hold on just a moment...

Linda Stillenbaur: An *adult* club? An *adult* movie?

Geoff Donovan: Yes!

Geoff Donovan: Isn't that cool?!

Geoff Donovan: *We* are going to be building the set for a 70s porn flick!!

Richard Fairlight searches his inventory for a moustache.

Linda Stillenbaur: Excuse me?

Linda Stillenbaur: That's good?

Linda Stillenbaur: Did I somehow manage to miss the by-the-way-we-do-porn-now meeting?

Geoff Donovan: It'll be fun!

Geoff Donovan: We'll be in the credits, too

Geoff Donovan: The publicity will be massive!

Linda Stillenbaur: Is this what you've been doing whilst you've been AFK?

Geoff Donovan: Not AFK, my dear; AFA.

Linda Stillenbaur: What?

Richard Fairlight: He means 'Away From Avatar'.

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

Linda Stillenbaur: We've been sitting here, waiting for you to come back and you've been striking a deal to do a *porno* film?

Geoff Donovan: Sweetheart, opportunities like this don't time themselves to fit conveniently around other people's schedules.

Geoff Donovan: You've got to be prepared to act and act fast if you want to make it in the world of business.

Linda Stillenbaur: It never occurred to you to let us know you were at least having this conversation?

Geoff Donovan: That's what I'm doing now.

Caroline Cardigan: I think it sounds like a great idea!

Linda Stillenbaur: How? How is this a 'great idea'?

Linda Stillenbaur: Explain that to me.

Caroline Cardigan: It's great exposure. It's a bit of harmless fun. It's creative, it's artistic...

Caroline Cardigan: It's a foothold in the biggest SL industry there is...

Linda Stillenbaur: This impacts on our *reputation*, Caroline.

Linda Stillenbaur: Doesn't that mean anything to anyone here?

Geoff Donovan: Oh come on... everyone *dabbles* in the adult industry in one way or another in here.

Linda Stillenbaur: No, Geoff, not everyone 'dabbles' in the adult industry.

Linda Stillenbaur: I refute your assertion.

Geoff Donovan: Sure they do. All roads lead to fornication.

Geoff Donovan: You sell a bed in the metaverse, it ain't

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going to be used for sleeping on, is it?

Geoff Donovan: And guess what, Linda? We sell beds.

Linda Stillenbaur: You prick.

Linda Stillenbaur: We sell kitchen equipment too, are you going to tell me that's all part of the online sexual revolution as well?

Geoff Donovan: It all starts in the kitchen, baby.

Caroline Cardigan: Hey Geoff, be kind.

Caroline Cardigan: Some people only think of a kitchen as a place of graft and toil,

Caroline Cardigan: of dirty dishes left by unappreciative husbands and endless tins of spaghetti hoops to cook for the kids.

Geoff Donovan: How unimaginably dull.

Caroline Cardigan: Linda can't help it if she's only talking from experience.

Linda Stillenbaur: Fuck off, Caroline.

Geoff Donovan: What have you got against a bit of harmless slap and tickle, Linda?

Geoff Donovan: Explain it to me.

Linda Stillenbaur: There's nothing to explain. We're not doing it. Simple as that.

Caroline Cardigan: Well now, I kind of think that should be a majority decision, don't you think?

Linda Stillenbaur: Oh come on, Caroline!

Linda Stillenbaur: Is it really such a shock to you that I might just have a problem with this?

Caroline Cardigan: It's not as though we're being asked to make BDSM furniture, or anything.

Caroline Cardigan: Our furniture – our normal furniture

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– will just happen to be in an animation that someone else is making. You know...

Caroline Cardigan: ...there was nothing really stopping them from using it in any case...

Caroline Cardigan: ...they don't need our permission to use something they've legitimately bought.

Geoff Donovan: That's right!

Geoff Donovan: This deal is just a bulk purchase discount in return for a bit of advertising. Nothing more than that.

Geoff Donovan: I'd have offered the same deal to anyone.

Caroline Cardigan: If you were a furniture maker in real life, would you expect to know from all your customers exactly what use they intended to put it to?

Linda Stillenbaur: No, of course I wouldn't.

Linda Stillenbaur: But that would be different from some pervert producer guy coming into my shop and me then agreeing to give him a load of my stuff at a knock down rate in return for my name at the end of his credits.

Geoff Donovan: 'Pervert producer'?

Geoff Donovan: You know, *some* would consider it an art form.

Linda Stillenbaur: And some wouldn't.

Richard Fairlight: Let's not make this a big porn debate, people.

Linda Stillenbaur: Actually, let's.

Caroline Cardigan: Oh please.

Linda Stillenbaur: Since, apparently, "all roads lead to fornication," the debate, presumably, boils down to the

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pervasion or non-pervasion of lust across all aspects of being in the metaverse. Right?

Linda Stillenbaur: I mean, if it **is** pervasive, then porn I guess doesn't actually **exist** as a phenomenon distinct from any other aspect of human existence.

Linda Stillenbaur: Going to work, hanging out the clothes to dry, ejaculation – all just the ABCs of the daily alphabet, right?

Geoff Donovan: Whatever.

Linda Stillenbaur: Or is it just possible that some of us, just occasionally, have different visions for our work?

Linda Stillenbaur: Things more soft. Things more gentle.

Caroline Cardigan: Like what?

Linda Stillenbaur: Like looking at something old and letting that trigger happy memories, Caroline: times when life was more simple, times when play was all that mattered, times when a week was a long time, times when you felt safe and secure and the world was exciting and the future an adventure that would **give** instead of endlessly taking.

Geoff Donovan: Nostalgia, Linda?

Geoff Donovan: Is that all that there is to your world?

Linda Stillenbaur: It is not all that there is to my world, no!

Linda Stillenbaur: But it **is** all that there is to this company. Or so I thought.

Geoff Donovan: There's plenty of nostalgia to be found in a 70s porn flick.

Geoff Donovan: Plenty of simplicity, plenty of play.

Caroline Cardigan: lol

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

Linda Stillenbaur: Not the same kind of simplicity, Geoff.

Linda Stillenbaur: And definitely not the same sort of play.

IM: Geoff Donovan: You know, Linda; it's a shame. It really is.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: What's a shame?

IM: Geoff Donovan: Someone like you... all that attention to detail... all that passion...

IM: Geoff Donovan: You would have made a great co-star...

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: As shocking and as repulsive a revelation as that is...

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I guess I should have realised you would have negotiated something else in it for you beyond just advertising for the benefit of the business.

IM: Geoff Donovan: Negotiation is what I do, baby.

IM: Geoff Donovan: And – excuse me – 'repulsive'?

IM: Geoff Donovan: I guess you did say 'hate' then, after all.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: I didn't say 'hate'.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: But now, you know, I just might.

IM: Geoff Donovan: I suppose you really are as square as you come across then.

IM: Geoff Donovan: For some reason, I'd supposed there was something more to you.

IM: Geoff Donovan: Something more vivid.

IM: Geoff Donovan: Something more exciting.

IM: Linda Stillenbaur: My darling, you have no idea.

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IM: Linda Stillenbaur: And you never will.

Caroline Cardigan: Well then. I suppose it comes to a vote. Geoff?

Geoff Donovan: Oh yeah, baby! Count me in!

Caroline Cardigan: Linda?

Linda Stillenbaur: Categorically, no.

Caroline Cardigan: I'm going to say yes with Geoff.

Caroline Cardigan: So that just leaves Richard.

Richard Fairlight: Um...

That's why it's a mistake to do with others what you could feasibly do by yourself. It is only an issue of time, in Second Life. Time gets jobs done and time learns you the true natures of people that subscribe to mask mythology. Of course, I could have gone on to do exactly the same shops and products all over again somewhere else – they were mine, after all. But the breakup of 'Backwards Glance' and the Donovan deal in particular sucked all the pleasure out of my business reinvention. More to the point, I discovered it was threatening to something beyond value to me. Because I was selling memories in that shop. I was selling my memories. I was selling our memories. I was selling his memories. They wanted to turn them into something that would have ruined them forever. And the possibility that that was even possible shocked me profoundly.

So I took my products – I took my memories – and I left.

2.

The regular

Here is a red brick wall and here is the starting point of all of my mini adventures. Here is where I 'hang' for at least the first thirty minutes of each session: be it a long one, be it a short one. And sometimes, here is where I am for more time than that. And sometimes, here is the only place I stand in.

Here is where I have discovered that friendship can exist in a virtual world. Here is where I have learned that the comfort of familiarity goes beyond just flesh and places and physical, droppable things.

Here is where we sit and numb our virtual asses, and talk about nonsense, and watch the spot where the newbies rez. We sometimes whisper wagers to each other as to whether the noobs are real noobs or not. Here is where I have learned more about alternative accounts and the why of them. I'm starting to think about getting a few more. Here is where I have become a certain thing, a certain person, a certain way; but it's only one of so many possibilities. I don't mind the thing that I've become and I don't deny that it is really me.

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But me in this place is different from me in that place. Me with these people is different from me with those people. Me in these clothes is different from me in those clothes. And me in this skin is different from me in that skin. I'm happy with what I have become here, but I could be other things as well. And why not try them out? Why not see what they feel like?

And why not spread myself a little further in the process? With each new me, there will be new places, new activities and new friends. I will extend my reach. I will broaden my search. I will increase the likelihood that I will see him or that he will see me.

Here is where it truly begins. Here is where I walk, I run, I leap...

Terry Very: So did I mention I'm due in court tomorrow?

Fishy Foxtrot: What?

Terry Very: I'm to be charged for vandalism. Or something.

Hoyos Scott: You're in court as in you're being put on trial for something?

Terry Very: Not 'on trial' as such.

Terry Very: Actually, yeah. I suppose I am.

Fishy Foxtrot: What did you do?

Terry Very: I broke a door. That's it.

Terry Very: For that they're going to spend tax payers' money prosecuting me.

Terry Very: By which I mean my money.

Terry Very: By which I mean, of course, your money.

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

Fishy Foxtrot: What kind of a door? How did you break it?

Terry Very: A car park door.

Terry Very: I kicked it.

Terry Very: I kicked it, and it broke.

Fishy Foxtrot: You kicked a door?

Fishy Foxtrot: Why on Earth did you do that?

Hoyos Scott: I kick doors sometimes.

Hoyos Scott: Sometimes, doors just have to be kicked.

Mindo Tolstoy: Yeah, but you kick them in place of kicking people, Hoyos.

Hoyos Scott: Is it not better to kick a door than to kick a person?

Fishy Foxtrot: It's better to kick a door than to kick a person, Hoyos, but if that makes you feel better then it reinforces your need to kick.

Fishy Foxtrot: Which makes it more likely you'll want to kick someone or something in the future.

Fishy Foxtrot: Basic behaviourism, my dear.

Fishy Foxtrot: Far better, therefore, to calm yourself with a non-door kicking strategy.

Fishy Foxtrot: Much healthier for you in the long run too.

Hoyos Scott: I am touched that you are trying to save my soul, Fishy.

Hoyos Scott: Such a shame that I am well beyond redemption.

Mindo Tolstoy: Ain't that the truth.

Fishy Foxtrot: So why did you kick the car park door, Terence?

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Terry Very: To open it.

Mindo Tolstoy: To open it?

Fishy Foxtrot: You do realise they have handles for that function, right?

Terry Very: I'm aware of that, yes.

Terry Very: I happened to have my hands full at the time.

Mindo Tolstoy: You were carrying shopping?

Terry Very: Not quite, but I was carrying bags.

Hoyos Scott: That is it? They are taking you to court for that?

Terry Very: Apparently, the degree of force I used was disproportionate to the amount of force that was actually required to open the door.

Terry Very: I say 'apparently'...

Terry Very: I suppose it's fair to say the video footage does demonstrate this fairly efficiently.

Mindo Tolstoy: You didn't do a test lick?

Fishy Foxtrot: A 'test kick'?

Terry Very: Of course I did a test kick.

Fishy Foxtrot: What's a test kick?

Mindo Tolstoy: Was this a known door or an unknown door?

Terry Very: Unknown.

Mindo Tolstoy: Unknown? Then you have to do a test kick?

Terry Very: I *did* a test kick.

Fishy Foxtrot: What's a test kick?

Hoyos Scott: Is it not obvious?

Mindo Tolstoy: A test kick? It's a test kick!

Mindo Tolstoy: You push the door a little with your foot

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to gauge its resistance. You test it. A test kick.

Mindo Tolstoy: Doesn't everyone do that with unknown doors?

Fishy Foxtrot: But why are you using your foot in the first place?

Fishy Foxtrot: What the hell's wrong with using your shoulder?

Hoyos Scott: He is a man! Men do not use their shoulders!

Fishy Foxtrot: What the hell are you talking about?

Fishy Foxtrot: There's some sort of unwritten law that says men have to kick doors open? What are you? A 70s TV cop?

Mindo Tolstoy: Hello? Excuse me?! Women use their feet too. Sometimes. When it's, um, necessary.

Terry Very: I couldn't use my shoulder.

Terry Very: I was carrying wheeled cases.

Terry Very: You can't get the twist right to use your shoulder when you're carrying wheeled cases; the centre of gravity is too low.

Mindo Tolstoy nods.

Fishy Foxtrot: But surely, if they were wheeled cases, you'd have been *pulling* them rather than carrying them. No?

Hoyos Scott: She is quick, this fishy!

Terry Very: The door was at the top of three steps. I had to pick the bags up.

Fishy Foxtrot: In which case, you pick them up by the strap, right?

Terry Very: For three steps? I'm not going to pick them

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up by the strap for three steps.

Fishy Foxtrot: You used the extendible handle?

Terry Very: Of course!

Mindo Tolstoy: You swung them up?

Terry Very: I swung them up, sure.

Mindo Tolstoy: That's some swinging!

Terry Very: Well, I stood on the middle step.

Fishy Foxtrot: That's going to reduce the life of your bags, Terrence.

Terry Very: You think I give a shit?!

Fishy Foxtrot: I see.

Terry Very: They're not even my bags! They're work bags. I only have them because I'm not able to store stuff at my office any more.

Terry Very: Every day I have to cart them backwards and forwards so that my desk is clear.

Terry Very: I say "my desk"; of course now that we're 'hot desking' don't actually have a desk any more.

Fishy Foxtrot: Every day? I thought you said it was an unknown door.

Terry Very: Ordinarily, I use the south entrance, yes.

Terry Very: On this occasion, I had to use the north doors.

Terry Very: The south doors were roped off. Actually, the whole south side has scaffolding and that orange, plastic netting all over it.

Terry Very: No-one knows what it is they're actually doing. There's never anyone actually *on* the scaffolding. I think it's fake.

Fishy Foxtrot: Fake?

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Terry Very: I think they're not actually doing anything at all. I think it's some sort of bureaucratic exercise.

Terry Very: Ordinarily when they're doing work they have signs up all over the place saying what they're doing and how long it's going to take. This time, there's nothing.

Mindo Tolstoy: Maybe the sign maker went out of business.

Terry Very: That's possible.

Fishy Foxtrot: There isn't more than one sign maker where you live?

Terry Very: This is the council we're talking about, remember?

Hoyos Scott: But we have forgotten the test kick?

Hoyos Scott: How, when the test kick was undertaken, did you fail to judge the resistance of the door?

Fishy Foxtrot: I still don't see why a kick was necessary in the first place.

Hoyos Scott: Then let us assume, for the moment, that it was!

Terry Very: I told you, I was carrying bags!

Fishy Foxtrot: Except what we haven't examined yet is why you couldn't have just put the bags down and operated the door using its handle.

Mindo Tolstoy: You're not Terry's mother in real life, are you Fishy?

Fishy Foxtrot: Is it wrong to aspire to do things nicely? Politely? Correctly?

Terry Very: Alright. You want to know why I didn't use the handle? I'll tell you why I didn't use the handle.

Terry Very: I didn't use the handle because *who knows*

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who's put their hands on that thing? It's filthy!

Fishy Foxtrot: I *knew* it! I knew there was a reason.

Fishy Foxtrot: Obsessive compulsive, then.

Terry Very: You're calling me obsessive compulsive? I'm obsessive compulsive because I don't want to touch a piece of metal that – for all I know – someone could have pissed all over?

Fishy Foxtrot: So you always kick your doors open?

Terry Very: Only the public ones.

Fishy Foxtrot: You always kick open public doors?

Does that include shops?

Terry Very: What are you talking about? Shop doors are always open.

Fishy Foxtrot: What about the doors to a church? You'd kick open the doors to a church?

Terry Very: I don't go to church.

Fishy Foxtrot: Not even for a wedding?

Terry Very: What is this? Are you *auditing* my door-passing behaviour?

Fishy Foxtrot: I'm just curious to know.

Mindo Tolstoy: I'm curious to know *why* you're curious to know.

Fishy Foxtrot: Excuse me? I'm not the one due in court tomorrow, I think you'll find.

Terry Very: I would not kick open a church door. Ok?

Fishy Foxtrot: Well that's a start.

Hoyos Scott: But still, the mater of the test kick is unresolved. On this issue, *I* am curious to know!

Terry Very: Oh, it's simple Hoyos.

Entering into chat range: Torling Biko

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

Mindo Tolstoy: Torling!

Fishy Foxtrot: Hey Torling :)

Terry Very: Biko!

Torling Biko: Evening everyone.

Torling Biko: Taking a while to rez tonight.

Fishy Foxtrot: Yes. SL is being a pig.

Hoyos Scott: And the simple answer is...?

Torling Biko: Oh good, there's a group of you.

Torling Biko: I have a bit of news. Some bad news, I'm afraid.

Fishy Foxtrot: Oh?

Terry Very: What's that?

Torling Biko: It's about Anna.

Torling Biko: She's ill.

Torling Biko: I just found out a few minutes ago.

Torling Biko: She wanted me to tell you all.

Fishy Foxtrot: Oh God. What is it, Torling?

Torling Biko: It's cancer, I'm afraid.

Fishy Foxtrot: No!

Mindo Tolstoy: Oh no.

Hoyos Scott: Poor Anna.

Terry Very: Cancer, eh? That's terrible.

Torling Biko: Yeah.

Fishy Foxtrot: Did she say what sort?

Torling Biko: I must admit, I didn't ask.

Torling Biko: Should I have asked? I should have, shouldn't I?

Fishy Foxtrot: It's ok, Dor.

Fishy Foxtrot: No-one ever teaches us how to respond to this sort of thing.

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Fishy Foxtrot: I'm sure you did just fine.

Mindo Tolstoy: You know her in real life?

Torling Biko: No. But we chat from time to time on Gmail.

Torling Biko: She came online for a few minutes about half an hour ago so that she could tell me.

Torling Biko: It's hard to take in.

Fishy Foxtrot: Does she need anyone to talk to?

Fishy Foxtrot: I'd be happy to chat with her, if she'd like that.

Fishy Foxtrot: I expect she probably doesn't want to come inworld right now. I understand.

Torling Biko: Actually, I think she's coming inworld quite soon.

Torling Biko: I think she was at work or something when she messaged me, that's why she could only get onto Gmail.

Mindo Tolstoy: She's coming on? She's coming here?

Torling Biko: I think so.

Terry Very: She's coming here soon?

Torling Biko: That's what she said – that she'd come inworld as soon as she got home.

Torling Biko: I think she was just on her way out.

Terry Very: Do you think she'll want to talk about it?

Fishy Foxtrot: Don't you go running off, now.

Torling Biko: She told me to tell you not to worry about it. She's happy to talk about it.

Terry Very: Really? She *wants* to talk about it?

Terry Very: I mean, do you think that's likely?

Torling Biko: I don't know, Terry.

Torling Biko: I mean, it is pretty big news.

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Terry Very: Of course.

Mindo Tolstoy: So she found out just today?

Torling Biko: She said she had some results back from a test this morning.

Terry Very: Really? She found out she got cancer and then she went back to work?

Torling Biko: Pretty much.

Fishy Foxtrot: Different people cope with that sort of news in different ways, Terry.

Fishy Foxtrot: Maybe she lives alone. Maybe she needed to be around people.

Mindo Tolstoy: That'll be why she wants to come online as soon as she gets home, I guess.

Fishy Foxtrot nods.

Terry Very: Even so.

Terry Very: It can't have been easy to concentrate.

Terry Very: I thought she worked in something that requires a lot of attention, like watching security cameras or something.

Fishy Foxtrot: Just because she was *at* work doesn't mean she was *doing* work.

Terry Very: Sure. Sure.

Terry Very: So you spoke to her – what? – half an hour ago?

Torling Biko: Something like that.

Terry Very: Did she give any indication as to when she might be getting here?

Fishy Foxtrot: If she only found out this morning then it won't have sunk in yet.

Fishy Foxtrot: We should be prepared that she might be

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very emotional this evening.

Terry Very: Oh great.

Mindo Tolstoy: Terry!

Terry Very: What, you're *looking forward* to it?

Terry Very: What are we supposed to say?

Torling Biko: You don't have to say anything, Terry.

She'll just appreciate you being here.

Torling Biko: I really really mean that.

Torling Biko: She won't be offended *at all* if you don't talk about her illness.

Fishy Foxtrot: Well, I'll be talking about her illness even if you're not, Terry.

Terry Very: You realise I do have other commitments in Second Life?

Torling Biko: I'm only asking you to stick around for one evening.

Torling Biko: One evening, Terry – is that so much to ask?

Terry Very: But it's not going to be just one evening, is it? Is it?

Terry Very: There's all the treatment ahead of her, right? All the sickness. The hair falling out and stuff. This is going to stretch. This is a long commitment.

Mindo Tolstoy: Terry!

Fishy Foxtrot: And your problem with that is?

Terry Very: I'm not saying I have a problem with it.

Terry Very: I'm just saying, it's a long commitment.

Fishy Foxtrot: We're her friends and she needs us.

Mindo Tolstoy: That's right.

Hoyos Scott: We will be there for Anna.

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

Terry Very: Sure.

Fishy Foxtrot: You don't sound convinced of that.

Terry Very: *Are* we her friends? I mean, *really*?

Fishy Foxtrot: What on Earth do you mean?

Terry Very: I don't know. Ignore me.

Fishy Foxtrot: Go on. Say what you were going to say.

Terry Very: It's not important.

Torling Biko: You callous, uncaring bastard!

Terry Very: You know what? I've been nicer to her than some of you have been from time to time. That's all I'm saying.

Torling Biko: What?

Terry Very: Are you all honestly just going to sit there and make out like she's been our best friend all this time? Really?

Terry Very: Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about.

Fishy Foxtrot: What are you saying? Of course she's one of our friends!

Torling Biko: You don't know what you're talking about, Terry.

Terry Very: Oh really? I think I know *exactly* what I'm talking about.

Terry Very: And I think you do too.

Terry Very: Anna isn't core here, she's periphery. Always has been.

Torling Biko: Periphery?

Fishy Foxtrot: What the hell are you talking about?

Fishy Foxtrot: Anna's not periphery.

Terry Very: She's periphery and you know it.

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Terry Very: Furthermore, she's periphery because that's where you guys want her.

Fishy Foxtrot: You are so wrong.

Terry Very: The truth hurts, huh?

Fishy Foxtrot: You are **so** wrong.

Terry Very: Oh I'm not wrong, Fishy.

Fishy Foxtrot: Yes you are.

Terry Very: I don't think so.

Terry Very: What was that put-down you used the other day?

Terry Very: Something about the number of men she's been through here?

Fishy Foxtrot: What? I don't know what you're talking about.

Terry Very: Sure you do. It was about a week ago.

Terry Very: You, me, Donald and Anna were here.

Terry Very: Plus a couple of noobs had arrived through the portal.

Terry Very: Both of them were Eastern Europeans. Polish, I think.

Terry Very: Don't you remember?

Fishy Foxtrot: No.

Terry Very: Come on!

Terry Very: One of the noobs said something about looking for a boyfriend and you said that'd make one less for Anna to go through. Something like that.

Fishy Foxtrot: I did **not** say that!

Terry Very: What?!

Terry Very: You think I'm making that up?

Torling Biko: Anna's had lots of boyfriends here?

HUCKLEBERRY HAX

Really?

Fishy Foxtrot: I didn't say that, Terry.

Terry Very: You didn't say that? Really?

Terry Very: Is that what you're definitely saying?

Terry Very: You know I can check my chat logs, right?

Fishy Foxtrot: If I said that, then I meant it as a joke.

Terry Very: Oh, that was no joke. That was a put down.

Terry Very: If that was a joke, it was a joke at her expense. Just like all the others.

Terry Very: Probably – come to think of it – to gain favour with Donald. Don't think I haven't noticed the way you speak around him!

Mindo Tolstoy: You like Donald? Really?!

Fishy Foxtrot: I do not like Donald!

Fishy Foxtrot: I mean I do like Donald, but not in that way.

Terry Very: Right.

Terry Very: Sure.

Fishy Foxtrot: You know what? I *do* remember that comment.

Terry Very: All coming back to you now, huh?

Fishy Foxtrot: As I recall – and what you seem to have forgotten, Terry – is that Anna had just made a rather intolerant comment towards the newcomers in response to their remark about looking for boyfriends..

Fishy Foxtrot: Something about eastern Europeans taking things that didn't belong to them, just like in real life.

Torling Biko: Really? She said that?

Fishy Foxtrot: Something like that, yes.

Terry Very: Yep. I remember that.

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Fishy Foxtrot: So you see, I was just communicating that that sort of remark is not acceptable.

Fishy Foxtrot: That's all.

Fishy Foxtrot: You know Anna, she can say things like that sometimes.

Terry Very: Exactly!

Terry Very: Which is why she is periphery!

Torling Biko: She says things like that a lot?

Torling Biko: This is something you guys talk about?

Fishy Foxtrot: No!

Fishy Foxtrot: We do not!

Fishy Foxtrot: It's just an observation I'm making now.

Terry Very: Don't try coming the innocent, Torling.

Terry Very: You're tuned into this. You're no different from the rest.

Torling Biko: What are you talking about?

Terry Very: You kept it pretty quiet that you and Anna chat outworld, didn't you?

Terry Very: Were you worried we wouldn't approve?

Torling Biko: What? What?

Terry Very: To use Fishy's psychobabble, were you worried you'd be seen as getting too close to an 'outgroup member'?

Terry Very: Were you worried we'd stick you on the periphery also?

Torling Biko: You're an idiot.

Terry Very: Sure I am. Sure I am.

Terry Very: Who's the outgroup member now, eh?

Mindo Tolstoy: You're very quiet, Hoyos.

Hoyos Scott: I understand about 10 per cent of what is

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being said here.

Hoyos Scott: And still I wait to hear why the test kick was not sufficient.

Terry Very: Did it ever occur to you guys that maybe Anna isn't quite as ill as she's making out?

Torling Biko: You bastard.

Fishy Foxtrot: Terry, that's taking it too far.

Terry Very: It's just an idea! I'm just voicing an idea!

Terry Very: I'm not saying that's how it is.

Terry Very: We can talk about ideas, can't we?

Terry Very: After all, we know it happens.

Fishy Foxtrot: We know nothing of the sort.

Fishy Foxtrot: They're only rumours.

