

An Invitation Out
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Characters:

Wridget - male, mid 20s; popular designer of custom avatars

ButtercupEGL - female, late 20s; Wridget's older sister

Scandalicious7 - female, 70, but her avatar is 19; Wridget's aunt

XLucidialX - male? mid 20s; famed A.I programmer

FlyByNightSOA - male, 30s; ButtercupEGL's husband

Flutterbye99 - female, 20's; popular blogger and socialite

ReverendVariety.org - male, 50s; theological technology expert

Raskin - female mid 30s; an Outdweller, friend of ButtercupEGL

The Maid - female 20's; a computer program

The Butler - male, a computer program; played by the actor playing XLucidialX

A note on pronunciation:

Names should be pronounced the way you would read an e-mail address or IM handle - name first, letters separately. For instance, X. Lucidial. X. Or Buttercup E.G.L. It is considered formal etiquette to say a name with all its letters or numbers. The more familiarly acquainted characters are, the more they leave these off, as a sign of affection.

Setting: An online chat room in the somewhat distant future.

Act One

Blank space. In the midst of it, WRIDGET, dressed in a high tech dream of Victorian finery, stands next to a woman in a futuristic twist on the traditional MAID uniform. Curiously, she has no face, just a blank, featureless head. Wridget peers at her with deep concentration.

WRIDGET

Hair color ... ginger. Shade 342. 14% blonde highlights, shade 11, thickness volume 6.5.

Wridget pulls back the blank scalp to reveal flowing red hair.

WRIDGET

Length, just about to ...

He gently pulls the hair down to the maid's formless chin.

WRIDGET

... there.

MAID

(calm, emotionless voice)

Would you like to save your changes now?

WRIDGET

It is far too sensible a thing to like doing, but I suppose I must.

MAID

Custom avatar amendments saved.

WRIDGET

And now that the hair is safe, I have no choice but to make the face especially daring.

His hands carefully sculpt every feature of the maid's face, giving rise to a forehead, eyebrows, eyes, nose, etc. He lingers a while on the lips, getting them just right. When he is finished, the maid looks to be a complete, flesh-and-blood person.

MAID

Save avatar as complete?

Wridget looks her over.

WRIDGET

Hmm. A few more freckles just ... (brushes a finger across her cheeks) there. As you were.

MAID

Physical manifestation achieved.

The Maid is distracted by something Wridget can't see.

MAID

Unauthorized user detected in chat room. Unauthorized user -

WRIDGET

But I've hardly built it yet. (sighs) XLucidentialx, is that you?

XLucidentialX is a rather fey young gentleman with lavender hair and fingernails, which go nicely with his neo-Victorian ensemble. He appears from nowhere in particular.

XLUCIDENTIALX

Wridget, my lad, hope you don't mind my popping in like this. The Nets are absolutely clogged with boredom.

WRIDGET

Do you mean clogged as in "blocked", or just wearing very tedious wooden shoes?

XLUCIDENTIALX

Take your pick. I can't be expected to do all the work for you.

WRIDGET

You could at least let me finish programming the room before hacking into it. You're so presumptuous on days when you're a man.

XLUCIDENTIALX

I am always presumptuous. When I'm a woman, I just feel the need to hide it better.

XLucidentialX notices the Maid with a gasp of pleasure.

XLUCIDENTIALX

Your latest design, isn't she?

Wridget nods.

XLUCIDENTIALX

It's ... lovely without quite being beautiful. And the work you do with freckles! I daresay this is your finest programming to date. You will pass her on to me when you're done, won't you?

XLUCIDENIALX (cont'd)

I'd cut quite the dashing figure in an avatar like this. It may even make its way into my permanent rotation.

WRIDGET

You do so love variety. It almost makes one wonder ...

XLUCIDENIALX

Of course it does. I've calibrated myself for just that effect. Nothing makes a person so vain as thinking they truly *know* someone. Keep people guessing and you keep them humble.

WRIDGET

I didn't realize humility was a virtue you had interest in.

XLUCIDENIALX

Virtues are much like loans - you often need them from other people, but there's no point in requesting one from yourself.

MAID

Personality requirements?

WRIDGET

Install Martha 3.0 Protocol.

XLUCIDENIALX

You can't be serious?!

MAID

Protocol installation completed. (Sudden cockney accent from here on) What else do you fancy, gov'nor?

WRIDGET

Room externalization, please.

XLUCIDENIALX

You're going to saddle this marvellous custom avatar with an over-the-counter personality?!

MAID

What size, sir?

WRIDGET

Accommodations for nine. We don't want to overwhelm the poor dear.

Walls appear out of the blankness.

WRIDGET

And I like the Martha 3.0. It's ... comforting.

XLUCIDENIALX

So are sweat pants and grandparents, but you don't trot either of them out in public!

MAID

Any style in particular, sir?

WRIDGET

Nouveau Victorian, please.

The walls flip around to reveal elaborate wallpaper, draperies and gilded trim.

WRIDGET

With the properly excessive amount of French Windows.

Several large French windows join together with the walls.

MAID

And what sort of view you fancy seeing through 'em?

WRIDGET

Oh - flying through the Andes.

The majestic Andes mountains soar by lazily behind the windows.

XLUCIDENIALX

If you were so hard up for decent A.I., you could have said so.

WRIDGET

I wanted something simple, which isn't exactly your forte. (to the Maid) Download a list of hors d'oeuvres apps for my perusal, please.

XLUCIDENIALX

It's still shoddy programming, Wridget. Your sister deserves better for her first time back in - how long has it been now?

WRIDGET

Over a year, I think.

XLUCIDENIALX

A year off-line. It's unthinkable!

WRIDGET

She claims it's been quite relaxing.

XLUCIDENIALX

Relaxing? Being cut off from any sort of life that matters with nothing but larvae to keep her company?

WRIDGET

It's called a baby, I believe.

XLUCIDENIALX

'Baby', 'infant', 'miracle of life' - whatever you call it, it's still people larvae.

WRIDGET

You've given yourself away there. You're clearly a man. Admit it.

XLUCIDENIALX

Because I don't happen to like babies? It's just that tendency toward generalization that keeps you content with Martha 3.0. You create this dazzling form, then stuff it full of standard cockney stereotypes? I see a surly, slightly homesick Norwegian named Astrid whose exterior gruffness rises from a life lived at the margins, which has not completely suppressed a genuine empathy with those who suffer. What say we keep it interesting and make her a kleptomaniac?

WRIDGET

Leave her alone, please. I'll see those apps now, Martha.

The Maid produces a fancy-looking menu from out of nowhere, and hands it to Wridget.

WRIDGET

When was the last time you took off your VR suit, Luci? The last time you stepped out of your compartment, and took a good, sharp breath of reality?

XLUCIDENIALX

I don't deal with reality, Wridget. I leave that to the people with no imagination.

WRIDGET

I've unplugged several times this year - to visit Buttercup and the baby - and each time, my mind was positively crammed with ideas!

XLUCIDENIALX

That's just what I object to. Ideas should be taken one at a time. Otherwise, they all run together and congeal into something horrid, like philosophy.

WRIDGET

No, there's a weight to things out there that you don't feel online, no matter how good the technology gets. Buttercup was quite right to insist on experiencing it. And I am beginning to wonder why so few people do nowadays. (To the Maid) Download the garlic shrimp croquette, stuffed mushrooms, the mini mignons in red wine sauce, and Nipples of Venus for dessert.

He hands the menu to the Maid, who exits. XLucidentialx draws a list from out of his jacket.

XLUCIDENIALX

Which brings us to why you invited one Scandalicious7.

WRIDGET

You hacked my guest list too?

XLUCIDENIALX

It's my highest form of compliment.

WRIDGET

Surely you don't object to inviting my old dowager aunt?

XLUCIDENIALX

It was my understanding that she disapproved of your sister's lifestyle, so -

WRIDGET

Aunt Scandalicious7 never approves of anything - what do you think old dowager aunts are for? It's quite the handy system, really. She disapproves and feels superior, we defy her and feel independent, and everyone ends up entirely satisfied.

XLUCIDENIALX

You haven't answered the question.

WRIDGET

What makes you so certain that there's anything to tell?

XLUCIDENIALX

Your demeanor, your tone, how your hairstyle points slightly upwards in a gesture of cautious optimism - You're preparing for something but I can't quite figure out what, and it's infuriating, so come out with it at once.

Beat.

WRIDGET

You're right, XLucidentialX. It *does* feel wonderful to keep people guessing.

The Maid enters again.

MAID

Scandalicious7 requests entrance to the room, sir.

WRIDGET

Ah, there's the old battle ax now. (To the Maid) Show her in, please.

The Maid opens the door to reveal SCANDALICIOUS7, an absolutely stunning girl who looks to be in her late teens. She strikes a grand pose in the doorway, wearing an ornate dress that's just a tad too revealing.

MAID

Scandalicious7 has entered the room.

XLUCIDENIALX

Well, 20 years of her has. Where's the other two thirds?

SCANDALICIOUS7

It's 19 and a half, not 20. If you're going to be insulting, at least be accurate about it.

WRIDGET

Really Aunt Scandy, that's young, even for you -

SCANDALICIOUS7

I was perfectly content to settle at 27, before people began to comment on how respectable it was. As for your appearance, nephew, I am more disappointed than usual. A man of your talents, in an avatar the exact age you actually are - I've never seen such a vulgar lack of ambition in all my life.

WRIDGET

I suppose I find other people more interesting. And with that in mind, Aunt Scandalicious7, I have something very important to tell you.

XLUCIDENIALX

I knew it - I knew that's why you invited her. But now at least, the suspense will be over.

WRIDGET

Martha, initiate private chat.

XLUCIDENIALX

Oh, that's just unfair -

MAID

Private chat initiated.

Lights focus on Wridget and Scandalicious7. XLucidentialX continues to protest, but no sound comes out. Eventually, he gives up and focuses his attention on the Maid, whispering something in her ear which makes her twitch robotically.

WRIDGET

You'll pardon my jumping at the opportunity before the other guests arrive, but I'd rather expected you to be fashionably late.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Oh, lateness hasn't been fashionable in ages, possibly even weeks. Really, you should pay more attention to things.

WRIDGET

Lately, my attention has been on one person in particular - Flutterbye99.

SCANDALICIOUS7

So has mine.

WRIDGET

What?

SCANDALICIOUS7

She's the first one to arrive anywhere worth arriving at. It's been my secret ambition this season to arrive at a party before her, and tonight I've finally succeeded.

WRIDGET

It's her that I wanted to speak to you about. I'm going to ask for her hand in marriage tonight.

SCANDALICIOUS7

You'll do nothing of the kind! This family has already endured the shame and ridicule of one traditional marriage. I shall not stand for another!

WRIDGET

I'm afraid I'm quite decided on the matter.

SCANDALICIOUS7

You're far too young to be decided on anything! Decision making requires a steady narrowing of options that only age and insurance companies can provide.

WRIDGET

Be that as it may, I remain quite firm.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Marriage will take care of that quickly enough. Oh, I know the siren call of love and commitment all too well, but I always remembered that I had duties and obligations! Your avatars *must* be seen as cutting edge to retain value. You know that. Even now, there are men and women all over the Nets who are relying on you to behave like a proper gentleman and shack up with the dear girl.

WRIDGET

It's no longer enough, Auntie. I'm tired of staring into a woman's designer eyes reflecting the designer moonlight. At the end of the day, I'd like to know that the woman I love is an actual woman and not some clever bit of programming!

XLUCIDENIALX

Come now, the term 'actual woman' is just so limiting!

WRIDGET

Luci, this was a private chat!

XLUCIDENIALX

That's right, and you should be ashamed of yourself!

WRIDGET

Me?

XLUCIDENIALX

When I go to the trouble of hacking a conversation, I expect to hear something worth the effort! But you're in love with Flutterbye99? Everyone and their developer knows that!

WRIDGET

I didn't realize it was common knowledge.

XLUCIDENIALX

This is what happens when you make googly eyes at the most popular blogger on the Nets. There's little doubt that she'll notice, and no doubt whatsoever that she's going to publish.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Which is why you must put a stop to this at once! If your poor mother had lived to see both her children follow in her ruinous footsteps -

WRIDGET

My mother believed in something that few people did, even in her day, and I'm beginning to see why it was so important to her. Did either of you go out to see ButtercupEGL since the baby was born?

SCANDALICIOUS7

Go out?! Good heavens, what a notion!

WRIDGET

Then you've not had the chance to hold her. Oh, it was ... quite something! I held her very close, so that she rested against my chest a bit, and all of a sudden, I could feel her tiny heart beating along with mine. When I plugged back in from that visit, I missed it terribly. It suddenly felt as though there were no beat to my life. No driving rhythm behind it all.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Then ask the girl to be your marching band drummer. But a wife is entirely out of the question!

WRIDGET

I need something and someone in my life more important than myself! And that someone is going to be Flutterbye99, whether she is a talented percussionist or not!

The Maid enters, her demeanor significantly changed.

MAID

(sudden Norwegian accent)

FlyByNiteSOA and guest request entrance to room.

SCANDALICIOUS7

(with disgust)

Wonderful. The husband. (To Wridget, regarding the Maid) Lovely accent, by the way. Is that Norwegian?

Wridget looks at XLucidencialX, accusative.

WRIDGET

That would be my first guess. (To the Maid) Show him in, Martha.

MAID

My name is Astrid.

WRIDGET

Of course it is.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Ghastly manners, the husband, and can't surf to save his life. Any more than three sites at once, and he starts getting distracted in the middle of sentences -

XLUCIDENIALX

Be grateful - Not finishing them is the only thing that keeps his sentences interesting.

WRIDGET

(to the Maid)

You may show him in now.

MAID

Please.

WRIDGET

I beg your pardon?

MAID

You say "show him in now *please*".

Wridget shoots XLucidencialX a dirty look.

WRIDGET

Duly noted. Now, *please* show them in, Astrid.

The Maid opens the door, letting in FlyByNiteSOA, big, genial, athletic, and not particularly stylish.

MAID

FlyByNiteSOA has entered room.

FLYBYNITESOA

Brother Wridget! How are you, you classy old scoundrel? Seeing anyone? No? Still living the life of the free and clear, eh? Ha ha! Good man! Your sister, bless her pure little heart, she worries herself to death about you being all alone, but we know better, don't we? Ha ha! You sly fox! (Slaps Wridget on the back too hard) You should come by the flight school sometime, and I'll give you some pointers. There's nothing the ladies love more than a handsome gent swooping them up and into the stars, believe you me! And goodness me, Auntie, don't you look positively -

XLUCIDENIALX

Illegal?

FLYBYNITESOA

Smashing! Just smashing! (To XLucidencialX) And you are?

XLUCIDENIALX

XLucidentialX. We've met. Numerous times.

FLYBYNITESOA

Xlucideni - ah, that's right. You were a lady last time I saw you, yes? The African one with the ample -

XLUCIDENIALX

Topics of conversation? Yes, that does sound like me.

FLYBYNITESOA

I hope you won't be offended if I'm not quite so friendly this time around? Ha ha! A joke, a joke! We'll all get along famously, I'm sure.

MAID

(sternly)

I take your coat. Now.

FLYBYNITESOA

Yes. Right. (to Wridget) I'm surprised she knows the routine! (Slides his coat off, shows it to the others) An "overcoat", it's called. People Outside wear them in winter to stay warm between destinations. No use to them in here, of course. But I like the reminder of where I came from, and where I'm going. (to the Maid) There you are, love.

The Maid takes his coat, then, when no one is looking, goes through the pockets, finds a silver cigarette case, makes sure she's not being watched, then deftly slips it into her apron pocket, and exits.

WRIDGET

Well, while you're here, please make yourselves comfortable. I'll have the hors d'oeuvres brought out in just a moment.

Everyone saunters away from the door, settling into the room.

XLUCIDENIALX

Any idea when we should expect the guest of honor?

FLYBYNITESOA

Oh, she's putting the little tyke to bed, then plugging in directly, she and Raskin.

WRIDGET

Raskin? I don't believe I'm acquainted with -

FLYBYNITESOA

Of course you wouldn't be. She's an Outdweller. Showed us the ropes of life among the unplugged! Nice girl. A bit odd, but then you'd have to be to abstain from all of this by choice, wouldn't you?

SCANDALICIOUS7

She can't bring an Outdweller here! Such mundane persons cause the worst sort of scandal - one without juicy entertaining parts.

WRIDGET

This is ButtercupEGL's party, Aunt Scandalicious7. I said she could bring whomever she liked, and I'm glad she took me at my word.

FLYBYNITESOA

And who knows, Auntie? If you keep your mind open, this evening may prove to be quite an education.

XLUCIDENIALX

I doubt it. This evening isn't nearly expensive enough.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Or as discriminatory.

WRIDGET

And thank goodness. I've found that anyone my sister likes tends to be a person worth knowing. I look forward to meeting this Raskin very much. (To XLucidentialX) As for not being expensive enough, you haven't seen the hors d'oeuvres yet.

