

A large flock of birds, possibly terns, is captured in flight against a clear blue sky. The birds are scattered across the upper two-thirds of the frame, appearing as dark silhouettes. Below the sky, there is a line of trees with green and yellowish foliage. In the foreground, a grassy field is visible, with a fence line and a white dome-shaped structure in the distance. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

Four Fates

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Viaker jeep

Introduction

This game is my entry in the Game Designers' Challenge for Ropecon 2006. The theme for the challenge is "bad omens", and the organiser of the event Satu Heliö. In my usual style, I'm going off on a tangent, and I'm not ashamed to admit that. Over the years, I've come to accept that when I write a game, I seldom know exactly where it will end up. A strength and weakness both, of course. As I read it, bad omens is about foreshadowings and foreshadowings is about fate.

The subject of the game is to some extent use and abuse, and how a single incident can completely destroy a life of a person. It is written for four players and one game master. A small boy is standing at a metaphorical crossroads joining four roads, each road representing his fate would he venture down it. In the end, the boy is to choose where to go, but he is only six years old, and cannot possibly relate to the severity of the question nor completely understand the issues, reasons or consequences. This is to be read as a metaphor for not being able to take responsibility for one's own actions.

The boy's fate would he venture down a certain road is played for each road, and the boy is then given his choice. There are many degrees of freedom, even though the different fates are outlined in the game. One player will assume the role of the boy throughout. The other players will play all the extras and from time to time also double as game masters as each fate will have a different storyteller. You will be in control of the last one. For the other three, one of the players will be in control aided by you. You are not meant to play any extras in the game.

Setting

The game takes place in a skewed version of Sweden in the 70s. Any fairy tale elements or oddities in the game are to be treated as perfectly natural by the characters. Many of the events, places and

persons in the game are disguised metaphors. Thus, contrasts will be sharp, things taken to extremes and many things loaded with symbolic values. This is valuable input to your imagination to be used however you like.

Playing the Boy

The Boy is the game's lead character as the four fates are all about his life. Early in the storyline, an event occurs that traumatises the boy for life. The boy becomes "special" and you might think of him as a having a very slight mental handicap. The boy, however, is unable to fathom this. He perceives himself as normal, and most people around him as slow and sometimes unable to understand him. To achieve this effect, we resort to a simple meta-play technique: all players and their characters will have slight trouble understanding the boy and his player---they will talk to him as you would talk to a child, using simpler words etc. To get the full effect, this should be kept secret from the boy's player but could be disclosed in the spirit of transparency (absence of secrets in the meta-play) if you feel uncomfortable about it.

The player playing the boy is the only player that never gets to be the storyteller, but is subjected to the fates given to him by the other players.

For convenience, we sometimes refer to the player playing the boy as Player Four.

Not Playing the Boy

The players not playing the boy will play all other characters in the game. You may do with these as you please---either put all characters in a shared character pool and let every player play every

character, or assign certain characters to certain players, or a combination. The other characters in the story are: Father and Mother; Grandma; The Old Man and The Old Woman; The Soldiers, Sergeant, The Enemy and The Victim; The Doctor, The Sister, Sister Friend, Thug and Violet; and Lady Luck. Lady Luck is special in that she may only be introduced in the story by you.

For convenience, we sometimes refer to the players not playing the boy as Players One, Two and Three where their number coincides with number of the fate for which they will be storytellers.

Allegories and Metaphores

Four Fates is a fairy tale, and fairy tales are often allegories with a strong message related to a simple truth or commandment style decree. I don't really believe in simple truths, and for those that are there, they are probably best stated in the simplest way possible and not hidden inside some game.

However, creation of Four Fates has been "metaphorically driven" in the sense of me thinking in terms of allegories and metaphors of things I wanted to have in the game. For the good of the game, I'm not going to let you in on how I've been thinking---I want you to interpret the game using your own frames of reference, not mine.

Vi åker jeep has pulled some dubious shit over the years, and one lesson that we have learned from that is that in role-playing, there is no such a thing as bad input. During Relationstabellen, a weird team of players playing drunkards waiting for Pekka to turn up with the booze was forced to listen to "Jingle Cats" as input to their sub-consciousnesses and later told tall tales about how that had actually brought them something. After this "experiment", we concluded that there is no such thing as bad input.

Thus, I stipulate that interpreting the events and the design of this scenario with "allegoric or metaphoric glasses" will be good. It forc-

es the players, and you, to stay sharp, to make parallels and think about what is happening and what different things may symbolise. I think it will make the actions more consistent and thus make the game more focused.

There are also several layers to this. Game mastering is controlling the fate of the characters. Forcing players to act as storytellers will thus force them to take control over fate. For me, this was an obvious design choice for this game.

Subject and Rough Outline of the Game

As briefly mentioned above, the story is meant to be about being used and abused and how a single event can destroy a life. At the age of six, our boy is (quite possibly anyway) molested, which casts a long shadow on the rest of his life. His grandmother, who can interpret the signs in nature, sees his future in the flight of the crows--the bad omen. She proceeds to tell him how this will affect his life in the way of four possible outcomes. In the first of the four storylines, he is fated to haunt the perpetrators, only to become one himself; in the second, he is fated never to come to terms with the traumatising of the molestation, leading to a life that is a lie; in the third, he is overcomes his dark past and is finally accepted into the ranks of real men, but for a too steep a price, which will claim his soul.