Terry Very: Rumours? Oh I think they're more than rumours.

Terry Very: A guy I knew once in Second Life created an alt who then came inworld pretending to be his best friend and told everyone he was in a coma following a car crash.

Terry Very: He then created *another* alt and came in as a noob who just happened to join the group of friends he'd been hanging around with before so he could hear what they said about him.

Terry Very: One week later, he miraculously comes out of the coma.

Fishy Foxtrot: Why? Why would he do such a thing?

Terry Very: To get into the core, Fishy! That's what it's all about.

Terry Very: If you're not in the core it's all about getting in the core. If you're in the core, it's all about staying there.

Mindo Tolstoy: And this guy just told you this?

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Terry Very: Sure he did. He got drunk one night.

Terry Very: Anyway, it was no great secret. They figured him out in the end.

Terry Very: He got too confident. He got cocky and decided to keep the noob alt going as an agent.

Mindo Tolstoy: An 'agent'?

Terry Very: He wanted to make sure no-one was saying things about him behind his back.

Terry Very: Plus the noob was able to big up his main avatar every now and again.

Terry Very: Anyway, eventually a couple of the main group noticed both him and the noob had certain ways of putting things and certain ways of looking at things.

Terry Very: Not to mention that they were hardly ever on at the same time.

Terry Very: Not to mention one always seemed to come on just when another had just gone off.

Terry Very: As a last ditch attempt to avert suspicion, he nearly melted his computer by bringing them both on at the same time and staging an argument between them.

Terry Very: Of course, what happened was he ended up crashing and everyone saw the two of them disappear at *exactly* the same moment.

Terry Very: He was an idiot.

Mindo Tolstoy: Gosh.

Mindo Tolstoy: The lengths people go to.

Terry Very: You'd better believe it.

Fishy Foxtrot: Is this 'friend' of yours really you, Terry?

Terry Very: Of course it's not me!

Terry Very: Do I strike you as the sort desperate for core

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approval?!

Terry Very: Are my current actions consistent with a guy who doesn't want to get cast out for his behaviour?!

Fishy Foxtrot: Nobody's talking about casting you out, Terry.

Terry Very: Well that's very charitable of you, Fishy, but I wasn't exactly expecting an official declaration.

Entering into chat range: Antonio Wallacstene

Hoyos Scott: The portal! It offers new flesh!

Fishy Foxtrot: Not in the mood, Hoyos.

Mindo Tolstoy: Hey Antonio!

Mindo Tolstoy: Welcome to mainland Second Life!

Antonio Wallacstene: Hello.

Mindo Tolstoy: 'Antonio'? Is that your name in real life? Or Tony? Or Anthony?

Antonio Wallacstene: No.

Mindo Tolstoy: What country are you from, Antonio?

Antonio Wallacstene: Italia.

Torling Biko: So you're saying this is all some sort of ruse by Anna to get into the 'core', as you put it?

Terry Very: It is *just* a suggestion.

Terry Very: I'm just putting it on the table for discussion. That's all.

Fishy Foxtrot: No. By 'putting it on the table', as you say, you're giving it credibility.

Fishy Foxtrot: You can't suggest something like that and remain neutral.

Terry Very: Look. This is Anna we're talking about. Ok?

Terry Very: Anna, who had that tantrum a couple of

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weeks ago when she thought she hadn't been invited to the Wellington's anniversary party.

Terry Very: Anna, who has a habit of teleporting out the moment that someone disagrees with her on something. Even the little things.

Terry Very: Don't tell me you never noticed that.

Mindo Tolstoy: I must admit, I had noticed that.

Terry Very: You see?

Fishy Foxtrot: Fine. So we're all agreed she can get a little tetchy at times.

Torling Biko: Are we?

Fishy Foxtrot: But there's no law of nature that I know about that says someone who's a little needy in that way can't get cancer, just the same as anyone else.

Terry Very: Absolutely. I agree with you one hundred per cent.

Terry Very: I concur!

Terry Very: Like I said, it's just a suggestion.

Torling Biko: Well, it sickens me that it even occurred to you, to be honest.

Torling Biko: Just so we're clear on that.

Terry Very: Thank you, Torling. I acknowledge your clarification.

Torling Biko: Prick.

Terry Very: May I clarify something back to you, sweetheart? Would that be ok?

Fishy Foxtrot: Stop it. Both of you. We don't need for this to get nasty.

Mindo Tolstoy: No, we don't.

Fishy Foxtrot: Whatever may or may not have been

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Anna's 'position' within or without of the group before, she needs us now and that's all that matters.

Mindo Tolstoy: I agree.

Fishy Foxtrot: And as for your hypothesis, Terry...

Terry Very: My *suggestion*.

Fishy Foxtrot: As for your 'suggestion', since there's no way of proving it, and since it would be a worse thing if you were wrong than if you were right, there is no point whatsoever in discussing it any further.

Mindo Tolstoy: Yes.

Terry Very: Fine.

Fishy Foxtrot: Good. I'm glad we agree.

Terry Very: I agree it would be worse if I were wrong than if I were right.

Terry Very: But on the issue of proving it, I think there's evidence we could collect.

Torling Biko: Oh for fuck's sake.

Fishy Foxtrot: What are you talking about? What sort of 'evidence'?

Terry Very: Just ask her a few questions.

Terry Very: If she *really is* going to be treated for cancer, she'll have all the answers, won't she?

Torling Biko: What? You think a day of living with this knowledge will have made her a doctor in the subject?

Torling Biko: You fucking idiot.

Terry Very: I'm not talking about medical answers.

Terry Very: I'm talking about what she's been told will happen next, what appointments she has and so on.

Torling Biko: You're sick.

Terry Very: Just ask her a few questions.

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Terry Very: That's all I'm saying.

Torling Biko: You know what? I can't stomach standing here listening to this.

Torling Biko: I'm out of here.

Torling Biko: Do what you want, all of you. I'll support Anna in my own way.

Fishy Foxtrot: Oh Torling.

Mindo Tolstoy: Don't be like that, Torling.

Terry Very: If you can't take a little conversation- oh, she's gone.

Fishy Foxtrot: Can you blame her?

Terry Very: It was just a *suggestion*.

Mindo Tolstoy: How very unpleasant this has become.

Mindo Tolstoy: I hope you don't get put off by this, Antonio!

Antonio Wallacstene: Where here is the place to have job?

Entering into chat range: Anna Fernside.

Fishy Foxtrot: Anna!

Mindo Tolstoy: Hey Anna :)

Hoyos Scott: Anna! You look beautiful as always!

Terry Very: Well well. Look at that.

Anna Fernside: Hey guys.

Anna Fernside: Oh thank you Hoyos!

Terry Very: You just missed Torling, Anna.

Terry Very: Isn't that unfortunate – you coming on at almost the precise moment she logged off? Such bad luck!

Anna Fernside: Torling left already?

Terry Very: She did! It's amazing!

Anna Fernside: Did she tell you my news?

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Fishy Foxtrot: She did, sweetie, and we're so so sorry.

Fishy Foxtrot: You must be feeling dreadful.

Anna Fernside: It's not the best day I've ever had, that's for sure.

Fishy Foxtrot: Tell us all about it.

Fishy Foxtrot: We're here for you, Anna.

Terry Very: Yes. Tell us *all* about it. Don't leave out any details now.

Anna Fernside: It's all happened so quickly.

Terry Very: Is it all a blur?

Anna Fernside: It really is!

Terry Very: Is it hard to get your head around?

Anna Fernside: Totally.

Anna Fernside: It's like I'm all of sudden living in a different country.

Terry Very: Let me see... Do you find that you really don't want to talk about it just this moment?

Anna Fernside: Not talk about it?

Anna Fernside: Good God no!

Terry Very: Really?

Anna Fernside: Why do you think I came online so quickly?

Terry Very: Well...

Anna Fernside: So I was waiting for the results since Monday.

Anna Fernside: Actually, they weren't really due until tomorrow, but they told me at the clinic it might be earlier.

Anna Fernside: It was like my heart just stopped when I got the call. I was at work, of course.

Fishy Foxtrot: You poor thing.

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Anna Fernside: I hadn't told anyone because, well, it's an awful lot of drama if it's nothing, right?

Anna Fernside: And it's kind of personal.

Anna Fernside: It's not that I didn't want to talk to anyone, you understand.

Fishy Foxtrot: You should have talked to us, sweetie.

Anna Fernside: A part of me did want to, actually, but the larger part was scared that I'd set myself up to look stupid if I talked about it.

Fishy Foxtrot: How do you mean?

Anna Fernside: Well... if the result *did* come back positive, any firm resolve expressed might have crumbled and I didn't want to crumble.

Anna Fernside: And if it had come back negative, then it might have looked like I was creating a drama for nothing, maybe even just seeking attention.

Fishy Foxtrot: Oh Anna...

Fishy Foxtrot: I'm sure no-one would ever have thought that.

Mindo Tolstoy: Did you want to say something, Terry?

Terry Very: Yes, I suppose so.

Anna Fernside: What's up Terry?

Terry Very: I just wanted to say...

Terry Very: I'm really sorry to hear your news.

Terry Very: You know we're here for you.

Anna Fernside: You're so sweet. You all are.

Hoyos Scott: Terry has to go to court tomorrow.

Anna Fernside: You do? Oh no! What happened?

Terry Very: I kicked a door.

Terry Very: It's not important.

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Hoyos Scott: He kicked and broke it *even though* his did a test kick first!

Hoyos Scott: And he *refuses* to explain this to me.

Terry Very: Ok. I'll tell you, Hoyos.

Terry Very: But only in IM.

What have I discovered in this place that fuels me; what have I discovered now that ties me down? The freshness seems to have faded – just a little – in the virtual world and the outside has started to seep in from between the pixels. As it must? We have to decide, all of us, if this is actually real or if it is simply a fiction shared in the minds of those hundred thousand connections. If it's real, then the second life must inevitably become the first life, the one life, the single life. If it is a fiction, then what prevents the third life? Or the fourth? Or the fifth? For me, it is neither of these possibilities. I am transient. I am passing. I have come here for a purpose.

Here is where I've seen the paths that I could travel on. I will take whichever routes look necessary, but I'll skip between them, illegitimately; I will not get stuck in one place if the path doesn't take me where I want it to. People have done that to me before, and I have learned always where I have a choice to exercise it. There is only one direction for me right now, there is only one aim.

I'm sorry, Anna.

7.

The role player

Like I said, I have a list of him. I look at it every day. I write notes on it when ideas occur to me. When I discover new outlets and activities in Second Life that are worth following up on, I scribble them there. It's more of a book now, really. A book of him. A book of scribbles and bullet points and landmarks and snippets of things I've overheard in conversations I probably shouldn't have been eavesdropping on. But which might be worth looking into.

The pages are starting to get worn. So many things written down and so many things crossed right back out again. When the book was in its 'blossoming phase' the number of ideas I was recording far outweighed the number of pieces of follow-up I actually had the time to work on. But, one-by-one, they got crossed out; one-by-one they got taken off the list. I still have a number to follow, but the list is starting to look finite again. I'm adding hardly anything. The few leads I do add, I usually find written down already and scribbled out. I have a lousy memory.

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Sheridan Rixx: Captain's Log, Stardate 4523.7. The Pennsylvania is escorting the Trellexian Ambassador to the talks at Dysian 4. For thirty-seven years, the Trellexians have been at war with the Zeldates from the neighbouring star system and this is the closest they have ever come to reaching even the most rudimentary of agreements. I am under strict orders to make the safe transportation of Ambassador Cardigan my top priority.

William Shing: ((4523.7?))

Sheridan Rixx: ((That's not a good star date?))

William Shing: ((Well, it is if your intention is to travel back in time about a hundred years...))

Sheridan Rixx: ((Oh.))

Sheridan Rixx: ((So do I need to add a hundred?))

William Shing: ((It doesn't work like that, no.))

Benjamin Toavoid: ((Just multiply it by ten. That'll be close enough.))

Sheridan Rixx: ((Ok.))

Sheridan Rixx: Captain's Log, Stardate 45237.3. The Pennsylvania is escorting the Trellexian Ambassador to the talks at Dysian 4. For thirty-seven years, the Trellexians have been at war with the Zeldates from the neighbouring star system and this is the closest they have ever come to reaching even the most rudimentary of agreements. I am under strict orders to make the safe transportation of Ambassador Cardigan my top priority.

Sheridan Rixx: Ambassador Cardigan, I trust you find your quarters comfortable?

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Jack Cardigan: Exceptionally, Captain.

Jack Cardigan: Trellexian warships are considerably less luxurious than your fine vessel appears to be.

Sheridan Rixx: Mr Shing, am I right in thinking you spent a couple of days on a Trellexian warbird last year?

William Shing: Indeed you are, Captain. It was part of a cultural exchange programme.

William Shing: And I can confirm the Ambassador's observations on the comparative comforts of our space craft.

Jack Cardigan: I trust your sensibilities weren't offended, Mr Shing!

William Shing: On the contrary, Mr Ambassador; my species has no need for the level of amenity provided by this star ship.

William Shing: I would even go so far as to say I found the lack of embellishment on your ships quite... refreshing.

Jack Cardigan: Refreshing, indeed!

Jack Cardigan: I must remember to convey this judgement to the Fleet Admiral next time I see him...

Jack Cardigan: ...he never tires of requesting funding to improve space-born standards of living; he never tires of insisting it will improve military morale!

Jack Cardigan: :: bellows with laughter. ::

William Shing: :: raises a quizzical eyebrow. ::

Sheridan Rixx: Crewman Fox – this is your first mission for Galactic Command, I understand?

Anthony Fox: Yes Sir.

Sheridan Rixx: I hope it will be a productive one.

Anthony Fox: Thank you, Sir.

William Shing: Crewman Fox, you should be aware that

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Captain Rixx specifically requested you for this mission.

Anthony Fox: I appreciate that, Sir.

Sheridan Rixx: ((Your tutor at the Academy made some very positive notes on your file about your performance in the medical role play)).

Anthony Fox: It was a simple case of medical prioritisation, Sir.

Sheridan Rixx: Very good, crewman. Carry one.

Entering chat range: Sheffield Sunshine.

William Shing: Captain, we have approximately one hour until our destination. May I suggest we use this time to review the formalities required of the opening talks?

Sheffield Sunshine: Where do U want me?

Sheridan Rixx: Good idea, Mr Shing. Let's do that in the briefing room.

Sheridan Rixx: Man the tactical station please Mr Sunshine. ((Welcome to the class, by the way. I'm passing you a note card with the RP rules.))

Benjamin Toavoid: Captain, long range sensors are picking up a vessel moving towards us on an intercept course.

Sheridan Rixx: Identify.

Benjamin Toavoid: Unknown configuration, Sir. Although the engine signature appears to be Zeldate.

Jack Cardigan: Pah! I should have known those dogs wouldn't let the talks proceed!

Sheffield Sunshine: Raising shields and locking phasers!

Sheridan Rixx: Belay that!

Sheridan Rixx: Ensign Sunshine, you do not have the authority to decide upon those actions. Is that understood?

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Benjamin Toavoid: ((Sheffield, only the Captain can order stuff like that, ok?))

Sheffield Sunshine: Aye aye, Captain!

Sheridan Rixx: What is the time to intercept, Lieutenant Toavoid?

Benjamin Toavoid: Based on current speed, fifteen minutes, Captain.

Sheridan Rixx: ((We only have an hour for the whole RP, Ben; sooner is better.))

Benjamin Toavoid: Based on current speed, six minutes, Captain.

Sheridan Rixx: Mr Shing, can you tell us anything about the configuration of that ship?

William Shing: :: Bends over library viewer :: Curious. I'm getting conflicting readings, Captain.

William Shing: The vessel appears to be both small and large at once. Perhaps it is a sensor error.

Jack Cardigan: Most likely it is a Zeldate trick to fool you into a false sense of security!

Jack Cardigan: If you'll take my advice, Captain, you'll raise your shields and arm your weapons right now!

Jack Cardigan: Show that Zeldate dog you will not be intimidated!

Sheridan Rixx: Thank you, Mr Ambassador.

Sheridan Rixx: I'll be certain to take your views into consideration.

Sheridan Rixx: Crewman Fox, open a channel to the approaching vessel. Inform them we are on a diplomatic mission and ask them to state their business.

Sheffield Sunshine: Captain, the enemy is opening fire

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on us!

Sheridan Rixx: A little unlikely, Ensign Sunshine; they're not yet within weapons range.

Sheffield Sunshine: They have a new weapon.

Benjamin Toavoid: ((Sheffield, Sheridan is the game manager – it's up to her to shape the main plot.))

Sheffield Sunshine: Ok but I saw that episode.

Sheffield Sunshine: I saw them all.

Sheridan Rixx: Thank you, Sunshine. Mr Fox – that hail, please?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Hey there Anthony, no response back from the Zelgate ship please.

IM: Anthony Fox: Okies.

Anthony Fox: Aye aye, Sir.

Anthony Fox: Approaching vessel, this is the Starship Pennsylvania. We are on a diplomatic mission. Please identify yourself and state your intentions.

Anthony Fox: No response, Captain.

Sheridan Rixx: Keep trying to raise them, Mr Fox.

Anthony Fox: Aye Sir.

Sheffield Sunshine: They will fire on us as soon as they are close.

Sheridan Rixx: Thank you, Mr Sunshine; I'm aware of that possibility. ∴ Looks at the First Officer ∴ Any suggestions, Mr Shing?

William Shing: Captain, I find the likelihood that the approaching vessel is *not* connected to our mission and the peace talks to be extremely low.

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Jack Cardigan: I should say!

William Shing: Perhaps Mr Sunshine's prudence is not in fact unwarranted.

Sheridan Rixx: What if we increase speed to warp 8?

Sheridan Rixx: Could we outrun them?

Sheffield Sunshine: The engines are damaged from our last mission.

Sheffield Sunshine: We can't go any faster.

Sheridan Rixx: Oh really? Why wasn't I made aware of this damage before now?

William Shing: I am also curious to learn about that.

Sheridan Rixx: Mr Sunshine?

Sheffield Sunshine: It was in my report you mentioned it at breakfast briefing.

Sheridan Rixx: I think you must have misunderstood something you heard me say, Ensign. Mr Toavoid?

Benjamin Toavoid: Sir?

Sheridan Rixx: Are you reading any engine difficulties?

Benjamin Toavoid: No Sir. Engine efficiency at 97 per cent.

Sheridan Rixx: 97? Hmmm. Remind me to have a word with the chief engineer about that missing three per cent. :: Winks at Lt Toavoid. ::

Benjamin Toavoid: :: Chuckles :: Aye, Sir.

Sheffield Sunshine: The engineer was killed last week.

IM: William Shing: Do you want me to get rid of him?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Naaaw. He's harmless.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: If he gets too cheeky I'll stick him in a red shirt and send him on an away mission.

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Sheridan Rixx: Mr Sunshine, do you feel all right?
Should I call the chief medical officer?

Sheridan Rixx: I know Mr Franklin talked about my deadlines for warp core re-alignment being the death of him, but I think I would have been informed by now if an actual fatality had occurred.

Sheridan Rixx: Or is it that you've slipped across from a parallel universe where the chief engineer really did perish? We should check. Mr Toavoid?

Benjamin Toavoid: Sir?

Sheridan Rixx: Scan the ship for chronoton particles will, you? Better safe than sorry.

Benjamin Toavoid: Aye, Sir.

William Shing: Chronoton particles, Captain? Are you expecting a temporal disturbance?

Sheridan Rixx: You're not familiar with Professor Wimfram's theory that inter-dimension rifts emit low-level chronoton particles?

William Shing: I believe I have yet to encounter that particular theory, Captain. Then again...

William Shing: ...I try to avoid the distraction of Wimfram's theories wherever possible.

Benjamin Toavoid: You're not a fan, Mr Shing?

William Shing: If I desire a flight of fancy, Lieutenant, there is always the holodeck.

Sheridan Rixx: Come come, Mr Shing. Be tolerant.

Benjamin Toavoid: Negative on the chronoton sweep, Sir.

Sheridan Rixx: Thank you, Mr Toavoid. Now then...

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Sheridan Rixx: Returning to the issue of the approaching spacecraft...

Sheffield Sunshine: Ha ha. Yes I am from the future.

Sheffield Sunshine: I thought it was last week the engineer gets killed but really its next week.

Benjamin Toavoid: Perhaps we can arrange for someone else to stand in the spot he gets killed in...

Sheridan Rixx: In the meantime, let's put some distance between us and our friend.

Sheridan Rixx: Increase speed to warp seven, Mr Toavoid.

Benjamin Toavoid: Warp seven, aye Sir.

William Shing: Captain, the alien vessel has increased its speed to compensate.

Sheridan Rixx: Time to intercept?

Benjamin Toavoid: Two minutes, twenty seconds Sir.

Sheridan Rixx: Any response to those hails yet, Mr Fox?

Anthony Fox: No Sir.

IM: Graeme Graeme: Hey Sheridan.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: GG!

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Bit busy now.

Sheridan Rixx: Then let's see just how fast they can go. Increase speed to warp nine.

Benjamin Toavoid: Warp nine, aye Sir.

Sheffield Sunshine: Engines at 50 per cent they're gonna blow.

Sheridan Rixx: I think I know this ship well enough to be able to gauge that for myself, Mr Sunshine. But thank you

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for the cautionary note.

William Shing: Alien vessel still closing.

William Shing: We will be in weapons range within 40 seconds.

Sheridan Rixx: Are you able to tell me who that is yet, Mr Shing?

William Sing: Sensors are indicating a Zelgate Warrior Class vessel, but I am not yet able to identify the specific ship.

Sheridan Rixx: That's odd.

Jack Cardigan: Captain, you should open fire as soon as you have the chance! I implore you!

Sheridan Rixx: What's the top speed of a Warrior Class vessel?

IM: Graeme Graeme: Just feeling really down at the moment.

William Sing: Our records indicate warp 8.7, Captain.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Sorry to hear that.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Everything ok?

William Sing: They could, however, be out of date.

Jack Cardigan: Clearly, they have developed a faster, more deadly craft.

Jack Cardigan: A sure sign that their intentions are hostile!

IM: Graeme Graeme: *She* just called.

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IM: Sheridan Rixx: Ah.

William Sing: Now entering weapons range.

Jack Cardigan: Please, Captain Rixx! For the sake of your crew!

Sheridan Rixx: All stop.

Benjamin Toavoid: All stop. Aye, Sir.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Who?

IM: Graeme Graeme: Who do you think?

William Shing: Alien vessel is also dropping out of warp.

Sheridan Rixx: Red alert. Raise shields.

William Shing: Red alert, aye Sir.

Sheridan Rixx: Stand by on phasers, Mr Sunshine; do not fire until I give the order.

IM: Graeme Graeme: My mother, of course.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Oh yes, of course.

Jack Cardigan: Fire, Captain Rixx! You **must** open fire!

Sheridan Rixx: For a diplomat, I must say you seem very keen on the use of weapons, Ambassador Cardigan.

Jack Cardigan: You fool! Can't you see we're a sitting duck?

IM: Roger Haerling: Sheridan, are you online?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Yes but busy.

IM: Roger Haerling: I see.

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IM: Roger Haerling: Busy. Again.

Sheridan Rixx: Distance from alien vessel?

William Shing: Four thousand kilometres.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Sorry. x

IM: Roger Haerling: I'll do my usual thing of waiting for you to have time for me again, shall I?

William Shing: The alien vessel is closing.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Should be finished in about 30 mins maybe.

Sheridan Rixx: Mr Toavoid, move us towards them.

Nice and slowly. One quarter impulse power.

Benjamin Toavoid: Aye Sir.

IM: Roger Haerling: Right. Sure. I'll wait. As always.

Jack Cardigan: You want us to move *towards* them?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Are you ok? You sound upset.

Sheridan Rixx: Yes, indeed, Mr Ambassador.

Sheridan Rixx: I want to take a closer look at this ship.

IM: Graeme Graeme: Of course, there are problems with Amy. As usual, I have to hear all about it.

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Jack Cardigan: They will butcher us!

Jack Cardigan: Just like the atrocities of Corrowan Seven.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Oh dear.

IM: Graeme Graeme: Always me, isn't it.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: You always listen to her, yes.

Jack Cardigan: Women and children slaughtered, Captain; a whole generation of Trellexians wiped out!

Sheridan Rixx: Thank you, Mr Ambassador. I'm aware of that terrible event.

IM: Roger Haerling: I don't know, Sheri.

IM: Roger Haerling: I mean, what's the point?

IM: Roger Haerling: We don't do anything together any more.

William Shing: As I understand it, Mr Ambassador, the Zelgate were responding to the destruction of their third moon by Trellexian forces two weeks previously.

Jack Cardigan: Pah! We did not know that moon was colonised! And do you know why?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: We spent time together only yesterday!

Jack Cardigan: Because the Zelgate would not tell us!

Jack Cardigan: We asked and we asked and we asked. We wanted to know what the sensor shield was there for.

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Jack Cardigan: If they had simply told us there was a colony there then things would have been completely different.

Jack Cardigan: As it was, we suspected they were developing a Heanan weapon there, deployable to Trellexian space within 45 minutes.

IM: Roger Haerling: A couple of hours once a week. It isn't enough.

IM: Roger Haerling: You're seeing somebody else, aren't you?

William Shing: But isn't it the case, Mr Ambassador, that your primary interest in the moon was its rich trilithium deposits?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Oh please, Roger.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Not this again.

IM: Roger Haerling: Tell me, Sheri...

IM: Roger Haerling: What are you here for?

IM: Roger Haerling: Why are you in Second Life?

IM: Roger Haerling: What do you seek?

IM: Roger Haerling: I realise it isn't me.

IM: Roger Haerling: And don't tell me it is. Or was.

IM: Roger Haerling: Is it just that you want to be noticed?

IM: Roger Haerling: Is it just that you want to be seen?

IM: Roger Haerling: Or heard?

IM: Roger Haerling: Or liked?

IM: Roger Haerling: Or loved?

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IM: Roger Haerling: Do you actually know how to love people in return?

IM: Roger Haerling: Do you actually know what it's like to have *one person* in the centre of your world?

IM: Roger Haerling: One person... and no-one else?

IM: Roger Haerling: Do you?

Sometimes, I stare at the screen, my fingers frozen above the keyboard, waiting, poised, dangling like the hands of a string puppet; hovering on stand-by for words to deliver, but instead there is only blindness, emptiness, numbness. And sometimes, anger fills the void. Sometimes, I imagine punching the screen until it leaks its ooze across my knuckles.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Now you listen to me, you condescending, sanctimonious little fuck... and you listen good.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: I know what that feels like better than you will ever know. Just so that you know, that person is now gone from my life.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Don't you ever speak to me like that again, in fact...

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Don't ever bother saying anything to me again.

IM: Roger Haerling: Baby please, I'm sorry.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: From this moment onwards, you're on mute.

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IM: Sheridan Rixx: We're finished.

William Shing: Captain?

Sheffield Sunshine: She has been taken over by probe we should kill her before she destroys the ship.

Sheridan Rixx: Sorry.