FLYBYNITESOA

You're a good man, Wridget, a very good man indeed! (To the others) Of all the people we knew, Wridget was the only one who ever dared to unplug and visit us. (To Wridget) I want you to know I'm very grateful for that. It meant the world to your sister, you know. Why, I don't think she could have ...

FlyByNiteSOA suddenly freezes in place, mouth agape, and stays that way. No one looks the least bit surprised.

XLUCIDENIALX

And there he goes.

WRIDGET

I'm rather surprised he lasted this long.

SCANDALICIOUS7

How one can live one's whole life in here and not pick up a knack for surfing, I'll never know. At this very moment, I am browsing new hairstyles, blogging, and reading a deliciously smutty romance synopsis, but you don't see me freezing up in the middle of a comment!

The Maid enters.

MAID

Flutterbye99 requests entrance to room.

WRIDGET

(to the Maid)

Show her in, please.

Flutterbye99 sweeps into the room, and is in immediate control of it. Her dress is not nearly as revealing as Scandalicious7's, but is much grander in every way. Her hair is a three act play by itself.

MAID

Flutterbye99 has entered room.

SCANDALICIOUS7

(under her breath)

If anybody failed to notice.

The Maid begins to exit. Wridget calls after her, but never once takes his eyes off of Flutterbye99.

WRIDGET

And, ah, bring the hors d'oeuvres back in with you, Astrid.

MAID

(rolling her eyes)

Yes, yes.

She exits.

WRIDGET

My dear Flutterbye99 ... I'm speechless.

FLUTTERBYE99

(sighs melodramatically)

Then I suppose I must make the first witty comment now. It's terribly inconsiderate of you, Wridget. Girls can be admired for their wit only after being worshipped for their beauty. Impress in the wrong order, and it looks like you're trying to prove something.

XLUCIDENIALX

Let me assure you, Flutterbye99, that Wridget and I never expect you to say the first clever thing in a conversation, and very seldom worry about you saying the second.

FLUTTERBYE99

Thank you, XLucidenaIaX. I was hoping for just such an insult to relieve me of obligation! And dear Scandalicious7. (They kiss each others' cheeks) I swear, you just get younger every day.

SCANDALICIOUS7

And you get later. Why, you're nearly the last to arrive. Are you feeling quite well?

FLUTTERBYE99

Oh, I've tired of the whole "fashionably early" rat race. Rushing around at all hours, trying to beat everyone else. It's such a drain on one's composure. Since I stopped, I've become 2.87 times more confidently beautiful upon arrival.

FLUTTERBYE99 (cont'd)
I had it measured on Wednesday. (To Wridget) Is ButtercupEGL here yet?

WRIDGET
She'll be here soon.

XLUCIDENIALX
She's putting the larva to bed.

WRIDGET
Luci -

XLUCIDENIALX
Pardon me. I meant 'darling angel'.

FLUTTERBYE99
And how has she been faring in her time away?

WRIDGET
Oh, she's -

FLYBYNITESOA
(snapping back to where he left off)
... Survived without you.

FLUTTERBYE99
That's quite a relief to hear. I must admit I'd had my doubts.

FLYBYNITESOA
(suddenly puzzled)
What?

FLUTTERBYE99
I have high hopes for this party of yours, Wridget. The guest of honor isn't even here yet, and it's already foiblicious!

WRIDGET
Foiblicious?

FLUTTERBYE99
Backhanded complimentary adjective to describe a person, place, or thing so full of flaws that it actually becomes interesting. Just one of three splendid new catchphrases I came up with before afternoon tea.

SCANDALICIOUS7
She thinks she's so clever. I was using "licious" as a suffix before she was born.

The Maid enters.

WRIDGET
Really, Astrid. Where are those hors d'oeuvres?

MAID
ButtercupEGL and guest request entry to chat.

Everyone freezes.

WRIDGET

Show her in at once!

The Maid just stares at him.

WRIDGET

Please!

MAID

ButtercupEGL and guest user Raskin have entered chat.

ButtercupEGL is dressed at once both more girlish and more down-to-earth than the other women.

Behind her comes Raskin, taking careful mincing steps into the room. Both her face and her dress are attractive in their outspoken plainness. Her tone throughout is alternately amused and forward, but never sarcastic or condescending.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Wridget, thank gods!

She laughs and envelops him in a gloriously indecorous hug.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Why, you look almost exactly the way you do Outside. My brother, the man of principle! (Guilty smile) I must admit I let vanity get the best of me tonight - unreddened eyes, cheeks less puffy, and breasts that stay up by themselves.

SCANDALICIOUS7

ButtercupEGL, where are your manners? A woman's cleavage should be seen and not heard of.

BUTTERCUPEGL

(curtseys)

I beg your pardon, Auntie. (Gestures to her chest) When you spend all day having them sucked on, you tend to forget they were considered sexy to begin with!

SCANDALICIOUS7

Buttercup!

ButtercupEGL goes to Scandalicious7 and takes her hand affectionately.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Oh, Aunt Scandy, I have so very much missed infuriating you.

She kisses Scandalicious7 lovingly on the cheek, then turns to Flutterbye99.

BUTTERCUPEGL
(to Flutterbye99)
And dearest Flutters.

She and Flutterbye99 take each others' hands.

FLUTTERBYE99
Nearest Butters. I have so missed our chats together. You've no idea how hard it's been, not having any sensible advice to ignore!

BUTTERCUPEGL
Nearly as hard as watching you ignore it, I imagine.

ButtercupEGL pauses, looks closely at XLucidentialX.

BUTTERCUPEGL
And ... XLucidentialX?

XLUCIDENIALX
But of course.

BUTTERCUPEGL
You're quite dashing tonight, I must say. Although I had hoped for some girl talk later.

XLUCIDENIALX
Ah, but if I'd come as a woman, I'd have spent all night being jealous of your absolute radiance.

They kiss each others' cheeks.

BUTTERCUPEGL
(to Raskin)
Did you see that? Luci's preferences are oddly contagious. Get too close, and they become your preferences too.

XLUCIDENIALX
I may be persuaded to slip into something more feminine later. And since you find this avatar so dashing, I'll make a gift of it to you.

BUTTERCUPEGL
That's very kind, but male isn't really my style for wearing out.

XLUCIDENIALX
Oh, I'm sure you can find some (looking between Buttercup and FlybyNite) extra-circular uses for it. I leave the details to you. (to Raskin) And this is?

BUTTERCUPEGL
Goodness, how could I forget?! (To the whole room) Everyone, this is my friend and absolute lifesaver, Raskin. Flyby and I couldn't have survived offline without her.

Raskin focuses in on Wridget, who stands closest to her, and thrusts her hand out at him.

RASKIN

Nice to finally meet you!

Wridget just stares at her. Raskin looks at her hand doubtfully.

RASKIN

Am I doing this wrong, or something?

XLUCIDENIALX

No, Miss. It's the generic guest user avatar you're wearing. He got lost redesigning you in his head.

WRIDGET

How rude of me. I'm terribly sorry.

RASKIN

Oh! Right! 'Cause I have the same face as, like, tons of other programs and poor people who can't afford fancy ones. (puts her hands all over her face and giggles) I keep forgetting this isn't mine. Is that weird? (suddenly stops, to Wridget) But I'm sorry. Were you not done staring at me yet? I could turn around so you can take me in all at once, if that'd help.

She does so, finds herself going faster than she meant to, then wavers unsteadily.

RASKIN

And ... Now I'm really dizzy.

BUTTERCUPEGL

(steadying her)

There's a lightness to movement in here that takes some getting used to. Oh, but it feels fantastic to be back! (Does a few balletic turns across the room) No aches, no creaks, no pressure on the joints! You never realize how delightful it can be online until you've been away.

FLUTTERBYE99

(to Raskin)

Now, I must admit to more than a little curiosity about you, my dear. You're an Outdweller, living offline all the time? What ever is that like?

RASKIN

(matter-of-fact)

It's real.

Nervous laughter from the others.

FLUTTERBYE99

Well. I'm glad we've cleared that up!

SCANDALICIOUS7

The nerve of some people!

RASKIN

I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?

WRIDGET

Not wrong. Just ... Blunt.

RASKIN

Oh, right. Because you like to think of all this as reality, don't you?

FLUTTERBYE99

We don't think of it as reality, dear. We've made it so. We took what used to be nothingness, and poured in so much of our energy that it nearly burst with all the friends, lovers and enemies we've made inside of it. If that weren't enough, we stuffed it full of our dreams, too. And gossip, and shared experience. Even those secret bits of self we wouldn't put anywhere else. We dared to thrust our lives into the darkness, and from out of it emerged a new world that is simply, completely real.

Beat. Raskin lets out a high pitched giggle, notices no one else is laughing. Stops.

RASKIN

Oh. Was that not supposed to be funny? I'll be quiet now.

WRIDGET

You're free to say anything you like here, Miss Raskin. And I hope you do.

XLUCIDENIALX

Yes, honesty is the best policy. All the best fight promoters say so.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Now Wridget, you promised me hors d'oeuvres, and I have just been craving some food that does nothing at all to my figure!

WRIDGET

Of course. Hors d'oeuvres, Astrid.

MAID

'Hors d'oeuvres, Astrid' what?

WRIDGET

(sighs)
Please bring in the hors d'oeuvres, if you would.

MAID

Yes, yes, I hear you first time.

She exits.

SCANDALICIOUS7

I say, it's getting impossible to program good help these days.

WRIDGET

No, it's just difficult to keep them that way. But please, make yourselves at home.

People start to settle in to the furniture. Raskin shuffles about the room with curiosity while ButtercupEGL throws her arms around FlyByNiteSOA.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Do you like me better this way, love? All sparkly and perfect, without spot or blemish?

FLYBYNITESOA

Darling, I like you any and every way I can get!

They kiss. ButtercupEGL pulls away, giggling.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I'm sorry. It's just been so long since we've done that without saliva involved.

RASKIN

Really? No saliva? (She sticks out her tongue, touches a finger to it, looks at it) Huh. Well at least we've still got tongues.

The Maid enters with trays of hors d'oeuvres, begins circulating among the guests, who help themselves.

FLUTTERBYE99

(to ButtercupEGL)

Now Butters, you must tell me absolutely everything! What has it been like, being unplugged from life in order to bring life into the world?

BUTTERCUPEGL

How dramatic you make it sound! The people I've been with might say you have it backwards.

WRIDGET

Is that true, Miss Raskin? Would you say it is we who are 'unplugged from life'?

RASKIN

Not unplugged. Just holding it at arms' length.

XLUCIDENIALX

With both hands? Or could I hold reality at bay with one and scratch my nose with the other, if the need arises?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Scoff if you like, but she's right in a way. (Takes FlyByNiteSOA's hand) We've learned a good deal about what's truly important through all this.

FLYBYNITESOA

That we have, pet, that we have.

BUTTERCUPEGL

And of course, there's all sorts of novelty at the beginning - You shed your suit, this skin you've relied on for everything - sustenance, temperature, keeping your muscles from atrophy - and suddenly there's nothing protecting you from your own senses, your own body, the intensity of the world around it.

SCANDALICIOUS7

It sounds perfectly dreadful!

BUTTERCUPEGL

It's actually quite exciting at first - feeling real heat or cold for the first time -

FLYBYNITESOA

Or simple little pains, like aching feet, or a sore back. They're inconvenient, of course, and yet they give one the odd feeling of having accomplished something.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Granted, that's a novelty more for men than women, isn't it? Even with a full service VR suit, there is that one recurring pain that a woman just can't escape from.

FLUTTERBYE99

And there's no sense of accomplishment with that. It feels more like a very grave punishment for terribly vague reasons.

The women nod in commiseration.

FLUTTERBYE99

I say, that's quite good. Astrid, update my current status to that last comment. Only switch the word "that" to "heavy menstruation". The Nets just love it when you go a bit graphic!

MAID

(dryly)

Uploading new status. Because you are so very clever.

FLUTTERBYE99

Thank you, I know.

RASKIN

I know a lot of former Indwellers, and the girls always adjust to real life a lot quicker. Maybe it's because they still have this monthly reminder that they have a body, where men don't.

WRIDGET

Do you have an opinion to add to that, Luci?

XLUCIDENIALX

(patting down his pockets)

I did. But unfortunately, I seem to have left my uterus at home.

BUTTERCUPEGL

(laughing)

There's no use trying to tease out Luci's real gender, Wridget. I've known him/her for longer than you, and I still can't put my finger on it.

XLUCIDENIALX

That's because there's nothing to put your finger on. (Beat) Which is a shame, because it sounds quite pleasurable. Whatever the physical reality may be, my "real gender" is whichever one I happen to be wearing at the time. That thing we call "self" is mostly a collection of other peoples' expectations. Appearances may indeed be deceiving, but the deceived are incredibly persuasive. Which makes me curious. What has it been like for you two, being confronted with each others' actual bodies for so long now?

WRIDGET

Come now, Luci, that's far too personal of a subject for a casual party.

FLUTTERBYE99

Not to mention a dreary one. If you're going to ask something personal, at least make it shocking! (to FlybyNiteSOA) For instance, do you ever regret letting your wife make such a momentous decision?

WRIDGET

I really don't think that's better -

BUTTERCUPEGL

It wasn't my decision. We made it together.

FLUTTERBYE99

(to ButtercupEGL)

You did? Because the last time I asked him what his reasons were, he said "Buttercup wanted to have a baby, so we had a baby".

FLYBYNITESOA

You laugh, but I've always held that it's the woman's will that matters in these ... Ah ... Matters. She has the ability to grow a human, for gods' sake! And without a single piece of laboratory equipment! If I was capable of that, I damn well might want to try just because I could! So who am I to tell her 'no, don't use your super powers to create something from nothing. It's rather inconvenient at the moment'. Sounds like a damn fool thing to say to me.

WRIDGET

Something from nothing? I think I recall the man being involved in there somewhere.

FLYBYNITESOA

Oh, but it's just not the same, old chap! I've seen it with my own eyes now, so I know of what I speak. For the woman it means 9 months of existing solely for the purpose of giving someone else a go at life. For us men, it's just, well, an uncommonly pleasurable game of darts, isn't it?

ButtercupEGL cracks up laughing.

SCANDALICIOUS7

You agreed to let your wife have a baby, guaranteeing years of isolation from society, simply because she could?! I thought you at least had the good sense to do it for the money!

BUTTERCUPEGL

That's not the reason, Auntie. And neither were all the government grants. Yes, we wanted to do our part toward halting this depopulation crisis, but -

SCANDALICIOUS7

It's all an elaborate hoax put on by conservative scientists, if you ask me.

XLUCIDENIALX

Oh, I don't know. The numbers show this latest dip might partially be due to my new line of A.I. children!

BUTTERCUPEGL

See, that there - that's why we did it. Because I didn't want another part of my life that could be made to order for me. Just once, I wanted to do something for someone else, to bring a life into this world that was real and lasting and entirely out of my control. Her likes, her morals, her calling in life, those are all for her to decide. And I am just breathless to see what she chooses.

WRIDGET

Astrid, champagne.

The Maid exits, then immediately re-enters with a tray of champagne glasses, passes them out.

FLUTTERBYE99

What is her name right now?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Right now, we're calling her Harmony.

FLYBYNITESOA

Until she's old enough to choose a handle for herself.

SCANDALICIOUS7

It's far too accommodating a name, if you ask me. No individualism in it.

RASKIN

But you haven't seen her. Trust me, she looks like a Harmony.

SCANDALICIOUS7

All the worse for her, then. What will the poor girl do if she has no soprano to stand next to?

WRIDGET

I think it's a splendid name. Harmony. A beautiful complication, bringing richness and complexity in equal measure.

FLYBYNITESOA

(exploding in laughter)

Harmony, measure - very good! Because they're both musical terms, you see?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Yes dear, they all got it.

XLUCIDENIALX

I was rather hoping to give it back.

Wridget stands and holds up his glass.

WRIDGET

Ladies and gentlemen, a toast: to Harmony.

EVERYONE

To Harmony!

They all drink.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Mmm. I have missed this (Helping herself to the hors d'oeuvres)- most of the pleasure of eating with none of the consequences! Raskin love, you really must try this.

Raskin gingerly takes one of the same hors d'oeuvres as ButtercupEGL, tastes it.

RASKIN

Hmm. Not bad. But without saliva, it's just not the same.

WRIDGET

Well, if you'll excuse me, I am going to steal away the guest of honor for a moment. But please let Astrid know if you need anything.

The guests nod in the affirmative, and begin to mingle. Wridget takes ButtercupEGL aside.

WRIDGET

Initiate private chat. (Steals a look at XLucidenialX) With re-enforced security settings, please.

MAID

Private chat initiated.

Lights focus on Wridget and ButtercupEGL, while the others go on chatting silently behind them. Left to themselves, Buttercup embraces Wridget again.

BUTTERCUPEGL

It's so nice of you to arrange this little gathering for me, Wridget.

WRIDGET

I'm glad I could. Will you be online regularly from now on, or -?

BUTTERCUPEGL

I should manage a few hours each day now. FlyBy will switch with me when he's done with his clients some evenings. He offered to earlier, but we needed time as a family first. I'm nearly done breast feeding, so Raskin can watch her in the afternoons if there's something really pressing.