The fourth fate is not outlined in the same way as the other three but told in relation to these. The fourth fate may lead wherever, but is supposed to make our boy cross paths with Lady Luck and subsequently end on an up-note. In my opinion, game mastering the fourth fate is slightly tougher, and naturally, it is the part where you get to be the storyteller. You could of course come up with a predetermined story for this part, but it would be wrong. Listen carefully to what goes on when the players are storytellers and make use of this to make your fate the most interesting, and giving a sense of closure to the story.

The Beginning

The story begins on a Friday afternoon, some time in summer roughly 40 years ago. The boy's father is given a farm 700 kilometres away in the south of the country, near the unstable border. There, he will start a new life as a farmer living off the earth and selling crops and cattle to the nearby military base. This is not unusual, single males are paid handsomely by the state to move to here, marry local women and have kids, gradually swedifying the gene pool. He does exactly that: falls in love with a local girl, marries her and start having kids. Their first child is a girl, born in 1965, and their second child, our boy, is born three years later.

The farm is not far away from civilisation, but for our boy, the distance is enormous. He dreams about the city that he has never seen. Not many other people live close by, and the only ones we will be focusing on now are Father, Mother, Grandma, and the old couple. On our boy's fifth birthday, the war starts. Even though the front is only one hour away by car, they are seldom reminded of it. Sometimes, a stray aircraft will pass over the farm. Then all work stops and everyone is looking at the sky wondering whether it is friendly or not. But they are not afraid. No one is going to bomb a small farm in the middle of nowhere and our boy waves to the aircrafts, friendly or not. Sometimes, they hear the sound of the cannons like a far away thunder. Once, soldiers stopped to fix a broken tire on their jeep. Every other week, a deserter stops to beg for a hot meal before running off deep into the woods never to be seen again.

When our boy turns six, the war is still raging. In fact, it will rage for his entire life. The front hasn't budged an inch. It is summer, and his father is harvesting the first crops and the fields are full of crows eating leftovers in the wake of the harvester. Our boy is sitting in the kitchen window with his Grandmother, who is pointing out to him the patterns in which the birds fly. "Something really bad is going to happen", she tells him, over and over, pointing at

the patterns in the sky made by the birds. Her family has been living here for God know how long, and living here means getting to know the birds. His Mother assures him that nothing is going to happen, and sends him off to play with his birthday present, a paper kite.

The boy is running over the fields with the kite behind him on a string. He doesn't look where he is going, he just runs and runs and runs until he cannot see the farm anymore. All around him, birds are flying, black crows it seems. They are forming the same pattern as before, but he is unable to understand them. And after all, his mother told him not to worry. So he runs. And just when the farm vanishes out of sight, it happens. Something grabs his kite and drags it to the ground. The string cuts into his hand and it starts to bleed. He looks at the blood pouring from his hand and does not notice The Old Woman under the trees. A string leads from the thing that captured his kite and up to a nail just above her head where a tiny bell is attached to it. She quickly loosens the kite and follow its string until she finds the boy. Without a word, she grabs his hand and pulls it towards her face and start licking the blood. Her tongue feels old and dry against his skin. She ties the string around his hands and leads him off into the woods. Whenever she feels he is lagging behind, she pulls hard on the string and it hurts. He sobs and his legs tremble. The woman carries a wooden basket full of dead crows. She is a bird catcher, and Father says they don't exist anymore.

The Old Man is waiting outside the cottage. He touches our boy's hair and face with his old hands. He smiles. Then they force him inside. It smells of crows' corpses in there. They tie him to a chair and start going through the basket. They sort the dead crows into two heaps. Two crows in the left and ten or fifteen in the right. The Old Man is disappointed. He shovels all crows in the right heap into the burning fire. The smell is awful. They start plucking the remaining two birds and put the feathers in a drawer that's already full of them. They then turn their attention to the boy.

Our boy is so sweet and innocent, and his skin is so soft. They are old and their skin is chapped and leathery. They undress him, careful not to damage him or his clothes. They carry him to the bed and run their hands all over his body. They are panting, and looking at each other and not at our boy. They are careful never to touch each other, only his skin. The Old Man licks his wound, just as the woman did, even though the blood has long since stopped running. The boy can feel his erection through his rags, hard against his naked leg. The old couple take it real slow and the boy loses track of time. He loses consciousness and wakes up with a bad feeling. He vomits on the bed spread.

Afterwards, they bathe him carefully in a large pot with herbs and a smelly soap. His small penis shrinks in the cold water. For a second, he thinks they are going to cook a meal of him, and when he asks, his first words to them, they break into laughter. They take him out of the water and dry him, long and hard, with a rough towel and help him put his clothes back on as his arms still wont move. Then they thank him. They fixate him with their tiny eyes that seem sunken too far into the head and it is like being hypnotised by a snake. "It was long since we met anyone like you", they repeat over and over. "We have not made love for ages." "You have no idea what joy you brought us, little one". They lead him through the woods back to the fields and hand him the kite. It isn't broken. "Do come again." There are no birds around their house, and the crows on the field go mad when the old couple emerge from the woods. They vanish without a trace and our boy begins to cry as never before.