Sheridan Rixx: Distracted.

Sheridan Rixx: Ok...

IM: Graeme Graeme: Are you up to anything?

IM: Graeme Graeme: I could do with someone to talk to. I feel really low.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: I don't have time right now, no.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: I might do in about a half hour or so.

IM: Graeme Graeme: I'm off work at the moment.

IM: Graeme Graeme: Got into a bit of a state yesterday.

IM: Graeme Graeme: Got sent home. Went to the doctor. I'm signed off for a week.

William Shing: Captain?

William Shing: Your orders, Captain?

IM: Speaker Lesley: Hey, Sheridan :)

IM: Speaker Lesley: You got a minute?

IM: Speaker Lesley: Mind looking something over for me?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Not at the moment, no.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Maybe in 30 mins?

IM: Speaker Lesley: Oh. Ok.

IM: Speaker Lesley: Probably won't be on then.

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IM: Speaker Lesley: No worries.

IM: Graeme Graeme: Nearly lost it with my line manager.

IM: Graeme Graeme: You remember it was my appraisal this week, right?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Oh right.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: How did that go?

IM: Graeme Graeme: Pretty crap.

IM: Graeme Graeme: I don't know why I bother sometimes, I really don't.

IM: William Shing: Everything ok?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Sure.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: IM issues.

Sheridan Rixx: Any response to those hails yet, Mr Fox?

William Shing: Captain, Crewman Fox became ill; I told him to report to sick bay. ((He had to leave)).

Sheffield Sunshine: I am doing communications now I signalled the aliens to surrender.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Why did he go?

IM: William Shing: Got bored, maybe. I don't know.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Is he still online?

IM: William Shing: I don't know. He's not on my friends list.

IM: William Shing: Are we going to get back to this?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: For Christ's sake.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: I'm distracted for two minutes and

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people start leaving the RP?

IM: Graeme Graeme: Send me a TP?

IM: Sheridan Rixx: I can't at the moment I'm in a role play.

IM: Graeme Graeme: Oh right. Ok.

IM: Sheridan Rixx: Hey Anthony. Everything ok? Sorry I was a bit distracted for a moment there.

Second Life: User not online - message will be stored and delivered later.

Sometimes, I stare at the screen and remind myself to breath...

Sheridan Rixx: Mr Shing...

Sheridan Rixx: What is the status of the alien vessel?

William Shing: We are ten kilometres away from it, Captain. It appears to have its shields raised and weapons armed.

Sheridan Rixx: 'Appears'?

William Shing: My sensor readings are inconclusive, Captain.

William Shing: Depending on the type of scan I run, I get sets of readings which do not agree with each other.

William Shing: A few actually seem to suggest there isn't a ship there at all.

Jack Cardigan: Clearly some sort of trick designed to

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confuse us.

Sheridan Rixx: Us... or maybe our computers...

Sheridan Rixx: You're convinced that they're hostile, Mr Ambassador, and yet they still haven't opened fire on us.

Sheridan Rixx: What's your explanation for that?

Sheffield Sunshine: They are all dead they have a killer disease. I beamed it over from the yellow containers in cargo bay three.

Jack Cardigan: Explanation? Explanation?

Jack Cardigan: Since when was I required to provide an explanation to you, Rixx? I am not your personal advisor!

Sheridan Rixx: Since you became a passenger on my ship, mister. Mr Toavoid?

Benjamin Toavoid: Sir?

Sheridan Rixx: I have a hunch.

Sheridan Rixx: Go down to the observation lounge and take an electronic telescope with you. I want you to look out of the window and tell me if you can actually see a ship there: yes or no.

Benjamin Toavoid: Aye, Sir!

Jack Cardigan: This is outrageous!

Sheridan Rixx: Is it? I have a hunch that Mr Toavoid's search will be in vain.

Jack Cardigan: What twisted logic is this that you follow?

Sheridan Rixx: If I'm right, what sort of explanation will you refuse to offer us then?

Jack Cardigan: I have never been so insulted in all my life!

Sheridan Rixx: Mr Shing, I want a level one diagnostic

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of our ship computer. Specifically, I want you to look for any code added within the last couple of days that accesses sensor and viewscreen subroutines.

William Shing: Scanning, Captain.

Benjamin Toavoid: Toavoid to bridge.

Sheridan Rixx: Anything to report, Lieutenant?

Benjamin Toavoid: Negative, Captain.

Benjamin Toavoid: I'm looking in the exact spot the sensors tell us the ship should be in but I can't see anything there.

Sheridan Rixx: Clever, Mr Cardigan. Very clever.

William Shing: On the contrary, Captain. The Ambassador's plan was flawed. It would never have worked.

Jack Cardigan: I have no idea what you're talking about.

Sheridan Rixx: There's no ship out there, and yet our sensors tell us there is. Therefore...

Sheridan Rixx: Someone has tampered with the sensors to make it *look* like there's a ship.

William Shing: I have detected the code, Captain.

William Shing: A very crude piece of programming; a very poor knowledge of how our systems work.

William Shing: Hence the conflicting sensor readings.

Jack Cardigan: And pray why, Mr Shing, do you think my plan would 'never have worked'?

William Shing: Very simple, Mr Ambassador.

William Shing: Clearly, you expected us to fire upon the ship, at which point your code would simulate its destruction for us...

William Shing: ... and thereby eliminating any physical evidence which could be subsequently examined.

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William Shing: The incident would have been logged as an attempt by the Zelgate Council to derail the peace talks and exploited by the Trellexian government as a mandate for continued hostilities.

William Shing: But, Mr Ambassador, your plan would never have worked because what your code could *not* do was simulate effectively an attack upon the Pennsylvania.

William Shing: You were therefore relying on us taking the first shot.

William Shing: And that, Mr Ambassador, would never have happened.

Sheridan Rixx: Ok everyone, that's it. RP over. Thank you very much.

Jack Cardigan: That's it? Don't I get to gnash my teeth in frustration?

Sheridan Rixx: Sure thing. Gnash away.

Jack Cardigan: :: Gnashes teeth ::

Sheridan Rixx: Not bad, Ben, but there was plenty of scope for incidental stuff that you could have used there. More asides you could have made. Might have kept Anthony in the game a little longer, you know.

Benjamin Toavoid: Ok.

Sheridan Rixx: Things like 'Ben tries to avoid meeting Tony's gaze as the ambassador gets more and more wound up by the first officer; he remembers the hysterics they were in the last time they compared notes on Shing's diplomatic record.'

Sheridan Rixx: That sort of thing.

Sheridan Rixx: Would it hurt you to think about giving the new guys a way in just once in a while? I can't be

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feeding everyone lines *all* the time.

Benjamin Toavoid: Sure. Um. Sorry.

Sheridan Rixx: And Sheffield, I want you to repeat basic RP class, and when you're there I want you to ask the instructor to explain 'God Mode' to you very clearly.

Sheridan Rixx: And then I want you to prepare for me a 500 word assignment on why God Mode disrupts RP for everyone. Do that and I just might award you your credit.

William Shing: Wow.

Sheffield Sunshine: I wrote a novel can I show it to you?

Sheridan Rixx: Show it to me after I've read your assignment and graded it.

Sheridan Rixx: Dismissed, everyone.

Benjamin Toavoid: See you later Sheridan, Bill, Jack.

Sheffield Sunshine: Yes Captain.

Jack Cardigan: Later, guys.

William Shing: That was a bit of an abrupt ending.

William Shing: Everything ok?

Sheridan Rixx: Where are you off to now? Going to hang out in your café?

William Shing: Probably.

William Shing: You?

Sheridan Rixx: Don't know.

Sheridan Rixx: Think I'll log off.

Sheridan Rixx: Maybe I'll sleep.

Sheridan Rixx: I fancy reading something, for a change.

Sheridan Rixx: Perhaps I'll watch some TV.

Sheridan Rixx: Or listen to an LP.

William Shing chuckles.

William Shing: You still call them LPs?

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Sheridan Rixx smiles.

Sheridan Rixx: We always did in my family.

Sheridan Rixx: In any case, it actually will be an LP.

William Shing: You have a turntable?

Sheridan Rixx: Of course. Well. I bought it a few years ago.

Sheridan Rixx: I have some of my parents' old records.

William Shing: Good for you, I guess.

Sheridan Rixx: Maybe.

Sheridan Rixx: Ask me in approximately 22 minutes.

William Shing smiles.

William Shing: You getting SL fatigued?

Sheridan Rixx: I think so, yeah.

William Shing: And I get the distinct impression it's not the first time.

Sheridan Rixx: Sometimes, Bill, I dream about leaving this place.

Sheridan Rixx: I wake up thinking about smell.

William Shing: And something keeps pulling you back?

Sheridan Rixx: One day, I won't need to be here any more, I have to believe that.

William Shing: Don't we all want that?

Sheridan Rixx: I'm not sure.

Sheridan Rixx: It all depends what we're in here for.

William Shing: And what are you in here for?

Sheridan Rixx: Hmmmm...

Sheridan Rixx: Ask me in approximately 22 minutes.

The pages are starting to get worn. The edges are starting to

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get frayed. Sometimes, I stare at the screen and the pixels blur and sting my eyes. And my world drains cold and empty.

Midnight comes and goes, and most nights the session is yet young. Most nights, I continue until I can hardly think. The warm nonsense of hypnagogia is one of my few pleasures now, I let it rock me backwards and forwards in front of my desk. I let it link dots that I can't tie together by myself.

Sometimes, the daylight comes as a surprise. A step outside the front door is like a sudden, sensory bath. I walked to the convenience store two doors down the other day to find that it had been turned into a drug store. I'd had no idea the old shop had closed. Straight away, I started to long for the smell of spices and newsprint you used to get when you walked through the front door, and the way the bell tinkled. What do we need with a drug store in this neighbourhood, anyway? No-one seems to know what happened to the friendly Indian family that used to run it. I miss them. I miss the husband worrying about his nephew to all the customers and I miss the wife talking about science fiction and her trips to Florida, and the time she nearly saw a shuttle launch. Another slice of life that's gone now, another footprint for me to weep over. The best thing I can do is stay at home until this is done, perhaps, and then I won't be distracted from the task at hand by my own maudlin. But sometimes I long to be outside, where air moves around me. When finally I do manage to pull myself out of my chair and into the heavy journey towards my bed I look through the gap in the curtains at the world in darkness and try to

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imagine having the energy to run through outside openness. A beach. A field. A garden. Somewhere where the waves don't roll in perfect cylinders and the leaves on trees don't go all blurry when looked at close up. I try to imagine feeling light and strong and fast. I think about what my feet would sound like as they thud against the grass or sand. I try to imagine him running across the grass towards me, his arms outstretched, that smile across his face.

I'm good at turning out the lights on everything around me and keeping my sights on the goal ahead. I can even trick myself into relishing the darkness from time to time. I'm here. I'm here to stay. I might as well try to like it, I suppose. But these occasional glances at the things I used to know are more than just reminders of things lost and things disappearing; they tell me that I need to touch things made wet by rain and I need to smell things that have risen from the soil and I need to see people and stop and stand wherever they are and talk about small things which matter. They tell me that if I keep myself away from these things for too long, the parts of me that need them will eventually wither and die.

Oh God.

This place is killing me.

6.

The attendee

It's all about my *presence*. Of course it is. If not through shops as extensions of me spread across the virtual land, then through the actual me at high density, high visibility places. I try to go where lots of other people go. I go to music events and stand-up comedy and exhibitions, and I keep an eye on the popular classes. Music as appropriate, of course. There'd be no point in me showing up at a folk festival.

Or would there? I have a list of everything him that I know of, that I consult; but people do change. And sometimes, of course, you go to an event less because it's of interest to you and more because it's of interest to the person you're going with. He will be with people, won't he? Everything I do is focused on him as an individual, but of course there will have been others who have felt and joined his passage, and that should make the task easier as well as more difficult, shouldn't it? Individuality is an illusion; virtual individuality even more so?

Against the context of a life of quiet, still seclusion, it's

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good to go to places and to sit with others and to watch things happen together; to be sharing a make-believe space, except it's not really make-believe at all. 30 people at a comedy set will all see the same things as they cam around the venue – the same décor, the same clothes worn by the other attendees and the same act (although they might have different opinions on how good it is) – and if the joke is good, then they'll all laugh out loud at the same time, wherever they happen to be, whatever country or continent they happen to be in. The minds of 30 people are in a place that doesn't exist, except it must exist because it's the same for all of them. “Sounds just like watching television” is what the guy at the convenience store said to me when I tried to explain it to him. But he's wrong. There are more places to chose from in Second Life. The audiences are smaller. And you can't show your approval of an act on a TV programme (except via a premium rate telephone number, of course). And you can't look around at the other viewers and learn about who they are or about who they want you to think they are. And you can't send them messages. My mission has made me a profile junkie. Sometimes, these little boxes fill my screen completely as I move from summary to summary, following the trail of partner links and picks. Sometimes, it's not the person themselves that interests me, but the maker of the clothes and attachments they're wearing. Sometimes, it's the owner of the land that interests me. Or the builder of the venue. Or the speaker of a certain turn of phrase. Or, sometimes, it's the owner of a voice... A single curiosity can lead to a cascade of cryptic information across the monitor and a stack of tiny

photographs and well-worn quotations to examine, and soon the music or the comedy or the poetry is forgotten.

And what exactly am I looking for in those minute summaries? Do I honestly believe that I'll somehow recognise him from three, four, five lines of text? Do I really know him that well? *Really?* In any case, will he actually *want* to be recognised? Plenty of people here don't. Including me. Perhaps his lines will be deliberately misleading. Perhaps he'll have nothing there at all.

Profile after profile after profile. There ought to be a collective noun for quantities of self-aggrandising, superficial nonsense. There ought to be a verb for threatening verbal harm to anyone who verbally harms a friend (perhaps an additional verb – or a prefix to the first – for those who follow-up their threat with the words, 'no, really'). There ought to be a word other than 'brother' or 'sister' (but better than 'sibling') for someone who you describe in your profile as 'brother' or 'sister,' but actually isn't.

Virtual siblings. I thought that was ridiculous, at first. I still don't quite have my head around it. But stranger things exist, I suppose. I get what it's supposed to communicate: closeness beyond mere friendship. Sure. I can't help but wonder, all the same, how you go about turning a friendship into a siblingship. Is there some sort of procedure you have to go through? Does one person generally ask or does the understanding somehow mutually emerge? And if you do have to ask, is it a bit like a marriage proposal? What if the other person turns your request down? What if they were waiting for an actual marriage proposal?

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And then there are the entries about 'partners': some the sweet little collections of greetings card devotedness; some the polite acknowledgements of the partner's fine attributes. And some the dazed, confused bewildered eruptions of text that somehow seem to cry, *how? How? HOW can this have happened to me? WHAT is going on in my head?* The passion of some often appears to exceed the capacity of the medium for its expression by a serious order of magnitude. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why poetry is popular in Second Life: when words are all you have to touch a person with, it becomes important how you use them.

Roger Haerling: A 'dalt'?

Roger Haerling: What the hell's a 'dalt'?

Stephen Somebody: Well you know what an 'alt' is, right?

Roger Haerling: Of course I know what an alt is.

Roger Haerling: *Alt*ernative account/avatar.

Stephen Somebody: Right.

Audra Avington: Oh wait, I think I know this one.

Roger Haerling: Do tell.

Audra Avington: It's a discarded alt, isn't it?

Stephen Somebody: Discarded alt – dalt. That's right.

Roger Haerling: Discarded? Why not 'deleted'?

Stephen Somebody: Have you ever actually deleted an account?

Audra Avington: I came close to it once, but I couldn't go through with it.

Stephen Somebody: Exactly. It's too much like killing

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off your granny.

Roger Haerling: Really? I think it's easy. I've deleted one.

Audra Avington: You have? Gosh!

Audra Avington: You heartless man!

Roger Haerling: Actually, it was easy.

Roger Haerling: One click and she was gone.

Stephen Somebody coughs and splutters.

Stephen Somebody: Roger, my lad: tell me more!

Audra Avington: *She*?

Roger Haerling: Oh. Did I actually just write that?

Audra Avington: Oh my. How embarrassing.

Roger Haerling: Any chance of me getting away with putting that down as a typo?

Audra Avington: Uh-uh.

Stephen Somebody: None whatsoever.

Audra Avington: I hope you gave away all the transferable stuff first.

Roger Haerling: But that would have meant advertising the fact that I was retiring her.

Audra Avington: If somebody gives you something they don't need any more, do you assume that means they're about to kill themselves?

Roger Haerling: Good point. I hadn't thought about it like that.

Audra Avington: You had a guilty conscience, that's why.

Audra Avington: You were worried people might be able to see the murderous intent in your eyes.

Stephen Somebody: So what was she called, this lady

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creation of yours?

Roger Haerling: Oh no. I don't think so. I'm not telling you that.

Audra Avington: Rogetta?

Stephen Somebody: Just her first name, that's all. Just give me an insight into how Haerling thinks female.

Roger Haerling: No way.

Stephen Somebody: Was it Mary?

Roger Haerling: No.

Stephen Somebody: Was it Susan?

Roger Haerling: No.

Stephen Somebody: Was it Rachel?

Roger Haerling: No.

Stephen Somebody: Was it Celia?

Roger Haerling: No.

Audra Avington: Soma?

Roger Haerling: No.

Stephen Somebody: *Soma*? Where did that come from?

Audra Avington: It's a name.

Stephen Somebody: Really?

Audra Avington: You never heard of Soma?

Stephen Somebody: I never heard of Soma, no.

Audra Avington: And your view is that it contravenes the laws of Second Life naming because...?

Stephen Somebody: I'm just curious to know why 'Soma' was the first name to pop into your head, that's all.

Audra Avington: I knew a Soma once, and at the time I wondered if she was a guy.

Stephen Somebody: Really? You saw the guy behind the

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female curtain? I always wondered how obvious that would be.

Audra Avington: Well there's no universally defined constant as to how difficult it is, you know.

Audra Avington: It all depends on how good a role player they are.

Stephen Somebody: Well yes, of course.

Roger Haerling: Did you ask her? Soma, I mean?

Audra Avington: As a matter of fact, I did. She told me she was female, of course. She was quite affronted.

Stephen Somebody: Did you try the bra size question?

Audra Avington: Of course.

Audra Avington: But too many guys are prepared for that one now.

Stephen Somebody: Really?

Audra Avington: In my mind I have this image of computer monitors across the world with sticky notes affixed around the edges saying '34B'.

Roger Haerling: Surely voice would be the simple decider?

Audra Avington: You'd be surprised at how many people still refuse to do voice.

Audra Avington: I think there's a feeling held by many that it shatters the illusion they're trying to build through their avatar and its mannerisms.

Audra Avington: Cross-gender avatars would appear to be an extremely good example of that.

Stephen Somebody: No doubting that.

Stephen Somebody: Not an issue in my case, of course, since the impression of masculine perfection would only be

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enhanced by my dulcet tones.

Stephen Somebody: So was she called Heather?

Roger Haerling: No.

Stephen Somebody: Annabelle?

Roger Haerling: I'm not telling you.

Stephen Somebody: Aha! You changed your response there from 'no'!

Stephen Somebody: It was Annabelle, wasn't it?

Roger Haerling: No!

Stephen Somebody: Ha hah! Rumbled!

Roger Haerling: It wasn't Annabelle.

Stephen Somebody: Yeah it was.

Roger Haerling: Fine. Think what you like. Actually, I'm glad you think it's that because now you'll stop asking for her actual name.

Stephen Somebody: So anyway, I'm curious: was Annabelle a fox?

Roger Haerling: Oh God.

Audra Avington: lol

Stephen Somebody: She was, wasn't she?

Audra Avington: Of course she was!

Audra Avington: Why would a guy do a female avatar and *not* make her a fox?

Audra Avington: Surely the fox box is an automatic tick?

Stephen Somebody: Not necessarily.

Stephen Somebody: I mean, I know every guy wants to *think* his female alt a fox...

Stephen Somebody: ...but that doesn't mean to say he's actually successful.

Audra Avington: That is true.

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Stephen Somebody: There are an awful lot of freaks out there.

Stephen Somebody: An appalling lack of knowledge about the female form.

Stephen Somebody: It makes me shudder just to think of some of the – quite frankly – dreadful approximations at femininity out there.

Roger Haerling: As it happens, I bought a shape.

Stephen Somebody: Well that's something, at least. So long as we're not talking about the one Linden shops.

Stephen Somebody: Did you buy a good skin as well? I hope so.

Stephen Somebody: There's something very dirty about wearing the freebie realistic skins.

Audra Avington: Dirty about wearing them or dirty about being with someone wearing them?

Audra Avington becomes curious.

Stephen Somebody treads carefully.

Roger Haerling: Ahhhhhhhh.

Roger Haerling: You too!

Stephen Somebody: Me? A female avatar?

Stephen Somebody: Don't be so ridiculous.

Audra Avington: You liar!

Stephen Somebody crumples up the sticky note on his monitor quickly.

Audra Avington: And you still have her!

Stephen Somebody: Only in that she hasn't been deleted.

Stephen Somebody: She is, in fact, discarded. A dalt.

Roger Haerling: So what *do* you call a deleted alt as opposed to a discarded alt?

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Stephen Somebody: You don't call them anything.
Stephen Somebody: They don't exist any more.
Audra Avington: So cruel! So harsh!
Stephen Somebody: Well they don't!
Roger Haerling: What about 'dead alt'.
Stephen Somebody: Right.
Stephen Somebody: Think about the acronym that creates for a moment, will you?
Roger Haerling: Oh yeah.
Audra Avington laughs.
Roger Haerling: 'Non-existent alt', then? Nalt.
Audra Avington: But that could be as much an alt that never got created in the first place as much as an alt that existed and then got rubbed out.
Roger Haerling: How about 'cancelled alt', then? Calt.
Audra Avington: Hmmm...
Stephen Somebody: Bleugh.
Stephen Somebody: I mean, I suppose it sort of works, but...
Audra Avington: Yeah.
Audra Avington: 'Calt' is crappy.
Roger Haerling: 'Killed alt', then. Kalt.
Stephen Somebody: Right.
Stephen Somebody: Oddly enough, that's a whole lot better.
Audra Avington likes that too!
Stephen Somebody: Kalt it is then.
Roger Haerling: History is made.
Audra Avington: Should I be contacting the press or something?

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Stephen Somebody: I like the way it reflects that deleting an alt is conceptually similar to killing it off.

Audra Avington: Me too.

Roger Haerling: Now I'm starting to feel guilty about deleting her.

Stephen Somebody: About Annabelle? You should do.

Stephen Somebody: It's cruel. It's brutal. It's unnecessary.

Stephen Somebody: That poor girl did nothing to you and you dragged her out the back and put a mouse click between her eyes.

Roger Haerling sobs with remorse.

Stephen Somebody: She was probably begging for mercy, you heartless fiend.

Roger Haerling: I only did it because they told me I'd reached my limit.

Stephen Somebody: Wow! You have *that many* alts?!

Roger Haerling: Well... a couple.

Stephen Somebody: A 'couple'? I hardly think so.

Roger Haerling: I barely used her, as it happens.

Stephen Somebody: You created her for sex, didn't you?

Roger Haerling: No!

Audra Avington: Stephen! How rude!

Stephen Somebody: Sure you did. You can be honest with me and Audra.

Audra Avington: Don't be so nosey!

Stephen Somebody: What were you after? Lesbian love or guy on girl action from a girl's perspective?

Audra Avington: Stephen!

Audra Avington blushes.

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Stephen Somebody: I never could work out whether a guy putting on a female avatar and seeking cybersex with a guy is a closet homosexual or a closet transsexual.

Stephen Somebody: And how does that change if the guy who's doing you *knows* that you're not really a woman?

Stephen Somebody: The possibilities are mind-numbing.

Stephen Somebody: It's like a whole new system of mathematics.

Audra Avington laughs, remembering some friends she knew in SL a while ago.

Stephen Somebody: I mean, is it possible to be a male turned on by the prospect of cybersex with another male in a female avatar, but turned *off* by the prospect of cybersex with another male in a male avatar?

Audra Avington: Yes, probably. Why not?

Stephen Somebody: What about being a male in a male avatar turned on by the prospect of cybersex with a female in a male avatar, but turned off by the prospect of cybersex with a male in a female avatar.

Audra Avington: And that too, I expect.

Stephen Somebody scratches his head and rubs his chin and thinks about all this.

Audra Avington: And then there's furies...

Stephen Somebody: Well quite!

Stephen Somebody: You know, it almost makes me sorry you have to chose between being male and female here.

Roger Haerling: What do you mean?

Stephen Somebody: How would it be if there was only one gender in Second Life?

Stephen Somebody: Imagine that. And imagine if there

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was no voice and it was against the terms of service to tell anyone whether you were a guy or a girl.

Audra Avington: People would still work it out.

Audra Avington: Just from mannerisms. From the sorts of things you say. It'd leak out. For most people, that is.

Audra Avington: Unless you were consciously trying to conceal it.

Stephen Somebody: So imagine doing exactly that.

Stephen Somebody: How far into the abstract is it possible to go?

Roger Haerling: But how would you, well, describe the physiology going on?

Roger Haerling: Doesn't there have to be *some* biological frame of reference in order for arousal to happen.

Stephen Somebody: I guess. Probably. I don't know!

Stephen Somebody: You have to admit, it's intriguing, though...

Stephen Somebody: ...the idea of having cybersex with someone whose real life gender you don't know and who doesn't know your own gender either – and it's intentionally done that way...

Stephen Somebody: ...even if you do actually assume a gender for the sake of the role play.

Audra Avington: Well, you could do exactly that in SL.

Audra Avington: So long as you had a gender neutral name.

Audra Avington: You should set up a group!

Roger Haerling: Remind me not join any groups set up by Stephen any time soon.

Audra Avington: I kind of like the idea.

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Roger Haerling: You do?

Audra Avington: Sure.

Audra Avington: It's all about expressing love, isn't it?

Audra Avington: It's all about transcending the limitations of your sexuality.

Stephen Somebody: Absolutely!

Roger Haerling: You feel the need to transcend those?

Audra Avington: I wouldn't exactly call it a *need*.

Audra Avington: But it would be nice to rise above them every once in a while, don't you think?

Roger Haerling: If you say so.

Roger Haerling: To be honest, I'm pretty happy with the limitations of my sexuality.

Stephen Somebody: And yet you created a female avatar!

Audra Avington: And killed her.

Roger Haerling: That wasn't for sex though.

Stephen Somebody: That's such a shame, Roger... for a moment, there, you had us all believing you were a much more interesting person than you are!

Audra Avington: How rude.

Roger Haerling: How rude indeed!

Stephen Somebody: I'm going to search through all my chat logs now and see if I ever met and got off with someone called Annabelle.

Stephen Somebody: You never know, Roger, you and I might already have made love to each other. Imagine that!

Roger Haerling: Must I?

Audra Avington: I think I'm going to go to the piano bar event in a minute. What about you two?

Stephen Somebody: I was thinking about going to a

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poetry open mic, but I seem to have hit the one hour there isn't one happening in Second Life.

