

# Introduction

**About me:** I am a writer and narrative designer from Waterford, Ireland. I have five years of experience as a narrative designer at Romero Games working on a variety of projects in the strategy/RPG, adventure, and first-person shooter genres. I am passionate about character-based narrative design that pushes the interactivity of the medium.

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## Portfolio Projects

### Empire of Sin (2020)

**Role:** Narrative Designer.

**Project Type:** Strategy/RPG

**Description:** *Empire of Sin* is a strategy/RPG hybrid game where players take on the role of one of Chicago's Prohibition-era mob lords. Competing with the other bosses, they build their bootlegging empire across the city. Featuring both strategy gameplay and narrative-driven RPG style missions and character building, *Empire of Sin's* narrative content served to deliver the mob lord fantasy in a fun, inclusive way while allowing players to express themselves through their chosen mobster personality. I contributed a large amount of dialogue and barks to the base game as well as planned and implemented side missions. For the game's DLC expansions (*Make It Count* and a cancelled second DLC), I created characters, designed main and side missions, and wrote dialogue and barks.

**Deliverables:**

**Sit-Downs**

My initial work on *Empire of Sin* primarily consisted of writing sit-down conversations between the various player characters. Sit-downs were one-off conversations that would occur the first time the player's boss encountered another boss in the game world. They would meet to get a sense of one another and maybe come to a business arrangement. The goal of these conversations was to allow the player to get a sense of each of the bosses' vibrant personalities, and to allow them to choose the kind of diplomatic relationship they wanted to establish with them. Each pairing of the fourteen bosses had a unique conversation, resulting in 184 unique conversations, of which I wrote more than half. A sample of two of these conversations can be found below.

Meyer Lansky sitdown with Angelo Genna									
	Angelo	Intro	Angry	Y'know, I took it as a sign of disrespect that you didn't come to see me the minute you got into town.	There's just too many Gennas to see. I'm the busiest man in Chicago. Let's get to why we're here.	Unmoved	A1		
					That may be true. From what I heard, there's one less Genna walking around these days.	Dismiss	A2		
	Angelo	A1	Dismiss	I'm the only one you need to worry about.	It's cute you think I'd worry about any of you, kid.	Agree	B1		
					You may have time to shoot the shit all day, but I don't. Let's chit-chat about money.	Laugh	B2		
						Dismiss	A2		
	Angelo	A2	Respect	You do good business, %(you.lastName), I ain't afraid to admit that. I think a temporary business arrangement could work out pretty well between us, til we get to know one another better and all.	That just might work.	Agree	C1		
					You're going to need to sweeten the pot a little bit, here.	Unmoved	A3		
					You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3		
	Angelo	A3	Thoughtful	How much sweeter does it need to be?	Throw in %(cash,0), then you got a stew going.	Neutral	J1 J2		
					A non-aggression pact to boot would make me feel a lot safer.	Neutral	J3 J4		
					I like the look of %(gangster.name). I want them for my crew.	Neutral	J5 J6		
					I want you to offer me protection.	Neutral	J7 J8		
					Throw in a few barrels of hooch, and I'd sleep better.	Neutral	J9 J10		
	Angelo	B1	ThreatReact	I wouldn't start bringing dead family members into this, pal, or else I'll make sure you have a few of your own.	Unless you're willing to schlepp up to New York, I'm something of a solo act these days.	Disagree	D1		
					Alright, I'm getting bupkis from this conversation. What are we doing here?	Dismiss	A2		
	Angelo	B2	ThreatReact	We've been a little busy, lately, but that's all over now. All my attention has been freed up to concentrate on you. So I would be worried, %(you.lastName).	I don't waste time worrying. I just act.	Disagree	E1		
					You're becoming more of a nudnik the longer this goes on. Stop boring me.	Dismiss	A2		
	Angelo	C1	Respect	I didn't think this would work out. Make sure to stay on my sweet side.	<b>You have a better head on those shoulders than I assumed. So long.</b>	Agree	Leave		
	Angelo	D1	Laugh	You, a solo act? Doesn't Arnold Rothstein have his hand up your ass, telling you what to do?	He taught me a lot, but I'm my own man now. Gotta start somewhere. Gotta end somewhere, too. Do you want me to end you?	Disagree	F1		
						ThreatReact	F2		
	Angelo	E1	Respect	A man of action? Maybe we are a little alike. Ya think we have enough common ground to strike up a deal?	You want to make some money?	Agree	A2		
					You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3		
	Angelo	F1	Neutral	Is that so? Did he teach you to defer to your betters? Cause that's what you're dealing with here.	You'd be worth nothing if you stayed in Napoli, and you're worth even less in America.	Laugh	H1		
					Did you bring me here to practice your small-talk skills, or is there some point to all this?	Dismiss	A2		
	Angelo	F2	Respect	Quick to go to war, eh pal? I like that. You're the kinda %(you.gender?guy(galperson)) I could do business with.	You want to make some money?	Agree	A2		
					You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3		
	Angelo	C3	Angry	You dope. Suit yourself, I'll have you running back to Chicago with your tail between your fucking legs in no time.	<b>I wouldn't bet on it.</b>	Disagree	Leave		