A crow lands besides him, flops its head over on the side. The boy stops crying. He sees the crows making their patterns, flying high up and diving straight down towards the ground. It looks dangerous. He walks towards the crows and they move away a couple of meters every time he gets too close. He follows them a bit and look, there is the farm, just behind the fields and the hedges. The harvester is not moving. It is like looking at a painting.

When our boy comes home, he finds his mother in tears. Grandma is dead. She died looking at the birds. Her heart just stopped beating. "She was right after all", Father says. But he means not what happened to our boy, and not matter how hard he wants to tell them, he seems unable to find the right words. Instead, he starts crying and Mother takes him in her arms. He can feel her breasts press against his body, but unlike before, it is not comforting anymore. He feels a burning sensation through his body, and a slight queasiness comes over him. He breaks lose from her hug and runs out of the house and into the fields. This time, he does not dare to go too far.

Mother and Father plait a coffin for Grandma out of trees' branches and they bury her in the treetop of the tall oak in the middle of the wheat field. There, she will be eaten by the crows that in return will carry her soul to the sun. They boy spends days looking at the tree. A big swarm of black birds are screaming and circling over the coffin. He sees their tiny movements as they eat at the body. The head dashes out, pries the beak into the flesh and rips out a small scrap of meat.

In his anger, he trows rocks at them. One crow is flying straight at him, and he hits it on the wing bringing it to the ground. He runs up to it but once he is right next to it, he doesn't know what to do. The bird looks at him with eyes that look familiar, almost human. It croaks at him, a sad sound with a familiar ring to it, but does not run away when he comes closer. It's wing is badly hurt and it seems unable to fly any longer stretches. When talking to the crow, the words never seem so hard to find as they are with everyone else. Whenever the boy looks over his shoulder, the crow will be there. Looking at him. Our boys knows who it is. But who would believe him if he told them?

About the Crow

The crow with the damaged wing is really our boy's grandmother. With a damaged wing, she is unable to fly into the sun. Instead, she remains on the earth and observes the life of her family, foremost her youngest grandchild. She cannot, of course, communicate with anyone and only our boy know who she really is. This crow, earthbound by his hand, will watch over him in this scenario and play an important part. It is your job as game master to put the crow and the birds into the stories and make them matter. But don't go over the top with the bad omens thing---the crow is supposed to be a guide, not a first and foremost a premonition.

The Bird Catchers

The Bird Catchers represent evil. They are soulless, and therefore unable to die. They live their lives in misery and constant frustration. There are two ways for them to end it all and move on: go into the water, or fly into the sun. The first is analogous with knocking on the door to hell and the second like going to heaven. Naturally, going to hell is easy, but going to heaven is hard.

The only way of flying into the sun is by making yourself a pair of wings, using only feathers from birds carrying a soul, that is, a bird carrying the soul of something dead in return for having eaten at its body. Thus, they trap souls in their feathery creation that will one day lift them to the sun. The old couple are laying traps for the crows on the fields, hoping to one day complete their sets of wings. When they come across our boy, they are a little more than half done, and have been at it for more than twenty years.

Naturally, the Bird Catchers will try to catch the boy's crow---a bird carrying a human soul will be a great aid to them. There is only one more human soul in their creation, which is that of their still-born child.

Becoming a Bird Catcher is a result of bad karma and can happen at any time in your life. You generally spend half a century as a bum alone and confused by the fact that you are still alive before you chance to meet with someone who can explain to you what you are and how you can end it. Most choose the easy way out and must regret it for an eternity of torment by the devils that be.

Preparing for Playing

There is an instruction booklet for each player. If you use a character pool, place all the characters face up somewhere where they can be easily accessed. If not, distribute the characters as you see fit. Before every fate, the players should read all characters that they will be playing, except the player playing The Boy. Thus, there will be four breaks in the game for reading characters. Naturally, one longer break in the beginning is also possible. What characters belong to a specific fate is indicated on their front pages.

Give the players some additional time to think about how they want to tell their fates and give them any help they might need with respect to how the game should be pushed forward, etc. Even though you are still the game master, keep in mind that you are meant to be an aide to the player acting as a story teller.

It is easy to get into a preparation mode that will be hard to break. The more time spent preparing for playing, the higher the expectations and the harder it will be to kick the game into gear. Thus, prepare, but be careful not to ruin the game by overdoing it.

Starting the Game

The game begins by the window in the farm where Grandma is sitting next to The Boy telling him what she sees in the flight of the birds. Every fate told in this game is a story told by her in some

form or other to the boy by that table. This is probably best narrated and not played. Every storyteller will start her story with the boy running out to play with the kite. Note that there is no single event that will turn things around that will be different for each story. That's bullshit anyway and as a metaphor it is just too in-your-face.

After each fate, return to the table with Grandma. Mother has still not heard a thing what they are whispering about. After the second fate she might ask just that and get "nothing" for an answer. Let Grandma study the birds for a bit before running off to tell the next story.