Audra Avington: Wow!

Audra Avington makes a note of the time.

Roger Haerling: No real plans.

Roger Haerling: What's the piano bar like?

Audra Avington: Oh it's great.

Audra Avington: They have some real talent there.

Audra Avington: You should come!

Roger Haerling: So long as I'm not intruding.

Audra Avington: You're not.

Audra Avington: Care to join us, Stephen?

Stephen Somebody: No thank you, dear. Not really my cup of tea.

Stephen Somebody: Actually, you've got me thinking about my poor little Sandra.

Audra Avington: Your female dalt?

Stephen Somebody: I feel suddenly guilty for neglecting her all this time.

Stephen Somebody: I think I might dust her down and take her out for a spin. If she's still speaking to me, that is.

Stephen Somebody: See if I can find her a nice handsome sailor to spin around a dance floor with.

Roger Haerling: Just how many dalts do *you* have, Stephen?

Stephen Somebody: To be honest, Roger, it's easier if we talk in terms of multiples of ten.

Roger Haerling: But how does it let you create so many?

Audra Avington: Just register them under different email accounts.

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Stephen Somebody: God bless Google.

Roger Haerling: So I needn't have deleted her? I could have spared her her life?

Stephen Somebody: It's all beginning to dawn on you, isn't it? The whole terrible truth.

Roger Haerling: If only I had known!

Stephen Somebody: Don't think for a moment any jury won't see through those crocodile tears.

Audra Avington: But why so many *discarded* alts, Stephen?

Audra Avington: Why aren't they used any more?

Stephen Somebody: No single reason, Lady Avington. A few arguments here, a few unresolvable differences there.

Stephen Somebody: It only takes a major falling out with one person to render an account almost unusable.

Stephen Somebody: Sure you can mute them, but when they go out of their way to turn all your friends against you and discredit your work, only the most robust can continue on regardless in what is, after all, supposed to be a leisure activity.

Audra Avington: Gosh.

Audra Avington: That's happened to you a lot?

Stephen Somebody: Just the once, actually.

Stephen Somebody: The rest were all one night stands and a couple of fatal crossposts.

Audra Avington: You love rat!

Stephen Somebody: Never offer friendship during the afterglow if you ever want to see him again. That's all I'm saying.

Audra Avington: Bastard!

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Roger Haerling: What's a 'fatal crosspost'?

Stephen Somebody: You really are behind on the SL lingo, aren't you Roger?

Roger Haerling: On the other hand, I'm the inventor of 'kalt'.

Stephen Somebody: But when you think about it, that's a bit like a serial killer coming up with a new term for the particular type of murder he's just carried out.

Stephen Somebody: Hardly the sort of thing you want to be interviewed on Letterman about.

Audra Avington: It's when you accidentally write something intended for person A into person B's instant message box. Am I right?

Stephen Somebody: Not exactly.

Stephen Somebody: Strictly speaking, it's when you accidentally write something derogatory about person B into person B's box, thinking, of course, that you're speaking to person A.

Stephen Somebody: Harmless stuff wouldn't be fatal would it?

Stephen Somebody: But, you see, you hardly ever crosspost *harmless* stuff accidentally.

Stephen Somebody: It just doesn't work like that.

Roger Haerling: Give me an example.

Stephen Somebody: So say I finally manage to coax Lady Avington here out of her bitmapped undergarments...

Stephen Somebody: ...next day, I see that you're online and open up an IM box to tell you all about it.

Stephen Somebody: Only halfway through the story, she comes online herself and asks me how I'm doing, and by

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accident I write the part about making her squeal like a monkey into her box instead of yours.

Roger Haerling: Right.

Roger Haerling: Yes, I can see how that could be fatal.

Stephen Somebody: It's a new type of social faux pas – completely unique to online relationships.

Stephen Somebody: There's no real life equivalent.

Audra Avington: What about when you're slagging someone off in the office and they happen to be standing right behind you?

Stephen Somebody: Well, first of all, that only actually happens in sitcoms and buddy cop movies.

Stephen Somebody: And secondly, it's not the same at all because when *that* happens there are other people to witness it.

Stephen Somebody: Fatal crosspost is a uniquely personal experience.

Stephen Somebody: Only you and the crosspostee realise what has happened.

Audra Avington: What if you cross posted by accident into group IM chat?

Stephen Somebody: Actually, come to think about it, that was indeed how one of the incidents I'm thinking of went.

Audra Avington: You put information about someone by accident into group chat?

Stephen Somebody: You know the squealing like a monkey example I just used?

Audra Avington: Yeeeeees?

Stephen Somebody: So that wasn't exactly a random, off the top of my head example.

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Audra Avington: Oh Stephen!

Roger Haerling chuckles.

Stephen Somebody: She wasn't chuckling, I'll tell you that for nothing.

Audra Avington: I don't doubt that she wasn't!

Stephen Somebody: The shame of it is, I was **that** close to asking **her** for friendship.

Stephen Somebody: Her and I could have been a beautiful thing together. Really.

Stephen Somebody ponders for a sorrowful moment over what could have been.

Roger Haerling: I don't think I've ever done a fatal crosspost.

Stephen Somebody: That's because you've never said anything bitchy enough about anybody.

Audra Avington: If you're not sure, then you haven't.

Audra Avington: You would remember if you had.

Stephen Somebody: Oh yes.

Stephen Somebody: Those moments are for keeping.

Stephen Somebody: No losing them down the back of the sofa.

Audra Avington: My first FC was at a music event.

Audra Avington: I was in an IM with a guy about someone I'm looking for... I couldn't think whilst this woman was singing...

Audra Avington: ...so I turned down my speakers and told him: "Sorry, had to turn off my sound... couldn't hear myself think above this dreadful racket"...

Audra Avington: ...except I typed it into public chat instead of his IM box.

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Stephen Somebody howls with delight at the humiliation.

Roger Haerling: Ouch.

Audra Avington: Ouch indeed.

Roger Haerling: What happened?

Audra Avington: At the time, no-one said anything at all about it and I wondered if nobody had noticed.

Stephen Somebody: Never! Of course they noticed!

Audra Avington: So I logged off and stuck my snoop alt in there...

Roger Haerling: Wait a minute. What's a 'snoop alt'?

Stephen Somebody: Surely that's obvious?!

Audra Avington: ...and, of course, they were all going on about it.

Audra Avington: Loads of them thought I'd done it deliberately – as if *anyone* would do something like that on purpose.

Audra Avington: They all had their theories.

Audra Avington: So anyway, that ended up being pretty much that for that account.

Roger Haerling: She became a dalt?

Audra Avington: She became a dalt.

Roger Haerling: You have many of them?

Audra Avington: A few.

Stephen Somebody: It's rumoured that my dalts have formed their own support group.

Audra Avington laughs.

Stephen Somebody: Only it's an underground affair; they have to keep out of sight of all the jilted lovers. Who have their own group, with my severed head as its mascot.

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Musical Gardens: Echo Location: Starting in five minutes at the Musical Gardens, Ella Forsythe will be singing in her incredible voice a collection of songs from the 1970s.

Musical Gardens: Echo Location: Don't miss this opportunity to hear one of SL's finest singers. Hurry over for a seat! [Breadline 12, 45, 43](#)

Audra Avington: Hmm... 1970s songs at the musical gardens...

Audra Avington: I could be tempted by that, actually.

Roger Haerling: Oh yes! I got that as well. You thinking of going?

Audra Avington: Definitely the sort of thing I'm interested in. However...

Audra Avington: I'm sort of known at the Wednesday night PBB event.

Audra Avington: If I'm not there, it will be noticed.

Roger Haerling: Really?

Stephen Somebody: Start attending these things on a regular basis, Roger, and you risk getting sucked in to the core group.

Stephen Somebody: And then it's like being stuck on one of those roundabouts you can't get off once you're on it.

Audra Avington: And therein lies another reason for abandoning an avatar.

Stephen Somebody: I concur.

Roger Haerling: Is an abandoned avatar different from a discarded avatar?

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Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Starting in five minutes at the Musical Gardens, Ella Forsythe will be singing in her incredible voice a collection of songs from the 1970s.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Don't miss this opportunity to hear one of SL's finest singers. Hurry over for a seat! [Breadline 12, 45, 43](#)

Audra Avington: Uh-oh.

Roger Haerling: Uh-oh?

Audra Avington: Did you get the PBB group chat just then?

Roger Haerling: No. I don't belong to that group.

Audra Avington: Echo just spammed it with a copy of the Ella Forsythe notice.

Audra Avington: And they have their own event starting in a few minutes.

Roger Haerling: So?

Stephen Somebody sucks in his breath between his teeth.

Roger Haerling: That's a bad thing to do?

Audra Avington: That's a bad thing to do.

Roger Haerling: Why?

Stephen Somebody: Oh Roger.

Stephen Somebody: It pains me to think about the people you've probably offended unknowingly over the years.

Roger Haerling: Months.

Stephen Somebody: Months.

Redclaw Station: Echo Location: Starting in five minutes at the Musical Gardens, Ella Forsythe will be singing in her incredible voice a collection of songs from the 1970s.

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Redclaw Station: Echo Location: Don't miss this opportunity to hear one of SL's finest singers. Hurry over for a seat! Breadline 12, 45, 43

Audra Avington: And the Redclaw group. She's really going for it tonight.

Roger Haerling: But why is it a bad thing?

Audra Avington: People will shut down their group chat windows. Especially when the same message is repeated across so many different groups and all those windows get opened up.

Roger Haerling: And?

Stephen Somebody: Once they're shut they're shut!

Audra Avington: If PBB put out a notice in their group chat now about the event about to start, anyone who just closed down the window won't see it.

Roger Haerling: I don't understand.

Roger Haerling: Won't it just open back up again when they send out the text?

Stephen Somebody: Nope.

Audra Avington: As Stephen says, once it's shut it's shut.

Audra Avington: Send out a call in another group's chat and you've pretty much prevented them from publicising any subsequent events of their own.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Thanks so much for spamming the group, Echo.

Audra Avington: And so it begins.

Stephen Somebody joins the group just so he can watch

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the fight.

Roger Haerling does too!

Stephen Somebody: What did you say it was? PBB?

Audra Avington: Piano Bar Blues.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: I thought Ella might be of interest to your group, is all.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location laughs.

Piano Bar Blues: Tony Ironsphere: Sounds good to me!

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: We have an event at the PBB starting in a couple of minutes, Echo... thanks to you most of our members now won't see our notice.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Just write it in here. People will see it.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location shrugs.

Audra Avington: The people of Second Life can be divided into two groups...

Audra Avington: Those who get the group chat spamming issue...

Stephen Somebody: Like me and Audra.

Audra Avington: And those who don't.

Stephen Somebody: Like you, Roger!

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: They won't see my message if they've closed their chat window now Echo!

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley despairs.

Stephen Somebody: It could go either way now... heads say it fizzles out here and now and nothing more gets said...

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Stephen Somebody: ...tails says it turns into a full-on text fight.

Roger Haerling: What's a text fight?

Audra Avington: Now that I come to think about it, this isn't the first time Echo's done this.

Audra Avington: She just doesn't get that spamming closes windows down.

Audra Avington: Either she assumes new text re-opens them like you did, Roger...

Audra Avington: ...or she thinks people always leave all their chat tabs open.

Roger Haerling: Why shut them down?

Stephen Somebody: You're kidding me, right?

Stephen Somebody: It's bad enough switching between two IM tabs with a couple of friend conversations going on...

Stephen Somebody: ...but it's nigh on impossible managing three, four, five extra tabs with group stuff going on in there.

Stephen Somebody: It's like trying to play the fucking piano.

Audra Avington laughs.

Stephen Somebody: Plus with all that extra precision required of switching between conversations, the likelihood of a fatal crosspost increases exponentially.

Stephen Somebody: Personally, I shut those dangerous little bastards down just as soon as they pop up.

Stephen Somebody: I've even left groups because of it.

Roger Haerling: Wow.

Roger Haerling: Such passion.

Stephen Somebody: *Fear*, my boy.

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Stephen Somebody: Passion has nothing to do with it.

Stephen Somebody: Group chat is the curse of Second Life.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Just write it in here, Pulp.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Echo, it WON'T WORK now you've spammed the group.

Stephen Somebody: Uh-oh. She's brought the upper case letters out. This is getting serious.

Audra Avington nods.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: It's a simple enough system, Pulp. I'd have thought you'd have learned it by now.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: ECHO, I KNOW HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

Piano Bar Blues: Tony Ironsphere: No need to shout.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: YOU SPAM it and people close their chat windows and then anything else sent to group chat gets lost.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Sorry Tony, it's just **very** frustrating when people aren't considerate of others.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Right.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: She just hates it when any events are run at the same time as hers, Tony.

Stephen Somebody: If these two were together in real life, that comment would now make the drawing of blood inevitable.

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Roger Haerling: This is so awkward to watch, and yet...

Roger Haerling: ...so compelling!

Stephen Somebody: Car crash chat. I agree.

Audra Avington: The most bizarre thing about this is that no-one actually knows just how many people are watching.

Audra Avington: If Pulp's worst fears are right and everyone in her group shut down their group chat windows after Echo's message, then it could be just those two and the three of us in this session.

Stephen Somebody: And Tony.

Audra Avington: And Tony!

Audra Avington: But it's possible, of course, that several people didn't get around to closing them down just yet... or maybe wanted to keep them open...or maybe there are group members only now just coming online and this is what's popping up for them.

Roger Haerling: Presumably, Echo assumes everyone to be watching though.

Audra Avington: Yes, I expect so.

Audra Avington: I mean, what do you think when you start throwing stuff like this at each other in a public chat group and nobody else says anything?

Audra Avington: Do you assume there's nobody there or that no-one's paying attention?

Audra Avington: Or that no-one's really interested?

Audra Avington: Or that *everyone* is watching in silence, waiting to see what happens next.

Stephen Somebody: Like us.

Audra Avington: Like us, yes!

Audra Avington: It is so incredibly hard to interpret.

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Audra Avington: No faces to look at. No eye contact to avoid.

Audra Avington: If Echo hadn't responded to Pulp's original comment about spamming it could have meant she was ignoring her or didn't know what to say, or just that she'd shut her own window down after posting (and didn't see it).

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: For fuck's sake, Echo. I despair of trying to explain this to you.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Just admit it, Pulp – competition scares the shit out of you.

Piano Bar Blues: Adrian Friendly: She's entitled to promote her event, Pulp.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: It's **my** group created to promote **my** events.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Do people really have such an issue with me getting just a teensy bit pissed off when people prevent me from doing that?

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location sighs.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Nobody's preventing you from doing anything, dear.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: But you **are** when you post your events in here just before mine start!

Piano Bar Blues: Archer Absolute: Hey guys, what's going on here?

Audra Avington: That'll be someone who just came online.

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Piano Bar Blues: Adrian Friendly: Pulp's getting shitty with Echo for posting in her group.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Oh dear Christ.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Is *nobody* listening to what I'm saying here?

Piano Bar Blues: Adrian Friendly: Did I get that wrong?

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: No, Ade. You're bang on the money.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: The princess in her ivory tower fears her inevitable ejection.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: I don't know why I bother. I really, really don't.

Stephen Somebody: This is going badly for poor Pulp.

Audra Avington: Yes.

Stephen Somebody: Is she someone you know?

Audra Avington: Sort of.

Stephen Somebody: I imagine a bit of public support would really help her out right now...

Audra Avington: Yes. But...

Audra Avington: Then I won't be able to go to Echo's event.

Stephen Somebody: What?

Audra Avington: If I wade on in there I not only advertise that I'm aware of this conflict – as far as Pulp knows at the moment, I might have closed my group chat window after Echo's initial post and be completely unaware that this is going on – but I also get marked down as a Pulp supporter.

Audra Avington: To go to Echo's music garden event

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after that would be unthinkable.

Audra Avington: But if I don't get involved, then I can go to Echo's 1970s do and simply feign ignorance of the whole affair.

Stephen Somebody: You're kidding me, right?

Audra Avington: Don't tell me you're about to lecture me on moral behaviour in SL, Stephen.

Stephen Somebody: Ok... I'm stunned by that.

Roger Haerling: If Pulp's in the right and you're able to help her out... well, shouldn't you help her out...?

Audra Avington: It's not always that simple, Roger.

Roger Haerling: How is it not that simple?

Stephen Somebody: Don't worry about it, Audra.

Stephen Somebody: This one's on me.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: I might as well pack the whole thing in.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Do whatever you have to, Pulp, just don't expect to get any sympathy out of people for not being able to cope with others starting up their own events.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: Echo, I must point out that Pulp is actually right.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: About the whole your post preventing her post from being seen thing, I mean.

Roger Haerling: Go Stephen!

Stephen Somebody: Let's see how that goes down.

Audra Avington: Thank you, Stephen. I really appreciate that.

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Stephen Somebody: It's my group too, now.

Piano Bar Blues: Adrian Friendly: She is?

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Well would somebody explain this rule to me, because it makes absolutely no fucking sense the way it's been explained so far.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: And who are you, by the way?

Audra Avington: So she has three outs:

Audra Avington: (1) Make out it's Pulp's fault for not explaining it properly.

Audra Avington: (2) Refuse to accept that you're right, Stephen.

Audra Avington: (3) Attempt to discredit you in some manner.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: Just a concerned onlooker, Echo.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: Didn't want you to end up looking too foolish for saying all these things when you are, in fact, in the wrong.

Audra Avington: Ouch!

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: I see.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: I notice that you only joined this group a few minutes ago, Stephen.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Are you actually a Pulp alt?

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Audra Avington: Didn't see that one coming.

Stephen Somebody: Option three, I believe.

Roger Haerling: I guess that's why it would have been better coming from you, Audra.

Audra Avington: Thanks for that, Roger.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: No, Echo.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: Not a Pulp alt.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: I have no idea who he is.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Right.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location sighs.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Look, Echo, all you have to understand is that people close down their group chat windows and then that anything added by others to the session doesn't get seen.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: She's right.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Whatever,
Pulp/Stephen.

Piano Bar Blues: Adrian Friendly: Pretty pathetic,
Pulp/Stephen.

Piano Bar Blues: Adrian Friendly: If you ask me.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Thank you, Adrian.

Audra Avington: Oh for God's sake.

Stephen Somebody: I seem to be making a bit of a pig's ear of this.

Roger Haerling whistles, innocently.

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Piano Bar Blues: Audra Avington: Please stop this, Echo. You're not being fair.

Piano Bar Blues: Audra Avington: It's true what Pulp says about group chat remaining shut for the rest of your login once you've shut the window down.

Piano Bar Blues: Audra Avington: She really isn't making that up.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: Audra? What have you got to do with any of this?

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: How's she roped you into this?

Piano Bar Blues: Audra Avington: I was reading the chat and I had to say something.

Piano Bar Blues: Audra Avington: You're being unpleasant, Echo; Pulp is only trying to promote her event and it is true what she said earlier.

Piano Bar Blues: Audra Avington: It's you that doesn't understand the way the group chat system works, not her.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Thank you Audra.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: I was beginning to go out of my mind then.

Piano Bar Blues: Echo Location: I see.

Piano Bar Blues: Adrian Friendly: Now I don't know what to think.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: Look. Ade. If you were to shut down this chat window right now and we were to continue talking in it, you wouldn't see any of what we said. That's all.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: It doesn't pop up again every time someone adds something so you miss any

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subsequent chat.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: That's right. That's all I'm trying to say.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: I don't mind people making announcements in my group chat, just so long as it's not close to one of my own events.

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: That's not such a bad thing, is it?

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: Is that any clearer for you?

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: Adrian?

Piano Bar Blues: Pulp Kindersley: Looks like he's gone.

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: He's gone and shut down the window, hasn't he? To see if what was said was right. For God's sake!

Piano Bar Blues: Stephen Somebody: The pillock.

IM: Echo Location: Don't you ever fucking step foot in my venue ever again. Ever. Do you hear?

IM: Audra Avington: What?

IM: Echo Location: You piece of shit. How fucking dare you speak to me like that in front of other people.

IM: Audra Avington: I don't understand.

IM: Audra Avington: I was just trying to explain to you, is all.

IM: Echo Location: I hope you'll be very happy curling up to your dainty little bitch.

IM: Echo Location: I hope she gives you a nice pat on the back for your obedience and you lick each others' arses to your hearts' content.

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IM: Audra Avington: Echo! Listen to yourself!

IM: Audra Avington: I was trying to bring an embarrassing public discussion to as rapid an end as possible. Don't be mad at me!

IM: Echo Location: It never crossed your tiny mind to IM me instead of humiliating me like that?

IM: Audra Avington: You were picking on Pulp, Echo.

IM: Audra Avington: You were trying to make out she was doing something that she wasn't and that needed to be corrected.

IM: Audra Avington: I understand that you're angry but it was the fair thing to do. It really was.

IM: Echo Location: Fuck off, Audra.

IM: Echo Location: Don't bother saying anything else to me. You're on mute from this point on.

IM: Stephen Somebody: Ok. I'm taking Pulp out for a spin later.

IM: Audra Avington: What?

IM: Audra Avington: You asked her out on a *date*?

IM: Stephen Somebody: You have a problem with that? You're jealous, perchance?

IM: Audra Avington: Of course I'm not jealous.

IM: Audra Avington: I hope you have fun.

IM: Audra Avington: I'm a bit dazed.

IM: Stephen Somebody: Shocked that you and I aren't an item? Me too. There's still time, you know.

IM: Audra Avington laughs.

IM: Audra Avington: You're an idiot.

IM: Stephen Somebody: So why are you dazed? You did

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a good thing back there.

IM: Audra Avington: Tell that to Echo.

IM: Stephen Somebody: She's cross? She's giving you grief in IM?

IM: Echo Location: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I saw total red mist. I'm sorry.

IM: Audra Avington: She's totally going off on one for me correcting her in group chat like that, telling me I'm a 'piece of shit' and never to 'step foot' in her venue again. Jesus Christ. What a fucking cow! What a fucking psychopath!

IM: Stephen Somebody: Audra?

IM: Audra Avington: Oh fuck.

IM: Audra Avington: Oh fuck.

IM: Audra Avington: Oh fuck.

IM: Audra Avington: Oh fuck.

IM: Audra Avington: You didn't just get any of that, did you?

IM: Stephen Somebody: Get any of what?

IM: Stephen Somebody: Audra?

Henceforth, therefore, Audra is a 'dalt'. Victim of a careless fatal crosspost, she must now fade gracefully into the oblivion which awaits the legion of unused Second Life avatars. Whatever. There are other alts I can use to go to concerts with. There are other venues I can visit, although I quite fancy hanging out at the musical gardens and seeing if

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Echo makes me public enemy number one. It's more out of curiosity than anything else, primarily because I really don't care what she thinks or says.

That's not true. I do care. I care because she's a human being who feels wronged by me and everyone should care about something like that. Echo is someone's daughter. Echo might be someone's mum. I care that she might fear me, that she might worry about what I might say to her or to others. I care that that flippant remark of mine might be a mirror that she's always avoided looking into up until now, that this moment I have run from and will soon, no doubt forget, could become something which haunts her, which eats at her; something which she cannot turn her back on. And I care that she might displace some or all of these uncomfortable thoughts and feelings onto Pulp, that she might seek to make this incident compatible with her view of who she is by making it the fault of one cunning individual who she will then demonise. Lying to other people is one thing, but lying to yourself requires true commitment and passion. If they were rivals before, Pulp and Echo could be mortal enemies now.

What I don't care about is me. It is of no concern to me that I lose yet another set of friends (although I think I might keep open at least a couple of links between these guys and whichever alt I task with the job of infiltrating this particular group once again). It is of no consequence that someone out there is mad at me. I don't feel upset about this. I don't feel angry. I don't feel hard done by. This, in other words, is not disappointment for me. I will move on, once more. I will ignore the anger. I will ignore the resentment. Perhaps

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I am the cruellest person in the world for being able to do this. But perhaps I am also the most compassionate.

3.

The builder

Apparently, making things is popular in Second Life. I suppose I kind of got that in the induction. There was a nice, neat, 'sandbox' on that island – more a well manicured lawn than a place of big construction – with some helpful signs around the edges. I made a pine cube and stretched it a bit, then got bored and left it there. The next sandbox that I stood in – several weeks later – was a sprawling desert of a place with bits of people's crap everywhere: buildings, vehicles, furniture, accessories; and then there's the stuff that you can stare at for half an hour and still not be able to work out what it's meant to be.

I saw a giant mustard bottle beside a giant hot dog. A FedEx van. Signs being made for men's suits. Prim cows and a sleeping cat. A floating building that emitted white particles downwards. A Spitfire. That became two Spitfires. That became three Spitfires. That became four Spitfires, circling the sim in a rather lazy, unhurried, certainly unspitfireish manner. A shelving unit. A DHL van. A

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coffin. At least a hundred pine spheres scattered at random across the flat landscape. A selection of garden furniture. A floating hotel, completely in pine. A Spanish villa. A camp fire. A well. I got accosted by a tribe of giant, flapping penises within the first five minutes. I got hit by flying bibles fired from a bible weapon. I got defended by a guy with a Richard Dawkins counter attack. I watched a girl dressed in shiny black, with fishnet stockings and thigh length boots and spider leg wings build a stone cottage with a fireplace.

I couldn't decide whether I was in some sort of vision of hell or some sort of depiction of heaven.

In the end, I chose the latter.

Unde Paris: Textures?

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Speyda Spade: They're pictures.

Unde Paris: Jpegs?

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Speyda Spade: You paste them to the side of your prims.

Unde Paris: The prim is the cube, yes?

Speyda Spade: A cube is one type of prim.

Speyda Spade: There are others. Like a sphere or a prism.

Unde Paris: Ok.

Speyda Spade: So if you wanted to make a concrete wall, you'd build a wall first and then cover it with concrete textures.

Unde Paris: Why would I want to make a wall of

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concrete?

Speyda Spade: Just an example.

Unde Paris: Where do I find the textures?

Speyda Spade: There are quite a few free ones to be found in Second Life.

Speyda Spade: Or you can buy them from stores.

Unde Paris: I have to pay for them?

Speyda Spade: Some of them.

Unde Paris: This costs a lot of money?

Speyda Spade: I don't know, actually. I never bought any myself.

Speyda Spade: I try to make my own, wherever possible.

Unde Paris: You can make your own textures? This is hard?

Speyda Spade: Hmm...

Speyda Spade: There are a few different aspects to making textures, each of which are a little difficult.

Speyda Spade: So I suppose I'd have to say yes to hard, although for certain there are harder things in SL.

Unde Paris: Different aspects?

Speyda Spade: Ok, so for starters you've got to source the textures in the first place.

Speyda Spade: You have to find examples in real life of the sort of texture you're after.

Unde Paris: You take photos of these?

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Speyda Spade: I have a camera built into my phone. It's not a brilliant camera...

Speyda Spade: ...but it's good enough for grabbing textures from close-up.

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Unde Paris: What texture pictures did you take?

Speyda Spade: A couple of wood textures. One really good one, actually...

Speyda Spade: My mother has a table from the 70s made from Danish teak...