WRIDGET

You must trust her a good deal.

BUTTERCUPEGL

With anything! You have no idea how much help she's been to us. FlyByNite and I nearly tore each others' heads off the first few months - no distractions, just the two of us at close quarters in all our foiblicious glory. Truth be told, she talked me out of leaving him more than once.

WRIDGET

Really?

BUTTERCUPEGL

And she was absolutely right - the connection we share now is ... Magical. Better than magical. It's real.

WRIDGET

(sighs)

Real.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I must admit, one of the hardest parts was having to leave you alone in here.

WRIDGET

(bitter laugh)

Amazing, don't you think? That you can feel alone with thousands of people listed as your friends?

WRIDGET (cont'd)
We're communicating all the time, but mostly just communicating how clever we all are. I'm through with that. I want what you and FlyByNite have.

BUTTERCUPEGL
Having it is wonderful. But getting it was not a pretty sight.

WRIDGET
It couldn't be any worse than this - drowning in shallow pleasantries all day.

BUTTERCUPEGL
(laughs)
Oh, it's much worse than that.

WRIDGET
But worth it?

BUTTERCUPEGL
Of course.

WRIDGET
Good. (Beat.) I'm going to ask Flutterbye99 to marry me.

BUTTERCUPEGL
What? When?

WRIDGET
Tonight, if you'll run interference.

BUTTERCUPEGL
Tonight?!

WRIDGET
Those visits to your compartment were a revelation, Buttercup! It was finally so clear, what I was missing - what I needed to do! Could you arrange a diversion, something to get everyone else out of the room for a moment? I could private chat her, but the occasion seems more formal than that, don't you think?

BUTTERCUPEGL
But when did ... have you two ...

She produces a fan from seemingly nowhere and uses it vigorously as she paces back and forth.

WRIDGET
Is something wrong?

BUTTERCUPEGL
Is it mutual?

WRIDGET
So far as I can tell. With Flutterbye, it's hard to be sure. You know that.

BUTTERCUPEGL

That's why I'm worried.

WRIDGET

Don't be. I can handle the rejection if she says no.

BUTTERCUPEGL

And what if she says yes? Could you handle rejection then? Dozens of little rejections everyday for the rest of your life? That's a possibility too.

WRIDGET

You've gone down this road yourself, and you're happy.

BUTTERCUPEGL

We've picked up some happiness along the way, but it was never the destination! So. Are you marrying Flutterbye99 because you can't imagine life without her, or because you can't bear to go on the way things are, and she seems like a good way out?

Long pause.

WRIDGET

That's an unfair question. I love her. And yes, I want things to change. But I'm seeking that change by putting another person before myself, just as you said.

BUTTERCUPEGL

But is it the right person?

WRIDGET

There's no possible way of knowing that until you've tried.

Beat. A sad laugh escapes from ButtercupeGL's lips.

BUTTERCUPEGL

No. There isn't. (Takes a deep breath) Have you told Aunt Scandy yet?

WRIDGET

(nods)

She was the first to arrive. Sort of.

BUTTERCUPEGL

And?

WRIDGET

She said it was a terrible idea. Which generally means it's a decent one.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I hope she's right. Well, wrong in the usual way. But for the life you say you want, Flutterbye99 seems an unlikely choice.

WRIDGET

And I think she might surprise you. What say you give her the chance to?

Long pause.

BUTTERCUPEGL

If she says no, and ruins my party, I'm calling it your fault for not being charming enough.

WRIDGET

Then you'll give me my diversion?

BUTTERCUPEGL

With a five star restaurant's amount of reservations.

Wridget grabs her excitedly and kisses her on the cheek.

WRIDGET

You're a dear, you know that?

BUTTERCUPEGL

You mean pushover. But I never could say no to you. I only hope this makes you as happy as you want it to.

She kisses his cheek back, and goes to join the others.

MAID

ButtercupEGL has left private chat.

WRIDGET

Yes, I gathered that.

MAID

Do not get snippy. You program me to be announcing these things.

The Maid heads to another part of the room. Both light and the sound of amusing chatter fill the room again. ButtercupEGL notices that FlyByNiteSOA is missing.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Hmm. I've been away five minutes, and I already seem to have lost my husband. That must be some new sort of record.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Nonsense. I had a friend who could lose her husband in three minutes flat. She had to practice everyday, but her hard work finally paid off.

RASKIN

(to ButtercupEGL)

The baby monitor went off, and he insisted it was his turn.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Such a thoughtful man when he actually manages to think. Well, I shall repay the favor. I wanted to show you all how my music has been progressing, and there's no better time than when the man who hears me practise all day is out of earshot. Wridget, would you program me an adjoining music room, please?

He whispers in the Maid's ear, making her twitch robotically. She makes a new door. ButtercupEGL sets her fan on a table by the couch, starts nimbling her fingers.

SCANDALICIOUS7

But why not just download a piano app right here?

XLUCIDENIALX

Because music is always more enjoyable with an escape route.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Exactly! Right this way, please.

She ushers Scandalicious7, Raskin and XLucidencialX into the next room. Flutterbye99 starts to follow. With a smile, Wridget grabs her wrist, and pulls her to him. They kiss passionately.

WRIDGET

Hello.

FLUTTERBYE99

Hello to you too.

Another kiss. Flutterbye99 gestures to where the others just left.

FLUTTERBYE99

I take it that was your idea?

WRIDGET

More of an improvisation, really.

FLUTTERBYE99

Well, it was brilliant. It's exhausting, you know. Always having to play the part. One of the hazards of being a person as well as a "personality". Who you really are doesn't always make the best interactive experience.

WRIDGET

I love who you really are.

He kisses her again, smiles.

WRIDGET

And I find the interactive experience quite satisfactory.

FLUTTERBYE99

It's different with you, and so refreshing to be able to let my hair down with someone. Metaphorically, of course. Actually letting down this hairstyle would take a liberating army. (Beat.) That's not bad. I should update my status to that when -

A look from Wridget silences her.

FLUTTERBYE99

I'm sorry. It's hard to turn off. But I don't want to worry about being clever right now. I just want to be with you.

WRIDGET

And I want to be -

FLUTTERBYE99

No. No more words. Not for a moment. Just hold me, and ... and that's all.

Wridget nods, and wraps his arms around her. Flutterbye99 relaxes into him. They stay there for a good long while. Flutterbye99 sighs in contentment.

FLUTTERBYE99

Yes. There they go. All those expectations. Now it's just you and me.

WRIDGET

It weighs that heavily on you, what people expect?

FLUTTERBYE99

Not always. Not even usually. But then there are nights like tonight ...

WRIDGET

And what makes a night "like tonight"?

She pauses, searching his eyes for something, finds it, then smiles sadly.

FLUTTERBYE99

Being out-matched.

WRIDGET

What?

FLUTTERBYE99

Inside that newly made room are three people with experiences, wisdom that was hard-won, and loads of stories about how they came by it. And what do I have? "Clever Things To Say". Nights like tonight are when I realize that that isn't enough.

WRIDGET

There's much more to you than clever things to say.

FLUTTERBYE99

Is there? My audience always wants more of the parlour tricks and the catchphrases, so that's what I spend my energy on. There's not always much left for the rest of me. I'm beginning to feel like a mountain of meringue with no pie underneath! No matter how much of it you serve, it's never enough for anyone.

WRIDGET

You are enough for me.

A pause.

FLUTTERBYE99

Oh Wridget, you're so romantic in that exact unrealistic way I used to dream of when I was twelve!

WRIDGET

I mean it.

FLUTTERBYE99

(tenderly)

I know.

He kneels down next to her.

WRIDGET

I love you, Flutterbye99, and not just as a "personality". I love all the parts of you that no one else gets to see. And I want to spend the rest of my life guarding them, cultivating them, helping them grow. I know a lifetime lasts longer than it used to, but even that is not enough time for me to see all of you, love all of you. And that is what I want, more than anything.

FLUTTERBYE99

Wridget, are you - are you asking me to marry you?

WRIDGET

Of course. Hadn't I made that clear?

FLUTTERBYE99

Yes.

WRIDGET

Wait - yes, I'd made that clear, or -?

FLUTTERBYE99

Yes, I will marry you! (Beat.) I never expected those words to come out of my mouth, but there they are!

WRIDGET

Darling!

He sweeps her up in his arms and kisses her.

FLUTTERBYE99

We're going to be very happy, aren't we?

WRIDGET

Completely!

FLUTTERBYE99

When shall we have the wedding?

WRIDGET

As soon as possible!

FLUTTERBYE99

It will be quite the scandal, won't it? Both of us, at the top of our fields, committing to such an outre lifestyle. It's bound to be the talk of the town.

WRIDGET

Perhaps if we kept things small -

FLUTTERBYE99

Dear, as much as you love me the person, you are marrying me the blogger too. And really, I don't do 'small' in either capacity. A quiet wedding would make us seem ashamed of it all. Doing it big is the only way to reclaim it after a fashion. But then, it will be just us, and we can create a home together ... something florid and impossible! Would you prefer a floating house or an underwater one?

WRIDGET

Floating, I think. There are more options that way.

FLUTTERBYE99

I entirely agree. See, we're already getting along splendidly!

WRIDGET

And once that's designed, you can move into my compartment, and -

FLUTTERBYE99

I beg your pardon?

WRIDGET

Or ... I could move into yours, if you like.

FLUTTERBYE99

I don't think we'll need to bother with that, do you? Relocating our bodies is just so much needless hassle, really.

WRIDGET

Needless?

FLUTTERBYE99

Our bodies could be in different hemispheres for all we know! I understand it for couples like your sister and FlyByNiteSOA - they have to live offline for the baby and all.

FLUTTERBYE99 (cont'd)

But since we won't be having children, it's not something we'll need to fuss with.

WRIDGET

But ... what about their fascinating experiences? Their loads of stories to tell?

FLUTTERBYE99

We'll have our own. They wouldn't be very fascinating if they were exactly the same as your sister's.

WRIDGET

I just thought -

FLUTTERBYE99

And it's more pure our way, don't you think? Spiritual, not physical. Shouldn't that be more than enough?

WRIDGET

Yes ... yes, of course.

FLUTTERBYE99

Growing right in the midst of the world instead of forsaking it!

WRIDGET

And ... and that world - it will be more vibrant, more real because we're together?

FLUTTERBYE99

Better than real. A fantasy come true! Now, do you want to announce our engagement when everyone returns, or shall I?

WRIDGET

Ah ... don't you think it would be better to wait?

FLUTTERBYE99

Wait?

WRIDGET

For that perfect time when the announcement will be truly impressive. Do it big, just like with the wedding. It is my sister's first night back. I'd feel rather dreadful stealing the spotlight.

Flutterbye99 kisses him on the forehead.

FLUTTERBYE99

You're so thoughtful, my love. It really is quite intimidating. So I suppose I should at least pretend to be thoughtful, and slip in to hear the end of your sister's little recital. Would you care to join me?

WRIDGET

In a moment.

FLUTTERBYE99

Even that seems far too long! (She starts to exit, then turns back to him) Oh darling, I am so happy!

She exits. Wridget sinks onto the couch, defeated.

WRIDGET

So am I.

He sits there for a long while, bewildered, staring into space. The Maid watches silently from the doorway, then breaks the silence.

MAID

You are in sorrow.

WRIDGET

(startled by her presence)
What? Oh. No. (Not at all believable) Quite the opposite, in fact. I've never been more pleased.

MAID

Nice trying. I know that look too well. From my own face, my own life.

WRIDGET

You know that look because Luci programmed you to, as a joke.

MAID

(shrugs)
Even so. You are hurting. I understand.

She joins him on the couch.

WRIDGET

I'm glad one of us does. I just asked the love of my life to marry me, and she said 'yes'. What on earth is there to be hurt about?

MAID

How she said 'yes'. That could hurt. That could hurt a lot.

She pulls FlyByNiteSOA's cigarette case out of her apron pocket, opens it, proffers it to Wridget.

MAID

Cigarette?

WRIDGET

Thank you.

He takes it, starts smoking without lighting it. The tip glows red, he exhales smoke.

She sets the case down on the side table, picks up the fan ButtercupEGL left there, sticks that in her apron pocket.

WRIDGET

Her 'yes' did carry certain conditions. Assumptions, really. Which may be worse. Can your love for someone be real if they aren't quite who you think they are?

The Maid puts her hand on Wridget's shoulder.

MAID

Reality. Illusion. Perhaps they are not so clean cut. Look at me. Am I illusion, or real? One dancing with other, I think. Maybe so is this love you feel.

The voices from the next room draw closer.

MAID

But others are coming. I go back to being surly now.

The Maid stands up, makes a show of tidying things as ButtercupEGL, Flutterbye99, XLucidentialX, and Scandalicious7 enter.

XLUCIDENTIALX

Exquisite playing, Buttercup, absolutely exquisite!

FLUTTERBYE99

And without any enhancement apps, which is just impractical enough to be impressive.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Yes, but the practise it takes is murder.

XLUCIDENTIALX

Oh no, murder is much more enjoyable. I've committed it myself on several occasions, and it never fails to cheer me up.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Oh Luci, what nonsense you talk!

XLUCIDENTIALX

I'm quite serious. I've hunted down and killed, let's see, nine avatars now? Oh, don't look so shocked, Wridget. All my victims are rich people who can afford new ones. I dare say my exploits have brought you a new client or three.

WRIDGET

Still, it's the principle of the matter.

FLUTTERBYE99

Now darling, you mustn't be so old-fashioned about every little thing.

SCANDALICIOUS7

(to Wridget)

When we were children, your mother and I killed each other numerous times. We always had a good laugh afterwards. Of course, later, when she actually died, it all seemed in rather poor taste. But I still have many cherished memories of the sunny afternoons we spent as girls, gaily slaughtering each other in the meadow.

XLUCIDENIALX

I tell you, nothing steels the nerves and focuses the mind like a good, well planned homicide. In fact, I believe everyone should do it at least once. Here. I'll even volunteer.

He draws a disturbingly large knife from out of his coat's breast pocket.

XLUCIDENIALX

I'm sure at least a few of you have wanted to stab me repeatedly throughout the evening.

He sets the knife down on the coffee table.

XLUCIDENIALX

So go on, have it out. You'll feel much better for it, I assure you.

Wridget notices Raskin standing in the corner with her hands over her mouth.

WRIDGET

Ah, perhaps we had better change the subject. I'm afraid we've shocked our guest.

FLUTTERBYE99

OH, you poor dear! You must think we're all terribly wicked!

Raskin takes her hands from her mouth to reveal that she was in fact stifling a laugh.

RASKIN

I think you're adorable! You're all *playing* at being wicked. (Picks up the knife) I mean, look at this thing! They don't need to be big, you know. Just sharp. It's like watching little kids play at war - they're so far from the real horror of the thing that it's actually kind of cute!

She uses the knife to impale a nearby hor d'oeuvre, then munches on it happily.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Cute? We're just a gaggle of overgrown children compared to you, is that it?

RASKIN

Well ...yeah.

SCANDALICIOUS7

I beg your pardon?!

RASKIN

But kind of in a good way. I mean, you stay young forever, you get to do-over your mistakes. You get to do anything, and there's no consequences! Adulthood doesn't come without those.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Let me assure you, Miss, we know the value of consequences here. In fact, we pay good money for them. I personally subscribe to this wonderful website - ReverendVariety.org - where you can choose from a wide variety of different deities, each with their own unique value system. Then that deity program monitors your adherence to his or her system, and doles out consequences accordingly.

RASKIN

What?

SCANDALICIOUS7

Say you select a god that encourages good works - when you perform them, they have specially designed protocols that increase your luck, or health or appearance online. If you disobey your god, you'll be stricken with calamities, like disease, or property destruction, for instance. And of course they guarantee that all consequences are fair and consistent to the guidelines set forth.

RASKIN

But... but ... You're cutting out the mystery, all the universe that doesn't fit in our stupid little concepts of it!

SCANDALICIOUS7

Those are some of the larger selling points, yes. So you see, your actions can have repercussions here, for a very reasonable monthly fee. Now what do you think of that?

Raskin takes a thoughtful bite of her skewered hor d'oeuvre, looks at the knife, and swiftly drives it through Scandalicious7's hand, pinning her to the couch. The whole room gasps. Scandalicious7 doesn't seem to be harmed, but she can't exactly go anywhere, either.

RASKIN

See? You jumped! So your brains still remember what it feels like to not be in control of everything. That's what you're running from - that feeling right there. You've built this whole place to get away from that. It makes sense, I guess. But I don't know - I think I'd miss it too much.

She draws the knife out of Scandalicious7's hand.

RASKIN

Your hand is fine, so it won't learn anything. (Looks at the knife) And no blood, even! If there was blood, you might get desperate for your wounds to mean something, and I'm not sure the rules of your little God game go that far.

FlyByNiteSOA blunders back in, oblivious.

SCANDALICIOUS7

(to Raskin)

Are you quite finished?!

FLYBYNITESOA

Completely. I thought it was rather quick for a diaper change, a game of horsey, and two and a half lullabies

MAID

Oh. Right. FlyByNiteSOA has re-entered chat.