Also, agree on the desired duration of the game. Depending on how you will play each fate, and at what level of detail, you can easily imagine them taking everything between one hour to ten hours. Thus, this game can be played as a five hour session or a four day session. The choice is yours. I think five to six hours is a good length, but it is way too much for some.

Ending the Game

Once the fourth fate is told, mother comes over to the boy and Grandma by the window and declares it is time that the boy run out to play. She will tell him nothing is going to happen, regardless what Grandma said. She will even throw him out if necessary.

Outside the house the boy must choose one fate to live by. Remember, the boy is only six years old and cannot really relate to deciding on a template for the rest of his life. Maybe he'll choose the last one because that's the only one he can remember or the second one because he really wants to see the city. This is about not being accountable for ones action.

When the boy has decided, he must account for his choice and explain it in the form of a monologue. The monologue could be done as the six-year-old, or as a 60-year-old looking back, etc. Just keep it pleas-

antly short and in character. A classic way of starting this monologue could be telling his age, where he is, what he is currently doing, how that feels and why things are the way they are. The Boy's last words are the last words spoken in the game.

The First Fate

The boy grows up, goes to school in a nearby village. He is not mentally apt for schooling, but physically, he does quite well. He is a fast runner, a good swimmer and also a good fighter. He gets into fights quite often, because he has a short fuse from being frustrated with not being understood, as he perceives it, and because he is bullied by other boys and girls for not being like everybody else. One day, in seventh grade, he accidentally kills another boy in a fight. He goes into a frenzy and is unstoppable and beats his opponent into a bloody pulp. He is sentenced for manslaughter and sent off to a correctional facility for youths. Swedish correctional facilities in these days have a habit of mistreating their inmates, and he is beaten up on a regular basis by older, stronger kids. Before his sentence is served, he escapes from the facility and vanishes without a trace. He is lost to the world and even to himself before twelve years later showing up at the doorstep to his home. He hasn't really been running from something, but hiding himself from the world as he is afraid that he will hurt it. But the loneliness is eating at him, and he is weak. With a body of a worn 30-year-old, he is still just a boy longing for his parents.

His parents are no longer the persons he was missing. He finds them unbelievably old and sad. The farm is run-down, everything crooked and small. And something is missing, but he cannot put his finger on what. They ask him questions that he is unable to give understandable answers to. They are like strangers to each other, forced upon each other by blood relations. The calm he was looking for is nowhere to be found.

He is lying awake in his old room, which looks exactly as when he left it. He can hear his parents quarrel in the next room, through the thin walls. They are debating whether to report him to the police or not. That much he can understand. He thinks they decide not to, but cannot really be sure. In any case, he does not care. There is nothing for him in life anymore. Nothing.

He wanders around in the cabin at night, touching and smelling the things that were his entire world twelve years ago. He finds his photograph on the wall reserved for relatives and friends passed out of time. His photograph was taken on the day of his sixth birthday. He remembers the kite, how it felt in his hands and the pain as the rope cut into them. Next to his picture is Grandma, he recognises her even though the photo is old, taken long before he was born. And, next to her picture is a picture of his sister.

He runs into his parents' bedroom and demands to know why his sister's picture is on that wall. Apparently, about the same time as he was sent to the correctional facility, she got lost in the woods for several days and when she came back, she was a completely different person. Silent, avoiding other people, sad. She would not talk to her boyfriend again. She sent letters to our boy, that he never received and that made her even more sad. Eventually she committed suicide by hanging herself in the large oak in the middle of the wheat field. Her body was already half-eaten when they found it.

Our boy is filled with anger and pain, but does not dare to cry. He couldn't stand being comforted by someone. His mother might try to hug him again and he fears that something like that would start something that he would be unable to control. Instead, he goes out into the fields and finally he realises what is missing. There are no birds. Not a single one. They are all gone. He climbs the trees, but finds only empty, ruined nests long since abandoned.

Something snaps in his head, and the events of his sixth birthday flicker before his eyes. He sets off in the direction of the cabin.

The old couple is asleep. They are sharing an old worn-out, leg-less bed. They are sleeping naked on top of the sheets in the summer heat. The place is exactly as he remembers it. The smell, where the tools were lying on the countertop. Even in the dark he can find the rope that they used to tie him up with so many years ago. It still feels sturdy still.

When they wake up, he is waiting there for them. They don't recognise him. Nor do they remember anything about his sister. No matter how he hurts them, they will not die. This time, he is the stronger one. He is in control and they have nowhere else to go. Every day, he will wait for them to get home, always without a catch. They know these lands are empty with birds, but know no other way. He smiles at them, touch their hair and faces. He does unspeakable things to them. He is surprised by his own imagination. He learns to get into their dreams so that there is no place where they can hide, even for a couple of hours. Gradually, he is becoming one of them, but does not realise it. He finds them more and more able to understand him, but thinks nothing of it.

One day the old man does not return. They find his body in the lake, far from the fields, far from where the traps are. Our boy has created a hell on earth for the old couple, so nightmarish and macabre that this way out seemed like a step in the right direction. The old woman tells him about death by water. She is too afraid to go the same way, but our boy, in anger over the old man having escaped, or at least chosen his own time of death, sends her to join him. He holds her under water until her soul leaves her body and is carried to hell by a fish.