Speyda Spade: ...which a lot of her other furniture is made from, but the thing is...

Speyda Spade: ...it's all old. Worn. Scratched. Grimy.

Unde Paris: The teak?

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Speyda Spade: Which I would have made do with, if necessary, but what I wanted was how it looked when it was new.

Speyda Spade: And the table was worn also, but...

Speyda Spade: ...then I remembered...

Speyda Spade: ...the table could be made bigger.

Speyda Spade: There are these two brass hooks you have to undo, then you can pull the two halves of the table apart...

Speyda Spade: And there, just below the space created...

Speyda Spade: ...a fold open piece of wood to fill the gap...

Speyda Spade: ...to turn a four seater table into a six seater table.

Unde Paris: The wood in the middle was not worn?

Speyda Spade: Oh Unde...

Speyda Spade: ...it was like discovering treasure.

Unde Paris: haha

Speyda Spade: It really was, though. It really was.

Speyda Spade: I was so delighted, I could barely contain myself.

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Speyda Spade: So that's task number one - *finding* the texture – and in the condition you want it in – in real life.

Speyda Spade: It's odd...

Speyda Spade: Texture hunting is a strange pastime.

Speyda Spade: I mean, I personally go for a rather eccentric type of texture. So I'm told, at any rate.

Unde Paris: What is it that you look for?

Speyda Spade: Well...

Speyda Spade: I like old textures.

Unde Paris: Old? Antique?

Speyda Spade: Not exactly.

Speyda Spade: Surfaces from the 60s and 70s.

Unde Paris: Ah.

Unde Paris: Like Danish teak.

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Speyda Spade: Other things too, though.

Speyda Spade: I like fabrics from that period.

Speyda Spade: Interior and exterior surfaces.

Speyda Spade: Concrete, plastics, wallpaper...

Speyda Spade: Yellow and blue Formica.

Unde Paris: Why do you like these things?

Speyda Spade: They remind me of my childhood.

Unde Paris: Aha.

Speyda Spade: I build things from that era, you see.

Speyda Spade: I am trying to build the house I grew up in, amongst other things.

Unde Paris: You are nostalgic?

Speyda Spade: Sort of, yes.

Speyda Spade: The funny thing is, having this mission – to collect textures from this period – makes you look at

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places in an entirely new way.

Unde Paris: You see things that you have never noticed before?

Speyda Spade: Yes, but also...

Speyda Spade: You **value** things in a way you never valued them before.

Speyda Spade: And it gives you these odd moments of delight. Like the other day...

Speyda Spade: I was walking in town looking at shops I've walked past literally a hundred times in the last couple of years, maybe a thousand times in all the time that I've been living here...

Speyda Spade: ...and, all of a sudden, I notice a narrow strip of wall – perhaps only half a foot wide – between two neighbouring shop fronts...

Speyda Spade: ...and it's covered in these tiny blue tiles. And I realise this has probably been there for the last 40 years or so. And I never even noticed it in all of the years that I've been passing it.

Unde Paris: You took a photo of it?

Speyda Spade: You bet your ass I did!

Unde Paris: haha

Speyda Spade: People probably thought me mad – standing there, in the street, taking pictures of a strip of old wall. but I'm way past caring about that sort of stuff. The thing is...

Speyda Spade: ...we're under so much pressure to derive all our pleasure from new and flashy stuff that has to be paid for in shops these days, and here was a moment of genuine happiness...

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Speyda Spade: ... coming from simply looking at a patch of a wall in a different way.

Speyda Spade: How ridiculous – and yet, how wonderful – is that?

Unde Paris: I think I understand.

Unde Paris: And did you use you picture of tiny blue tiles yet in any creation?

Speyda Spade: No, not yet.

Speyda Spade: At the moment, it's just a part of 'the collection'.

Speyda Spade: (Of course, that's another thing: I started off the collection not with the intent to collect, but just to find textures I could use. Now it's taken on a life all of its own haha.)

Speyda Spade: In any case, I need to do some work on the tiles picture.

Speyda Spade: I need to make it seamless.

Unde Paris: Seamless?

Speyda Spade: Right – so that's the third thing that you have to do.

Unde Paris: Did I miss the second thing?

Speyda Spade: The second thing is sort of preparing for the third thing.

Speyda Spade: The second thing is actually taking the picture.

Speyda Spade: And there are a few things to think about when you're doing this.

Speyda Spade: Number one – forget about using your flash.

Speyda Spade: At least, forget about using your normal

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camera flash.

Speyda Spade: Your texture will only end up being washed out or unevenly lit.

Speyda Spade: Polished or shiny surfaces especially – in those, you end up getting a flash reflection.

Unde Paris: Yes, of course.

Speyda Spade: And number two - you have to get the texture dead on – nothing at an angle.

Unde Paris: At an angle?

Speyda Spade: Imagine you're standing in front of a field of flowers.

Unde Paris: Ok.

Speyda Spade: If you took a picture of the flowers from your standing position, the flowers might well fill the picture but they would not be of uniform size.

Unde Paris: The closest flowers would be big and the furthest flowers will be small.

Speyda Spade: Correct.

Speyda Spade: Now imagine something flatter, like a pebble beach – or even a sandy beach.

Speyda Spade: The effect is exactly the same.

Unde Paris: How, then, would you photograph these things? By hanging above them?

Speyda Spade: Certainly, the best place to photograph something like that would be from above, yes.

Speyda Spade: From a cliff path looking down, for example- although that would need a good zoom lens and you still wouldn't be looking *straight* down.

Speyda Spade: Or if there was a promenade, you could climb up onto the railings and look down onto the sand

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below you.

Speyda Spade: Provided, of course, your shadow is behind you.

Unde Paris: And why is this important?

Speyda Spade: If your textures are to be tileable seamlessly, each edge should be about the same as each other edge.

Unde Paris: What does tileable mean? What does seamless mean?

Speyda Spade: If you're going to use your sand texture over a large area, you're going to want to use it many times over. Imagine...

Speyda Spade: ...if you wanted this entire region to be sandy and you had a photograph...

Speyda Spade: ...if you just used the photograph once – if you stretched it out over the entire region – it's going to look all wrong.

Speyda Spade: A grain of sand is going to get so enlarged it'll look like a pebble.

Unde Paris: Ah.

Unde Paris: I think I understand.

Unde Paris: You use the same picture repeatedly, as though it is a tile.

Speyda Spade: Exactly.

Speyda Spade: But if you did that and it was very clear where the edges between the tiles were, then that would look wrong too.

Unde Paris: It would not look natural.

Speyda Spade: Exactly.

Speyda Spade: So a *seamless* tile is one which you can

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use over and over and it isn't clear where one tile ends and the next tile begins.

Speyda Spade: And for a tile to be properly seamless, a great deal of attention has to go into its edges.

Speyda Spade: If you were to take that standing photo of a sandy beach it might look to you like it's a rectangle uniformly covered in sand...

Speyda Spade: But the instant you try to tile it, it will be obvious that it's not. Very obvious.

Unde Paris: So the relative size and the number of 'grains' betrays the edges of the picture.

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Unde Paris: And the same is true for lighting, yes?

Speyda Spade: Yes. Exactly.

Speyda Spade: So say you're in a building and you see a wall that has a great wallpaper on it you want to capture...

Speyda Spade: You might stand yourself right in front of the piece you want to photograph – literally bang on, dead to centre...

Speyda Spade: ...but what you forget to notice is how that patch of wall is lit.

Speyda Spade: If it's lit by a window to the left of you, for example...

Unde Paris: ...then the left side will be lighter than the right side.

Speyda Spade: Exactly.

Unde Paris: I see.

Speyda Spade: The thing is, you wouldn't notice it ordinarily – you would look at the wall and swear blind it's uniformly lit...

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Speyda Spade: ...but the instant you try to tile it, you'll know that you were wrong.

Unde Paris: I understand.

Speyda Spade: This is a pretty boring conversation, isn't it?

Unde Paris: haha

Unde Paris: I understand that this is something you enjoy very much.

Speyda Spade: A little, I guess.

Speyda Spade: It's something to do.

Speyda Spade: Takes my mind off of other stuff.

Unde Paris: What sort of other stuff.

Speyda Spade: Oh... just more boring stuff.

Unde Paris: It is interesting to me that in this environment made possible by modern technology you chose to try to recreate an era when none of this was possible.

Speyda Spade: That's odd to you? Isn't that exactly what people who are interested in history *should* be doing here?

Unde Paris: Maybe you are right.

Unde Paris: You build your house just for your nostalgia?

Speyda Spade: Mostly.

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Speyda Spade: I'm building it up, piece by piece, from all the old photographs I have.

Speyda Spade: I had to colour correct them first; restore them from their faded state.

Speyda Spade: I'm only doing the front room, you know.

Speyda Spade: That's the only room I have pictures from.

Speyda Spade: I suppose no-one ever thought to take

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pictures of the hallway or the bathroom or the kitchen.

Speyda Spade: Or the bedrooms.

Speyda Spade: I wish they had.

Speyda Spade: When I look at the pictures of the front room, so much comes back to me.

Speyda Spade: I wish I could remember the whole house that way.

Speyda Spade: In my mind, now, there is just this one room – it's full of colour – and all the other rooms are vague and undefined and grey.

Speyda Spade: I do remember my bedroom always being cold when I got into bed at night.

Speyda Spade: But then, I suppose most people of my age would have a memory not too dissimilar to that.

Speyda Spade: There was something about being curled up into a ball in a freezing cold bed...

Speyda Spade: ...slowly – ever so slowly – you would push your toes away from you, down through the sheets, letting them warm the bed as they went. Yes.

Speyda Spade: And I remember condensation on the window.

Speyda Spade: This ladderax is my favourite piece. It's what I'm working on at the moment.

Unde Paris: Amazing.

Unde Paris: Such detail.

Unde Paris: Such passion.

Speyda Spade: Such insanity, don't you mean?

Unde Paris: Haha.

Speyda Spade: I'm customising a rotate script for the cabinet door.

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Speyda Spade: My mother has the real thing. I want to sample the sound it makes when it opens.

Unde Paris: What are these compartments for? What is stored in there?

Speyda Spade: Records, of course! LPs.

Speyda Spade: Ours used to have a record player on top of that part. The speakers were all wood.

Speyda Spade: My father used to play a particular James Last LP on it whenever it was time to tidy up.

Speyda Spade: I think she keeps a CD radio on that surface now. Some cheap thing she bought from Argos.

Speyda Spade: Metallic red. Horrible.

Speyda Spade: She has an aluminium CD stand next to it. Gah.

Speyda Spade: I broke my wrist in that house, you know. Just after my fifth birthday.

Unde Paris: You had an accident?

Speyda Spade: I fell down the stairs.

Speyda Spade: Apparently, I cried and cried and cried. My parents tried to get me to eat sweets to calm me down – white chocolate buttons with sprinkles on. I was only five, but even so...

Speyda Spade: ...you'd think I would remember something like that, wouldn't you?

Unde Paris: Perhaps the pain was so great your mind has blocked it from your memory.

Speyda Spade: Hmmmm....

Speyda Spade: Perhaps.

Speyda Spade: I used to wonder if it was a story someone had made up.

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Speyda Spade: I used to wonder if it ever actually happened to me at all.

Unde Paris: You remember *nothing* about it? Nothing at all?

Speyda Spade: I wore a cast for several months afterwards. I do remember that. I remember it itching.

Unde Paris: But nothing about the accident?

Speyda Spade: I remember nothing about it, that's right.

Unde Paris: But why would a parent manufacture such a lie? What purpose would it serve?

Speyda Spade: I'm not saying that's what they did.

Speyda Spade: I'm just saying I don't remember it.

Speyda Spade: I remember plenty of other things. Bigger things. More important things.

Speyda Spade: I suppose it just got overshadowed by them.

Unde Paris: 'Bigger things'? Like what?

Speyda Spade: Let's not talk about that.

Unde Paris: Ok.

Unde Paris: Understood.

Speyda Spade: Thanks.

Speyda Spade: Maybe another day.

Unde Paris: Does that mean that we are friends?

Speyda Spade: I guess it does!

Unde Paris: Good.

Unde Paris: Then you can show me your house so far?

Unde Paris: Is that possible here?

Speyda Spade: Yes!

Speyda Spade: Let me find it in my inventory.

Speyda Spade: You know, I could do with some sort of

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system for storing stuff in here – something with folders...

Speyda Spade: At the moment I'm storing everything in 'Objects' and that – I am starting to realise – is a big mistake.

Speyda Spade: Ah, here we are... you'd better stand back a little if you don't want to become one with the fire place.

Unde Paris: Ok.

Speyda Spade: Ta da!

Speyda Spade: One 1970s living room.

Speyda Spade: What do you think?

Unde Paris: I like it.

Unde Paris: I like it a lot.

Unde Paris: It is very authentic.

Speyda Spade: Thanks!

Unde Paris: I can see you have put a lot of work into this.

Unde Paris: Oh yes. A lot of work.

Speyda Spade: When I get really into building, I lose myself. Completely. Utterly.

Speyda Spade: Time passes me by unnoticed.

Unde Paris: You are in flow.

Speyda Spade: If you say so.

Unde Paris: It is the scientific expression for what you are describing.

Speyda Spade: Right.

Speyda Spade: I can spend hours at it. Literally hours at a time, and barely notice.

Speyda Spade: Of course, *sometimes* I find building the most dreadful bore.

Unde Paris: All of these textures you have created yourself?

Speyda Spade: Almost all of them, yeah.

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Unde Paris: Have you ever considered selling these items?

Speyda Spade: In a Second Life shop? No.

Speyda Spade: I can't imagine there would be any interest in this sort of thing.

Unde Paris: You might be surprised.

Unde Paris: You cannot be the only person who enjoys nostalgia of this period.

Speyda Spade: I have a strong belief that reminiscing can be good for you.

Unde Paris: Perhaps that could be your shop slogan.

Speyda Spade: haha

Unde Paris: I'm serious.

Speyda Spade: I know you are.

Speyda Spade: But I really don't know.

Speyda Spade: I really don't know that anyone would actually buy it.

Unde Paris: I have not been here long, but it strikes me that this is a market quite unlike anything that exists in the real world outside.

Speyda Spade: That is true.

Speyda Spade: No doubt about that.

Unde Paris: People do actually spend money on these non-physical items, yes?

Speyda Spade: Yes.

Unde Paris: They really do spend real money on things they will never actually be able to touch?

Speyda Spade: Absolutely.

Unde Paris: They will complain about having to pay a dollar to download a song from the Internet, but not

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complain about having to pay a dollar for a pair of make-believe trousers for their avatar?

Speyda Spade: That's the way it goes, yes.

Unde Paris: Do you not think that extraordinary?

Speyda Spade: It's a brave new world, there's no doubting that.

Unde Paris: I think you should make a shop and sell your creations.

Unde Paris: Your work deserves to be put on display, if nothing else.

Speyda Spade: You really think so?

Unde Paris: Of course.

Unde Paris: Your furniture is the best furniture that I have ever seen in Second Life.

Speyda Spade: You're only four days old!

Unde Paris: So you know, then, that I am speaking the truth!

Unde Paris: Your work – there is something about it which appeals to me...

Unde Paris: Perhaps I also am infected by your nostalgia.

Speyda Spade: Enjoy it. But try not to analyse it too much.

Unde Paris: It reminds me of a simpler time, yes, but also that period was a more complex one.

Speyda Spade: Of course. Well... it was, after all, the space age.

Speyda Spade: A time when everything the future held was thought to be just around the corner.

Unde Paris: A time when science was thought to hold all of the answers.

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Speyda Spade: Yes.

Speyda Spade: There was a hope then, an optimism that's not seen so much these days.

Unde Paris: Was there, though? Are you certain?

Speyda Spade: No.

Speyda Spade: But that's how I remember it anyway.

Speyda Spade: Things were bigger back then. Taller. Stronger.

Speyda Spade: The concrete was whiter; no-one ever thought that it would come to be stained black by the rain.

Speyda Spade: I like buildings made of concrete.

Speyda Spade: I like straight lines and right-angles.

Speyda Spade: I like brutality in my architecture.

Unde Paris: Only in your architecture?

Speyda Spade: Careful with that wit, now.

Unde Paris: Where are you right now? What do you see?

Unde Paris: Do you see right angles?

Unde Paris: Do you see brutality?

Speyda Spade: I'm in a coffee shop, as it happens.

Speyda Spade: I'm drinking a medium cappuccino made with skimmed milk and Fair Trade coffee.

Speyda Spade: Everything is wood and carpet and burgundy here.

Speyda Spade: At the table next to me is a very overweight woman of about my age. She's blonde. She keeps fiddling with her phone.

Speyda Spade: She was here when I sat down. As I look at her cup now I see only dried froth stuck to the inside of it, but she keeps raising it to her lips every now and again, all the same.

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Speyda Spade: It's a small cup. The smallest size cappuccino.

Speyda Spade: She has some sort of girlie T-shirt on, it's grey, but it has a slogan with pink kisses underneath it. It doesn't flatter her.

Speyda Spade: She has plastic carrier bags around her feet – at least four. One of them has a big 25% sign on it.

Speyda Spade: Now she's fiddling with her phone again.

Speyda Spade: Now she's examining her receipt.

Speyda Spade: I wonder who or what she's waiting for.

Speyda Spade: Now she's taken something out of one of the bags.

Speyda Spade: It's a men's shower gift set... shower gel and deodorant in a red box with a seasonal message on the side.

Speyda Spade: Oh dear.

Speyda Spade: Why would anyone examine so closely something so dull as that.

Speyda Spade: It makes me sad to watch her.

Speyda Spade: I wonder who the gift is for and I wonder why she chose it.

Speyda Spade: I wonder what she is anticipating the reaction will be of the recipient.

Speyda Spade: I wonder if he's the one she's waiting for.

Unde Paris: How can you be certain she is waiting for someone?

Speyda Spade: I know it. I can feel it. She's trying to look busy. She's trying to look occupied.

Speyda Spade: She's trying too hard to look like she's *not* waiting. But wait...

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Speyda Spade: Now she's got up...

Speyda Spade: Putting her coat on...

Speyda Spade: Gathering up her bags...

Speyda Spade: She's gone. She's given up.

Speyda Spade: How sad.

Unde Paris: What is it that makes you sad?

Unde Paris: That her wait was for nothing?

Unde Paris: That she is fat?

Unde Paris: That she chose a dull gift?

Unde Paris: That she chose a dull gift because she did not have the money to buy anything better?

Unde Paris: Or that she chose a dull gift because she did not have the imagination to buy anything better?

Speyda Spade smiles.

Speyda Spade: Lets not get too analytical, shall we?

Unde Paris: Shall we not?

Speyda Spade: Anyway, what has this to do with 1970s furniture?

Unde Paris: You told me that that period of your life is one you associate with more optimism.

Unde Paris: I was curious to know if your experience of your life right now was therefore a pessimistic one.

Speyda Spade: I'm sure there were plenty of fat and lonely people around back in the 70s too.

Unde Paris: Are you sure?

Speyda Spade: Are you making fun of me?

Unde Paris: I'm sorry.

Speyda Spade: I told you, it's not something that should be looked at closely.

Speyda Spade: I know that the whole thing falls apart up

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close. I don't care.

Unde Paris: It is possible – is it not – that this woman is a beauty in Second Life. No?

Speyda Spade: Ok. For what it's worth, it was the gift that did it.

Speyda Spade: Now that I think about it, she didn't so much examine the box, as *appraise* it.

Unde Paris: Explain to me this difference.

Speyda Spade: Between examine and appraise? It's about appreciation.

Speyda Spade: She looked at it as though she was satisfied with her purchase.

Unde Paris: Her satisfaction angers you?

Speyda Spade: Angers me? No! Why do you suggest that it angers me?

Unde Paris: But you would prefer that she felt no satisfaction? No?

Speyda Spade: I would prefer that the person she gives it to appreciates it.

Unde Paris: What if that person is you?

Speyda Spade: What?

Unde Paris: What will you say if someone you do not know well gives you such a gift for Christmas?

Unde Paris: Or, if you prefer, what will you say if someone you do know very well gives you such a gift for Christmas?

Unde Paris: Which will sadden you more – that you have received this gift or that she has given it?

Speyda Spade: Next time you ask me to describe what I can see I'll focus on the furniture.

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Unde Paris: haha

Unde Paris: Perhaps we do take this too far.

Unde Paris: But I do like sometimes to look at a glimpse more closely.

Speyda Spade: To 'look at a glimpse'?

Speyda Spade: What does that mean?

Unde Paris: It means to take something insubstantial – like the smell of the air that we pass through – and examine it in more detail.

Unde Paris: More importantly, to enjoy its detail.

Unde Paris: The sad detail and the ugly detail as well as the beautiful detail.

Unde Paris: It is to look closely at a single brick, rather than to just notice an entire wall.

Speyda Spade: How very wise of you, I'm sure.

Speyda Spade: You must be some sort of motivational speaker in real life.

Unde Paris: No.

Unde Paris: But I do work in a 1960s concrete building.

Speyda Spade: You do? Oh!

Speyda Spade: Describe it to me?

Speyda Spade: Please?

Unde Paris: Of course.

Unde Paris: It is four levels high.

Unde Paris: It is divided all the way along the front by thick, vertical strips. They stretch from the ground to the roof.

Unde Paris: The window frames are metal, painted white. The paint is flaking away.

Speyda Spade: But it's metal.

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Unde Paris: The paint is bubbled brown in places where the rust below rises through.

Speyda Spade: I can see it.

Speyda Spade: I even know just how it would feel if I touched it.

Speyda Spade: The bubbles might crack open beneath my fingernail.

Speyda Spade: And I know that if this is a window that opens, it will open very, very stiffly.

Speyda Spade: And you have to pull on it with all your strength to shut it again.

Unde Paris: You are correct.

Unde Paris: The passing of time has not been kind to this futuristic building.

Speyda Spade: How lucky you are to work in such a place.

Unde Paris: I will have to introduce that idea to my colleagues.

Speyda Spade: Perhaps you should teach them to examine their glimpses better.

Unde Paris: It is not just a question of aesthetics, Speyda...

Unde Paris: Those windows are extremely inefficient at keeping out the wind.

Speyda Spade: Yes, I remember that too.

Unde Paris: And sometimes the rain. It all depends upon the angle it falls at.

Speyda Spade: How marvellous. How wonderful.

Unde Paris: The glass can rattle in a storm.

Speyda Spade: Like the sound of laughter.

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Unde Paris: And you should know that the marble tiles in the entrance hall are cracked and broken, and no-one has replaced them.

Speyda Spade: But you can see the grandeur in them. You can see what the future used to look like.

Unde Paris: Should I point out at this stage that every level has had installed 16 metal support pillars – two for each corner and two for each side – to strengthen it, to keep it from falling down?

Unde Paris: Your future is turning to dust.

Unde Paris: It is the victim of entropy.

Speyda Spade: I'm not naïve to that. I know that it's all getting eaten away, crumb by crumb.

Speyda Spade: I know pretty soon it will all be gone; the buildings demolished, the furniture dumped.

Speyda Spade: All the more reason to capture it now in Second Life whilst we still can!

Unde Paris: And so you shall.

Unde Paris: I like your vision, Speyda.

Unde Paris: I like that you see beauty in ugliness.

Speyda Spade: Perhaps it is you who sees ugliness in beauty, Unde.

Unde Paris: Perhaps we shall agree that beauty is defined by every person, by themselves.

Speyda Spade: True in theory, perhaps.

Speyda Spade: In practice, people tend to take advice.

Unde Paris: To know, all the same, that that advice does not have to be followed is a good thing to understand.

Speyda Spade: You mean the joy of discovering your individuality?

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Unde Paris: You have only just discovered yours now?

Speyda Spade: Perhaps I have yet to truly stumble across it.

Speyda Spade: In truth, I'm only really appreciating this stuff – I'm only really *noticing* it – because of the associations it has for me.

Speyda Spade: It's not like I discovered it all by myself, or something. It's not like it could have been any different.

Speyda Spade: This is what I was born into... I can know no other way.

Speyda Spade: If I'd been born in a diner, perhaps I'd appreciate grease.

Unde Paris: You should make a shop and sell your furniture. You really should.

Speyda Spade laughs.

Speyda Spade: Ok. I'll think about it.

Unde Paris: I can see reminiscence emerging as a new category of leisure pursuit in Second Life.

Unde Paris: Perhaps you will be the inventor that everyone will talk about.

Speyda Spade: Nah.

Speyda Spade: No-one remembers who came up with new ideas.

Speyda Spade: It's not like being the first to step onto the moon or anything.

Speyda Spade: The best I could hope for would be to have a whole bunch of people copy me.

Speyda Spade: And then a whole bunch of people copy the copiers.

Unde Paris: How long have you been on Second Life?

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Speyda Spade: About six months. You can tell from my profile.

Unde Paris: And this is the reason that you came? To build?

Speyda Spade: What is the reason that you came, Unde?

Unde Paris: I think, to meet people like you, Speyda.

Speyda Spade: Is that a chat-up line or the start of an enduring friendship?

Unde Paris: Since I have yet to establish how a chat-up line can be developed into anything more than a chat-up line in this environment, I think we had better assume that it is the latter.

Speyda Spade smiles.

Speyda Spade: Well in that case, this is the **real** reason why I'm here...

Building is building is scenery, I suppose. We all move our puppets about on a gigantic, digital stage. When we sit, after all, we are actually already seated. But it is helpful to us to arrange all the little coloured dots in front of us so that the little patch of pixels that is me is on the little patch of pixels that is an orange, 1970s armchair (with cushions). And in a reclining, carefree position. It helps to fill that void created by the absence of our nonverbal communication. Some might even argue that the nonverbals you can create in here are actually more subtle, more sophisticated than anything realistically achievable in RL.

For it is *all* about communication: the sit communicates commitment to an interaction, an allocation of time to

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another person, a desire to be in proximity to somebody rather than long distance messaging. If the sit is on a couch – instead of separate chairs – it communicates the sharing of 'near space', which means that we are closer now than mere acquaintances. If the sit is side by side on a couch it communicates that we are closer still, that we now mean something important to each other. It is good to mean that to somebody, even if they are a thousand miles away and you don't know what they look like.

If the sit is on a 1970s couch, it probably means that one of us is bonkers but that they are loved by the other, even so. Better still, our insanity is what attracts them to us in the first place.

8.

The SL-fatigued

Enough's enough. I want out. I'm leaving. And yet, an evening away from the virtual world nearly brings me out in a cold sweat. Incredible, I know. This is how bad it's become. I am caught. I am addicted. I no longer know how to spend time with just myself. I now require the company of my avatars.

Sometimes it is the old identities that I return to on nights like this; the reasoning being that an evening spent in skin I no longer rely on is surely an acceptable compromise. Digital methadone. Better than cold turkey. Of course, I am not content then to simply wander. I went back to the wall to find that everyone I knew from there had moved on. I couldn't be bothered to track them down in different places and it felt wrong to be there without people who knew me. I logged off after ten minutes and then I did a terrible thing. Mindo got turned from a 'dalt' to a 'kalt'.