Stony silence, as everyone still stares at Raskin.

FLYBYNITESOA

But if I'd known you were so badly in need of conversation, I'd have sung a bit faster.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Quantity of conversation is not the problem. It's the matter of subject. And I for one am not staying to hear any more of it!

RASKIN

I'm awfully sorry. I didn't mean to -

SCANDALICIOUS7

It was good to see you again, Buttercup. I am very glad to have you back. Now that you're among your own kind again, one can only hope that certain influences will slowly wear off. Until then, I must bid you adieu.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Auntie, please -

SCANDALICIOUS7

Good evening to you all. (with a scornful look to Raskin) Well, most of you, anyhow.

She storms out, still nursing her not-
quite-injured hand.

MAID

Scandalicious7 has left chat.

FLUTTERBYE99

Astrid, upload video of the last five minutes to my blog,
please. It's the viral event of the season! Why, I haven't
seen such a genuine outburst of emotion since, well, since
Luci's last murder, actually.

XLUCIDENIALX

I tell you, the girl is a natural! Did you see the speed and
lyricism of her stabbing motion? (To Raskin) You must show me
your form some time -

WRIDGET

(leaping up)

I think we've had enough stabbing for one evening. Let's have
a dance, shall we? (To the Maid) Something classical, please.
From, oh, the Romantic Period.

The Maid nods. 1980's New Wave music
starts to play (think The Smiths, The
Cure, or something like it). Wridget
holds his hand out to Raskin.

WRIDGET

May I have this dance?

RASKIN

Um, sure.

Wridget and Raskin start to dance a
mostly traditional waltz. The others
begin to pair off as well: ButtercupEGL
and FlyByNiteSOA, XLucidencialX and
Flutterbye99. They dance in circles,
the couple furthest downstage being the
one the audience hears before they
whisk off again.

RASKIN

I'm sorry I disrupted your very nice party. I didn't mean to.
It just ... came out all of a sudden.

WRIDGET

I'm glad it did. I needed to hear it.

RASKIN

It wasn't even aimed at you. You've actually been out in the
world. That's meant everything to your sister, by the way. I
mean, I've tried to help as much as I can, but without you -

WRIDGET

And why have you?

RASKIN

What?

WRIDGET

Tried to help her as much as you can?

RASKIN

She was so brave, how could I not? The few Indwellers that still have babies usually hire one of us to be a surrogate. But Buttercup wasn't afraid to risk everything to be real.

WRIDGET

I wonder what that feels like.

FLYBYNITESOA

Let me guess - Raskin went off on a bit of a tear, did she?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Oh, it was delicious! I've been dying for this crowd to get a proper dressing-down for a year and a half!

FLYBYNITESOA

Anything else I missed?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Only the most important bit - my brother just asked Flutterbye99 to marry him.

FLYBYNITESOA

Really?! Dare I ask?

BUTTERCUPEGL

I don't know yet. I haven't had a moment alone with him since, and it's quite hard to tell from just observing.

XLUCIDENIALX

Initiate private chat, please.

MAID

Private chat initiated.

FLUTTERBYE99

And what is that for?

XLUCIDENIALX

To congratulate you on your forthcoming nuptials.

FLUTTERBYE99

Luci! How did you -

XLUCIDENIALX

Simple. I overheard that he was going to ask you, then after you two were alone, you appeared amused, and he looked terrified.

FLUTTERBYE99

Well, aren't you the clever one?

XLUCIDENIALX

In most settings.

FLUTTERBYE99

If that's the case, perhaps you'd enjoy a challenge?

XLUCIDENIALX

Not nearly as much as I'd enjoy a wager.

FLUTTERBYE99

All right then. 500 gold that you can't get a kiss from the Outdweller.

XLUCIDENIALX

That's no small challenge. But no small enjoyment either. I accept your wager, and just in time, too.

The couples promenade, then switch partners - XLucidencialX with Raskin, FlyByNiteSOA with Flutterbye99, Wridget with ButtercupEGL.

XLUCIDENIALX

Congratulations. You're officially the most interesting person in the room.

RASKIN

I'm not sure if that's a compliment.

XLUCIDENIALX

It is when the thing that makes you interesting is your courage.

RASKIN

Are you sure it was courage that made me do that, or just stupidity?

XLUCIDENIALX

Stupidity is doing something without thinking. Courage is thinking something is stupid and doing it anyway.

Raskin laughs.

BUTTERCUPEGL

So she said 'yes'?

WRIDGET

To marriage. Then quickly said 'no' to everything I thought a marriage would be.

BUTTERCUPEGL

No children, then?

WRIDGET

Not even living in the same physical space.

BUTTERCUPEGL

What are you going to do?

WRIDGET

What can I do? Tell her 'Oh, that proposal you accepted five minutes ago may have been a tad hasty'?

BUTTERCUPEGL

But this is Flutterbye99, after all. She may not be quite serious about it.

FLUTTERBYE99

Tell me, that strange little man that performed your wedding all those years ago - is he still available?

FLYBYNITESOA

I'm afraid he passed on shortly after that. But have you tried ReverendVariety.org? Aside from the website, he's very active in the Historical Wedding Re-enactment community. He's a student of mine at the flight school, actually. I could contact him for you if you -

FlyByNiteSOA's face freezes, blank, while his body continues dancing.

FLUTTERBYE99

If I what? (then she realizes) Oh heavens. Again?

She kicks him in the shin.

FLYBYNITESOA

- would like me to. Owwww!

FLUTTERBYE99

That would be marvellous. But could you wait to contact him until after the dance is over?

FLYBYNITESOA

Yes, that might be best.

The couples promenade again, then bow to each other as the song ends.

FLYBYNITESOA

Ah, a good dance sets everything to rights, doesn't it? And I know just how to keep the mood lifted - a nice, rousing flight demonstration! See what I did there - flight, lifted? (Laughs loudly) But yes, it seems as though we're already flying over the ... where, exactly?

WRIDGET

Over the Andes.

FLYBYNITESOA

Excellent! If you'll program us a veranda to take off from, Wridget, I'll show you all a few tricks.

BUTTERCUPEGL

It would please me immensely! (To FlyByNiteSOA) I haven't seen you fly in far too long. (To the others) He's so graceful in the air. You really should see it.

FLUTTERBYE99

FlyByNiteSOA being graceful at anything provokes both interest and skepticism, which are the two feelings I always indulge.

Wridget whispers to the Maid, who twitches in her robotic manner, then opens one of the sets of french windows.

MAID

New veranda is this way.

FlyByNiteSOA leads the party out, except for Raskin, who sits on the couch. XLucidentialX is the last one to the door, when he sees Raskin alone.

XLUCIDENTIALX

You don't care much for displays of aeronautics, Miss Raskin?

RASKIN

Not when it's all just created by a computer. (Beat) Plus, I think some people might need a break from me saying things like that.

XLucidentialX sits down next to Raskin.

XLUCIDENTIALX

You'll have to excuse them. They're not used to people caring enough about beliefs to actually challenge them. I, on the other hand, enjoy a good challenge now and then.

RASKIN

Okay then. If you agree with what I said, why do you live in here?

XLUCIDENTIALX

I don't agree with what you said. I admired it, which is far better, if you ask me. Admiration is the highest form of jealousy. Agreement is just an excuse for people to switch off their brains.

RASKIN

That's very cute. Now talk like a real person, please.

XLUCIDENTIALX

If you insist. You were right in saying that people use the Nets to hide from reality, but you went wrong in supposing they could ever succeed at it.

RASKIN

Wait ... what?

XLUCIDENIALX

Even if we came here to avoid it, we still have real thoughts, real desires, words that stir real emotion from those who hear them. True, this floor is merely an illusion. But reality haunts our every artificial step.

RASKIN

So you agree with Flutterbye99? By bringing all that with you, you make your own reality.

XLUCIDENIALX

No, it's far more tragic than that. And far more beautiful. You're right in saying that we never grow up the way you do - we live sheltered lives, free of accidents and miracles. We are seldom surprised and never bewildered, and our souls are poorer for that. But do you truly believe mankind would have given all that up if there were not something just as precious to be gained?

RASKIN

And what would that be?

XLUCIDENIALX

Our whole selves.

Raskin cracks up again.

XLUCIDENIALX

Go on and laugh, but I can prove it to you.

RASKIN

Okay then. Go ahead and try.

XLUCIDENIALX

Tell me, if we were unplugged right now, and I didn't like your appearance, would I come this close to you, or put my arm around you like this?

RASKIN

Probably not.

XLUCIDENIALX

And if you knew for certain I was a different type than you like, or a different gender, would you let me?

RASKIN

No, I probably wouldn't.

XLUCIDENIALX

So there you have it. If I am attracted, it's not to pheromones, or the color of your eyes, which you really had nothing to do with. I am attracted to the choices you've made. If I say 'you are so beautiful, Raskin', I don't mean your appearance, but who you are. For in here, there is no barrier between our souls. We both know this isn't a hand, but my desire to reach out and touch you. (He gently puts his hand on her knee) And when I do, it isn't your body I connect to. It is your bravery. Your goodness.

XLUCIDENIALX (cont'd)

Your bright simplicity of spirit. When two people kiss, it is not their lips that touch. It is their hope.

RASKIN

Yes.

XLUCIDENIALX

Their want.

RASKIN

Yes.

XLUCIDENIALX

Their desperate longing to be known.

XLucidenialX and Raskin share a long, passionate kiss.

RASKIN

Wow. Even without saliva, that was pretty amazing.

XLUCIDENIALX

And was that any less real for being online?

RASKIN

No. It ... happened.

XLUCIDENIALX

Yes. It did.

RASKIN

So what's my share?

XLUCIDENIALX

Pardon?

RASKIN

My share of your winnings.

XLUCIDENIALX

What?

RASKIN

Let's see, half of 500 gold is 250. That's fair, isn't it? I mean, I did do half the work.

XLUCIDENIALX

You mean you - ?

RASKIN

Those were some impressive moves, though. Made it really easy for me. How about 60/40?

XLUCIDENIALX

But that was a private chat. How did you -?

RASKIN

(laughs)
See? Even you think this is all so great that no one who grew up online would ever leave! And of course, security code is so much easier to crack when you aren't considered a threat.

XLUCIDENIALX

You *hacked* me?!

RASKIN

In some cultures, it's a compliment.

XLucidentialX sits there, flabbergasted.
Then slowly starts to laugh.

XLUCIDENIALX

Oh, well done! I can't remember the last time someone got the drop on me. Well done indeed!

RASKIN

Wanna bet I can do it twice in one night?

XLUCIDENIALX

Another wager?

RASKIN

Yes, that you're maybe not as perceptive as you think. At least not when your perfect little world gets a variable thrown in.

XLUCIDENIALX

And what variable is that?

RASKIN

Me.

XLUCIDENIALX

Interesting. What are the stakes?

RASKIN

Huge.

XLUCIDENIALX

I'm listening.

RASKIN

(looking around the room)
Yes, but others might be too. Initiate private chat.

MAID

(from offstage)
Private chat initiated.

Raskin tells XLucidentialX something, but only he can hear. He is taken aback they go back and forth, inaudible to anyone but themselves.

Finally, Raskin turns from XLucidentialX and gives some sort of command.

MAID
(from offstage)
Private chat closed.

XLUCIDENTIALX
You really think you can - ?

RASKIN
I won't be doing anything. But it will happen.

XLUCIDENTIALX
This is far too serious a matter to be treated as sport in this fashion. I'm in.

RASKIN
Good.

XLUCIDENTIALX
And if I win?

RASKIN
Then I'll delete my knowledge of your bet with Flutterbye99 from the chat history, you can have her 500 gold all to yourself, and show the recording to as many people as you like. It might even go viral in minutes.

XLUCIDENTIALX
It *will* go viral in seconds. And if I lose?

RASKIN
Then you owe me a favor.

XLUCIDENTIALX
Hmm. Favors can be dangerous business.

RASKIN
Isn't that what makes them so exciting?

XLUCIDENTIALX
Very well. A favor it is. I'm beginning to think I have met my match in the perception department. And I'm suddenly quite curious to know just what you look like offline.

RASKIN
I thought you said that didn't matter.

XLUCIDENTIALX
It does if it matters to you.

They look at each other for a good long time.

RASKIN
You're different from the others, aren't you? The things you do, they mean something. Even what you said before the kiss -

XLUCIDENIALX

Why stop before the kiss?

RASKIN

Because the kiss was the wager.

XLUCIDENIALX

We've just made a wager. Will that make you say or do anything that you don't mean?

RASKIN

(thinks about it)

No. No, it really won't.

XLUCIDENIALX

Well then - (picks up two champagne glasses, hands one to Raskin) a toast. To gambling with meaning.

RASKIN

To realizing that's what life truly is.

They drink.

XLUCIDENIALX

Now if you'll excuse me, I find I too need a break from you saying things like that.

RASKIN

Fair enough.

XLucidentialX exits through the French window. Raskin downs the rest of her champagne quickly, which causes her to stumble and drop her glass. It lands on the floor without a sound. Raskin stares at it, picks it up. She laughs to herself, drops it again. Same reaction. She picks it up, starts banging it against a table with delight. It still doesn't break. Wridget enters, also with champagne, watches her for a while.

WRIDGET

Now here's an interesting ritual. What does it mean, exactly?

RASKIN

Oh! Sorry. It's just ... the glasses don't break here.

WRIDGET

Break?

RASKIN

You know, shatter.

Empty look from Wridget.

RASKIN
Um, split apart into lots of tiny pieces?

WRIDGET
Glasses can do that?

RASKIN
Where I'm from, they do it all the time.

WRIDGET
And do they come back together again?

RASKIN
No.

WRIDGET
So ... what's the purpose of that?

RASKIN
There isn't one, but it kind of happens anyway. If you want to see, I can reprogram it for you.

WRIDGET
You can do that?

RASKIN
Sure. (Sets her glass down, and takes Wridget's) I got to know my way around code pretty well before I left. Now let me see here ... (Runs her hand over the surface of the glass)

WRIDGET
Left? You weren't born an Outdweller?

RASKIN
We're all born Outdwellers, Wridget. The weird part is that so few of us stay that way. But yeah, I plugged in around age 4, like everybody else.

WRIDGET
So what made you leave?

RASKIN
It wasn't just one thing. It wasn't even all at once. I guess I finally got to this point, where all of this, it just ...

WRIDGET
Wasn't enough.

RASKIN
Right.

WRIDGET
And people do that? They can't find some, some missing part of them in here, so they just ... leave?

RASKIN
There's no 'just' about it. But yes. They leave. A ton of us are that way - converts, I guess you'd call us.

WRIDGET
And did you find it out there?

RASKIN
What?

WRIDGET
The missing piece.

RASKIN
Not *the* piece. But pieces. Things you didn't realize were missing till you find them. Things that look little at first, then grow bigger and bigger.

WRIDGET
Such as?

RASKIN
Limitations. It's so much different in here. The way a person looks is a choice. You don't find the deep revulsion in yourself at things other people can't control. You never bump up against the limits of your own mercy. You're all free to fly, but to do that, you've given up gravity. There's no roots to grow, no pull to fight against ...

WRIDGET
No weight.

RASKIN
(handing him the glass)
Right.

Wridget looks at the glass, turning it in his fingers.

WRIDGET
And most of us don't fly - we float, as streams of data carry us from site to site. I thought I found a way out of that. A heartbeat to my life. Our hands entwined tonight and I thought, 'yes! This is weight, this is life!' But she was just next to me in the current, and if I ever got out, she'd keep right on going. I want to be anchored together, but she just wants someone to float next to for a while. And I can't be that. I've just had enough!

He hurls the glass to the ground. It shatters.

WRIDGET
What - what did I do?

RASKIN
You broke it.

WRIDGET
That ... was the single most satisfying thing I've done all night!

Why stop there?

RASKIN

Pardon?

WRIDGET

You could keep going. You could come with me.

RASKIN

You mean ... out - ?

WRIDGET

Yes. Stand up, dry yourself off, and come exploring. Find your limits, the walls inside where your goodness ends. Seek them out, and then break them to pieces like that glass.

RASKIN

Could I really - what about Buttercup?

WRIDGET

You'd see her more! She'll be mostly offline till Harmony's old enough to plug in.

RASKIN

Wridget stares at the broken glass on the floor.

Astrid!

WRIDGET

The Maid enters.

What?

MAID

I need to make amendments to the room. Please inform everyone that I've been called away on ... important business, but to stay as long as they like. ButtercupEGL will be the new moderator. Follow her instructions to the letter, then auto close the room when the last guest exits.

WRIDGET

Yes sir. Because you said please.

MAID

Thank you. (Starts off) Oh, and let XLucidenialX know he can have your avatar once you sign off. A parting gift. Do you have all that?

WRIDGET

I have 4,085 gigabytes memory. I think I handle that.

MAID

Astrid, you're a lifesaver!

WRIDGET

He kisses her on the cheek. She stares at him strangely, compulsively wiping her cheek as she exits.

WRIDGET

Is there anything I need?

RASKIN

You have real currency?