All of a sudden, our boy is overcome by that strong fear of water that all Bird Catchers feel. His transformation into a Bird Catcher is now complete. He feels the fishes feed off his legs and flees the water in panic.

He has learned where all the traps are, and on his way home, he hears the bell ring to signal that something is caught in a trap. He follows the sound of the bell to the trap, but when he gets there, the bird is

already dead. It is an old crow with a damaged wing. He takes it home and uses the feathers from the two sets of wings the old couple was building to construct a single pair. With the last crow, the wings are complete. Our boy straps them on and takes off. He sees the lake where the bodies of the old couple are almost consumed now, the farm, the fields, the woods and the smoke from the cannons at the border. The wings take him higher and higher, until he is consumed by the sun and finally finds peace.

In Short

Schooling, killing the boy, escaping the correctional facility, re-
turning after being lost from the world, alone in his old room and finding the picture of the sister, seeking out the old couple, harassing them and gradually becoming one of them, the old couple dies, his grandma sacrifices herself for him, he finishes their work and finds peace.

The Second Fate

Our boy grows older, goes to school which does not work well for him. He only manages to make one single friend, the older boy Thug, who is so poor that he has to take his lunch money every day. He has trouble with abstract thinking and being couped up with a lot of other kids in the same room. It is decided that he will be dropped, which he interprets as finishing school long before the others. He goes back to the farm and spend a couple of years working with his parents on the fields. He never ventures far off and refuses to take part in any job that could not be carried out with the farm in sight. He does not know he is placed on the waiting list for a mental institution where they will try to find out what is wrong with him using crude and old-fashioned methods.

The facility is in the city, and finally he gets to see it. It is a big and scary place filled with people and the streets are crowded causing everybody to bump into each other. But in the institution, they save him and lock everyone out so that he gets to be alone. He likes it that way. He even invents two imaginary friends, Sister and Thug, that he will talk to when it gets too lonely and he needs comforting between treatments. They attach electrodes to him, they try to teach him simple mathematics and punish him with electric shocks when he fails to understand. They are convinced that his specialness is due to laziness and that such things can be overcome with brute force. Sister and Thug will talk to him during and after these sessions, they try to help him with the numbers, but they are not better than him. Then they make long apologies afterwards, when he is hiding in some corner, licking his wounds.

Only once his real sister comes to visit him, but he finds her much older and not the same as the one he remembers, the one he talks to when no one is listening, and sends her away. She keeps sending him postcards, with little enough text for him to almost read and these are his only treasure.

A few years pass by. The doctors refer to him as a lost cause and there is no hope for treatment. He isolates himself from the rest of the inmates and develops an entire life of his own in his own mind.

He falls in love with his imaginary female friend. Yes, she is his sister, but it is excusable. She isn't real, and she is the only young woman he has ever known and thus she is the only person that he can use as a template for creating the woman of his dreams. Despite the peculiarities surrounding this, the doctors encourage his fantasies. They are harmless, and might even do him some good. In his fantasies, he, Sister and Thug go on trips together. He is stealing the destinations and events from his sister's postcards, and substitute any mentions of boyfriends and husbands with himself. He visits a skewed version of the world built on his limited knowledge of foreign countries, cities and cultures.

He is still unable to make physical contact with other people, even in his imaginary world. He desires sex, but does not know how to go about it. He starts fantasising about it, but substitute himself for Thug. Neither Thug nor Sister are particularly thrilled about this, but as they live by his rules in his mind, he can force them and that is exactly what he does. He sits by their bed, directing their lovemaking. He cums in his pants but cannot relate to what it is, or why. Their relationship is strained.

He is making progress and they convince him to break his solitary confinement and meet with the other inmates. He makes weekly appearances, telling them about his travels and reading to them out loud from his postcards, written by his own hand. An old female inmate who listens to his obvious lies takes pity on him and ambushes him with a comforting hug. He beats her repeatedly until he is dragged back to his cell, never to leave it again. Sister and Thug are locked out of his room, and never let in again. For a couple of weeks, they bang at the door, but he doesn't have the key and after a while, they grow tired and leave him to his fate.

Later that year, the psychiatric ward moves to another building, but as he never talks to anyone or exit his cell, he is forgotten and left behind. Suddenly, the place is as empty as space. You hear the sound of the building slowly crumbling down. The air is filled with mould and dust. For the first time in a long time, he feels alone. He wanders through the empty halls of the clinic, looking at the city through the windows, but it never occurs to him to step out into it. He still goes to bed in the same cell every night looking the door behind him.

He starts using the phone. He dials random numbers and listen to peoples' voices. He almost have conversations. Then he comes across her. Violet. The computer voice of the automatic train and air plane ticket booking system. They talk about travelling. He feeds her the names of the places on his postcards, and she tells him various ways of getting there, by means of train and air plane. He tries to tell her that

he loves her, but repeatedly she offers him that love is not a word in her vocabulary. She doesn't understand. But his love is stronger than her ignorance. He keeps calling, and she is always there to pick up the phone. She is always there for him, and even though she would never use the word, surely it must be love.