But that's what moving on is all about, right? Hard choices have to be made if they have to be made. So the

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next one to go was Linda. Killed. Mortessa was even easier to send to the bottom of the lake. But I hesitated on Speyda Spade. Speyda, after all, had known Unde.

For months, Unde and I had danced together, sometimes on a nightly basis. We'd danced at Phats and at the Velvet and at Bogart's and at a whole load of other places I can no longer remember. We'd danced and we'd talked. I told Unde more about myself than I had ever told anyone in my life. I told Unde everything.

And Unde never judged me. We danced and we talked and we listened to each other, and it occurs to me now that dancing, talking and listening – in no particular order – are probably the three finest things to do with another person. Some of the people who knew us thought that Unde and I might be secret lovers. But Unde and I just liked to dance and to talk and listen to each other. Nothing more. Nothing more was necessary.

In the end, things faded; we saw each other less and less. Real life issues took over for Unde and my own search took me away from time in Speyda. It was a good way to move on. Every now and again we'd catch each other online and go for a dance at Bogarts, just like the old times. It's never mattered if it's been a week or a month or six months since my last conversation with Unde: when we talk we step right back into those old shoes like it was yesterday. Which is exactly how long-term friendships should be defined.

I logged on as Speyda to see if I could find Unde. I suppose I was hoping I'd end up being talked out of quitting.

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IM: Speyda Spade: Are you there, Unde?

Second Life: User not online - message will be stored and delivered later.

IM: Speyda Spade: Ok. No worries. Hope you're well.

IM: Speyda Spade: It might be a while before you hear from me again. I'm taking a break.

IM: Speyda Spade: Actually, I'm thinking of leaving SL completely. All my avatars. Every one of them.

IM: Speyda Spade: I've had enough. I'm sick of feeling like I'm glued to this seat.

IM: Speyda Spade: My search is a waste of time, I know it is.

Speyda Spade: Maybe you should have told me that. Maybe it's what you thought, but you knew I'd hate you if you said it.

IM: Speyda Spade: Well, I think I'm ready to move on now.

IM: Speyda Spade: I think I have to be, right?

IM: Speyda Spade: I can't remember the last time I went for a walk that was more than just the time it took me to get to my car.

IM: Speyda Spade: Or the time it took me to zig-zag the aisles at the supermarket.

IM: Speyda Spade: I hate supermarkets.

IM: Speyda Spade: I hate my car.

IM: Speyda Spade: I hate this existence.

IM: Speyda Spade: You know, the other day I contemplated ordering my groceries online. That's when I realised.

IM: Speyda Spade: When it's good in here it's good only

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for moments.

IM: Speyda Spade: I hope you're ok.

IM: Speyda Spade: I'd say goodbye except I can't help think we're going to meet again.

IM: Speyda Spade: Perhaps one day in real life.

IM: Speyda Spade: Probably by accident.

IM: Speyda Spade: Be well, Unde.

IM: Digest Preview: Hello Speyda.

IM: Digest Preview: You're all alone.

IM: Digest Preview: Are you waiting for someone?

IM: Digest Preview: Can I add my tab to your IM window?

IM: Speyda Spade: Hello Digest.

IM: Speyda Spade: You know, I completely failed to take in that I had rezzed here.

IM: Speyda Spade: Too caught up in an IM I had to send.

IM: Speyda Spade: Of course, this is where I was when I logged out last.

IM: Digest Preview: You didn't intend to come here?

IM: Speyda Spade: No.

IM: Speyda Spade: I came online to talk to a friend.

IM: Digest Preview: And they're offline.

IM: Speyda Spade: Yes.

IM: Digest Preview: Ask me how I knew that.

IM: Speyda Spade: It's obvious. You inferred it from my use of the word 'send'.

IM: Digest Preview: Good tuning!

IM: Speyda Spade: Not really.

IM: Speyda Spade: That was easy.

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IM: Digest Preview: If you say so. Now then...

IM: Digest Preview: ...you could continue to just stand there whilst you compose your IM...

IM: Digest Preview: ...however I ask that you consider another possibility...

IM: Speyda Spade: Let me guess... you'd like me to dance with you whilst I compose it?

IM: Digest Preview: Good God no.

IM: Digest Preview: You think I don't have better things to do than to dance with someone who doesn't give me a hundred per cent of their attention?

IM: Digest Preview: You think I enjoy having to wait for the simple answers to my simple questions? I do *not* appreciate being juggled, conferenced or put 'on hold'.

IM: Digest Preview: As a matter of fact, I was going to ask you to sit down.

IM: Speyda Spade: Right. Yes. Of course.

IM: Digest Preview: Thank you.

IM: Digest Preview: Clubs like this invest a lot in their pose balls. At least do them a favour and actually *use* them from time to time.

IM: Speyda Spade: Duly noted.

IM: Digest Preview: When you've finished writing your message, of course, I'll be happy to take you for a quick spin around the floor.

IM: Digest Preview: If you insist.

IM: Speyda Spade: I wasn't intending on insisting.

IM: Speyda Spade: I wasn't intending on even asking in fact.

IM: Digest Preview: Was your previous visit here also

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one where you stood absently on the side and exempted yourself from the business of the establishment or did you actually partake in dancing with someone?

IM: Speyda Spade laughs.

IM: Speyda Spade: I danced.

IM: Speyda Spade: I danced with the person I was IMing, in fact.

IM: Digest Preview: 'was'?

IM: Digest Preview: Can I assume you're finished messaging, then?

IM: Speyda Spade: There you go again, making inferences from single words.

IM: Digest Preview: There were plenty of words in your utterance to make inferences from; I just focused on the important one.

IM: Speyda Spade: 'Utterance'... such a charming way to refer to the conversation of your guest.

IM: Speyda Spade: It makes me think of my words as some sort of excreta.

IM: Digest Preview: In fairness, if you spent much time here listening to the typical public conversation, some sort of excreta wouldn't be a completely unwarranted expectation.

IM: Speyda Spade: And yet you encourage me to embrace the norms of the venue.

IM: Digest Preview: A shopkeeper might not enjoy the conversations of his customers, but he's still within his rights to wish they could maybe do a bit more shopping.

IM: Speyda Spade: Alongside wishing that she didn't keep being mistaken for a man in male generalisation.

IM: Digest Preview: Your response to that was meant to

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be, "Gosh! Wow! Do you own this place?"

IM: Speyda Spade: Why would I seek confirmation of something so obviously implied?

IM: Digest Preview: It would have given me a chance to fake being annoyed with myself for letting that slip out.

IM: Speyda Spade: That would probably only have embarrassed us both.

IM: Digest Preview: It would have been an opportunity, at least, to introduce awkwardness to our conversation.

IM: Speyda Spade: Really? You think we need additional awkwardness?

IM: Digest Preview: I was thinking about the you knowing that I know that you know I lied about not knowing I'd mentioned it moment.

IM: Speyda Spade: Admittedly, that is 'awkwardness' at both a social and cognitive level.

IM: Digest Preview: Have I given you a headache?

IM: Speyda Spade: Not yet. But it's possible I'll be using that line later.

IM: Digest Preview: We seem to have missed somewhere along the way the bit where you tell me what a great place this is and how you've always enjoyed coming here.

IM: Speyda Spade: I seize up whenever I attempt to formulate solicited compliments. It's a condition I have.

IM: Digest Preview: Oh really? How very uncomfortable you must feel at office parties.

IM: Speyda Spade: Like you wouldn't believe.

IM: Speyda Spade: Thank God for the photocopier and amusing body parts, is what I say.

IM: Digest Preview: I'm so glad I don't have to deal with

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the actual physical presence of my employees.

IM: Speyda Spade: Absolutely. Just think – then you'd have to install toilets and maybe even employ someone else to clean them.

IM: Digest Preview shudders at the thought.

IM: Speyda Spade: Human beings are such filthy creatures, aren't they?

IM: Digest Preview: Quite revolting, yes.

IM: Speyda Spade: Oh dear. Suddenly, I'm thinking about excreta all over again.

IM: Digest Preview: It is the blessing of Second Life that we can conduct our affairs without ever having to worry about such things.

IM: Speyda Spade: It's kind of from one extreme to the other though, don't you think?

IM: Speyda Spade: A bit of perfume was never a bad thing. The smell of steam rising out of the street is one I wouldn't be without either.

IM: Speyda Spade: You see, I'm all for happy mediums.

IM: Digest Preview: I hadn't intended for you to infer I dislike *all* olfactory sensation. Just so we're clear.

IM: Speyda Spade: I hadn't for a moment imagined that you were.

IM: Speyda Spade: As a matter of fact, I was just camming around and those were the first two smells I could come up with based upon the things I was looking at right here.

IM: Speyda Spade: But it's reassuring to know, I guess, that you're not one of these men who would voluntarily impair their sense of smell if given the chance. Thanks for

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the clarification.

IM: Digest Preview: The perfume reference I get, but the steam?

IM: Speyda Spade: I was looking just out of the window.

IM: Speyda Spade: The big one at the front. The one that most people approaching will see before anything else.

IM: Speyda Spade: The one I imagined you would have put a bit of thought into.

IM: Digest Preview: I see. So your entire appraisal of my establishment offers up just a single smell before you have to start looking outside for further inspiration?

IM: Speyda Spade: I didn't think you'd appreciate references to the stale smell of booze behind the bar and the stink of vomit in the make-out corner.

IM: Digest Preview: And these are smells you *appreciate*?

IM: Speyda Spade: Oh yes. Right.

IM: Speyda Spade: That *was* the point I was trying to make, wasn't it?

IM: Digest Preview: I believe it was.

IM: Speyda Spade: Hmmm... Looks like that headache might be on its way.

IM: Digest Preview: Perhaps I can offer a head massage? I might even have a pose ball for that, somewhere.

IM: Speyda Spade: Is this something you're skilled at in real life?

IM: Digest Preview: Not even remotely. However...

IM: Digest Preview: ...neither am I able to foxtrot in RL, and this appears to have no impact on my ability to do so inworld.

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IM: Speyda Spade: Such a shame. It's just so much better reading the words of someone who actually appears to know what they are talking about.

IM: Digest Preview: Steady on, old girl; it's not like I'm resorting to the use of an xCite! attachment.

IM: Speyda Spade: Do they *do* those for head massage?

IM: Digest Preview: I've not seen one yet myself, however...

IM: Digest Preview: ...the assumption I generally hold is that if it's a body part that can be touched by someone then there's probably an xCite! attachment out there for it somewhere.

IM: Speyda Spade: My worry would be that halfway through a relaxing treatment, someone might click on the wrong menu item and give me an 'earth shattering orgasm'.

IM: Digest Preview: That would certainly constitute an increment in awkwardness.

IM: Digest Preview: Not to mention probably a higher interest amongst the witnesses in head massage.

IM: Speyda Spade laughs.

IM: Speyda Spade: I think I'll stick to pain killers for the time being.

IM: Digest Preview: Suit yourself.

IM: Speyda Spade: (Was it too soon to use the word 'orgasm' in our conversation?)

IM: Digest Preview: (A little on the soon side, yes).

IM: Speyda Spade: Some gentler music might help, you know.

IM: Digest Preview: It's the disco hour.

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IM: Speyda Spade: *Hour*?

IM: Digest Preview: Ok – hours.

IM: Speyda Spade: And yet you call this place a ballroom.

IM: Digest Preview: Twenty out of twenty-four hours isn't bad.

IM: Speyda Spade: I don't like that places in Second Life are open non-stop.

IM: Speyda Spade: It spoils the illusion, somehow.

IM: Speyda Spade: There should be times when you are open and times when you are shut – just like in real life.

IM: Speyda Spade: And when a place like this is shut, the chairs should be put on the tables and there should be a guy with a mop cleaning round them.

IM: Speyda Spade: The lights should be dimmed, all except for the lights at the bar and maybe light spilling out of an office at the back somewhere, where some manager is up late working out the figures, or better still...

IM: Speyda Spade: ...a couple of the employees are making love amongst the paperwork.

IM: Speyda Spade: It's wrong for places to be open all of the time.

IM: Speyda Spade: It makes them not as living, somehow.

IM: Digest Preview: An interesting picture. Are you volunteering for the job of throwing people out when it gets to closing time?

IM: Digest Preview: In which case, I look forward to hearing you explain it to someone living in a time zone where it's only half past seven in the evening.

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IM: Speyda Spade: See, that's the other thing – Second Life should be regionalised according to time zones. In fact...

IM: Speyda Spade: There should be virtual countries to pair up with the real ones – a virtual Europe, a virtual France, a virtual India and so on.

IM: Digest Preview: You do realise France is inside Europe, right?

IM: Speyda Spade: Each region should have a local clock synchronised according to the local time in that real life place (hush) and that should include sun up and sun down times, varied according to the time of year.

IM: Digest Preview: Do these places have to be the same shape as their real life equivalents?

IM: Speyda Spade: No.

IM: Speyda Spade: That would be just silly.

IM: Digest Preview: Of course.

IM: Digest Preview: So no geographical features shared with the real life place, then?

IM: Speyda Spade: If someone wants to create a virtual Nova Scotia then that's up to them, but it wouldn't be a obligatory feature, no.

IM: Digest Preview: And are you allowed to move from country to country? Will we need some sort of system of visas and immigration?

IM: Speyda Spade: You can go wherever you want.

IM: Speyda Spade: But think about it – if you're in Europe and it's dark and you teleport over to the States where it's still daylight, the feeling of actually having travelled to somewhere different will be much stronger.

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IM: Speyda Spade: Psychological tricks like that are important to virtual world immersion.

IM: Digest Preview: I can see you've given this a lot of thought.

IM: Speyda Spade: I've had plenty of time to think about it.

IM: Digest Preview: Do you think these are changes that could be made to Second Life? Or do you think someone else should start over?

IM: Speyda Spade: I don't think they'll change it. There's no motivation to do that sort of thing.

IM: Digest Preview: I agree. Now then...

IM: Digest Preview: ...about that making love amongst the paperwork example...

IM: Speyda Spade: I had a feeling you might want to return to that issue.

IM: Digest Preview: I am nothing if not thorough.

IM: Speyda Spade: I do appreciate rigour.

IM: Digest Preview: Do you imagine two young things in there, thrusting and gyrating from all that youthful, optimistic exuberance they seem to be so full of? Is it the waiters you see? Is it the bar staff? Is it the new pianist – a talented young thing, fresh to the city and desperate to absorb as much as he can that his fingers know what to speak of – and a customer he's talked into staying behind?

IM: Digest Preview: Or is it something older, harder? Less reckless and yet somehow more wild? Less energetic and yet somehow more urgent? Less aesthetic and yet somehow more beautiful? Less trivial and yet somehow more fleeting? The manager and and an old friend passing

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through... a moment of passion snatched out of two difficult lives, briefly intertwined again...

IM: Speyda Spade: Whatever it is, I can assure you there's no thrusting and gyrating involved.

IM: Digest Preview: Then tell me how you see it.

IM: Speyda Spade: I see the more mature version, but...

IM: Speyda Spade: ...in my back room, the lovers are strangers that only met that evening.

IM: Digest Preview: Interesting. Tell me more.

IM: Speyda Spade: Their movement is urgent and frenzied, yes – in fact, it began as if from nowhere: an explosion of sudden kisses just outside the office door, backward steps into the room, out of sight of any passers by, until she felt the edge of the desk pressing into her from behind. And then the papers got swept aside, files fell to the floor and flopped open, spilling documents across – let me see, now – black and white tiles. An open box of paper clips got overturned and there were paper clips scattered everywhere; as she pulled down her skirt and panties and sat herself on the desk and lay back, she felt them pressing into her skin...

IM: Speyda Spade: ...little droplets of momentary cold...

IM: Speyda Spade: Mmmmm...

IM: Speyda Spade: Their movement is urgent and frenzied, yes, but underlying the urgency is a tiredness, a weariness, a sense of exhaustion, a sense of futility.

IM: Speyda Spade: Underlying the urgency is the certain knowledge that this will change nothing, that the world is every bit as impossible and as loveless as they both know it to be, but that this momentary gasp of intimacy – even so –

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is not just an ugly manifestation of biological reality.

Afterwards...

IM: Speyda Spade: ...as they button up their shirts, they'll be quiet and shy like any other couple, but, unlike the youngsters, they'll both know that they'll probably never see each other again and they won't mind that this is the way it has to be. They'll look at their watches, note that the world spins on as usual – how could it be any otherwise? – but they'll feel that a valve has been released, a sigh has been set free, and it looks for now once more like it might just be bearable for a short while again.

IM: Speyda Spade: So that's the kind of encounter I have in mind.

IM: Digest Preview: Did you just jump from the part where they're tearing off each others' clothes to the part where they're putting them back on again? Or did I somehow fall unconscious and miss a really significant chunk of the narrative there?

IM: Speyda Spade sighs.

IM: Speyda Spade: Am I expected to do *all* of the work?

IM: Digest Preview: I can supply the sound effects, if that would help?

IM: Speyda Spade: Come here. Let me kiss you.

IM: Digest Preview: If you insist.

IM: Speyda Spade: Inexplicably, I do...

And so I have learned to lust. What the hell. If it passes the time, if it keeps me in here, if it helps me to do the thing that

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I came here to do, then what is the problem in that? As for Speyda, she did grant the friendship request that came in via its little blue box at the end of the desk top encounter, but she was a little sad that – after everything that had been said in the preamble – the basic conditions had not been understood. Now that I know he's the owner of the venue, it's not as though I would ever have had difficulty finding him if I had wanted to. She granted his friendship request, but of course I have no intention whatsoever of honouring it. I killed Speyda within an hour of logging off, weeping as I did so for all the conversations she had had with Unde. Unde and I will share more moments together, of course; hers is a friendship that transcends all the various avatars. Even so, to kill off an account like that at such short notice is a serious risk to take. What if, by coincidence, Unde were to do the same to hers at the same moment? It would be no good us both wondering around in our shiny new avatars if we didn't each know the other's new identity. It would be a repetition of my original problem, only this version more inexcusable. The next time I see her I'll make sure she has an email address for me. I should know better than to leave these things to chance.

4.

The opposite sex

It occurs to me that I am presented in SL by a somewhat unique opportunity. As the searcher, I may assume far more roles in the metaverse than I might in the real world without employing the assistance of others (which I am hardly in a position to do). After all, it's been a long time. I don't *really* know everything that will be him. I have a list and I will follow it, but other avenues of exploration cannot hurt. He is a man, and maybe one route towards his circle is for me to be a man as well.

But what sort of a man? What aspects of him are because he is a man and what aspects of him influence how he is a man? What sort of a man should I be that I improve my chances of overlap with him? If I have guessed him correctly, should I be a man just like that or would that sort of a man, in fact, dislike a like minded company and prefer the presence of variance? And then there is that whole other layer to consider as well.

To do this means a lie, and a lie that I am uncomfortable

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with. I'm not sure why the concealment of gender is a more big deal than the concealment of age or of ethnicity or of disability – although these, I suppose, aren't exactly variables we *actively* deceive upon – and yet, somehow, it is. Any one of those other things I suppose we would consider revealing the more we got to know somebody, for no other reason than that friendship and deception must surely be only negatively related. But gender should be up front from the start. But why?

So, it started as an experiment. And then – because people believed in it and because gender is expected to be up front – the guilt started to grow...

Frank Roasted: Back.

Bradley Watson: Welcome back, Frank.

Suzette Waterchurch: Did you crash, Frank?

Frank Roasted: Yeah.

Frank Roasted: I need a new computer.

Frank Roasted: This piece of crap needs junking.

Bradley Watson: You do seem to be crashing a lot lately.

Softly Spoken: What are your graphics settings?

Softly Spoken: Maybe you should turn them down a little.

Frank Roasted: I don't think it's the graphics that's the problem, Softly.

Frank Roasted: I mean, it displays the graphics just fine for all of the time that it's working and then – bam – the computer just dies.

Softly Spoken: You said it freezes, right?

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Frank Roasted: That's right.

Frank Roasted: Screen freezes. Nothing moves.

Suzette Waterchurch: What about sound?

Frank Roasted: Sound just stops.

Softly Spoken: Your computer could be overheating.

Frank Roasted: Wouldn't it just turn itself off if that were the case?

Softly Spoken: Not necessarily.

Softly Spoken: Is it happening at random or do certain programs have to be running?

Frank Roasted: You mean applications? Oh well, it only ever crashes when I'm running SL.

Suzette Waterchurch: It's graphics. No question about it.

Softly Spoken: That's almost certainly a graphics problem.

Frank Roasted: Really? You're sure?

Suzette Waterchurch: Completely sure, my dear.

Softly Spoken: Pretty much.

Frank Roasted: So I need a new graphics card?

Suzette Waterchurch: You do.

Softly Spoken: In an ideal world, yes.

Softly Spoken: But you could still just turn the graphics down in your settings a bit.

Frank Roasted: Well it never used to do this.

Suzette Waterchurch: It could be the accumulation of dust, you know. Maybe you should open it up and give it a clean.

Softly Spoken: That might help, yes.

Frank Roasted: Give it a... clean? What do you mean, exactly?

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Softly Spoken: Vacuum it.

Suzette Waterchurch: Suck that dust up, darling!

Frank Roasted: Really? I can do that?

Frank Roasted: I won't damage it?

Softly Spoken: Turn it off first, of course.

Suzette Waterchurch: It's not like we're asking you to give it a sponge bath!

Bradley Watson: Heh.

Frank Roasted: Vacuum. Fair enough. I guess I can do that.

Frank Roasted: You're sure you're not winding me up?

Softly Spoken: Trust me, Frank – the moment you get that lid open you'll be astonished at the amount of crap in there.

Bradley Watson: What if he's using a laptop?

Softly Spoken: Oh crap. Right. Yes.

Softly Spoken: Ignore the vacuuming advice if its a laptop.

Frank Roasted: It's ok. It's not.

Frank Roasted: But thanks for the clarification anyway.

Softly Spoken: Ok good. Phew.

Frank Roasted: Would that have been a problem?

Softly Spoken: Things are just more delicate and fiddly in laptops. Best not to muck about inside them too much.

Frank Roasted: You seem to know a lot about computers, Softly.

Softly Spoken: I grew up with a brother obsessed by computers.

Frank Roasted: Even so.

Softly Spoken: Vacuuming the insides of a PC isn't so

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complicated a thing to get your head around.

Frank Roasted: Really? It would never have occurred to me.

Softly Spoken: But once you've seen someone do it, it's an easy thing to remember.

Frank Roasted: True enough, I suppose.

Softly Spoken: A discussion about the different types of CPU cleaning fluid so that new thermal paste can be applied for a heat sink reseal – now *that* I find hard to follow.

Bradley Watson: You what?

Frank Roasted: Come again now?

Softly Spoken: Hah!

Suzette Waterchurch: I'm astonished you even remembered that, Softly.

Frank Roasted: You're some sort of IT technician, aren't you? Own up!

Softly Spoken: lol

Softly Spoken: Ok. You got me.

Frank Roasted: I knew it!

Softly Spoken: I work in IT support for my local council.

Softly Spoken: It's not something I chose to talk about in any level of detail.

Suzette Waterchurch: Hmmmm... A room full of geeks and nerds and then you, Softly. I bet you're a popular girl!

Frank Roasted: And not just amongst colleagues. I bet the customers enjoy your 'support'.

Softly Spoken: I have noticed that people seem to take technical information coming from a girl more seriously than when it comes from a boy. I don't know why that is.

Frank Roasted: When it's a guy and he's nodding at

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everything you say and stroking his chin and looking thoughtful...

Frank Roasted: ...he's not actually listening to a word you're saying. You do realise that, right?

Softly Spoken: lol

Frank Roasted: In fact, there's nothing actually unusual in female IT staff. They're essential.

Frank Roasted: I firmly believe every IT department has to have at least one hot girl geek in order for it to function. It's the only explanation.

Softly Spoken: For what?

Frank Roasted: For why the executives accept the quite frankly loony restrictions imposed by the average IT department.

Suzette Waterchurch: Hahahaha

Bradley Watson: Frank!

Bradley Watson: That's an outrageous thing to say!

Bradley Watson: To begin with, it's assuming all executives are male.

Frank Roasted: Not all. Just the majority.

Frank Roasted: If you're able to show me organisations where that isn't the case, I'd be happy to look at your data.

Bradley Watson: Hmm...

Suzette Waterchurch: I work for a council too. The IT department drives me crazy. I'm sorry, Softly.

Softly Spoken: No worries.

Frank Roasted: It drives you crazy because it's nonsensical.

Frank Roasted: Anyone in their right minds would see that it's nonsensical.

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Frank Roasted: Which is why they have to have a geek chick to look at whilst it's being explained to them.

Softly Spoken: I'm sorry. Exactly which parts do you find nonsensical, Frank?

Bradley Watson laughs.

Bradley Watson: Good for you, Softly. Attack! Don't let him get away with it!

Frank Roasted laughs.

Frank Roasted: Ok, so the council I worked for up until very recently...

Frank Roasted: They encourage you to work at home on the one hand...

Frank Roasted: ...but on the other hand, they make it impossible for you to actually do so.

Frank Roasted: For example, say I want to write up a report...

Frank Roasted: The easiest thing for me to do – if I'm going to work on this both at home and at work – would be for me to transfer from one place to the other on a memory stick. But wait!

Frank Roasted: I'm not actually *allowed* to save reports onto memory sticks!

Softly Spoken: What did you do in the council?

Frank Roasted: I was in personnel.

Softly Spoken: Right.

Softly Spoken: So say you just happen to be carrying around sensitive human resources data on your memory stick and you lose it one day...

Softly Spoken: ...are you going to be quite so blasé about its security when someone recovers it and sends it to

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the national newspapers?

Frank Roasted: Look, I understand all that... but how is taking data out on a memory stick any different from taking data out of the office inside a paper file to a meeting?

Frank Roasted: A practice which, incidentally, people have been doing for *decades*.

Softly Spoken: Simple. It's smaller. It's easier to lose.

Softly Spoken: You put it in your pocket and you pull it out by accident when you pull out your car keys.

Softly Spoken: And, instead of having information about just one person one it, you could in theory have information about your entire workforce.

Softly Spoken: In which case, it's not the equivalent of taking *one* paper file out of the office at all.

Bradley Watson: Nice response!

Frank Roasted: Ok fine. But, regardless of your protestations, the council still is insisting that staff start to work from home.

Frank Roasted: In accordance with this policy and the fact that 10 to 20 per cent of our working weeks are spent in meetings away from the central office, the number of desks is reduced and a 'hot desking' policy introduced...

Softly Spoken: If I can just stop you there...

Softly Spoken: Your intention was to demonstrate the nonsensical nature of the IT strategy... so far, you've only demonstrated the nonsensical nature of council policy. You'll get no disagreement with me over that.

Bradley Watson: hahaha

Bradley Watson settles back and eats popcorn.

Suzette Waterchurch snuggles up next to Bradley and

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steals some of his popcorn.

Bradley Watson is too distracted by the warmth and scent of Suzette to notice her stealing from him and instead suspects Frank. Who he kicks.