WRIDGET

A little, for the nutrient pack deliveries.

RASKIN

That might do for now. Later, though -

WRIDGET

I have plenty of assets I could convert. It would only take an e-mail or two in the morning.

RASKIN

Then you're all set.

WRIDGET

Well. Lead the way.

Raskin and Wridget exit. A moment later, ButtercupEGL enters from the veranda.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Wridget, we're just about to - Wridget?

She looks about the room, spots the broken glass on the floor. She kneels down, pick up a shard, and stares at it, uncertain. Curtain.

Act Two

Sound of a couple climaxing in the darkness, then silence. Lights come up on ButtercupEGL and FlyByNiteSOA lying in bed together in varying states of undress.

FLYBYNITESOA

How was that?

BUTTERCUPEGL

(still out of breath)

Quite ... something. The snowfall during climax was new.

FLYBYNITESOA

Did you like it?

BUTTERCUPEGL

It was very bracing.

FLYBYNITESOA

I do my best to keep things interesting.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Yes, but 'Keeping things pleasant' has its charms as well. (She kisses him) Do you like it better this way?

FLYBYNITESOA

Online? I don't know about 'better'. It's certainly tidier. All the sweat, you know, it's murder on my grip. But I don't enjoy the Pleasure Synchronization software nearly as much as I used to.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Yes - just the idea that there's a computer program regulating how much of me you feel -

FLYBYNITESOA

It's bloody cheating if you ask me! I'll admit, my success rate is much lower offline, but there's a genuine feeling of accomplishment when it happens - A sense of 'By gods! I really did it this time!' And I must confess, when I don't achieve that noble end, I love the way you fake it.

BUTTERCUPEGL

What?

FLYBYNITESOA

Don't misunderstand me, pet. You're quite good at it, but every now and then I can tell, and I think it's marvellous!

BUTTERCUPEGL

I never -

FLYBYNITESOA

Because you don't have to. Because you don't do it for your own pleasure. You do it to make me happy.

FLYBYNITESOA (cont'd)

Coming at the same time, we both get something out of it. But faking it is a selfless act of true devotion.

He tackles her playfully. ButtercupEGL gives a little scream of surprise, then falls to laughing along with him, roughhousing for a bit.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Do you know what I miss about it offline? Those ridiculous faces you make toward the end!

FLYBYNITESOA

I do not!

BUTTERCUPEGL

I swear, you look just like a teething Pterodactyl!

She acts this out. Wrestling and laughter ensues.

FLYBYNITESOA

Lies! All lies!

BUTTERCUPEGL

I think it's adorable ... when I'm not worried about losing a limb!

FLYBYNITESOA

They do look rather tasty.

He grabs her arm and bites onto it playfully. ButtercupEGL lets out a squeal.

BUTTERCUPEGL

That tickles!

FLYBYNITESOA

What? This?

More arm biting ensues. ButtercupEGL gasps with laughter.

BUTTERCUPEGL

You fiend! You turned my ticklishness preferences back to "on" when I wasn't looking!

FLYBYNITESOA

Who, me? I'm just a hungry pterodactyl. Nom nom nom!

The chomping, and laughing, continues.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Higgins, help!

The BUTLER enters, a stiffly proper gentleman sporting a monocle and a bushy mustache.

BUTLER

Yes, m'lady?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Revert to my default physical sensitivity settings!

FLYBYNITESOA

Pay no attention to her, Higgins! She's having a wonderful time!

BUTTERCUPEGL

Now!

BUTLER

Default sensitivity settings restored.

ButtercupEGL suddenly stops, mid-squirm, and is perfectly calm, despite her husband's best efforts to the contrary.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Ah. Much better. (To FlyByNiteSOA) Are you quite done?

FlyByNite stops, looks up at her. Takes one last gnaw on her arm. Then gives up.

FLYBYNITESOA

Bloody cheating, that's what it is! Just remember when we're back offline that you've brought it on yourself!

They kiss. The Butler twitches robotically.

BUTLER

XLucidialX requests entry to the room.

BUTTERCUPEGL

But we haven't made the room public yet! How does Luci do that?! Higgins, will you get the bed, please? The last thing I need today is XLucidialX asking questions about our sex life.

The Butler causes the bed to disappear. A table and chairs appear in its place.

FLYBYNITESOA

I wouldn't mind, actually, so long as I got to ask a few questions in return.

BUTTERCUPEGL

There's not much likelihood of that, I'm afraid. So you may want to consider pants.

FLYBYNITESOA

Pants! Yes. Suit please, Higgins. The usual.

BUTLER

Yes, sir. (hands FlyByNite the suit) XLucidialX is still awaiting reply.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Tell Luci to wait. We're not nearly ready. And I'll need all the composure I can get today.

BUTLER

Message sent. XLucidialX awaits your pleasure.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I'll see the wardrobe now, Higgins.

BUTLER

Yes m'lady.

The Butler fetches a full length mirror on a stand, which he faces toward ButtercuPEGL and away from the audience.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Select gowns, Neo-Victorian, category B. Function: slide show.

BUTLER

Type, category and function selected, m'lady.

FLYBYNITESOA

I still don't understand why you're bothering to host this at all, considering how you feel about it.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I won't know how I feel about it until he actually talks to me. (To Butler) Next.

ButtercuPEGL looks in the mirror, poses a few times.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Next. Ever since he came back, he's been avoiding me like a virus. This way, at least, he'll have to work harder to do so. Next. (More posing) Next. Hmm. That's not bad. In lavender, please? But 8% darker. (To FlyByNiteSOA) What do you think? Does it say "approachable, but won't be pushed aside" to you?

FLYBYNITESOA

(slides a finger down her chest)

Lower the neckline to about there, and yes.

ButtercuPEGL raises his finger an inch.

BUTTERCUPEGL

There will do just fine, thank you. I'll take this one, Higgins.

BUTLER

Excellent choice, m'lady.

He reaches into the mirror and pulls out a stunning lavender dress. FlyByNiteSOA helps her into it.

FLYBYNITESOA

Wridget just feels guilty for leaving you is all. That, or he's ashamed that he didn't have the stomach for it.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I don't care about any of that! We're family, pure and simple. Wridget should know better.

She looks at herself in the mirror and sighs.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I dearly hope this isn't one more impulsive decision.

FLYBYNITESOA

I think it looks lovely.

BUTTERCUPEGL

I meant Wridget, not the dress. But thank you anyway. (To Butler) We're ready now, Higgins.

The Butler snaps his fingers, and a door opens in the wall. The avatar that was formerly the MAID, but is now XLucidentialX, enters, sporting powder blue hair and fingernails, which go nicely with her extravagant, nearly 18th century looking dress.

BUTLER

XLucidentialX has entered the room.

XLUCIDENTIALX

Have I ever told you how much I love to be kept waiting before entry? It gives one time to sit and reflect on all the scandalous things the people inside are busy hiding.

FLYBYNITESOA

And just what do you think you are doing?!

XLUCIDENTIALX

Making a rather spectacular entrance, if I do say so myself.

FLYBYNITESOA

I mean your appearance!

XLUCIDENIALX

Isn't it lovely? The moment I saw this one, I told Wridget it would enter into my regular rotation, and lo and behold, it has.

FLYBYNITESOA

But this is to be a meeting of the wedding party, and you're the best man!

XLUCIDENIALX

And?

FLYBYNITESOA

And the best man is supposed to be a bloody man, damn it!

XLUCIDENIALX

Then I suppose the Maid of Honor should be chivalrously dusting the altar while the groom gives the horses a good brush? Literalism is a slippery slope, my friend. Figuratively, that is.

FLYBYNITESOA

What?!

BUTTERCUPEGL

Oh, let her be, darling. She's obviously not in a mood to be trifled with.

XLUCIDENIALX

I wish I were. No one enjoys a good trifling with more than I. Instead, I have the misfortune of needing to ask a serious question.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Before 7pm. And not on a Tuesday? This is quite the momentous occasion!

XLUCIDENIALX

(sits at the table)

Don't rub it in. Might we have a spot of tea, perhaps? Things always feel slightly less serious when you're holding something with your pinky up.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Of course. Some tea please, Higgins.

BUTLER

As swiftly as possible, m'lady.

The Butler exits, then immediately reappears with tea, which he serves. XLucidentialx looks him over closely.

XLUCIDENIALX

Wait, is that -? Really, Butters. I give you a dashing custom avatar, and you turn him into the Butler? When I said "extra-cirricular use", I -

BUTTERCUPEGL

I know what you meant. And chose to ignore it. (to the Butler) Thank you, Higgins, that will do for now.

The Butler exits.

XLUCIDENIALX

Higgins?! If you're going to reinforce old stereotypes, you should at least choose more colorful ones. He could be a Scotsman named Gordon Campbell, sturdy and reliable, though perhaps a touch too fond of drink, with an oddball sense of humor, a pronounced limp, and an accent exaggerated to extremes out of a sense of nationalist pride. What do you say? It would only take me a moment.

BUTTERCUPEGL

A kind offer, but no, thank you.

XLUCIDENIALX

Really, you and your brother's lack of imagination when it comes to A.I. is astounding!

FLYBYNITESOA

It's something of a game with them, constantly trying to see who can be the most utterly traditional.

XLUCIDENIALX

(to ButtercupeGL)

I fear your brother has gotten the best of you this time. There are few things so old-fashioned and traditional as marrying for the wrong reasons.

FlyByNiteSOA bursts out laughing, but is silenced by a poisonous look from ButtercupeGL.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Considering the occasion, Luci, that comment is in poor taste even for you.

XLUCIDENIALX

But not untrue?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Didn't you say you had a serious question for me?

XLUCIDENIALX

Yes, and that was it. A frivolous way of posing it, I admit, but what did you expect? It isn't Tuesday, you know.

BUTTERCUPEGL

You think my brother is making a mistake?

XLUCIDENIALX

Naturally. But what matters right now is what you think. You know him better than anyone. And before I put certain ... arrangements in place, I must be sure that I should.

FLYBYNITESOA

Now see here, Miss, or - or whatever it is you are. You have no right to go interfering in Wridget's affairs!

XLUCIDENIALX

Which is why I came to you - You're family. Interfering in one another's affairs is what you're there for, isn't it?

BUTTERCUPEGL

It's no use, Luci. I don't know any more than you do.

XLUCIDENIALX

But ... he tells you everything.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Not anymore.

XLUCIDENIALX

Well, then. Never mind the rest of us. *He* thinks it's a mistake, or he would have come to you about it. Isn't that the traditional thing to do?

BUTTERCUPEGL

I still reserve judgment until I hear it from him face to face.

XLUCIDENIALX

How very sisterly of you. Well, you can keep an open mind, and I'll keep a few tricks up my sleeve.

The Butler enters.

BUTLER

The betrothed couple requests entry to the room.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Show them in at once. (To XLucidentialX) I'll be keeping my eye on you.

XLUCIDENIALX

I'll do my best to keep it entertained.

Wridget enters, with Flutterbye99 proudly clutching his arm.

BUTLER

Wridget and Flutterbye99 have entered the room.

FLUTTERBYE99

Notice anything different?

BUTTERCUPEGL

You're actually sharing an entrance for once?

FLUTTERBYE99

Nonsense. Wridget is my fiancée. That counts as an accessory. (To the Butler) Update that to my status, please. (To ButtercupEGL, regarding the Butler) What is his name?

Higgins. BUTTERCUPEGL

Of course it is. FLUTTERBYE99

New status uploaded, Miss. BUTLER

It's good to know that your priorities haven't changed, even if your left eye is just a touch too far apart from your right. XLUCIDENIALX

Ah, you guessed it! Fabulous little imperfection, isn't it? Wridget designed it for me himself - an utterly ingenious new trend he started. FLUTTERBYE99

More of a fad, I'm afraid. WRIDGET

Either way, it's the latest thing. FLUTTERBYE99

I haven't heard a word about it! FLYBYNITESOA

I rest my case. FLUTTERBYE99

Do try and be civil, darling. WRIDGET

We're about to be family, Wridget. The time for civility has passed. FLUTTERBYE99

Yes, now we're free to irritate each other to our hearts' content! FLYBYNITESOA

And you know what they say - irritation is the sincerest form of battery. FLUTTERBYE99

They don't say that! FLYBYNITESOA

Update to my status, Higgins. FLUTTERBYE99

Yes, Miss. BUTLER

They shall in about five minutes. FLUTTERBYE99

BUTLER

The ReverendVariety.org requests entry, sir.

FLYBYNITESOA

Yes, he's expected. Send him in, please.

The Butler opens the door, lets ReverendVariety.org inside. He is purposefully not as youthful looking as the others, with strategically grey hair, and very colorful vestments displaying every conceivable religious symbol and a few new ones.

BUTLER

ReverendVariety.org has entered the room.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Greetings, everyone! Where are those adventurous lovebirds waiting to plumb the depths of that great mystery called matrimony?

WRIDGET

Right here, Reverend.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Wridget, then? Good to finally meet you in person. Ah, Flutterbye99! I'm an avid follower of your blog - but then again, who isn't? - and let me say, madam, that it is an absolute honor to make your acquaintance!

FLUTTERBYE99

Yes, it is. How kind of you to notice.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

And Buttercup, our lovely Maid of Honor! How are you, my dear?

BUTTERCUPEGL

I'm quite well, thank you.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Excellent, excellent! FlybyNiteSOA, looking as robust as ever!

FLYBYNITESOA

Thank you, Reverend!

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Now let me guess - this lovely young lady must be our best man?

XLUCIDENIALX

Quite perceptive of you, Reverend.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

One can always count on XLucidenaIaX to be splendidly unconventional.

FLYBYNITESOA

Oh, do you two know each other?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

But of course. XLucidialX has programmed some of our site's finest and most popular deities.

XLUCIDENIALX

What can I say? Thinking like an omniscient master of all I survey comes rather naturally to me.

FLYBYNITESOA

Well, I'll be damned to -!

And he's stalled again.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

To ... to ...? (to the others) Did he just -?

BUTTERCUPEGL

It happens rather frequently, yes.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Really? He never does this during lessons.

FLUTTERBYE99

That's reassuring.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Shall we have some tea while we wait? Or is that too casual? Higgins, champagne.

They all sit at the table, leaving FlyByNite standing by himself. The Butler replaces the tea with champagne.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

He's an excellent flight instructor, you know. I went from hovering just a few inches off the ground to full on soaring and gliding in a little over a week. Though I'm still a bit skittish on take off. The exact positioning of the arms is tricky to say the least. How long does he stay like this, usually?

BUTTERCUPEGL

One never can tell. So for now, we'll just have to guess where it is he's being damned to.

FLUTTERBYE99

I have a few educated guesses. (To the Reverend) How about you?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

I prefer to keep my opinions on damnation to myself. Such things aren't as good for business as they used to be.

WRIDGET

So you think of what you do as a business, as opposed to a calling, say?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Oh, they've been entwined from the very beginning! God agrees to provide various temporal and eternal goods and services in exchange for worship and obedience - two valuable commodities in any day and age, especially if you're going to -

FLYBYNITESOA

(roaring back on)

- hell in a handbasket!

XLUCIDENIALX

The man makes an excellent point.

FLYBYNITESOA

What?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Nothing, dear. Shouldn't you be going now?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

You won't be joining us, FlyByNiteSOA?

FLYBYNITESOA

Afraid not. I have to pick up the little tyke from Ra - from the baby-sitter's.

WRIDGET

If we'd known, we could have scheduled an earlier time for -

FLYBYNITESOA

If I'd known beforehand, I would have told you, of course! Most days, she can keep Harmony until 4 or 5, but something came up, apparently. And strictly speaking, I'm not a member of the wedding party anyhow.

BUTTERCUPEGL

No, but you're my hero, as always.

She kisses him.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Tell Harmony that mommy will be home as soon as she can.

FLYBYNITESOA

Of course. (To Wridget) Anything you'd like me to relay while I'm out?

FLUTTERBYE99

What could Wridget possibly have to say to anyone out there?

FLYBYNITESOA

Haven't the foggiest. That's why I was asking.

FLUTTERBYE99

He has no message to relay, I assure you.

XLUCIDENIALX

That's what I admire about Wridget. He's a man that always speaks for himself!

BUTTERCUPEGL

He doesn't have a message for his niece, at least?

FLUTTERBYE99

Oh. Yes. I forgot about her. How is she doing?

BUTTERCUPEGL

She's fine. She misses you, Wridget. (To Flutterbye99) He's a very good baby-sitter, you know.

FLUTTERBYE99

You don't say?

WRIDGET

Tell Harmony I miss her too. Very much.

FLYBYNITESOA

She'll be delighted to hear it. Especially if I can find a place to insert the word "fuzzy". She can't get enough of that one. Don't know why. But yes. Can I tell her to expect a visit from you two any time soon?

FLUTTERBYE99

Oh, that's very kind of you to offer!

WRIDGET

Yes -

FLUTTERBYE99

But we couldn't possibly. Wridget's still recovering from his experience Out there. Why, he's only just now coming back to himself.

BUTTERCUPEGL

(under her breath)

And may have a bit further to go.