In his late 60's, he feels a sharp pain in his chest. Not for the first time and he knows what it is. He calls Violet and again tells her he loves her. She responds that she does not understand and ask him to repeat his statement. His chest is still aching and the cramps are starting to overcome him. He repeats that he loves her, but she will not hear of it. Eventually, he dies by the phone with her sweet voice in his ear. You are number 14 in our queue to personal service. Please wait. Calls will be answered in the orders they were placed.

He is buried in a coffin that the crows' beaks will never get through. It is government policy, and besides, heaven has no place for retards.

In Short

Meeting Thug in school, being shipped off to the psychiatric clinic, given crude shock therapy treatment without result, create imaginary world, send visiting sister away, falling in love with imaginary friend, re-living sister's postcards, forcing Sister friend to have sex with Thug, beating another inmate after forced to physical contact, isolating himself and become forgotten in the move, love affair with computer voice, heart attack, buried in a coffin that the crows' beaks will never get through.

The Third Fate

Our boy grows older. He refuses to leave the farm and takes care never to venture so far from the house that it vanishes out of sight. He is ruled unfit for schooling and instead works with his par-

ents on the land. The animals take a liking to him, as if they sense he is special. They care for him. They know he is not going to hurt them. He is good with machines too, likes to drive and has an instinct for repairing them. When he is alone, or with animals, he is happy. He dislikes being around other humans as he does not know how to behave around them. They don't understand him. As he is so good at everything else around the farm, he grows up to believe that he is exceptionally bright and at times even doubt that his parents are his real parents. He hates physical contact with other humans.

His sister is the only human that he has no trouble talking to. She always seems to understand what he is saying. He never talks to her about the incident on his sixth birthday. As soon as she turns eighteen, she leaves the farm and moves to the city. She sends him post-cards every month for the first year with magnificent motives of large buildings, crowds, bridges and neon, but the rate gradually slows down and stops altogether. He knows their contents by heart and pretends to read them out loud to the animals on the farm.

The stream of soldiers going to or returning from the front is increasing. Sometimes, entire units pass by and ask for shelter or food. He admires the soldiers, and helps repairing their trucks and motorcycles. One day, they ask if he does not want to join them, and without a word to his parents, he signs the draft papers and gets on the truck to the front.

They are guarding a military hospital and prison camp, close to the border. They are only a couple of kilometres away from the fighting and the sound of guns and explosions are much higher here than ever on the farm. He finds it difficult to be so close with so many people. He is always last into the shower and avoids any games or activities that include physical contact. He is approached by a female soldier who has taken pity on him. She wants to bed with him, and he panics.

He can tell from watching the birds if there is going to be an attack, if they have anything to fear from the coming day, etc. If an enemy aircraft is approaching, he will know it long before anyone else, and

he will know what buildings to evacuate. When this ability becomes known, he is sent off to the front to join their special units operating behind enemy lines, destroying bridges and military installations. He will know where they are and how to approach them. The soldiers love him, he is their saviour and he has trouble dealing with all the attention he is getting.

One day, they find themselves deep into enemy territory. The area is completely empty from birds. Our boy panics. The soldiers are unable to understand what the problem is and still expect him to guide them. He tries to lead them back to their camp, but is soon completely lost. They come across a small village and decide to stay there for the night. The village is occupied by a small group of women and children, and the soldiers start doing what they are trained for. They threaten to kill the children and rape the women and our boy finds himself trapped in a situation where he cannot escape. He is cheered on by the other soldiers. He forces himself to touch one of the women, her clothes are already torn. He rapes her, and once the act is completed, he moves on to the next one like a machine. In the end, one of the soldiers stop him. Then, they kill the children and move on. The soldiers welcome him into the "club of real men". They hug and slap each other on the back and the boy realises that it no longer troubles him. As if he fucked himself clear of all that tension and up-strungedness. Our boy is unable to understand what is going on but is happy to really feel part of a group of humans for the first time in almost twenty years.

He continues to lead the troop with guesses. They go around in circles and the soldiers are beginning to loose faith in him. Two days later they come upon a single bird in the forest, a crow, sitting on the lower branches of a magnificent oak tree. The boy heaves a sigh. Finally an aide.

Our boy is admiring the magnificent crow when he hears the sound of helicopters. Now, everyone looks to him for instructions. The crow remains on its branch and the boy instructs all the soldiers to hide

under the tree waiting for the helicopter to pass. But it doesn't. It circles over their bit of the forest dropping grenades. The bird remains still on its branch, and so do the boy and the soldiers. There is something familiar about the bird. The birds flap its wings and he can clearly see that the left one is damaged and healed bad. Then the napalm grenade hits them, the soldiers, the boy, and the crow. He is alive for another 45 seconds. Long enough to see his first friends burn their hands from trying to remove the burning sticky substance from their clothes, face and hair, see the magnificent oak tree catch fire, and smell the familiar smell of burning crow. He can hear himself scream, but there is no pain. Or perhaps it is so great that his nerves are unable to fathom it.

Two days later, a band of stray dogs will eat his scorched remains making his soul earthbound.

In Short

Staying on the farm, sister is the only one that understands him but she leaves for the city, war is intensified and he joins passing soldiers, finds it hard to be among people, his skill of reading birds' patterns, especially that of crows gives him a place in a special unit sabotaging deep behind enemy lines, ventures upon an area with no birds to help him guide his unit, guesses which leads them to a village, raping women and killing children, overcoming his fear of closeness with humans, finding Grandma, being led by her into the fire.