					<b>I doubt you have the chutzpah to mess with me, friend.</b>	ThreatReact	Leave		
	Angelo	H1	Thoughtful	Done your research, did ya? Well that tells me you take me more seriously than you let on. You wanna do business?	You want to make some money?	Agree	A2		
					You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3		
	Angelo	I1	Respect	I didn't think this would work out. Make sure to stay on my sweet side.	<b>You have a better head on those shoulders than I assumed. So long.</b>	Agree	Leave		
	Angelo	J1	Agree	[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.	This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1		
	Angelo	J2	Disagree	[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	CalmDown	I1		
					This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1		
	Angelo	J3	Agree	[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	CalmDown	I1		
	Angelo	J4	Disagree	[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	Disagree	C3		
					This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1		
	Angelo	J5	Agree	[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	CalmDown	I1		
	Angelo	J6	Disagree	[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	Disagree	C3		
					This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1		
	Angelo	J7	Agree	[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	CalmDown	I1		
	Angelo	J8	Disagree	[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	Disagree	C3		
					This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1		
	Angelo	J9	Agree	[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	CalmDown	I1		
	Angelo	J10	Disagree	[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.	Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying. Then you get nothing.	Disagree	C3		
		END							

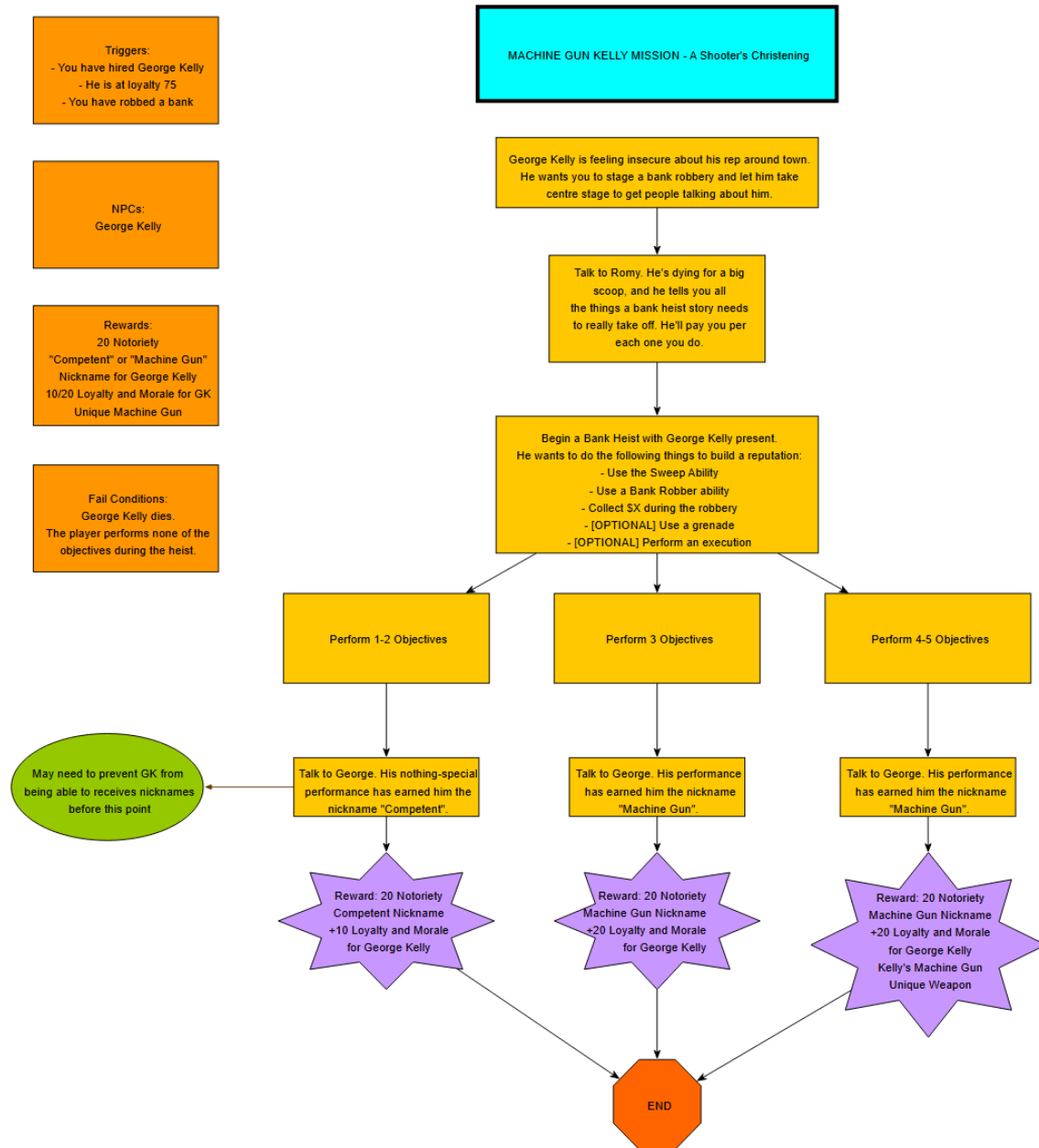
Meyer Lansky sitdown with Sai Wing Mock									
	Sai	Intro	Respect	I am pleased you made it. Many are afraid to face the Tong.	I never heard of you.	Unmoved	A1		
					I'm the busiest man in Chicago. Let's get to why we're here.	Dismiss	A2		
	Sai	A1	Disagree	Do not feign ignorance. My exploits are whispered of all across Chicago and beyond.	I heard you were an unpredictable operator.	Agree	B1		
					I heard you were a wild idiot who'll probably blow himself up one of these days.	Laugh	B2		
					You may have time to shoot the shit all day, but I don't. Let's chit-chat about money.	Dismiss	A2		
	Sai	A2	Respect	Your business is strong. A business arrangement could work between us, for a time, at least.	That just might work.	Agree	C1		
					You're going to need to sweeten the pot a little bit, here.	Unmoved	A3		
					You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3		