FLYBYNITESOA

What?! I was standing next to the man for a good deal of his "experience Out there", and I don't remember it being so dreadful as all that -

WRIDGET

It was worse than dreadful. It was absolute magic. New sensation upon new sensation, splashing up against you with such force! But none of them brought me any closer to what I was looking for.

FLYBYNITESOA

Perhaps you were looking for the wrong thing. Did you ever think of that?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Darling -

FLYBYNITESOA

I'm not being boorish, love. Well, not *just* being boorish. I'm trying to understand what Wridget expected to happen, because I have absolutely no idea!

FLUTTERBYE99

Most likely because it's a sentiment that's higher than you're used to reaching for.

FLYBYNITESOA

(not noticing the insult at all)

Yes, that must be it. When we went Out, it was for something practical. We wanted to raise a family, and now we are. That's why you go Out. Not to look for some sort of blinding revelation.

WRIDGET

There were plenty of those. They just kept ... breaking apart. Into disappointments. Nagging little disappointments.

WRIDGET

Real alcohol, for instance, doesn't taste nearly so fine as this. And its effects are much spottier than the neural response programming. Granted, there is a - a sort of taste to beer after manual labor that one can't quite find here, but -

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Don't tell me they forced you into manual labor?!

BUTTERCUPEGL

It's the only labor available, dear.

FLYBYNITESOA

And it isn't as though he were building the bloody pyramids!

WRIDGET

Closer than you think. Working with hair and skin online is an art limited only by the imagination. Out there, it becomes a long series of battles against gravity, a horrible invention, by the way - I sincerely hope that Newton fellow was beheaded for coming up with it. Merely standing up for prolonged periods becomes a trial of endurance!

XLUCIDENIALX

But you were able to.

WRIDGET

To what?

XLUCIDENIALX

Stand. Bodies decay Out there, don't they? Not everyone can do that.

WRIDGET

Yes, that's true.

XLUCIDENIALX

So this gravity is kinder to some than to others.

WRIDGET

I ... I suppose.

FLYBYNITESOA

Well then, I can tell Harmony that you won't be over?

WRIDGET

No, not for some time.

A strange look from Flutterbye99.

FLYBYNITESOA

Then I'll be off. I seem to have annoyed the bride enough for one evening.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Well, you know what they say - "Irritation is the sincerest form of battery"! (laughs)

FlyByNiteSOA stares at Flutterbye99,
who just smiles.

FLYBYNITESOA

Right. Well, if you'll excuse me, I must be off to where they don't say that. Ever. Good day.

He exits.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

It sounds like quite the trial you've been through, Wridget. How ever did you cope?

XLUCIDENIALX

Why, the same way all martyrs do - by clinging to the hope of eventual congratulations.

WRIDGET

I don't know that I did cope. I missed browsing terribly! Just drifting with the current from link to link... but offline, relaxation becomes ... active. Something you're forced to pursue in order to have. The people out there are so desperate to lose themselves that they don't even stop at the synopses - they actually read whole books!

FLUTTERBYE99

No!

WRIDGET

It's true. I did it myself on occasion, the effects of which were ... perplexing.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

In what way?

WRIDGET

You know those quick bursts of accomplishment you feel every time you glean a new fact while surfing the Nets, like a parade of sudden fireworks, lighting up the sky one after the other?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Of course.

WRIDGET

There's not one single explosion in the reading of a book. It's more like ... like your eyes adjust to the dark expanse that the fireworks bloomed in front of. Did you know they could do that? Your eyes? Darkness Out there is so different, like some, some great black glitch that keeps you from seeing anything! But only at first. Your eyes get used to it, you see. You have to focus more than usual, but you can start to make things out around you. That's what reading a book felt like. You squint and you strain, and then suddenly, you realize there is so much of that sky, and so many others staring into it at the same time, from very different places. Without the loud bangs and bright colors, the world becomes cluttered with other lives, your own being the merest glimmer of light among them.

FLUTTERBYE99

(embracing him)

Oh, darling! That sounds absolutely terrifying! I am so glad you've made it back, where you never have to feel that ever again!

WRIDGET

It wasn't so bad a feeling. But, ah, not worth enduring an unplugged life for. Of course. All those aching joints, the sneaking embarrassments, that ... that odd feeling you get when you catch a glimpse of your reflection in a window, that you've been stranded in a face that's not your own. None of the pleasures add up to the pains that come with them. They're ... not worth the trouble. What's really so special about the taste of tears, or the throb of someone else's heartbeat, or watching a sunset nobody planned, that will never take shape in that exact way ever again ...

Wridget trails off in thoughtful reverie.

FLUTTERBYE99

I see what you mean. What's the use of sunsets if you can't replay your favorites on occasion?

The Butler enters.

BUTLER

Scandalicious7 requests entry to the room.

Wridget chokes on his mouthful of champagne.

BUTTERCUPEGL
I hadn't expected her today. Did you, Wridget? (To Butler)
Show her -

WRIDGET
Ah, that may not be the wisest idea, Buttercup.

Wridget takes ButtercupEGL aside from the others.

BUTTERCUPEGL
Why ever not?

WRIDGET
(whispering)
I may have ... neglected to mention my engagement to her.

BUTTERCUPEGL
But we come to her with everything.

WRIDGET
At this point, it's more of a formality than a -

BUTTERCUPEGL
Show her in, Higgins.

WRIDGET
Buttercup!

ButtercupEGL stomps away from Wridget, whispering in XLucidentalX's ear as she passes.

BUTTERCUPEGL
Whatever it is you were going to do, go ahead and do it.

Scandalicious7 enters, looking a touch closer to her mid-twenties in both appearance and dress.

BUTLER
Scandalicious7 has entered the room.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG
Ah, one of our most faithful clients! What a pleasant surprise! I wasn't told that you were going to be involved in the ceremony -

SCANDALICIOUS7
I wasn't told that there was a ceremony to be involved in. Thankfully, I have a network of shameless gossips who pretend to be my friends, which has proven more reliable than certain relations who seem ashamed to be my family. Good heavens, are you having the reception right now?

WRIDGET

What? No! We were simply deciding on the type of ceremony we -

SCANDALICIOUS7

Either way, you display a soullessness and disdain for family that, in my youth, I would have found quite attractive in a man. But now it cuts me to the quick! Why, the very thought that you would attempt to enter into matrimony without my consent -!

WRIDGET

But you never consent to anything.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Only because defiance builds character!

XLUCIDENIALX

It also does wonders for one's complexion.

SCANDALICIOUS7

XLucidentialX, this is a familial matter, and I will thank you to keep your far too freckled nose out of it!

XLUCIDENIALX

Don't listen to her, Wridget. Your work with freckles is unsurpassed in the medium.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Yes, but the lady has a point about this being a family matter. Perhaps we should give them a moment. I'm sure we both have other business to attend to.

XLUCIDENIALX

Now that you mention it, I do. If you all will excuse me, I have to see a four breasted leopard woman about a certain bachelor party.

ReverendVariety.org exits, with XLucidentialX following. As she goes out, she quickly whispers into the Butler's ear. He twitches robotically, then exits.

SCANDALICIOUS7

(to Wridget)

If you needed a prancing egomaniac to confide in, you could have chosen the one who was related to you.

WRIDGET

To what end, exactly? No matter what I said, you would reject it without reason, and I would disobey your orders. We've always had more of a game than a relationship, Auntie, and it's one I've begun to tire of.

Beat.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Yes, well ... perhaps I hadn't realized the importance of our relationship until you stopped keeping up the pretense that we had one. I take my pretenses quite seriously, and I shall not surrender them lightly! (She sits down) Now then, you have not yet entered into a state of marriage, so there is still time to do this properly. State your case clearly, and pray don't spare any of the sensationalistic detail.

WRIDGET

I refuse. This is a completely unnecessary conversation.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Which is precisely why it is important. Unnecessary conversation is what separates us from the animals.

BUTTERCUPEGL

You must admit, Wridget, you've been quite secretive about what led you to propose again.

WRIDGET

That was my choice.

Flutterbye99 stands and presents herself to Scandalicious7.

FLUTTERBYE99

Well, it certainly isn't mine. What would you like to know?

WRIDGET

Flutterbye, you don't have to -

FLUTTERBYE99

Dear, I've blogged every detail of our engagement from the beginning. Lately, I've had to update the saga three to four times daily just to keep up with demand. The least I can do is give your family as proper an account.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Please tell me you have a condensed version.

FLUTTERBYE99

When it comes to the two supreme art forms of the age, I excel more at over-sharing than summarization. But I shall do my best. (Produces a letter out of nowhere) I suppose I should begin with the e-mail he sent me the day after he left Buttercup's party. (Hands Scandalicious7 the letter) It's the most adorably earnest thing you'll ever read in your life! Brought me to tears more than once, I admit - I can't remember having laughed so hard!

SCANDALICIOUS7

A sure sign of heartbreak if there ever was one.

FLUTTERBYE99

Of course, it was all something of a lark, the first time. Betrothal is such a novelty nowadays - I figured at the very least, I'd make a good blog series of it.

FLUTTERBYE99 (cont'd)

It was a few months before I realized that it wasn't merely a novelty that Wridget took with him when he left. My fans - they pay the bills, god bless them - but all they want from me is more, always more, every minute of every day. (To Wridget and ButtercupEGL) You two have known me longer than almost anyone. Even before I became "someone to know". And you weren't there for the wit, or the catchphrases, or the shocking admissions. You were just there ... for me. But then both of you went traipsing offline, left me stranded with the demanding crowd, and suddenly there wasn't anyone around me that I was enough for.

Silence.

FLUTTERBYE99

So before long, I found myself in the embarrassing position of writing my own ridiculously earnest set of e-mails.

SCANDALICIOUS7

One can receive e-mails in ... *that* place?

WRIDGET

A primitive "view only" mode, but yes. And they were ... very persuasive.

SCANDALICIOUS7

I suppose anything would be out *there*.

WRIDGET

Flutterbye99's e-mails would have been beautiful no matter where I had read them.

FLUTTERBYE99

They were the unfiltered outpourings of my heart. Which means rubbish so far as literature is concerned. But there must have been something to them, because in the end, he came back for me.

She kisses Wridget.

FLUTTERBYE99

You saved me, dear. You truly did. (To the others) So of course, I said yes. And meant it, this time.

SCANDALICIOUS7

And that is why you plugged back in, nephew? You ventured out in search of meaning and human connection when all the time it was waiting in your own back yard?

Wridget fidgets nervously under Buttercup's gaze.

WRIDGET

For the most part.

SCANDALICIOUS7

A rather cliched moral to glean from one's first romance, but I suppose there's nothing to be done about that now. (To Flutterbye99) And what of your parentage? Did you know them?

FLUTTERBYE99

I enjoyed a casual acquaintance with my mother. My father, of course, is anyone's guess.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Good. I do not approve of this modern familiarity between parent and child. It has always been a relationship of mutual inconvenience. Attempting to alter that only makes it more so. Income?

WRIDGET

I don't think that is a question for -

FLUTTERBYE99

915,000 a year.

WRIDGET

(surprised)

Really?

SCANDALICIOUS7

In Credits?

FLUTTERBYE99

(nods)

Not counting gifts and services in trade.

SCANDALICIOUS7

I had no idea blogging had become such a lucrative field.

FLUTTERBYE99

It's a growing industry. For geniuses, at least.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Do you hold any property?

FLUTTERBYE99

Well, there is the site for the blog, of course. I hold several apartments like this one on various social networks, a spacious house site, as well as several domains named after clever words and phrases I've invented that I sublet to smaller enterprises.

SCANDALICIOUS7

That is satisfactory. I hear that nothing strengthens a marriage quite like the ability to flee somewhere else at any moment. But on to other matters: Republican or Democrat?

FLUTTERBYE99

Neither. I'm afraid I have no interest in sports.

SCANDALICIOUS7

How about religion?

FLUTTERBYE99

Oh yes. I'm a devoted Narcissist. Reformed Narcissism, mind you, not Orthodox.

SCANDALICIOUS7

The distinction?

FLUTTERBYE99

An Orthodox Narcissist only sees the need to be worshipped by oneself. But I allow others to worship me if they so choose.

SCANDALICIOUS7

How very accommodating of you. And now we come to more personal matters, for which we shall require privacy. (To ButtercupEGL and Wridget) You will excuse us.

WRIDGET

Auntie, this has gone on long enough. Now let her be, or -

FLUTTERBYE99

Initiate private chat, Higgins.

The Butler limps on.

WRIDGET

Flutterbye, you don't have to -

BUTLER

(thick Scottish accent)

Private chat initiated.

Lights dim on Flutterbye99 and Scandalicious7, who carry on a silent conversation.

WRIDGET

Blast!

BUTLER

And the name is Campbell. You'd think two syllables wouldn't be so hard to remember, but that's the upper classes for you.

He brings a flask from out of his jacket and takes a swig.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Why can't Luci ever leave well enough alone?

WRIDGET

I don't know. But - I had better retrieve her and the Reverend.

He heads for the door.

BUTTERCUPEGL

No, you had better sit down, or start shopping for a new avatar. Because if you walk out that door, I will gladly murder you on Luci's recommendation.

WRIDGET

Buttercup -

BUTTERCUPEGL

You have been avoiding me for months. Me. And I have patiently waited for you to tell me what happened, but the moment we end up alone together, you slip out of the room like a greased ferret.

WRIDGET

Buttercup, I -

BUTTERCUPEGL

No! I am through being patient, and I am done indulging your little game of rodent shuffleboard!

WRIDGET

It's mustelid shuffleboard, actually.

BUTTERCUPEGL

What?

WRIDGET

Ferrets aren't rodents, they're mustelidae. Of the weasel family.

BUTTERCUPEGL

A family you're beginning to resemble more than our own! Now either tell me what is going on, or be man enough to admit that you aren't man enough to admit it.

WRIDGET

You know why I came back online - I agonized over it for weeks, mostly in your hearing.

BUTTERCUPEGL

And yet, I don't recall a word about Flutterbye99 or her 'lovely e-mails'. Odd, considering you apparently plugged back in to save her.

WRIDGET

From her point of view, that is what happened. Yes, with some melodramatic distortion, but -

BUTTERCUPEGL

If you didn't tell me about her part in your decision to leave, did you tell her about Raskin's?

WRIDGET

What is there to tell? Nothing happened between us.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Plenty of things happened, Wridget. Just not the things you'd hoped.

WRIDGET

I didn't go out for Raskin, and I didn't come back in because of her, either. I went Outside looking for something much more elusive than romance.

BUTTERCUPEGL

And what was that?

WRIDGET

My true self, a true connection. *Something* true. But all the subterfuge, all the false disguises, they're Out there, too, only more dangerous because they're not just external! Here you sculpt your appearance to your innermost being, and people flock to you accordingly. Offline, it's nearly the opposite.

The Butler busts up laughing. Wridget and ButtercupEGL look at him.

BUTLER

Er. Beggin' your pardon. Was telling jokes to meself.

WRIDGET

(back to ButtercupEGL)

Outside ... who knows who you will connect with?! So you twist your personality in an effort to, to please, or meet expectations. In a matter of months, I no longer recognized myself! I thought I would grow more real out there, but I'd never felt more ghostly, more insubstantial! That is what made me go back. And then, I received an e-mail from someone who reminded me who I was. Not only that, but she needed me - yes, needed me to help her recognize herself. Is it any great mystery that when I came back, we decided to be together?

BUTTERCUPEGL

No. But love and need are not the same thing, Wridget. And they very rarely go together.

BUTLER

The Private Chat now be closed.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Well, nephew ... (Stops, to ButtercupEGL) Wasn't your Butler English before?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Yes, but he sometimes forgets to take his medication.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Ah. Well then, after a lengthy interview, nephew, I believe I have come to a decision.

WRIDGET

Wonderful.

SCANDALICIOUS7

I find that I approve of this union -

WRIDGET AND BUTTERCUPEGL

What?!

SCANDALICIOUS7

- and wish you every happiness in your life together.

FLUTTERBYE99

Why thank you, Aunt Scandalicious7. That is most kind of you.

WRIDGET

But you've never approved of anything.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Ever.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Then be encouraged that you have finally done something right.

The Butler laughs again, but quickly stifles it under Scandalicious7's gaze.

WRIDGET

I ... don't know what to say.

SCANDALICIOUS7

Since you are new to this situation, I shall excuse your ignorance this once. But an expression of thankfulness would be appropriate.

WRIDGET

Yes, of course. Thank you, Aunt Scandalicious7.

BUTTERCUPEGL

(to Scandalicious7)

And now that you've given your consent, we'd be honored if you stayed for the rest of the meeting.

SCANDALICIOUS7

And what exactly would this meeting entail?

WRIDGET

Going over logistics, mostly.

SCANDALICIOUS7

At the very mention of the word logistics, my avatar grows pale with boredom. So if you will excuse me, I have several more interesting places to be at the moment. Best wishes to you both.

She heads to the door.

BUTTERCUPEGL

(to Wridget and Flutterbye99)

Please excuse me for a moment.