The Fourth Fate

As opposed to the first three fates, the fourth is not scripted. There is no predetermined story arc. The idea is for the fourth fate to end badly, but generally be happier than the other ones. Also,

the fate should relate to the previous ones. You may only use places and people from the previous fates, not introduce new ones. You may however reinterpret anything---for example, the boy's sister might well be one of the women that he rapes in the village or he himself may be one of the children in the same village. The player playing the boy will determine what places and people should be included in this story, and the order in which the places should be visited. You determine where it starts and stops.

There is one new character for the fourth fate---Lady Luck. She might be the boy's constant companion or only appear once. The bad ending should also in some way relate to death or disappearance or similar of Lady Luck. Perhaps the boy will drive her away. Of course, there is no reason why Lady Luck and Sister cannot be the same person.

My fellow jeep and partner in crime Martin Brod^hn suggests that not only may you use only places and people from previous fates, but they must all be used. My sole objection to this idea, and the reason I want to be pragmatic about it, is because it will likely make this story much longer than the previous ones instead of shorter, which would be preferable since the game is drawing near its end and players are likely looking forward to closure. This all depends on how you play the game---one could easily imagine it as a four three--four-hour sessions game played over several days.

Deviating from the Scripted Fates

Deviating from the scripted fates is bound to happen. It is not only perfectly natural, but also recommended. I give the scripted fates to the players for two reasons: first to set a tone about the game and what it should be about, and second to inspire them. New ideas and interpretations are bound to surface during the reading of the material, moreso in their current state, less so if they only read the In Short versions. For example, if the third fate ends differently, that's okay with me. The story does not require everything to be

exactly as I outlined it, or I would have written a play instead, and directed it myself.

How to Game Master Four Fates

As game master, one of your most important jobs is to get the crow into the story, preferably many more times that she is explicitly mentioned by me. The idea is that the earthbound crow is supposed to appear time and time again in the life of the boy. You can interpret this any way you like---is the crow angry at the boy for hurting meaning it will make his life a living hell, or is it trying to help him in life and help him overcome his scars from the incident on his sixth birthday?

The player who is the current storyteller will decide how the game is played. Obvious approaches include boiling down the fates into a set of key scenes playing each scene in a particular order, or playing parts of it in ways of postcards between the siblings. Another possibility is to start with a voice-over narrative in the style of "Ten years later, our boy is in prison for..." As usual, anything that feels suitable for the telling of the specific story goes. I'm going to stress again how many players might not be used to game mastering and will be needing your help and support. You need to understand what parts of the story each storyteller will focus on and how those parts will be woven into the game.

Even though players will double as storytellers, you will still be the game master. Apart from aiding the current storyteller, you will be the person who legitimises the game, you will provide input to the players in terms of what they think and feel. You may request monologues or outsides to expose the inner play, etc.

Go easy on the "bad omens" thing. It doesn't really get mu juices flowing, and I'd rather have the only bad omen in the story as what Grandma sees on the fields.

Narratives

Only Player Four has the right to do monologues about the boy in first person. Everyone else must use third person. I would like to encourage you to briefly interrupt the game every so often and give short narrative in terms of facts about birds, particularly crows, and what you can tell from looking at how they fly over a wheat field and about souls being carried to heaven by them. You should mix truths with lies and fabrications. The players will make good use of such information in the game. These voice-overs can be injected wherever, whenever.

On the Absence of Names

I have a thing for avoiding names and replacing them with epithets, like “The Boy”, “The Old Woman”, etc. If you like, you can give the characters name when you play, but in my experience it is mostly not needed. Remember, this is a fairy tale, in which people are not seldom referred to as something like “The Prince”.

A Brief Example

The players read their characters and the boy’s back-story and their fates. Player one comes up to you to discuss how to game master her part. Having some own experiences of youth correctional facilities, she’d like to focus an extra bit on that part, and would like to to narrate a few things when the boy returns to the farm instead of playing it, to save time. You start by talking about the farm, describing the wheat field. How you can see Father’s harvester moving and kicking up dust at the horison, and the peculiar moves of the birds. “What is it grandma?”, the boy says... You quickly go through the obvious bits and once you get to the place where she starts telling the fates, player one takes over with a narrative