Frank Roasted: Hey!

Bradley Watson: Don't mind me.

Bradley Watson: Pray continue.

Frank Roasted: Ok. PowerPoint.

Softly Spoken: Oh God...

Softly Spoken: I do hope you're not going to complain about having to keep to your corporate PowerPoint style.

Frank Roasted: Why can't I complain about that?

Softly Spoken: You assume IT are responsible for that rule? You assume IT are responsible for that style?

Frank Roasted: Well...

Softly Spoken: Corporate style is a PR issue. Complain to them about it. Next.

Bradley Watson applauds.

Frank Roasted: Fine. Email limit.

Frank Roasted: I had 350 megabytes. 350 megabytes! Google can give 5 *gigabytes* to every person on the planet, but my council can't even give *one* of those to each of its employees.

Frank Roasted: Get out of *that* one, lady!

Softly Spoken: Let me ask you something...

Softly Spoken: In the 'good old days' of snail mail and faxes...

Softly Spoken: Did you used to just throw all your bits of paper that just happened to arrive in this manner into one enormous filing cabinet...

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Softly Spoken: Organised solely according to the order that it came to you in?

Bradley Watson: hahaha

Bradley Watson: Damn, but you're good, girl!

Frank Roasted: Aha! That analogy is flawed!

Frank Roasted: You can't say it's like a filing cabinet!

The comparison's not valid!

Frank Roasted: You can't **search** a filing cabinet in the same way that you can your email, can you? See? I got you!

Softly Spoken: Flawed shlawed.

Softly Spoken: Have you ever **used** Outlook search to track down an email?

Softly Spoken: And what about when other people need to locate stuff? What if you got run over by a bus tomorrow?

Softly Spoken: If I had a dollar for every Joe who thinks it's easy for someone else to track down those vital emails in his inbox... Geez...

Softly Spoken: Learn to save your attachments, file the emails that you need and delete ones that you don't. Is it **so** hard to do that?

Bradley Watson: Bravo! Bravo!

Suzette Waterchurch giggles.

Frank Roasted spasms in the throes of his death.

Softly Spoken: haha

Softly Spoken: Take that, man who thinks we're chosen only to distract other men from paying attention to the detail.

Suzette Waterchurch: Yeah! Pig!

Bradley Watson: lol

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Frank Roasted: What was that you just said? I'm sorry, I didn't hear a word of it – I was far too distracted by looking at your breasts.

Softly Spoken slaps Frank!

Bradley Watson: hahaha

Frank Roasted: Actually... Guys...

Frank Roasted: This is as opportune and appropriate a moment as I'm likely to have to tell you something I've been working up to telling you for quite a while now. Something serious.

Suzette Waterchurch: Oh God. He's got SL fatigue. He's going to say he's leaving.

Frank Roasted: Not exactly...

Bradley Watson: Don't do it, Frank! You're my only male friend, God damn it!

Bradley Watson: Not to mention the only friend I have called Frank.

Frank Roasted: Well that's just it. You see...

Softly Spoken: Out with it, man!

Frank Roasted: Geez, this is hard. You see...

Frank Roasted: I'm not really a guy, people.

Frank Roasted: I'm a girl. I'm a woman.

Frank Roasted: So I'm not your only male friend at all, Bradley.

Frank Roasted: I'm not anybody's male friend, for that matter.

Silence in Second Life is such a difficult thing to gauge, particularly when your computer has been playing up. You

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can never quite be certain if a sudden absence of communication from everyone around you is a glitch in the internet connection, a sim crash, a failure in your graphics card or complete and utter speechlessness.

Frank Roasted: Somebody say something?

Suzette Waterchurch: Oh my God. I don't believe it...

Softly Spoken: I'm speechless.

Softly Spoken: Speechless!

Bradley Watson: Now there's a turn to the conversation I didn't see coming.

Bradley Watson: You sure had me fooled, Frank.

Frank Roasted: Don't hate me, guys.

Frank Roasted: I just wanted to see the world from a different perspective, that's all.

Frank Roasted: I enjoyed being thought of as a man.

Frank Roasted: I know I should have said something right from the start, but I didn't, because then you would have spoken to me in a different way...

Frank Roasted: And then, once we became friends, it got too hard to tell you the truth.

Frank Roasted: The longer and longer I left it, the harder and harder it became.

Frank Roasted: To be honest, it's been eating away at me for a couple of weeks now.

Frank Roasted: I feel terrible for having deceived you all like this. Just terrible.

Softly Spoken: ...Speechless!

Bradley Watson: Don't worry about it, Frank.

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Bradley Watson: We love you, whoever you are.

Suzette Waterchurch: Oh God.

Suzette Waterchurch: I'm welling up here.

Softly Spoken shifts uncomfortably.

Bradley Watson: You're a good man. That's all that matters.

Suzette Waterchurch: A good *woman*.

Bradley Watson: A good woman. That's what I meant to say. Woman. Damn.

Suzette Waterchurch: Why did you want to be a man, Frank? Were you looking for a woman?

Frank Roasted: I just wanted to try on the role.

Frank Roasted: Plus, I thought it would be nice to be me for a while, but without all the disadvantages.

Bradley Watson nods.

Suzette Waterchurch: You sure you weren't looking for a woman to have some fun with?

Frank Roasted: Quite sure.

Bradley Watson: You sound like you're offering, Suzette!

Suzette Waterchurch: Bradley! I'm hurt! You know I only have eyes for you!

Softly Spoken: Look, guys...

Softly Spoken: Now that the subject's been broached...

Softly Spoken: I can't let you stand there by yourself, Frank. You're not the only one cross gendering in SL.

Softly Spoken: Not even the only one in this bar...

Suzette Waterchurch: OMG! Softly?! You too?!

Softly Spoken: Sorry guys. I'm so sorry.

Frank Roasted: You're a *man*?!

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Softly Spoken: Yeah.

Suzette Waterchurch: OMG!

Bradley Watson: Well this conversation just keeps on surprising, doesn't it?

Frank Roasted: After all that, you're not an IT chick?

Softly Spoken: No.

Frank Roasted: You gave me all that male chauvinist grief and you were a guy yourself all along?

Softly Spoken: Is this a good time to mention pots and kettles?

Frank Roasted: I'm astonished.

Frank Roasted: I never would have thought it.

Bradley Watson: Oh come on, Frank. The IT skills? The pensions knowledge? And have you forgotten the half hour lecture last week on the analogue TV switch off?

Bradley Watson: You have to admit, it makes a whole lot of pieces fall into place.

Frank Roasted: Hmmm... when you put it like that...

Bradley Watson: We all saw what we wanted to see.

Suzette Waterchurch: What made you do it, Softly? What were you looking for in female form?

Softly Spoken: Just an experiment.

Suzette Waterchurch: Experiment my ass. You were looking for some girl action, weren't you!

Suzette Waterchurch: Or did you want to know what it's like to be fucked by a guy as a girl? Be honest!

Bradley Watson: Suzette!

Suzette Waterchurch: What?!

Frank Roasted: You seem to have quite an insight there, Suzette.

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Suzette Waterchurch: I have personal experience. There. I said it. So sue me.

Softly Spoken: What?!

Suzette Waterchurch: Since we're all cleansing our souls this evening.

Bradley Watson: You have to be kidding me.

Frank Roasted: You're a guy as well?

Suzette Waterchurch: A guy looking for guys who are into girls, that's right.

Suzette Waterchurch: Me and Bradley would have gone places. We were getting there.

Softly Spoken: Is there anyone here who is actually who they say they are?

Bradley Watson: I'm afraid not.

Frank Roasted: What?!

Suzette Waterchurch: Hahahaha

Suzette Waterchurch: Ah, the irony!

Softly Spoken: I don't believe it!

Suzette Waterchurch: I was hoping to get taken by a guy and the closest I got was to be nearly taken by a girl who thinks she's taking another girl?

Bradley Watson: Pretty much.

Softly Spoken: hahaha!

Frank Roasted: So wait, let me get this straight...

Frank Roasted: Bradley – you're a gay female in real life pretending to be male in order to attract a straight female...

Frank Roasted: Softly – you're a straight male in real life pretending to be a gay female in order to attract another gay female...

Frank Roasted: And Suzette – you're a gay male in real

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life pretending to be a straight female in order to attract a straight male.

Frank Roasted: Is that right?

Bradley Watson: Pretty much.

Suzette Waterchurch: Spot on.

Softly Spoken: Yeah. I guess.

Suzette Waterchurch: And you, Frank? What are you?

Frank Roasted: Me? I'm confused.

I'll keep a male alt handy, all the same. You never know when something like that might come in useful. It pays to avoid thinking too much about the combinations, though. I'll unpack him when there's a specific purpose for him and when that's done I'll put him away again. No messing. No socialising. No friendships.

No complications. In the end, that evening, Suzette ended up getting off with Bradley anyway. They later told us they were too far into IM sex to stop for the mere details of identity. As their subsequent contributions to public chat got less and less, it became increasingly clear they were either having sex or an argument and so I directed Softly back into his comfort zone on the issue of my graphics card and we left them too it. I have no intention of exploring intimacy in the metaverse; all the same, the idea of a homosexual male making love to a homosexual female – each taking the other's gender and at the same time *knowing* about the swap – knots by head up so badly I can hardly form words whilst thinking about it. I have to think about it, though, at least a little. I think it's probably a good thing that

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we should be glad the internet has revealed of our nature.
Probably.

1.

The newbie

I had a dream this morning, before I woke up. I had a dream about Tony. In the dream, he was both six years old and thirty-six years old. He was both ages at the same time, but never in the same moment; it was like looking at those pictures which are either one thing or another, but never both at the same instant. Two faces or a vase. An old woman or a young one. A cube coming outwards or leading back into the paper.

I asked big Tony what he was doing these days and little Tony looked up at me affectionately, so I could pat him on the head. We were in the living room at Aneray Gardens and it looked exactly as I remembered it, all yellow and orange and brown. Big Tony told me he was playing, which I thought was an odd thing for *him* to say. But then he said it again and meanwhile little Tony jumped up and down and said, “yes!”

At the same time as it was Tony flicking between ages, so too it was me. Only I was switching more slowly. Six

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year old me got cross with six year old Tony for being so unhelpful and reached forward and slapped him, hard, on the nose. Six year old Tony wailed and I sighed with exasperation. Thirty-six year old Tony looked at me sadly and started to back away from where I was standing. "I'm sorry!" I shouted after him, as if he was miles in the distance even though he was actually only a few feet away. "I didn't mean to slap you, Tony!" I started to cry. I looked in a mirror and saw wet lines beneath my eyes, but they were the eyes of thirty-six year old me. "You little bitch," my reflection said to me. "You drove him away from us."

Tony waved at me/us from a patch of grass that looked blurred and somehow pixelated. I saw that he was surrounded by people, but they looked odd, like the cardboard cutouts of Hollywood stars you sometimes got in the foyer of the cinema. He was sitting in a brown armchair, just like the one we had, but it looked blockier. One of the people patted his head and I noticed that she looked just like me. New friends. A new family. "A second life!" he called back to me. And then he faded into nothing.

Firebird Telecom: Voice will never catch on. You mark my words.

Magnet Commoncold: Of course it will.

Pelican Bluespine: Sure it will.

Firebird Telecom: Nope.

Magnet Commoncold: Look at the number of people that are using Skype already.

Firebird Telecom: That doesn't count.

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Firebird Telecom: That's completely different.

Pelican Bluespine: How is an alternative method for doing *exactly the same thing* in any way 'completely different'?

Firebird Telecom: You silly boy.

Firebird Telecom: It's not 'exactly the same thing' at all.

Firebird Telecom: Granted, I would no more touch that than I would Cornelius' genitals either, but it's still a different thing entirely.

Cornelius Treadstone: Hey!

Firebird Telecom: Come now, Cornelius; that really can't have been news to you.

Pelican Bluespine: *How* is it a different thing?

Firebird Telecom: Why, it's simple.

Firebird Telecom: Skype you do person to person.

Firebird Telecom: It's just like placing a phone call.

Firebird Telecom: But this voice thing they're proposing would mean that everyone in a virtual place could talk altogether at once, just like you were actually near each other.

Firebird Telecom: If you can imagine quite so ghastly a thing.

Firebird Telecom: If I want repeated aural rape, I'm quite capable of taking myself to my local supermarket.

Cornelius Treadstone: lol

Firebird Telecom: Don't you 'lol' me, Cornelius.

Magnet Commoncold: So you're saying you would use voice if it was just one to one, but not if it was everyone to everyone.

Firebird Telecom: If you'd been paying attention,

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Margaret, you'd have understood I have absolutely no intention of using either.

Magnet Commoncold: 'Magnet!' It's 'Magnet'!

Firebird Telecom: What?

Magnet Commoncold: Not 'Margaret'.

Firebird Telecom: Yes yes yes.

Pelican Bluespine: Are you secretly a man in real life, Firebird?

Firebird Telecom: Don't be so absurd.

Firebird Telecom: Would a man have such exquisite taste in accessories as I?

Pelican Bluespine: Then why do you have such an aversion to people hearing your voice?!

Firebird Telecom: Because it's vulgar! It's coarse! It's such an ugly thing to bear witness to.

Magnet Commoncold: Your voice is?

Firebird Telecom: My voice, your voice; anybody's voice.

Firebird Telecom: The whole illusion gets shattered.

Magnet Commoncold: Illusion? What illusion?

Firebird Telecom: The illusion of Second Life! We spend all this time building it...

Firebird Telecom: ...with our avatar shape, our avatar skin, our clothes, our accessories and our animation overrider...

Firebird Telecom: Why in God's name would you then want to blow the whole thing to pieces by letting people hear your voice?

Firebird Telecom: It might interest you to know, Margaret, that I already hear a voice in my head when you

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speak – when you *write*, that is – that's unique to you and how I think of how you sound...

Firebird Telecom: ...and I have different voices for Pelly and for Cornelius.

Pelican Bluespine: So... what you're telling us is you can hear voices...?

Firebird Telecom: That's right. And I don't need to hear new ones.

Firebird Telecom: My voice hearing needs are already well-satisfied.

Magnet Commoncold: Really? You hear us? So how do we sound?

Firebird Telecom: In Cornelius' case, to be honest, it's more of a guttural grunting that I hear instead of the articulation of actually recognisable words.

Cornelius Treadstone: Hey!

Firebird Telecom tosses Cornelius a fish for reassurance.

Pelican Bluespine: What about me? What about me?

Firebird Telecom: You want a fish too?

Pelican Bluespine: No! What do I sound like?

Firebird Telecom: Hmmmm. Well you're kind of boyish.

Pelican Bluespine: 'Boyish'?

Firebird Telecom: Boyish.

Pelican Bluespine: You think I sound like a boy?

Firebird Telecom: You have a youthful exuberance about you.

Pelican Bluespine: Is that good?

Cornelius Treadstone: I'll swap 'grunting' for 'boyish' any day.

Firebird Telecom: You'll be quiet and finish your fish, is

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what you'll do.

Pelican Bluespine: Nobody ever told me they thought of me as boyish.

Firebird Telecom: It's quiet endearing.

Pelican Bluespine: Do you think I *look* boyish?

Firebird Telecom: Maybe the glasses. Maybe the hair cut. The trainers are rather suggestive too.

Pelican Bluespine: My glasses?! My hair cut?! My trainers?!

Firebird Telecom: This is a very boyish response you're giving right now, by the way.

Pelican Bluespine: Do *you* think I sound boyish, Magnet?

Magnet Commoncold: Hmmm? Me? No. Definitely not.

Pelican Bluespine: Oh my God – you *do*, don't you?!

Magnet Commoncold: Believe me, there's nothing wrong with boyish.

Firebird Telecom: Darling Margaret, I do believe you flushed just then. A happy memory, I trust?

Magnet Commoncold coughs. Yes thank you, Fire.

Pelican Bluespine: Boyish, you say?

Magnet Commoncold: Boyish. But in a yummy way.

Pelican Bluespine: Boyish. Ok.

Magnet Commoncold: And what about me? How do you hear my voice?

Firebird Telecom: Margaret? Oh, you're warm and smooth and gooey, baby.

Magnet Commoncold: Oh!

Magnet Commoncold: I mean...

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Mmmmmmmmmmmmm.....

Firebird Telecom: Quite.

Cornelius Treadstone grunts.

Magnet Commoncold: Ok ok... so say they invented a way of selecting how your voice sounded, *then* would you use voice?

Firebird Telecom: What in God's name are you talking about?

Pelican Bluespine: You mean like you could buy what your voice sounded like? Like buying your shape and skin and animation overrider?

Magnet Commoncold: Yes yes! Exactly!

Firebird Telecom: I don't recall giving my permission for this to turn into a hypothetical discussion.

Magnet Commoncold: Understanding it from a hypothetical perspective will help me to understand your actual preference in the non-hypothetical world, Fire.

Firebird Telecom sighs. Oh very well.

Firebird Telecom: I suppose I might use a voice if I could be certain it was exactly how I wanted it to sound like.

Firebird Telecom: But I'll tell you another reservation I have, which wouldn't be solved by your little Deus ex machina...

Firebird Telecom: ...which is that having to write in text forces you to consider more completely what it is you want to say and how you want to say it.

Firebird Telecom: Plus if you get halfway through typing something out and realise that what you're saying is bollocks, you can just delete the whole lot and start from scratch.

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Firebird Telecom: You don't get luxuries like that in voice, my darlings: once it's out, it's out.

Firebird Telecom: Ahhh, if only I could have a pound for every time I've seen that unmistakable look of horror that comes into a person's eyes when they suddenly realise the utter incompetence of what they're part way through saying... and that they're way past the point of no return...

Firebird Telecom: ...like a pilot looking sadly at the eject button as he lets his jet plummet towards the ground. So sad.

Magnet Commoncold laughs.

Pelican Bluespine: Been there. Done that.

Firebird Telecom: Of course you have.

Firebird Telecom: That's one of the reasons why you like Second Life. Communication is less embarrassing.

Firebird Telecom: No verbal farts or burps to have to worry about. Well. Less of them, at least.

Firebird Telecom: Of course, some people just can't help themselves.

Firebird Telecom scratches Cornelius behind his ear.

Cornelius Treadstone scrolls up and tries to work out if he's just been insulted again.

Firebird Telecom: Why do you think it's so popular with aspies?

Pelican Bluespine: 'Aspies'?

Magnet Commoncold: People with Aspergers.

Pelican Bluespine: Ah.

Magnet Commoncold: We have a guy like that at work. He's our IT liaison person.

Magnet Commoncold: He has his hair slicked back and –

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I swear to God – wears tank tops. A total nerd. Everybody says he's on the spectrum.

Firebird Telecom: You can tell it must be the twenty-first century when lay diagnosis becomes the subject of water cooler gossip.

Firebird Telecom: How I long for the days of just calling someone a retard. You knew where you were back then.

Magnet Commoncold: He's a complete nightmare to talk to. Doesn't make eye contact (he looks at a point somewhere off your left shoulder), ums and ahs and ers constantly, smiles in inappropriate places...

Magnet Commoncold: ...says about as little as he can, in fact. Hardly ever answers your question with anything more than, "Yes, they do that sometimes." It's like he has this little bank of phrases.

Magnet Commoncold: When he sends you an email, on the other hand, it's like you're hearing from a completely different person.

Magnet Commoncold: He's polite, considerate, articulate... even funny at times.

Firebird Telecom: Because when he has the time to compose an email without you staring at him he forgets to be crippled by anxiety and actually focuses on what he wants to say to you.

Magnet Commoncold: Me? A source of anxiety? I'll have you know I have a smile that bees try to pollinate!

Pelican Bluespine: Beauty can be deadly too.

Firebird Telecom: It's all about predictability. Beauty has nothing to do with it. Anyway...

Firebird Telecom: What we're basically saying here is

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that I'm right and you're wrong and voice will never catch on because people will hate it once they actually realise just how incongruous their feeble voices are against the image of strength and grace they've invested all that time and effort in.

Firebird Telecom: Right?

Magnet Commoncold: It's not **all** about image though, is it?

Firebird Telecom: We establish the image in order that we can have the sorts of conversations we imagine a person with that image has.

Firebird Telecom: The image is the passport.

Pelican Bluespine: You know what? I'm going to speak into my microphone right now. You're going to hear me whether you like it or not.

Pelican Bluespine: I'll show you 'boyish'.

Firebird Telecom: Too late. Speakers muted.

Pelican Bluespine: Argh!

Pelican Bluespine: I'm doing it anyway.

Firebird Telecom: Good for you.

Pelican Bluespine: At least Magnet and Cornelius will hear me.

Magnet Commoncold: Sorry. I don't have the voice beta.

Cornelius Treadstone: Me neither.

Pelican Bluespine: Wait a minute... you guys think voice **will** catch on and yet you don't have the beta...

Pelican Bluespine: ...meanwhile, Fire is completely opposed to it and she does?

Magnet Commoncold: Couldn't bothered... just one more thing to make SL lag and crash.

Cornelius Treadstone: I never knew there was one.

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Cornelius Treadstone: First I heard about voice was this conversation.

Firebird Telecom: And as for me, I just enjoy being in the 'experimental' zone. It makes me feel exclusive.

Pelican Bluespine: I give up.

Magnet Commoncold: What about Daveish? What about Mortessa?

Pelican Bluespine: You're expecting the newbies to have the beta?

Magnet Commoncold: You never know.

Daveish Newbury: Not me sorry.

Pelican Bluespine: I'm sorry, but it freaks me out every time I learn that the newb who's been standing there in silence all this time really has been listening in to every word of our conversation.

Pelican Bluespine: No offence, Davish.

Daveish Newbury: Sure haha

Firebird Telecom: Don't mind Pelican, Davish; he's just completely incapable of behaving in a consistent manner...

Firebird Telecom: One minute, he's extolling the virtues of actually talking online so that other people can literally *hear* you...

Firebird Telecom: ...the next he's concerned that some text he's chosen to put into a public chat box has actually been read by somebody else.

Firebird Telecom: You go right ahead and lurk, if you need to. We all go through that stage.

Mortessa Crash: Actually, I *do* have the beta.

Magnet Commoncold: Yay Mortessa!

Pelican Bluespine: Another eavesdropper!

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Firebird Telecom: ffs, stop being so boyish, Pelly.

Magnet Commoncold: Yes, Pelly. Put a lid on it.

Magnet Commoncold: Stop picking on the newbies.

Pelican Bluespine: Fine.

Magnet Commoncold: Put your microphone on and talk so that Mortessa can hear you then. She can tell us whether you sound boyish or not.

Pelican Bluespine: Don't want to now.

Firebird Telecom: Oh God.

Pelican Bluespine: A sulker?

Firebird Telecom: He'll stamp his feet in a moment.

Firebird Telecom: You see? He's nervous, now.

Firebird Telecom: He doesn't want to do it in case his voice doesn't live up to our expectations.

Firebird Telecom: He's worried he's going to disappoint us.

Firebird Telecom: So now he's hiding behind a sulk.

Pelican Bluespine: Ok ok! I'll do it!

Mortessa Crash: But wait a minute. I only met you guys just now.

Mortessa Crash: I haven't formed any opinions as to how any of you will sound.

Mortessa Crash: I don't have any assumptions to compare his voice to.

Pelican Bluespine: My God, she's right. We've been such fools!

Magnet Commoncold: 'Boyish' or 'not boyish' will do for me for now.

Firebird Telecom: I, of course, wish to play no part in this whatsoever.

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Pelican Bluespine: Anyway, how come you even have the beta in the first place, Mortessa?

Mortessa Crash: I asked someone I know to set up Second Life on my computer for me. He's sort of one of those IT guys you were talking about earlier.

Mortessa Crash: He told me I should have the beta viewer because it's got all the latest features.

Pelican Bluespine: And he wasn't wrong. He wasn't wrong.

Mortessa Crash: He rarely is.

Mortessa Crash: That's why I ask him for help!

Magnet Commoncold: Hmm... Are you an alt, by any chance, Mortessa?

Mortessa Crash: A what now?

Magnet Commoncold: An alt... *alt*ernative account.

Mortessa Crash: I don't know what that means.

Pelican Bluespine: It means you open up another account with Second Life in addition to the one you have already.

Pelican Bluespine: If you were an alt, that would mean you had another account that you'd been using for longer.

Magnet Commoncold: Which would mean you're not really a newbie at all.

Mortessa Crash: Ah. Ok.

Mortessa Crash: What would be the point in me pretending to be new, exactly?

Magnet Commoncold: Well, it could be, for example, that we know your regular account and you're here to see if we talk about you behind your back.

Firebird Telecom: Ignore them Mortessa darling. All they're doing is admitting to their own sickeningly perverted

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behaviours.

Firebird Telecom: Don't let their cynicism soil you.

Magnet Commoncold: I'm just proposing an alternative theory for how it is Mortessa has the version of the viewer most newbies would know nothing about.

Magnet Commoncold: You have to admit, it is a little bit odd that she's using that.

Firebird Telecom: Margaret, darling, *surely* you can find more interesting things to think about?

Magnet Commoncold: I'm just saying!

Pelican Bluespine: You should become an SL detective, Magnet.

Magnet Commoncold: I do notice things that others miss, it's true.

Cornelius Treadstone: What a shame there's no 'Dragnet' surname – then you could have been 'Magnet Dragnet'
HAHAHA

Firebird Telecom prepares handkerchief and chloroform for Cornelius.

Mortessa Crash: You get detectives in Second Life? Really?

Magnet Commoncold: Oh sure.

Mortessa Crash: What sort of thing do they do?

Pelican Bluespine: Trap cheats, mostly.

Mortessa Crash: Cheats? Cheats at what?

Magnet Commoncold: Cheats at love!

Firebird Telecom: A large number of people come into Second Life suffering the insane delusion they can somehow find love in here. They 'partner' themselves to the first obedient person that comes along, then they either a) start

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having a virtual affair with someone else, b) suspect their partner of having a virtual affair with someone else or c) both.

Firebird Telecom: In the case of (b) and (c) we find there is a role for a virtual detective...

Firebird Telecom: It's a human disappointment at so many levels.

Mortessa Crash: I'm astonished.

Firebird Telecom: Oh yes.

Firebird Telecom: You will find in here that many of the obstacles to positive interaction have been removed in Second Life, but that the human spirit has prevailed...

Firebird Telecom: ...and found ways of erecting them again.

Magnet Commoncold: True.

Mortessa Crash: People actually pay people to do this?

Magnet Commoncold: Well, *apparently*.

Magnet Commoncold: I've never actually met one of these people, it has to be said.

Magnet Commoncold: But you can find them in search.

Firebird Telecom: Just because they're listed in search you know, that doesn't mean to say they're actually making a living out of it.

Pelican Bluespine: To be honest, I think it's less that there's a booming trade in private investigation and more that lots of people are turning their hand at amateur detective work.

Pelican Bluespine: You get partnered, you settle down and all of a sudden you notice that your partner isn't around so much any more.

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Mortessa Crash: What does 'partnered' mean?

Magnet Commoncold: It's kind of like the Second Life equivalent of marriage.