Wridget and Flutterbye99 sit down and converse amongst themselves as ButtercupEGL intercepts Scandalicious7 before she leaves.

BUTTERCUPEGL
Auntie, may I have a word before you go? In private?

BUTLER
Private chat initiated.

SCANDALICIOUS7
What is it?

BUTTERCUPEGL
For my own peace of mind, I must know what Flutterbye99 said to convince you that this was a suitable match.

SCANDALICIOUS7
She was full of a great many warm sentiments, most of which I think she actually believes. But you misunderstand me. I said I approved, yes. But I did not say I found it a suitable match. Quite the opposite, in fact.

BUTTERCUPEGL
I beg your pardon?

SCANDALICIOUS7
You young ladies are such amateurs. Wridget was the first man to resist her charms for more than a day and a half. He left her rejected, and she was able to get him back. So now she thinks what she's feeling is love when it is quite obviously a sense of accomplishment.

BUTTERCUPEGL
Then why on earth did you say you approved?!

SCANDALICIOUS7
It was the only move I had left. I've disapproved of every good decision Wridget has ever made. I thought if I actually approved of something, he might think twice about the wisdom of it.

BUTTERCUPEGL
But this is far too important a thing to play at, Auntie! You must tell him what you truly think.

SCANDALICIOUS7
And what good would that do? After all those years I spent treating his thoughts so lightly? At the time your mother died, the last thing I wanted was responsibility to anyone, so I turned my guardianship of you two into a kind of game. It worked well when you were younger, but you grew up while I refused to. And now ... the game is all I have left.

Long silence. Scandalicious7 heads to the door, but stops before she goes out.

SCANDALICIOUS7

If I were to take a trip offline, to meet Harmony ... that would be acceptable?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Auntie ... of course!

SCANDALICIOUS7

Good, good. Now if you will excuse me, I feel the sudden need for a reckless dalliance with someone half my age. Perhaps even a third. It's been quite some time since I've had this much seriousness to make up for.

Scandalicious7 exits.

BUTLER

Scandalicious7 has left the room. Private chat closed.

Wridget and Flutterbye99's conversation blares to life.

FLUTTERBYE99

Now, that is enough of that. What your aunt and I said to each other was said in confidence, which means you'll have to wait and see it on my blog like everybody else.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Sorry to keep you waiting. But that was ... quite unexpected. Aunt Scandy wants to come Out to meet Harmony sometime next week. Both of you are more than welcome to join her if you like.

WRIDGET

Scandalicious7 actually plans to unplug?!

BUTTERCUPEGL

That is what she said.

WRIDGET

This has been a most singular day indeed.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Do you mind if I pop offline for a moment to tell my husband the news? Unless you're in a hurry to -

FLUTTERBYE99

Of course not. I can't think of a better way to spend an afternoon than putting off something important. Can you, darling?

WRIDGET

What? Oh. No. That should be fine.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Thank you. I won't be long.

ButtercupEGL exits.

BUTLER

ButtercupEGL has left the chat, just in case you couldn't tell from watching her.

FLUTTERBYE99

Campbell, more champagne, please.

BUTLER

Champagne! Right! I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes!

He exits. Then immediately comes back in with two glasses of champagne on a silver tray.

BUTLER

That was Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, though they tend to leave that line out of the synopses.

He sets the glasses on the table, then disappears again.

FLUTTERBYE99

Does it upset you?

WRIDGET

What?

FLUTTERBYE99

Your aunt going offline?

WRIDGET

Upset me?! I ... I ... I don't know whether to pity her or the outside world more. Both will receive something they aren't remotely prepared for.

FLUTTERBYE99

You can't hide your feelings from me behind cleverness, darling. I know where to look. Now what is it?

WRIDGET

She's never approved of a single thing I've done. Then, on the day that she finally does, she sets out on the path she just approved of me rejecting. I don't know what any of it is supposed to mean.

FLUTTERBYE99

She gave us her blessing to make amends with you, and she's going Out to see the child to make amends with your sister. Is it really so hard to understand?

WRIDGET

But why now?

FLUTTERBYE99

What does it matter, so long as she's happy for us? Or at least trying to be. Besides, she'll be there for your sister now, and we'll have each other. Which is all I'll ever need.

She kisses him passionately, only to be interrupted by the Butler, entering with a card on a silver tray.

BUTLER

A text for you, missy.

FLUTTERBYE99

What on earth -?

BUTLER

What? You mean you can't read Swahili? (Loud laughter) A joke! A jibe! A real knee-slapper! (He touches the card) There you are, ma'am. Back into boring old English.

Flutterbye99 glares at the Butler, then goes back to reading the card.

FLUTTERBYE99

Heavens, how could I be so careless?

WRIDGET

What is it?

FLUTTERBYE99

A newsfeed interviewer wondering where I am. My public can't seem to get enough news of our wedding plans. Oh darling, I could have sworn I'd rescheduled it for tomorrow.

WRIDGET

No harm done. We'll start fresh when you get back.

FLUTTERBYE99

You are sure you don't mind being left alone like this.

WRIDGET

Not at all. I have some business to attend to as well. (Noticing the abandoned glasses of champagne) Besides, there are now two fine glasses of champagne that need finishing.

FLUTTERBYE99

You're a perfect dear, do you know that?

WRIDGET

It's beginning to dawn on me, yes.

FLUTTERBYE99

I'll be back before you can finish both glasses.

WRIDGET

Then I'll drink very quickly.

She gives him a quick kiss, and speeds out the door. Wridget sits down, weary.

BUTLER

Would you like anything to go along with the champagne, sir? Perhaps a plate of fresh strawberries?

WRIDGET
Everyone else is gone, Raskin. You can stop playacting now.

The Butler freezes for a long moment.
When he finally replies, it is Raskin's
voice that comes out of his mouth.

BUTLER/RASKIN
What gave me away?

WRIDGET
Luci's personalities are more subtle in nature. Besides, you
laughed in all the wrong places.

BUTLER/RASKIN
Old habits die hard, I guess.

WRIDGET
Change out of that old thing, will you? If you're going to
confront me, do it with the face I met you in.

BUTLER/RASKIN
Oh. Right.

The form of the Butler vanishes,
replaced by Raskin herself.

RASKIN
Is this better?

WRIDGET
No.

RASKIN
I was afraid of that.

WRIDGET
How did you convince XLucidentalX to sneak you in?

RASKIN
It's a long story. She kind of owed me a favor.

WRIDGET
Luci only does favors for herself. Unless she wagers with
them. Shall I guess what the terms were?

RASKIN
It sounds like you're pretty convinced already.

WRIDGET
This was all just a lark for you, was it? "Bet you I can get
Wridget to follow me out - you'll owe me a favor, and we'll
have a good laugh either way." Is that about right?

RASKIN
Unplugging was your decision. I had nothing to do with it.

WRIDGET

You asked me to go! I would never have dreamed of leaving if you hadn't!

RASKIN

You were dreaming of it already, or you never would have said yes. Getting Out is a long process. I only asked because I saw it working in you.

WRIDGET

And so you could win a wager.

RASKIN

The wager ... presented itself. I took it because I needed someone on the inside who could hack me through to you once you plugged back in.

WRIDGET

Once I ...? You were that sure I wouldn't stay?

RASKIN

Plugging back in is part of the process. I didn't last nearly as long as you on my first try.

WRIDGET

Your *first* try?

RASKIN

Did you think it would be simple? That you could throw off your old reality like a coat that didn't fit right?

WRIDGET

That was what you told me, wasn't it? I could just walk out and start afresh -

RASKIN

I never said you could "just" do anything.

WRIDGET

You never said anything about processes or first tries either. 'Come out and change your life', you said. "Find your limits, and break them'.

RASKIN

And you have a lot further to go.

WRIDGET

So you arranged all of this to ... what? Convince me to come back?

RASKIN

You're not ready to come back, but you're about to do something that will make it so much harder for you when you are.

WRIDGET

I don't ever intend to be. I've made my decision.

RASKIN

This isn't something you decide to do or not do. It's something that happens to you. Did you choose the ache that pushed you Outside in the first place?

WRIDGET

Going unplugged didn't take it away.

RASKIN

And plugging back in didn't either. Did it?

Silence.

WRIDGET

No. Everything seems so ... thin. A dab of reality spread across an infinite space. But the real things are rare offline too. You failed to mention that. There are just as many false constructs out there, the main difference being they're not nearly as convincing. You can just make out the truths they're meant to obscure. And that ...

RASKIN

That's what really hurts. Just enough reality to make the ache for it worse.

WRIDGET

Yes.

RASKIN

That's why I retreated back inside, too. Everything out there just hurt too much, so I'd come running back here, trying to lose myself any way I could. Thought I succeeded once or twice. But the ache would always come back.

WRIDGET

How many times?

RASKIN

Six.

WRIDGET

Six.

RASKIN

Over the course of ... was it five years? Then one night, it just... broke. Both worlds suddenly parted, and I saw ... something bigger. An Ultimate Reality that all the other ones were pieces of, tiny shards of a broken reflection. And I saw it wasn't about choosing one place or the other - but gathering up every sliver of the truth I could get my hands on and seeing how they caught the light. I decided to look offline first - I wasn't quite as desensitized to things there. So I unplugged the next day, and spent years just scouring Outside for glimmers of the Real. As I went, I began to call the Realness 'God'. A name with a lot of baggage, but it felt good to have someone to thank for the glimpses.

RASKIN (cont'd)

I've just now started plugging in every now and then, to see what truths were staring me in the face for so long. It's ... interesting.

WRIDGET

That's not considered cheating?

RASKIN

Life online is still part of what Is, just not the whole of it. A lot of Outdwellers live a little bit in both. It differs from person to person. But the process is universal - it's a slow avalanche of years, frustration, yearning. It takes a lot of all three to erode the reality you know. But it does happen eventually.

WRIDGET

No one just plugs back in and stays there?

RASKIN

A few.

WRIDGET

And what makes you so certain I'm not one of them?

RASKIN

Seeing how upset you got at the news that your Aunt is going Out without you.

WRIDGET

Ah.

RASKIN

Flutterbye won't understand, Wridget. If I'm right about what you're in for, she won't understand, and she'll make it worse.

WRIDGET

She'll make it worse?! You let me walk into "years of turmoil until something breaks" without a word of warning, and you think Flutterbye99 is the one I should steer clear of?

RASKIN

You're right. I should have told you. I just got so excited when I saw it in you - the same longing that started me on this journey that's meant so much. I wanted to help it along. Make it easier for you somehow. It wasn't my place to do that. I see that now. But you're about to make the exact same mistake.

WRIDGET

And what is that supposed to mean?

RASKIN

You're leading Flutterbye into a minefield of expectations she's completely unaware of - expectations of children, time unplugged, everything your sister has. Tell me you don't still want all that.

WRIDGET

I want ... what's best for both of us.

RASKIN

What you want is for her to come around to your opinion.

WRIDGET

Can you guarantee that she won't?

RASKIN

You can't choose that journey for her, Wridget.

WRIDGET

To hear you talk, I can't choose anything! I'll just ache and ache, running from one reality to the other until something breaks!

RASKIN

(overlapping)

I never said it was -

WRIDGET

(overlapping)

I have a choice!

RASKIN

You had a choice. And then you made it. You reached for more than the reality you'd been handed. Running back here doesn't unmake that. Marrying Flutterbye99 won't unbreak the glass.

WRIDGET

You're wrong. I am going to stay inside. I am going to love my wife, and she will be enough for me.

RASKIN

She can't just be a woman, and a lover? She has to be "enough for you" too?

WRIDGET

Just because you couldn't handle it doesn't mean that she won't be able to.

Another silence.

WRIDGET

I would have stayed if you had said yes. Damn your 'parts of the process' and your six tries. I would have stayed.

RASKIN

Maybe. But I wouldn't be real anymore. Just a program for keeping the ache at bay. And I could never stay in a reality that small. I don't think you can, either.

Raskin looks up suddenly.

RASKIN

She's done with the interview. I'll turn the butler avatar back over to the computer, and be on my way.

WRIDGET

How will I know it's not still you?

RASKIN

Easy. I can't do a proper British accent.

WRIDGET

Since this is the last time we shall see each other, I should tell you ...

RASKIN

Yes?

WRIDGET

You can't do a proper Scottish one either.

RASKIN

I guess I've grown rusty at pretending to be things I'm not. Goodbye, Wridget.

Raskin starts to exit.

WRIDGET

Raskin - after all those years searching for glimmers of God, He took the ache away?

RASKIN

He can't do that, Wridget. He *is* the ache.

She disappears, replaced by the Butler as Flutterbye99 enters.

BUTLER

(British accent again)

Flutterbye99 has entered the room.

At the sight of her, Wridget puts on a determined air of jubilation. He rushes over and sweeps Flutterbye99 up into his arms.

WRIDGET

There she is, more famous than when she left just a minute ago!

FLUTTERBYE99

It's a terrible nuisance, too much fame. It starts to get all over everything. In an hour or so, this sofa will have its own lucrative endorsement deal.

The Butler exits. Flutterbye99 kisses Wridget playfully.

FLUTTERBYE99

Did you miss me?

WRIDGET

Terribly! Let's call everyone back this minute! I refuse to wait any longer to find out how I'm going to marry you!

FLUTTERBYE99

I've already taken the liberty. Do you always get this exuberant after seeing my interviews? I may have to schedule more of them.

WRIDGET

I must confess, I didn't watch it. I spent the time ... thinking of you instead. Was that awful of me?

FLUTTERBYE99

Normally I would say yes, if the interview weren't entirely predictable. The questions were so dull, I had to answer them in rhyming couplets just to keep from falling asleep.

WRIDGET

I'm sure you were brilliant.

FLUTTERBYE99

I was. As I'm sure you'll agree when I make you watch it later.

The Butler enters.

BUTLER

XLucidentialX requests entry -

FLUTTERBYE99

Yes, yes, she's expected.

BUTLER

As you say, Miss.

The Butler opens the door, allowing XLucidentialX back in.

XLUCIDENIALX

So you've decided to call us back, after all. I was beginning to wonder.

WRIDGET

I hope you're not too disappointed.

XLUCIDENIALX

That depends. Is there more wine?

BUTLER

ButtercupEGL and ReverendVariety.org, re-entering the room.

XLucidentialx looks just the slightest bit startled.

XLUCIDENIALX

Your butler is British again?

WRIDGET

You noticed. It's so kind of you to take such an interest in my personal affairs.

They share a significant glance.

XLUCIDENIALX

Your affairs have gotten so interesting lately that it's been hard to resist.

ReverendVariety.org and ButtercupEGL enter.

XLUCIDENIALX

And now that everyone's here, there is no reason why everything shouldn't go as planned from here on out, (to Wridget) is there?

WRIDGET

So how exactly does one go about this, Reverend? Are there many types of weddings to choose from?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

My dear Wridget, the possibilities are absolutely endless! Why, there are hundreds, possibly even thousands of different wedding traditions - but perhaps we can narrow it down a bit. Were you thinking of a Western or an Eastern approach?

WRIDGET

I don't know that we'd thought about that.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Then let me put it another way. Would you like your wedding to last several hours, or several days?

Wridget and Flutterbye99 look at each other.

FLUTTERBYE99

We were expecting a few hours at the most.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Western, then. Not as colorful as, say, a traditional Chinese wedding, which comes with parades and tea and a roast pig that symbolizes virginity, but interesting nonetheless. Did you have a religious preference?

XLUCIDENIALX

Well, the bride is a devout Narcissist, but I believe they only do weddings for one. (Dramatic gasp) Would this technically be considered polygamy?

FLUTTERBYE99

Possibly. And no, you're not invited to marry us too. (To the Reverend) We're open to any religious ceremony. What are some of the most intriguing?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Well, there's the Jewish ceremony - they do some very exciting things with chairs and canopies, then at the end, the groom breaks a glass, and -

WRIDGET

No glass breaking, please.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Very well. There is also the Catholic version, unique for its full aerobic workout!

FLUTTERBYE99

No, thank you.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Another possibility you may want to consider is a form popularized in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which adheres to the basic rituals of the Christian ceremony while dispensing with any true spirituality whatsoever.

FLUTTERBYE99

That sounds utterly delightful! Do tell us more!

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Allow me to demonstrate - at the front of the room is the altar, where the majority of the ceremony will take place.

FLUTTERBYE99

Altar? Nothing is to be sacrificed in this ritual, I hope?

XLUCIDENIALX

Only your independence, darling.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

No blood shall be spilt, I assure you. Seating for the guests is divided in two over there, with a spacious aisle in the middle. One side for the bride's guests, one for the groom's.

WRIDGET

Why the separation, exactly?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Scholars aren't in agreement on this point at present. ReEnactorg45 posits that it was to keep contentious families from coming to blows, while FactOrator argues, and personally I agree with him, that it was to discourage sexual couplings during the ceremony, based on repeated mentions in media of the period that weddings made single women what they colloquially referred to as "easy".

BUTTERCUPEGL

I assumed that it grew from the fact that they needed an aisle in the middle for the bride to walk down, and friends and family preferred sitting together, so that it eventually became official.