						I want you to offer me protection.	Neutral	J7J8	
						Throw in a few barrels of hooch, and I'd sleep better.	Neutral	J9J10	
						Then you have a gift for understatement. None know or could hope to predict what I could do next. The only thing you can be certain of is that I will win.			
		Sai	B1	Thoughtful		Win what? We're not playing a game, here. This is business.	Disagree	D1	
						Alright, I'm getting bupkis from this conversation. What are we doing here?	Dismiss	A2	
		Sai	B2	Laugh		Better keep you alive then.	Thoughtful	E1	
						You're becoming more of a nudnik the longer this goes on. Stop boring me.	Dismiss	A2	
		Sai	C1	Respect		<b>You have a better head on those shoulders than I assumed. So long.</b>	Agree	Leave	
						Let it be so.			
						It's all a game. %(you.lastName). That is why I can take lives with ease, why I can make moves no one can predict. Because I see the rules, I set them as I see fit.			
		Sai	D1	Thoughtful		We have that in common.	Agree	F1	
						You're a megomaniac. You understand that, don't you?	Angry	F2	
		Sai	E1	Respect		You want to make some money?	Agree	A2	
						You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3	
						Few can compare themselves favorably to me, but I suspect you might have the necessary qualities.			
		Sai	F1	Neutral		Necessary for what? I didn't realise this was a job interview.	Unmoved	H1	
						Did you bring me here to practice your small-talk skills, or is there some point to all this?	Dismiss	A2	
						I know you mean to insult me, but Western psychoanalysis only serves to constrain the strong. I pay no mind to it. Can we talk business, Dr. Freud?			
		Sai	F2	Dismiss		You want to make some money?	Agree	A2	
						You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3	
						Many in this city would beg for a place at my table. It will not be offered to you again. Know that if our organisations come into conflict, it will end poorly for you and yours.			
		Sai	C3	ThreatReact		<b>I wouldn't bet on it. I doubt you have the chutzpah to mess with me, friend.</b>	Disagree	Leave	
						You wouldn't last a minute with the Hip Sing Tong. %(you.lastName), but perhaps our organisations could work together.	ThreatReact	Leave	
		Sai	H1	Disagree		You want to make some money?	Agree	A2	
						You think I'd make a deal with a shmuck like you?	Disagree	C3	
		Sai	I1	Respect		<b>You have a better head on those shoulders than I assumed. So long.</b>	Agree	Leave	
						[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.			
		Sai	J1	Agree		This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1	
						[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.			
		Sai	J2	Disagree		Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying.	CalmDown	I1	
						Then you get nothing.		C3	
						This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.			
		Sai	J3	Agree			Neutral	I1	
						[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.			
		Sai	J4	Disagree		Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying.	CalmDown	I1	
						Then you get nothing.	Disagree	C3	
						[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.			
		Sai	J5	Agree		This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1	
						[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.			
		Sai	J6	Disagree		Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying.	CalmDown	I1	

		Sai	J7	Agree	[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.	Disagree	C3				
					This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.	Neutral	I1				
		Sai	J8	Disagree	[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.	CalmDown	I1				
					Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying.	Disagree	C3				
		Sai	J9	Agree	[SUCCESS] You drive a hard bargain. Fine, that'll work.	Neutral	I1				
					This is a great deal for the both of us, you'll see.						
		Sai	J10	Disagree	[FAILURE] You must think I was born yesterday. The business arrangement is all you get.	CalmDown	I1				
					Fine, I'll take it. Can't blame a guy for trying.	Disagree	C3				
					Then you get nothing.						
			END								

## Side Missions

I also designed and scripted several side missions involving the recruitable gangster characters. This involved working with mission designers to plan and implement the missions into the game. Below is a branching diagram we used to plan one of the game's DLC side missions.



## Tools Used:

- Unity
- BRScript (Proprietary scripting language used for this project)

## Impact:

Reviews of the game (including [PC Gamer's](#)) pointed to the quality of the sit-down conversation feature's writing, of which I wrote more than half of the 144 that appeared in the base game.

# Project Buttercup (2021)

**Role:** Narrative Designer.

**Project Type:** Mystery/Adventure

**Description:** *Project Buttercup* was a demo project undertaken by a small team at Romero for a client following the cancellation of *Empire of Sins* second DLC expansion. I worked on this project with another Romero Games narrative designer. We took the client's initial pitch for the game, expanded the world and characters, designed the game's narrative delivery systems, and wrote and scripted the narrative content for the demo using Inkle and Unity.