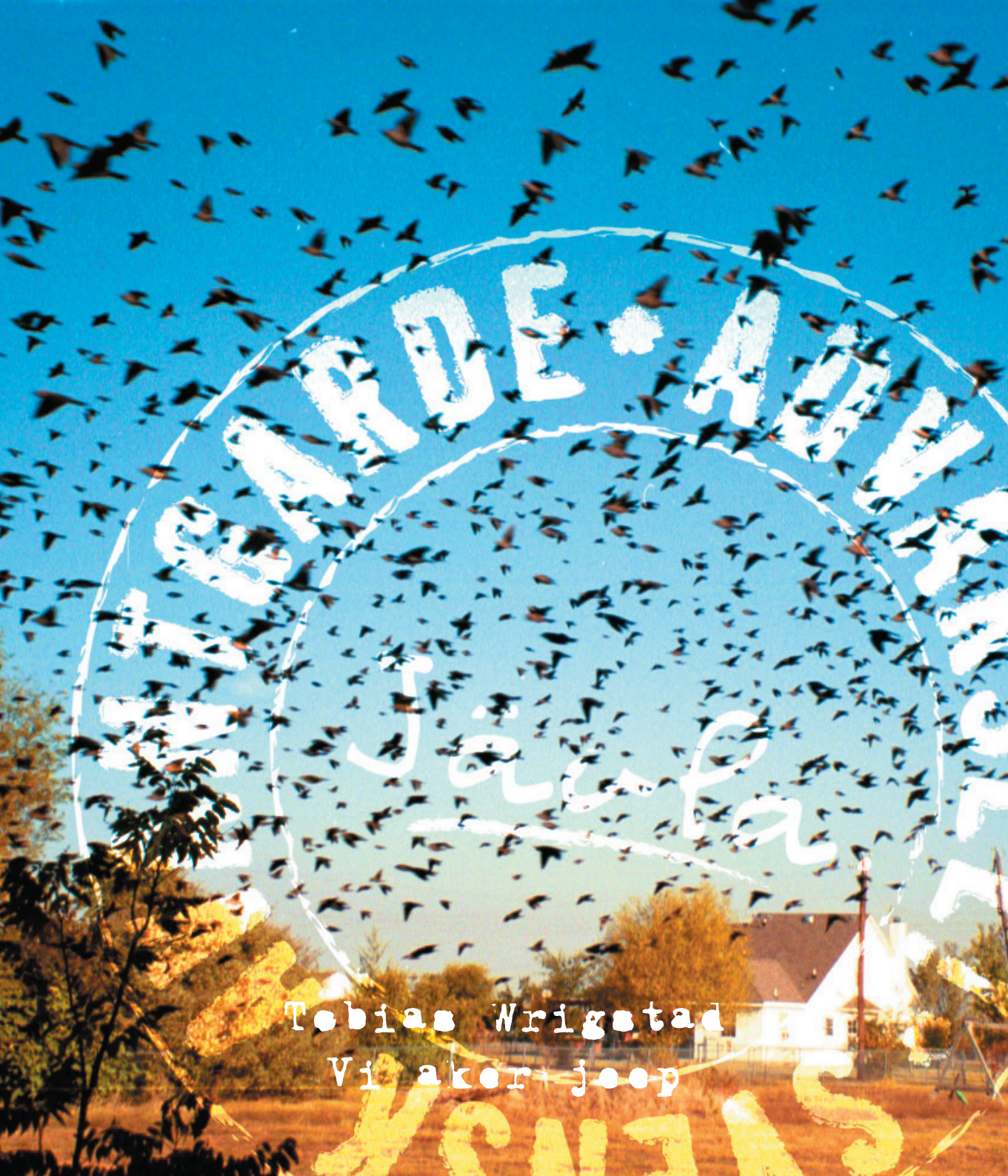
of his own. "The boy turns seven, and is send to school..." She goes through a few incidents so that everyone understands the boy's situation. She continues, "Then came the day when he killed Miranda." She is pointing at player three while she says her name, and no one can miss it. You quickly realises that this is the starting of a scene and start describing the school building, and the situation. It is the lunch break, and the kids with saved lunch money run down to the candy store to buy sweets. They get high on the sugar rush and that's when it happens. The players realise the scene is theirs and start working with what they know and have come to understand from the narratives. Player two starts talking to The Boy about him being in love with Miranda, and taunting him, pushing him to go up to her. She is in love with you to you know. All the girls are, you're so SPECIAL. Player one joins in as a second child taunting The Boy. Then Miranda enters, going straight up to The Boy and telling him how ugly and stupid he is and there is no way in the world that she would be in love with him. The player then calls for playing an "inside", that is, what Miranda really feels on the inside. She is actually in love with our boy, but doesn't dare tell it, as he is at the bottom of the status pyramid. She would like to punch the other boys, but she doesn't dare. Then she goes back to play her "outside" and continues to slander the boy. The boy suddenly looses it and starts throwing punches at her. The other boys get scared and run off. Player one resumes the role of the storyteller, and marks that the scene has ended by continuing his narration. "He wanted to stop hurting her, but he couldn't. It was as if he wasn't in control over himself..." She proceeds to talk about the sentence and sending him off to the correctonal facility and starts the next scene where The Boy is arriving at the gates, driven there by his parents.

Feel free to use any player style and to change player style several times during the same game. For example, part of the third fate could be told as letters to home; the phone conversation with Violet can be told using two players as Violet, one with her actual answers, and one that plays the answers The Boy is actually hearing; The Boys revenge

on the old couple can be played as him talking to the camera about what the did; the sex scenes can effectively be played only voice-wise, where the boy is running around excited about what goes on in his head, and Sister and Thug, protesting, panting, etc.; even the rape can be told as a letter to home---a letter that probably never existed, but it is nevertheless interesting to see what such a letter would have looked like, or be played with one player standing over the other (physical contact being important here) telling her what she is doing to her, or the other way around, how you are hurting me. Fake sex on the floor is not the way to go, regardless of how nice it can be.

E - N - D





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