ReverendVariety.org stares at her in
silence for a moment.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

What a fascinating theory! Do you have evidence? Sources? And
if so, would you possibly consider collaborating on a Wiki to
that effect? If your hypothesis is in any way founded, it
could very well turn modern wedding scholarship on its ear!

FLUTTERBYE99

Could this historical breakthrough perhaps wait until I
actually know what my own wedding will consist of?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Of course, of course. My apologies. It's just so exciting!
But where was I?

FLUTTERBYE99

Bride's side and groom's side.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Right. Once the guests are seated, the groom enters from a
side door, and stands - (bringing Wridget to the right spot)
about here, facing the audience, alone. This helps to ratchet
up the suspense - will the bride indeed appear, or flee at
the last minute, sending this nervous man's life into chaos
before our very eyes? Real crowd-pleasing stuff!

XLUCIDENIALX

(to ButtercupEGL)

Which do you think he'll be rooting for at that point?

BUTTERCUPEGL

Shhhhhh.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Then to sustain the tension as long as possible, we send in
all the unimportant people first! Little girls with flowers,
little boys with rings, couples in ascending order of
intimacy, until we come to the true people of import - the
Matron of Honor, and the Best, er, Man.

XLUCIDENIALX

Not to worry. I'll take care to be appropriately gendered on
the day of. Perhaps as a centaur.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Excellent. (He hurriedly walks ButtercupEGL and XLucidentialX
to their starting positions) You'll walk, or trot as the case
may be, to the altar as slowly as you can - keeping the
audience on the edge of their seats - then split off, Matron
of Honor to the left, Best Man to the right of the Groom. And
finally, we have the heart-stopping entrance of the Bride. As
you enter, the crowd will rise to their feet in joyful
relief!

BUTTERCUPEGL

And also to get a better view of your absolutely glorious dress.

FLUTTERBYE99

There is a glorious dress written into the ceremony?!

BUTTERCUPEGL

And allotted time for people to stare at it.

FLUTTERBYE99

This wedding just gets better and better! What happens next?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

That depends. Do you have any living relatives who are particularly eager to be rid of you?

FLUTTERBYE99

Not that I know of.

XLUCIDENIALX

Don't give up, dear. (Casting a glance to ButtercupEGL) It's early yet.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

So we'll skip the giving away of the bride, and cut straight to the vows, which I will administer through a series of melodramatic questions. For instance, I would turn to the groom and say, 'Do you, Wridget, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health to have and to hold, to love and to honor, as long as you both shall live?'

FLUTTERBYE99

Sickness is hardly a pressing concern these days, and if you are unable to buy things, you can eventually learn to program them yourself. These vows, as you call them, seem rather out-dated.

WRIDGET

Yes, but if it's part of the ceremony to -

FLUTTERBYE99

Surely the promises that bind our lives together should reflect the world in which we live? Reverend, is there any precedent for amending these questions to fit the times, so to speak?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Oh yes! "Writing your own vows", it's called. In the early 21st century, it was something of a mania, usually accentuating emotion while down-playing the more dreary responsibilities of the arrangement.

WRIDGET

But I don't wish to 'downplay' anything. Did you update your vows, Buttercup?

BUTTERCUPEGL

We did, actually. Instead of "for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health", we said "through joy and sorrow, through good times and bad, in all the richness and variety of human experience".

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

I say, that's quite good!

FLUTTERBYE99

I'm sure I could do better, given the time, but I don't mind being saved the effort. What do you think, darling?

WRIDGET

"All the richness and variety of human experience". Yes. I like it.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Weddings really are useful things! They focus all your energies on carving out this ideal little moment - the exact right words, the exact right color scheme. And meanwhile, the enormity of what you are doing sneaks behind the flower arrangements and the cake samples, where you won't notice it until it's too late to turn back. When I was looking forward to my wedding, I saw a towering monolith. But when I looked back, I found a squat little stepping stone between paths, and that was all.

WRIDGET

Still, a wedding does change things.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Not so much as you'd think. *Marriage* changes things, but it's a gradual sort of change. Which is what a wedding is there to camouflage, I suppose.

Wridget is visibly stricken by her words, but Flutterbye99 and ReverendVariety.org fail to notice.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Fascinating! There is so much we in the Wedding Re-enactment Community could learn from you, my dear. You simply must stop by the forums soon.

FLUTTERBYE99

And how are these "vows" administered, Reverend?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Oh. Yes. Let's try them out, shall we? I stand in the middle here, while you and Wridget stare deeply into each other's eyes. Good. Now, do you, Wridget, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, through joy and sorrow, through good times and bad, in all the richness and variety of human experience, as long as you both shall live?

Wridget stays frozen, silent, for an uncomfortably long time.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

But of course, I forget to tell you - The traditional response is "I do".

More silence.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Which you may say at any time.

Even more silence.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Preferably soon.

WRIDGET

I'm sorry. It's just - you said to stare deeply into each others' eyes, and ... there's just not much behind eyes in here. Comparatively, I mean. But yes, where were we?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

"Do you, Wridget, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, through joy and sorrow, through good times and bad, in all the richness -

WRIDGET

All the richness and variety of human experience. That contains quite a lot.

FLUTTERBYE99

It could include nearly anything! Opulent soirees held over active volcanos, intimate nights in mountain cabins, thrilling dog sled races to buried treasure -

WRIDGET

Even going Out to see Harmony on occasion. Even having children of our own.

FLUTTERBYE99

Well ... yes, but I think you and I had best stick to caring for hypothetical sled dogs.

WRIDGET

Why is that?

FLUTTERBYE99

We're just not that sort of people, dear. We're both terribly busy - our careers are our children, you've said so yourself. Besides, I've never particularly wanted to.

WRIDGET

But what if I do?

FLUTTERBYE99

You could try having some by yourself, but I hear it's quite difficult.

WRIDGET

Flutterbye, I'm serious.

FLUTTERBYE99

And I can't be. Not about this. It's just too ridiculous.

WRIDGET

You used to think marriage was ridiculous, but you changed your mind on that.

FLUTTERBYE99

Ah. I see what this is. You're afraid that once we're married, my ovaries will hijack my higher brain functions, and I'll demand a litter of babies!

WRIDGET

No, that's not what I -

FLUTTERBYE99

Rest assured, dear, I am not that kind of woman.

WRIDGET

But what if I am?!

FLUTTERBYE99

What?

WRIDGET

I mean ... you know ... the male version.

XLUCIDENIALX

That's a shame. I was just about to be interested in this conversation.

FLUTTERBYE99

Will you be quiet? This has nothing to do with you!

XLUCIDENIALX

But who else will program him some children at such reasonable rates?

FLUTTERBYE99

(to Wridget)

You've never spoken of wanting children before.

WRIDGET

The first time I proposed, you dismissed the notion out of hand, and -

FLUTTERBYE99

And then you left me!

WRIDGET

I left everything, not just -

FLUTTERBYE99

Was that why?!

WRIDGET

There wasn't a single reason for -

FLUTTERBYE99

But that was one of them.

WRIDGET

Flutterbye -

FLUTTERBYE99

And you still want to spend whole chunks of our lives offline, after all the ghastly things you went through Out there?!

WRIDGET

There were some ghastly things. But there were beautiful things, too. Things that I want to share... with you.

FLUTTERBYE99

Things like babies.

WRIDGET

Yes. Perhaps. That's one option I would -

FLUTTERBYE99

Things I have to ruin my body for. Things I have to have a body for!

BUTTERCUPEGL

It's not so bad as you might think - well, not so bad and a good deal worse all at the same time, but -

WRIDGET

I just want something in my life that's too big to be contained by the Nets!

FLUTTERBYE99

That's me, Wridget. That's supposed to be me.

WRIDGET

Then don't be contained by it! Come Out with me. You could blog about it. It would be fascinating!

FLUTTERBYE99

I'm already fascinating! I don't need anyone's help! I just need you! But that's not mutual, is it? I'm not enough for you. I'm missing these - these experiences -!

WRIDGET

It's not about that! It's about knowing all of you!

FLUTTERBYE99

Everything I am is right in front of you, Wridget! What does it matter if there's some sack of bones and tissue plugged into a computer somewhere?

XLUCIDENIALX

It matters more than you think -

FLUTTERBYE99

That has nothing to do with who I am!

WRIDGET

But it has something to do with me. My bones. My tissue. They're not strangers to me anymore. I can't pretend they don't exist.

FLUTTERBYE99

So instead, you'll watch them spoil and decay!

BUTTERCUPEGL

Perhaps we should give you two some privacy -

FLUTTERBYE99

(ignoring her)

And you want me to come along for the ride!

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Or if you'll wait just a moment, there's a place where I ask if anyone knows why these two should not be joined together where -

WRIDGET

But we're in love, aren't we? Is that really so much to ask?

FLUTTERBYE99

Yes! We live in a paradise where everything works the way it was designed to, all the time! Can't you see how beautiful that is?

WRIDGET

I see how beautiful everything is. I ache for it. And I can't just let half of it go.

FLUTTERBYE99

Then you're the one who's broken, not me. I am a happy, healthy, perfectly normal girl! And I am not giving that up! Not for you, not for anybody!

WRIDGET

But if you'd just try to -

FLUTTERBYE99

No! You want to drag us back into the Dark Ages. Well, I won't go!

She grabs up one of the glasses of champagne, and downs it in one long gulp.

XLUCIDENIALX

(gesturing to Flutterbye99)

The new poster girl for progress and enlightenment, ladies and gentlemen!

WRIDGET

You've been online since you were four years old, Flutterbye. Four years old! In all that time, you've never once been curious about the place we all came from?

FLUTTERBYE99

What's there to be curious about? Hunger? Crying? Because that's all I remember about it. Wanting things, not getting them, and crying. Why would I ever want to go back to that?

WRIDGET

Because it's true. And if we want to live in reality, we have to -

FLUTTERBYE99

No one lives in reality, Wridget. Online or off, we all pick a version we can live with.

WRIDGET

But what if it's not a version? What if it's a piece of the whole? And the more pieces we pick up, the more we -

FLUTTERBYE99

More, more! That's all you want now! (verging on tears) And here I was, foolish enough to think you wanted me.

WRIDGET

Flutterbye!

FLUTTERBYE99

You've seen more of me than anyone. Ever. And it's still not enough. No matter how much I give you, or *them*, it's never enough!

She hurls the champagne glass across the room. It breaks with a crash. Everyone just stares at it for a moment.

FLUTTERBYE99

I have no idea how that just happened, but it was the most satisfying thing I've done all day! And you most certainly deserved it!

She storms from the room.

WRIDGET

Flutterbye, wait! I -

She slams the door behind her. Silence. Wridget just stands there, staring at the door.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

And I believe *that's* why most people answer with the traditional "I do".

BUTTERCUPEGL

This is not the time for speculation, Reverend.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

No, of course not. I'm terribly sorry. But surely all is not lost! Run after her, young man! Give her some assurance of your devotion, and surely -

WRIDGET

(quiet, motionless)

I can't give assurances for anything right now. Least of all myself.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Ah. Well, shall we ... postpone to a later date, then?

WRIDGET

(still with his eyes on the door)

Does this feel like a postponement to you?

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

(after a pause)

No, I'm afraid not.

He heads toward the door apologetically.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

I had hoped to leave here giving you my congratulations, not my condolences. But you have them. My best wishes to you all.

He opens the door, starts to leave, but turns back and leans in to ButtercupEGL.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Though if your daughter is in need of any ceremonial assistance, I am branching out into christenings, Bat Mitzvahs and Witches' Sabbaths. I could send you a link if you're -

BUTTERCUPEGL

Good day, Reverend.

REVERENDVARIETY.ORG

Ah. Yes. Good day.

He makes a bashful retreat. At his departure, silence descends on the room. Wridget looks down at the pile of glass at his feet.

WRIDGET

When did she reprogram it to break again, I wonder? Quite the parting shot. A perfect something to remember her by.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Flutterbye doesn't know how to -

XLUCIDENIALX

He's not referring to Flutterbye99.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Luci, what exactly did you do?

WRIDGET

All of this. Everything falling apart. This was all your doing.

XLUCIDENIALX

Not remotely. And that may be the first time anyone has overestimated my importance in something.

WRIDGET

It was you that hacked Raskin back in, that let her bring it all back up to the surface. If it hadn't been for you, I would never have blurted it all out like that!

BUTTERCUPEGL

(to XLucidentialX)

You brought her to see him? That was your plan?

WRIDGET

Plan?

XLUCIDENIALX

Yes. I'm not even sure how it worked, actually. What did she say to you, Wridget? What finally prodded you into acting on your convictions again?

WRIDGET

You dare talk to me about convictions? After ruining my life to honor some useless wager?!

XLUCIDENIALX

That old thing? You must think I'm a frivolous monster. It's quite flattering, and most likely the version I'll tell at parties, but I'm ashamed to say it's not the true one.

WRIDGET

What do you care for the truth?

XLUCIDENIALX

I'm here to experience the truth, Wridget. Why are you here, exactly?

WRIDGET

If you had been offline with me, if you had felt the constant struggle, the -

XLUCIDENIALX

What kind of a struggle? Not fitting in the confines of your biological gender? I've certainly felt that one, as I'm sure you can tell.

WRIDGET

No. No, more ...

XLUCIDENIALX

Physical? You body crippled by illness? Something like that?

WRIDGET

It was ... spiritual in nature.

XLUCIDENIALX

Well, you fared better than I did in the genetic lottery. Congratulations.

WRIDGET

Luci, what are you saying?

XLUCIDENIALX

You didn't know? Hmm. The gossip about me isn't as widespread as I thought. It really is quite disappointing.

WRIDGET

Then you're ...

XLUCIDENIALX

Aware of my body, just like you. Only mine happens to be broken - equal parts a prison and a lie. I've been stuffed into a defective skin that never fit me, crushed beneath the labels attached to it, and left to suffocate. That was my offline childhood in a nutshell. In fact, spending it in a nutshell would have been more comfortable. It was only when I plugged in that I was finally able to breathe. Only then could I discover the part of me not defined by a gender, or genetics, or a collection of diseases! Only then could I face who and what I was, online and off. The physical part - all that sickness and confusion? I'm grateful for it. It keeps me from taking all this for granted. This place has been my redemption, but you want to use it as an escape!

WRIDGET

That is not what I -

XLUCIDENIALX

You have luxuries that I don't, and I will be damned if I watch you use the thing that saved me as a way of running from yourself. Not without a fight.

WRIDGET

So this was all for my benefit, was it? I don't recall anyone asking you to interfere!

BUTTERCUPEGL

I did.

Silence. All eyes on ButtercuPEGL.

BUTTERCUPEGL

She came to me this morning, said she had something up her sleeve, and I gave her the go-ahead to do it.

WRIDGET

You ... but ... why would you ever -?!

BUTTERCUPEGL

Because you wouldn't come to Aunt Scandy. Because you wouldn't even come to me!

WRIDGET

And you couldn't imagine that I would make a good decision without your help!

BUTTERCUPEGL

I couldn't imagine that you would make a good decision and not want to share it with me!

WRIDGET

That was all it took? All the reason you needed to betray me?

XLUCIDENIALX

If we hadn't, you would have betrayed yourself. I leave it to you to decide which is worse.

WRIDGET

All you've left me with is another pile of broken glass.

XLUCIDENIALX

If you dislike it so much, you could take the Reverend's advice - run after her, tell her it was all a mistake. Renounce Outside forever, and say that she's all you'll ever need. If you mean it, she may actually take you back.

Wridget doesn't move.

XLUCIDENIALX

No? So really, you don't mind that this happened. You're just angry about how.

WRIDGET

Damn you, Luci! Why can't you leave anything alone?

XLUCIDENIALX

Oh, I can. In fact, I shall right now. And you can go on cursing me if you like. But I have grown quite skilled at shaking the curses back off.

And with that, she sweeps out of the room. Wridget stands there a moment, then kneels down and starts to pick up the pieces of glass on the floor.

BUTTERCUPEGL

Wridget, I'm -

WRIDGET

Please. Just - just go.

She hesitates a moment, then nods, and starts to leave. She's nearly to the door when Wridget breaks the silence.

WRIDGET

Why now? Why did she have to tell me that now? Why did you have to tell me you helped her?! Why can't anything stay the same as it was?!

BUTTERCUPEGL

Because nothing ever does, Wridget. Nothing is truly at rest. It's all changing, growing older, breaking down. This place shields our eyes from seeing it, but it's still happening.

WRIDGET

Raskin broke a glass for me the night we met. Because I wanted to see what it looked like. And now all these months back inside, all that time with Flutterbye, I was trying to forget that I saw it break.

Wridget starts to laugh, which very quickly turns to crying.

WRIDGET

It won't ever go back together, will it?

BUTTERCUPEGL

No. It won't.

He takes a deep breath to get a hold of himself, then looks at one of the larger glass slivers, holds it up to the light.

WRIDGET

This right here, this is the truth. But look at all those glimmers.

He turns the piece of glass back and forth. ButtercupEGL watches him, smiles to herself, and quietly leaves the room as Wridget is slowly engulfed in more and more small, refracted slivers of light. Curtain.