**Deliverables:**

## Branching Dialogue

Below is a sample of branching dialogue I wrote for this project. Dialogue for this project had to offer multiple routes for the player to conduct their investigation, and track what the player had learned throughout their prior conversations.

```

1 ->GraveDiggerConversation
2 VAR havegraveyardkey = true
3 VAR ReadPaganBook = true
4
5
6 ▾ === GraveDiggerBark
7 Hold on there now. You aren't meant to be in here. #Muldoon
8 ->END
9
10 ▾ === GraveDiggerConversation
11 Done havin' a nosy around, are ya? That gate there was locked for a reason, you know. #Muldoon
12
13 *I'm here on Garda business.#player
14 ->DeclaredYouWereAGardaToMuldoon
15 *Why is that, then?#player
16 ->AskedWhyGraveyardIsClosed
17 *I don't need to explain myself to you.#player
18 ->LeftGraveDigger
19
20 ▾ === DeclaredYouWereAGardaToMuldoon
21 You must be that detective. You can't just swan onto private property wavin' your badge about. You might think we're
    an easy con out here, lad, but you'd be better off rethinkin' that. #Muldoon
22
23 *I got the key from the Church - I've been allowed in.#player
24 ->IBelongHere
25 *I'm conducting a murder investigation, and you'd be wise to avoid angering me.#player
26 ->ThreatenedMuldoon
27 *I've no such prejudice, I promise you that. Who are you, sir?#player
28 ->FriendlytoMuldoon
29
30 ▾ === AskedWhyGraveyardIsClosed
31 Orders from the Town Council. You'd have to take it up with them. #Muldoon
32
33 *Who's on the Council?#player
34 ->AskedAboutCouncil
35 *Well I'm taking it up with you. Don't try my patience. #player
36 ->ThreatenedMuldoon
37 *Sure I know it has nothin' to do with you. What would your name be, anyway? I'm Detective Byrne.#player
38 ->FriendlytoMuldoon
39
40
41 ▾ === IBelongHere
42 The Church has nought to fuckin' do with it, it was the Council's orders that closed the place. #Muldoon
43
44 *Who's on the Council? #player
45 ->AskedAboutCouncil
46 *You mind your tone when you speak to me, alright?#player
47 ->ThreatenedMuldoon
48 *Alright, take it easy, I'll take it up with the Council. #player
49 ->FriendlytoMuldoon
50
51 ▾ === ThreatenedMuldoon
52 I don't have to say a word to you, Detective. In point of fuckin' fact, your trespassin' on private property. So
    don't push it.#Muldoon
53 *What's your name? Don't mess me about, now.#player
54 ->FriendlytoMuldoon
55
56 ▾ === FriendlytoMuldoon
57 I'm John Muldoon. Caretaker of the Church grounds. Gravedigger, today.#Muldoon
58 *Whose grave are you digging?#player
59 Who'd you fucking think? The dead girl. Savas.#Muldoon
60 **The family have decided to bury her here? #player
61 I don't know what they want. But she belongs here.#Muldoon

```

## Project Silver Bullet (2021-2025)

**Role:** Narrative Designer

**Project Type:** First Person Shooter

**Description:** *Silver Bullet* is a currently cancelled Romero Games first person shooter project. I worked on this game through every element of production: creating the game's setting, characters, and story, designing narrative design and other game systems, writing technical and design documentation for game features, writing and implementing in-game dialogue, writing and editing cinematic scripts, and collaborating closely with all departments to ensure narrative quality and cohesion across the entire project.

**Deliverables:** As my work on this project was unreleased and potentially will see further development in the future, I cannot share actual material from the project without requesting that any employers who wish to see samples of the work sign an NDA.

## Non-Games Work

Below are two samples of some of my published non-games work, the short story *Shepard Tone* and the non-fiction essay *Lurking in Hellworld*.

### Shepard Tone

*Shepard Tone is a short story published in The Moth magazine in 2022.*

#### *Elaine, 2028*

Before I was 30 it seemed like nothing bad could ever happen to me, until I had a week where it seemed like all was dying, culminating, of course – typical dramatist – with my mother.