Mortessa Crash: You're kidding me?!

Mortessa Crash: People get married in this game?!

Pelican Bluespine: Don't call it a game. It's not a game.

Mortessa Crash: It's not?

Pelican Bluespine: It's not.

Magnet Commoncold: What brings you to Second Life, Mortessa?

Magnet Commoncold: Why are you here?

Mortessa Crash: I heard that it was popular and I wanted to check it out.

Magnet Commoncold: And that's it?

Mortessa Crash: That's it.

Magnet Commoncold: No other reason?

Mortessa Crash: No other reason.

Firebird Telecom: It's like watching the questioning technique of Hercule Poirot...

Firebird Telecom: ...after he's just been slipped a dose of strychnine.

Magnet Commoncold: What are you expecting to find here? What is it you have heard about SL that has most piqued your curiosity?

Mortessa Crash: I heard that people can spend hours on it.

Mortessa Crash: And I wanted to know why.

Mortessa Crash: And how. I mean *how* can people spend that amount of time in here all in one go? What is there to do?

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Mortessa Crash: How do they suspend their own boredom for that long?

Magnet Commoncold: Ok. 'Alt' theory dismissed.

Magnet Commoncold: You have to be a newbie to come out with a question like that.

Mortessa Crash: So explain it to me.

Mortessa Crash: What is there in this place to keep me here?

Pelican Bluespine: You sound so sceptical about the value of the metaverse and yet you went to the trouble of getting someone over to set your computer up for it.

Mortessa Crash: It isn't that I'm sceptical, actually. Not at all.

Magnet Commoncold: So why are you here? This sounds like more than just a passing interest. I can't believe you're here on a whimsey.

Mortessa Crash: Is it possible to employ a Second Life detective to see if they can find somebody who you think is on SL?

Magnet Commoncold: Eh? What?

Pelican Bluespine: You mean you give the detective the target's real life details and they found out if they have an account?

Mortessa Crash: Yes. Kind of.

Pelican Bluespine: Probably. I guess so, at least.

Magnet Commoncold: It would be a breach of the Terms of Service, though.

Mortessa Crash: 'Terms of Service'?

Magnet Commoncold: The thing you click agreement to when you come into Second Life for the first time.

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Mortessa Crash: And what happens if you breach the Terms of Use, then?

Magnet Commoncold: In theory, you could get chucked out, I guess. Banned.

Pelican Bluespine: So... you're trying to find out if someone you know is on Second Life?

Mortessa Crash: Not exactly.

Firebird Telecom: You're trying to find somebody you already know is on SL, aren't you my dear?

Pelican Bluespine: Oh my God – are you a stalker?

Mortessa Crash: I'm not a stalker, no.

Magnet Commoncold: Like she'd really admit it if she was.

Mortessa Crash: I promise you, I'm not a stalker.

Magnet Commoncold: Exactly what a stalker would say.

Pelican Bluespine: Who are you looking for?

Magnet Commoncold: Is this some sort of alimony thing? Are you trying to find your ex-husband, or something?

Mortessa Crash: No alimony, no.

Pelican Bluespine: Who, then? A work colleague? A fit looking neighbour? A celebrity? Some guy you see walking his dog every morning at 6:00am on your morning jog through the park?

Magnet Commoncold: Oh! Is this some sort of criminal investigation? Are you a police officer?

Mortessa Crash: Ok, I'll tell you. It's nothing quite so spectacular as any of those things, though. Not really.

Mortessa Crash: You'll probably be disappointed.

Mortessa Crash: I'm looking for my brother.

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“A second life!” he called back to me. And then he faded into nothing. And then I woke up, and it was a minute before my alarm was due to go off, and those words were stuck there in my mind, but fading fast.

Dreams about Tony are gifts and I treasure every one of them. Even the bad ones, by which I mean even the ones where I get told it was me that drove him away. It's a six year old's understanding of something I get much more clearly now, but it doesn't stop the six year old from thinking it, and it doesn't stop me from being angry with the six year old. I treasure even the bad dreams, because it's a chance to remember how he looked and how he smelled and how he sounded. It's a chance to remember what it was like to be physically close to him. Dreams about Tony don't come often enough. I've tried inducing them. I've tried thinking to myself during the day that, “Tonight I will dream about Tony.” But it doesn't seem to work. Of course, I might be wrong about that. It might be that I do dream about him – maybe every night – and then I just forget all about it. I never remember dreams when I get woken by my alarm. They seem to be made of spider silk; my alarm clock smashes through, cuts the anchors so the rest of the web shrivels into a wrinkled scab. This morning, I got lucky. I woke before my alarm went off. I woke with my eyes shut and I lay in bed for a full thirty seconds or so thinking I was back in my bed at Sydney Street, because back when I lived there I would dream of Tony almost every night and wake up wondering what he was doing.

And that was strange as well. As my consciousness pulled itself up fully into the light, I became aware of where

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I was and where I wasn't; I realised I was in that other place now, that 'grown up' place where I had to get myself up and do the morning sequence of my own volition. But, even as I became aware of this, I knew I would be able to hold on to the Sydney Street image for just a few seconds longer if I kept my eyes tightly closed. Although it wasn't actually an 'image', as such. It was more of a spatial awareness. I could sense the door being beside me rather than on the other side of my bed. I could sense the landing and the stairs outside it rather than the apartment hallway and the door at the end that leads out to the fourth floor corridor. I could sense the window at the foot of my bed and the street lamp outside that always kept my room from ever being in total darkness. And then I thought about what it was like to wake up in that house, about Philip listening to Radio One in the kitchen with his paper and his glass of orange juice, about the table all laid out with empty bowls and the boxes of breakfast cereal waiting on the counter. I thought about the wait outside the bathroom. I thought about the coats on the hooks at the bottom of the stairs. I thought about the walk to school and how I used to trail behind because it was the only time in the day that I got to be by myself other than when I was actually sleeping.

And I thought about having to move school and about weeping in class and about coming home at the end of the day and the question of dinner and the vote that I always ended up losing. Probably, I didn't always lose; but that's how I remember it.

But, most of all, I thought about the words that still echoed in my thoughts. I held them there in my mind,

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looping them over and over, keeping them as fresh as I possibly could. And, not because I was especially interested in the words themselves, but because by repeating them in his voice I could hear his voice in my head. It shocks me now how hard it is for me to remember what he sounded like. And looked like. I repeated them over and over to myself - "A second life!" - enjoying the one second sound byte until the phone rang and I got told about a cancellation. And when I put the phone down at the end of the conversation I didn't think any more about Tony or my dream or the three words he had left me with, because the phone had acted like my alarm clock and severed the last of the anchor lines. I probably would have never thought about that dream ever again...

...and then someone at work used those words in a completely different context and pulled them right back up into conscious thought. And I asked him to come to my house and set my computer up for something. I told him there was something I wanted to try...

The dearly departing

And still they come here: bright faced, eager, innocent; looking for money, looking for love, looking for meaning. Surely this sort of thing should get a mention somewhere on some sort of national mental health index: the number of people who think life in a virtual world compares favourably with life in the actual world expressed as a percentage of the total adult population (and a break down over the standard age ranges); that sort of thing. In this case, the societal failure is two fold: firstly for believing such a thing could be true in the first place and secondly for not learning from the mistakes of others. How many years, now, have people stood by and watched as we have plugged ourselves into non-existent places? Has no-one bothered too look at this in more detail? Has no-one bothered to think about what's happening to us whilst we stare at this illuminated rectangle? Where does this lead to? Where does it take us as human beings? Bit by bit by bit I have removed myself from air and living things and *life*. I feel gorged on artificial moments. I

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feel fat and bloated and slow. I feel sick at the very thought of even another minute spent in the synthetic haze. I want my life back.

I can barely remember why I even came here in the first place. Oh yes. A dream. A sentence at the end of a dream. I should learn to pay less attention to such nonsense. I'm a fool for coming here and thinking my search would be successful. If I'd heard that Tony was staying somewhere in Manchester, I would hardly have taken the next bus up as my strategy and started asking people in the street at random if they knew him.

And still they come. A new generation sweeps in, like freshers at the fair, and they're not in the slightest bit interested in what us oldies have to say about this place. New places; old patterns. They love Second Life, just like we used to. They'll go through all the phases: the excitement, the wonder, the boredom, the meaningful engagement activity, the politics, the disillusionment, the endless restarts, the thrill seeking, the withdrawal symptoms following the first escape attempts and finally, inevitably, the resentment. It all lies before them; it's a new road still, but the wear is now beginning to show. Just up ahead is the place where they start to complain about lag and transaction issues – aka Level One dissatisfaction – then it's stoicism all the way until the straw comes along that bursts the balloon of growing anger: *why is it* that we *still* can't display text on the side of a prim? *How is it* that survey after survey can be sent to residents about what features might convince them to subscribe/renew their subscriptions and still not a single one of these ideas be implemented? *Don't they realise* that every

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time they start an announcement with words like, “We really value the thoughts of the community” we now know there will follow an announcement which directly contradicts that very sentiment?

Aka Level two dissatisfaction.

I don't suppose my story is all that different from anyone else's, not really. Something rather different from the normal reasons pulled me in, perhaps, but I got sucked pretty much into the same issues as everyone else. All for nothing. Over two years of evenings pissed into the metaverse. A total waste of time.

Tickle Gently: Congratulations, Bush.

Bush Williams: What's that, Tickle?

Tickle Gently: I nominate you to be the last person I ever speak to in Second Life.

Bush Williams: Oh.

Bush Williams: Ok.

Bush Williams: You're quitting?

Tickle Gently: I'm quitting.

Bush Williams: I suppose I should ask why?

Tickle Gently: Much as I would probably revel in a re-telling of the details, I very much doubt you'd find anything in them that was particularly original.

Bush Williams: SL fatigue. I see it all the time.

Tickle Gently: Yes.

Tickle Gently: I came close to quitting a few months back, but I managed to muster up the strength to carry on for a little bit longer.

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Bush Williams: I've thought about it a couple of times.

Bush Williams: Came close just the once. Couldn't go through with it, though.

Bush Williams: Still... if you have to go then you have to go.

Bush Williams: No sense in putting off the inevitable, right?

Tickle Gently: Thank you.

Bush Williams: For what?

Tickle Gently: For not trying to talk me into staying.

Bush Williams: Not my job to do that.

Bush Williams: In any case, that *is* why you chose to talk to a complete stranger about it, isn't it?

Tickle Gently: Of course.

Bush Williams: Why *are* you telling me? Why not just go? If you didn't want any fuss, that is.

Tickle Gently: I probably should have done exactly that. But it didn't seem quite right, somehow.

Bush Williams: You wanted somebody to say goodbye to?

Tickle Gently: Yes, that's it exactly.

Bush Williams: I agree that's a better way of doing it.

Tickle Gently: Saying goodbye to a stranger, how poetic. That could be a song title.

Bush Williams: Not quite a stranger...

Bush Williams: I suppose I represent Second Life...

Bush Williams: I'm the embodiment of all residents... their collective speaker.

Tickle Gently: Let's not make this too complicated.

Bush Williams: Sorry.

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Bush Williams: I'm a little nervous that you're going to get all emotional on me. I should warn you, I won't be very good at handling that.

Tickle Gently: Don't worry, I'm too tired for emotional.

Tickle Gently: In fact, there's a tranquillity about this moment that I'm quite enjoying.

Bush Williams: You know, I can almost see a business in this...

Tickle Gently: Seeing people off, you mean?

Bush Williams: Yes!

Bush Williams: I could erect a little flower garden or something. Perhaps a little chapel. Play some gentle music. Maybe a curtain you get to disappear behind.

Tickle Gently: I'm worried now you're going to turn me into Soylent Green.

Bush Williams: haha

Bush Williams: So how come you chose me to share this with? Was I literally just the first guy that came along?

Bush Williams: I mean, you could have chosen some real assholes to share this with.

Bush Williams: Boy were you lucky!

Tickle Gently laughs.

Tickle Gently: I came here last night.

Tickle Gently: Looking for you, in fact.

Bush Williams: You were looking for me?

Tickle Gently: I *was*.

Tickle Gently: But you weren't here. I sent you an IM, by the way.

Bush Williams: Ah. They get capped.

Tickle Gently: Right. I should have thought about that.

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Tickle Gently: It's such a hassle, though; all that fussing about with note cards.

Bush Williams: I agree.

Tickle Gently: I'm lazy, I know.

Tickle Gently: In any case, it was rather a half hearted message.

Bush Williams: That was when you decided?

Tickle Gently: Pretty much about then, yeah.

Bush Williams: Just so we're clear, you're not quitting because you didn't find me here when you came looking for me, right?

Tickle Gently: Don't worry, Bush. You're not the cause of my discontent.

Tickle Gently: It was inevitable. Yesterday was when I at last realised that.

Bush Williams: Good.

Bush Williams: 'Cos if I thought you held a grudge, I might out of guilt attempt to resuscitate you.

Tickle Gently: No grudge.

Tickle Gently: No resuscitation, please.

Bush Williams: Why did you come looking for me in the first place?

Tickle Gently: Actually, someone you know sent me over here to look at your builds.

Tickle Gently: A guy called Affable.

Bush Williams: Aff sent you here? He actually recommended me? Ha!

Bush Williams: He thinks I'm a nut case, you know.

Tickle Gently: He did mention that.

Tickle Gently: I believe the word he used to describe

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your work was 'traumatic'.

Bush Williams laughs.

Bush Williams: His problem is he has no taste. But I like his ideas about nostalgia.

Tickle Gently: Not many people have your sort of taste though Bush, do they?!

Bush Williams: Awww. You're going to give me a hard time too?

Tickle Gently: Actually, no.

Tickle Gently: You see, that's why Affable sent me here.

Tickle Gently: I let it slip that I like this sort of stuff too.

Bush Williams: You do? This stuff? Really? Wow!

Tickle Gently: Can I take that to mean your sales are not good.

Bush Williams: hahaha

Bush Williams: Actually, I don't sell. I'm not really interested in selling.

Tickle Gently: Really? Why?

Bush Williams: These things are too personal to me. It would be like selling the family photographs.

Tickle Gently: I understand that.

Tickle Gently: Better than you'd probably think, in fact.

Tickle Gently: But you have a good eye. Wow.

Tickle Gently: Just look at this stuff.

Tickle Gently: Texture rezzing only just now completing.

Tickle Gently: Gosh.

Tickle Gently: That's a great fabric on the sofa. I haven't seen it before.

Bush Williams: That one I uploaded myself.

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Tickle Gently: How did you source it? Old clothes at the back of the cupboard?

Bush Williams: As a matter of fact, I think that one's from a shirt I bought from a charity shop originally.

Bush Williams: Albeit quite some time ago. When I was a student, I think.

Tickle Gently grins.

Tickle Gently: Oh my.

Tickle Gently: Just look at your Danish Modern.

Bush Williams: Oh you like it?

Tickle Gently: It's giving me goose bumps just to look at it!

Bush Williams grins.

Bush Williams: It's nice to have someone here who actually understands this junk!

Tickle Gently: Please don't call it that.

Tickle Gently: Oh!

Tickle Gently: You have a Ladderax!!

Bush Williams: Yes! Haha

Bush Williams: Reconstructed from vague childhood memories and a few pictures I found on the Internet.

Tickle Gently: It's quite superb. I'm speechless.

Bush Williams: Isn't it a beauty?

Tickle Gently: Would you like to see mine?

Bush Williams: You made a Ladderax?! You're kidding.

Tickle Gently: Yes, I made one. And plenty more 60s/70s stuff besides.

Tickle Gently: I used to sell it. I had a shop.

Tickle Gently: Although not as this avatar.

Bush Williams: Right. I was wondering about that – I

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noticed your avatar is fairly recent.

Tickle Gently: Nosing through my profile, were you?

Bush Williams: Guilty as charged.

Tickle Gently: I do that a lot too. Now then...

Tickle Gently: Let me see if I can find that Ladderax.

Tickle Gently: I think I copied all my stock over... let me see...

Tickle Gently: Ah yes.

Tickle Gently: Oh. I can't rez here.

Bush Williams: Oh right. Let me just fix that.

Bush Williams: There. Try now.

Tickle Gently: Nope.

Tickle Gently: Parcel full.

Tickle Gently: Too many prims for your land!

Bush Williams: Damn.

Tickle Gently: No worries. It doesn't matter.

Bush Williams: I have 13 available. How many do you need?

Tickle Gently: It's something like 27 I think.

Bush Williams: Gosh.

Tickle Gently: Yeah.

Tickle Gently: It's all the handles.

Tickle Gently: Plus I made separate drawers, which I probably shouldn't have bothered with.

Bush Williams: Well now I just *have* to see it!

Bush Williams: Let me clean up my build area. It's up above us.

Tickle Gently: Ok.

Bush Williams: Fly with me?

Tickle Gently: Sure.

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Bush Williams: I don't want to leave you by yourself, you see.

Tickle Gently: Haha.

Tickle Gently: Don't worry.

Tickle Gently: I won't do myself in before saying goodbye. In fact...

Tickle Gently: A sky platform could be quite handy...

Bush Williams: Great.

Bush Williams: I knew I should have erected a fence.

Tickle Gently: lol

Bush Williams: Here we are.

Tickle Gently: Ohhh. So much stuff.

Bush Williams: Yeah.

Bush Williams: So creating a space should be easy enough.

Bush Williams: Let me just get rid of all those prims in the far corner.

Tickle Gently: Ok.

Bush Williams: There.

Bush Williams: We now have 34 prims free.

Tickle Gently: Great.

Tickle Gently: That'll definitely do it.

Bush Williams: Put it in this space here, if you can.

Tickle Gently: Will do.

Tickle Gently: There! Success!

Bush Williams: Still rezzing for me. Grey shapes.

Tickle Gently: I've added in some scripted movement and sound effects too.

Tickle Gently: You click on the cabinet doors and they open.

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Tickle Gently: But give it an extra few seconds after it's rezzed before you try so that the sound files have enough time to load.

Tickle Gently: I'm very proud of this piece, you know. Of all the things I've made, this is my favourite.

Tickle Gently: Didn't sell a single one though.

Tickle Gently: No-one has any taste. No-one.

Tickle Gently: Can you see it yet? Has it rezzed?

Bush Williams: Yes.

Tickle Gently: So?

Tickle Gently: Don't keep it to yourself!

Tickle Gently: What do you think?

Bush Williams: I'm speechless.

Bush Williams: I don't know what to say.

Tickle Gently: You like it?

Bush Williams: 'Like' it? It's amazing.

Bush Williams: I have goose bumps up and down my arms right now?

Tickle Gently: You do? Yay!

Bush Williams: This is **exactly** like the one we used to have when I was a boy.

Tickle Gently: It is?

Bush Williams: It's... amazing.

Tickle Gently: You used to have a Ladderax like this? **Just** like this?

Bush Williams: The exact same layout.

Bush Williams: We used to have a record player on that cabinet. I remember that because...

Tickle Gently: Your father used to play a certain James Last LP on it when it was time to tidy up?

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Silence in Second Life is such a difficult thing to gauge. Pauses, gaps in the conversation, could be due to so many different things. The person at the other end could be distracted by someone with them in RL. They could be taking a phone call. They could have run to the bathroom. They could be talking to someone at the door or banging on the wall to get the neighbours to keep the noise down. They could be making coffee or raiding the fridge or hanging the washing on the line outside. They could be tending to their cat or shouting at their dog. They could be feeding a child. They could be sticking a plaster over a cut. Their computer could have frozen. They could have just received an important email. They could be responding to IMs from somebody else. They could be filing out their tax return in another application, juggling you with their work.

Or they could be staring at the monitor in shock.

Tickle Gently: Are you still there?

Bush Williams: Yes.

Bush Williams: How did you know about the tidying up record?

Tickle Gently: Isn't it obvious?

Tickle Gently: My father did that too.

Tickle Gently: My father...

Tickle Gently: *Our* father.

Bush Williams: This can't be true.

Tickle Gently: Tony? is it really you?

Bush Williams: Tony...

Bush Williams: I haven't been called that for a very long

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time.

Tickle Gently: Oh my God.

Tickle Gently: I don't believe it.

Tickle Gently: Tony... I have been looking for you for such a long, long time.

Bush Williams: Tina...

Bush Williams: They said you didn't want contact...

Tickle Gently: They said a lot of things.

Bush Williams: I knew you were still alive. I knew it.

Tickle Gently: I knew it too.

Bush Williams cries.

Tickle Gently sobs.

The system is big. The system is all-knowing. The system is wise. The system pervades everything. The system does what is best.

Bollocks. The system creaks – it always has. The system staggers. The system stumbles from one crisis to the next. Its primary aim is survival, which it manages – but only just. The system tackles the stairs but at the top it grabs hold of the handrail for support, and it wheezes and it rasps as it struggles to get its breath back.

After the incident, it was decided that Tony and I were to be taken into care. We were placed with a family in Falmouth, originally. It lasted for about four months. I remember crying in my bedroom a lot and the foster mother (I can't recall her name, it was something beginning with M I think) telling me I had to be a big girl now. We turned seven a few weeks into the placement, but the social workers only

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realised a week after our birthday. We got given some books we already had.

Tony got into a lot of trouble at school for his behaviour almost straight away. I think he thought we'd get sent back home if they couldn't handle us. The foster father – George (his name I won't forget) – got angry at him because he had to go into school all the time to talk to the teachers about all the things that Tony had done. I remember him screaming at us that “no amount of fucking money is worth this hassle.” His description of us as “spoiled little shits” was later revised to “they need some sort of special help” at the placement review meeting that got called, and the social worker went on to write this up as “T & T are troubled youngsters and the family are struggling to meet their needs.” There were no foster placements available at that point in the county for two children together, so Tony and I got split up. Tony went to stay with a family in Penzance and I got moved out to carers in Plymouth.

The system creaks. The system staggers. Once we were separated, once we'd been allocated different social workers – because eighty miles was too great a distance for a single worker to operate across (but not too great a distance to lie between siblings when nothing else was available) – our cases became disconnected. Weekly contact in Bodmin quickly faded to monthly contact. Then my social worker changed and it was a while before anyone bothered to tell her I had a brother (or perhaps she just didn't read beyond the first few pages of my file). By then, Tony's placement had changed again and his new carers told social services they were too busy to arrange contact. I remember that my

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own carers were very vocal about how disgraceful this was in conversation at the diner table, but when it came to face to face conflict, Philip and Tracey were weaklings and they accepted the apologies of the system without much protest at all in the end. Like it was them who needed apologising to. And then my social worker got changed again. A few months later we heard a report that Tony had been moved to a residential school elsewhere in the country. I asked my social worker where he'd been taken to and why and, at first, she thought I was talking about a completely different child (who just happened to have the same name) and told me my brother hadn't gone anywhere. It took several weeks before that error finally got noticed. By then, Tony's file had been passed on to the other authority where the residential school was. My carers tried pushing my social worker to arrange a contact, but their hearts weren't in it when they realised how far away it was. The last thing I ever heard about him was he'd been adopted by a "very religious couple" who had then moved out to the states. I got told that by Philip, who had received a phone call from my social worker, who had spoken to the Head Teacher of the residential school. No-one knew quite how this had happened without me being involved in the process, but that was because they were assuming there was a role for my opinion in it in the first place. In fact, it was just a matter of the social worker assigned to the adoption case seeing that there was 'no contact' with me in Tony's file and assuming there was good reason for that. The adoption was done in a hurry. The couple that adopted Tony left an address in Florida behind, but it was a short-term rent whilst they got themselves sorted

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out properly. Possibly they did leave an address behind when they moved on a few weeks later, but if they did then the landlord lost it. We were left with a name and nothing else. And 'Smith' is a very common name in the states. I shall look forward to hearing their explanation – if they are still alive – as to why they never even attempted to arrange contact for their adopted son with his twin sister. I have no doubt it will include the words 'we thought it in both your interests'.

Looking back on it now, it seems incredible how I just accepted that he was gone, out of my reach. Then again, I was numb for several years. I wanted Tony desperately, of course, but what I *really* wanted was for things to go back to how they had been. I wanted things to go back to normal, before the police had come knocking, before I'd opened my mouth, before I'd found the pictures in the drawer.

Father died of cancer eight years into his sentence. Mother's term was only eighteen months – she maintains she didn't know anything about any of it to this day – and she was released for good behaviour after twelve of those. Even so, we weren't allowed any contact. I didn't see her again until I was twenty-two, in fact. In theory, I could have seen her when I was eighteen, but her name change, several changes of address in the intervening years and the usual bureaucratic reluctance to let me find out anything about anyone stretched the process out for well over a year. I was adopted by then myself, in fact, so the authority had pretty much nothing to do with me by the time I entered into adulthood. Of course, she could have come looking for me. But my mother was a broken woman the moment she opened

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the front door that night. There was nothing left of the woman I remembered by the time we were reunited. She told me she hadn't wanted to bring any more pain into my life by interfering, that she had forfeited her right to inclusion in my affairs. I didn't recognise her. But I recognised the Ladderax.

At first – but only at first – people had looked at us with tears in their eyes. I didn't really understand it. Later, I realised it was that people thought that we were the victims. I wanted to tell them that we had never been touched, that our lives had been simple and happy and peaceful, right up to the moment of that knock on the door – we were not, after all, the right 'category' to have been in any danger. I wanted to tell them it would be alright if they just put back everything the way it had been before. Those were the moments when people would squat so they could look me in the eye and tell me, “Tina, that's just not part of the plan, I'm afraid.” I wondered if that meant that what I thought had been good in my life – all of it – had in fact been bad. I wondered if that made me bad for thinking about it, for dreaming about it, for yearning for its return. Eventually, the yearning subsided as my new life took hold – exactly as they had told me it would – but I still fantasised about having my old life back again somehow. I didn't care that it might be wrong. I didn't care that it might be evil. It had been about drawing pictures on the coffee table at weekends, not about going to the football at Home Park. How could that be evil? It had been about listening to Terry Wogan on the radio in the mornings, not Dave Lee Travis. It had been about watching the BBC on Saturday evenings, not ITV. It had

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been about Miss Reynolds and Oak Class, not about Mrs Daniels and Class Four (and all the other classes and all the other teachers that followed). It was about long hair, not pigtails. It was about home knitted jumpers, not cardigans bought from C&A.

I didn't care that it might be wrong. It was my secret pleasure to think about it and I did so regularly.

Bush Williams: You came here specifically to look for me?

Tickle Gently: Just for you, Tony.

Tickle Gently: And to think, we were that close to quitting.

Bush Williams: 'We'?

Tickle Gently: My avatars and I.

In the end, I did everything they told me to. I settled down in school. I behaved. I studied. I left college and got a job. I created myself according to the new parameters that had been defined for me. I adopted the new account provided and Tina2 was the version that grew up big and strong, and dragged me into the adult world. I suppose we all hit moments when a new avatar is required. But I still thought about my little one – the original me – the first Tina – my poor, discarded alt. I thought of her playing in the 1970s living room with the brown carpet and the yellow walls and the Danish modern Ladderax, and the James Last LP on the turntable when it was time to tidy up.

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With my brother.