I felt as if, as I am told people believed in the nineties, we *had* lived through the end of history. It was over, except just for me, and me alone. For some reason, I had been given a reprieve, been allowed to abdicate from events and struggles and had emerged on the other side unscathed. Nothing bad ever happened to me. I was comfortably middle-class, able-bodied, competent, reasonably but not impressively intelligent – anything more may have aroused contempt – and relatively good-looking. I was thin; I had no allergies, even my periods were mild. I was charming enough to be at least tolerated by almost everyone I had ever met. No one even in my extended family had died. My parents had not been abusive. I had enough siblings to not be lonely but not so many as to feel overshadowed. No pregnancy scare had ever troubled my teenage years, no teacher had ever been inappropriate with me. I spoke French well enough to travel.

I had been blessed not just personally, but geopolitically. My birth took place among the only halfway decent time to be born on the island of Ireland in the nation's history – the 1990s. I had been born in the South, not the North. Whatever issues there were there were a distant



memory. Further afield, there had been fascism and communism and a Cold War, but that was over now. All conflict had been resolved except for a few troubled parts of the world that I was told were intrinsically turbulent anyway. There was an economic crash, in my youth, but my parents had recession-proof jobs. The internet was shoring up the last of life's little inconveniences, and it was only going to get better. Climate change wasn't going to stir up any significant trouble in my lifetime, and someone would figure something out before then. This was the story I was given as a child, the pillars of my safety, and I was assured they would never crumble.

And they hadn't.

I read all the blogs, of course, and slim fashionable philosophy books. I had several opinions and – it seemed to me – more sophisticated views than the ones handed to me as a child on the various maladies infecting society: racism, spiritual malaise, bigotry, the environment, rising fascism, etc. But none of it ever really affected me inside. I took this as a sign of my own detached maturity.

Knowledge of all the evil things happening to other people in the world didn't touch me in the slightest. It did, however, begin to fill me with dread at the thought that these things would happen to me, that whatever spell of protection had been worked on me would be broken. I would spend my lunch breaks (and, often, much of my workday) googling grisly ways to die. It was easy to do this in the office I worked in because no one else knew or cared what my job was or what I was meant to be doing. I wasn't sure either, but, nonetheless, my paychecks continued to roll in.

I knew many obscure statistics about airline crashes, the number of campers eaten by bears in the southwestern United States, the chance of being hit by a car, the exact speed at which the car would have to be travelling to kill you instantly, things of this nature. I often forgot my own friends' birthdays or the day of the week, but I could identify sixteen types of deadly mould, and I knew exactly how they would kill you. My lungs often felt as if they were being eaten by some corrosive disease from the inside, but my doctor had stopped accepting my calls. It hurt more than any other man who had done the same.

I told all of this to Rachel, over dinner. This was at the start of the week things started to go wrong. She told me – as if remarking upon the weather – that she wasn't sure she wanted us to be close friends any more. She said that I had become very distant, that it had started a long time ago, but that she herself had only just realised. That surprised me, the idea that I was distant from anything. Everything felt very imminent.

But I just said, that's okay, these things happen. I didn't know that for sure. I was just guessing.

The next day my cat died, which made me feel stupid. I had often worried about ways the cat could die. I could feed it something poisonous by mistake, or it could be killed by a child experimenting with his psychopathic instincts. In the end, it had been run over by a truck. I felt dumb because it was such an unnecessary tragedy to have happen to me – by getting a cat, I had opened myself up to it. I didn't have time to think or feel much about it, however, as that was the same day there was a big tsunami in South America and I became very busy at work, looking up ways to survive a tsunami.

Concurrent to this thick strand of anxiety that curled through me like one part of a DNA helix was an equally thick strand of desire. I was sex-obsessed, for one thing, in a way that I alternated between being very ashamed and very proud of, depending on what blogs I was following at the time. Sometimes the two strands would intertwine directly, like when Boston Dynamics introduced a new kind of robot that was humanlike in its proportions and movements, and I became simultaneously as aroused at the thought of being bedded by one of these robots as I was terrified at the potential of being killed or shepherded into some labour camp by them.

When they were introduced onto the streets as law enforcement a few years later, Garda uniforms and all, this confusion only grew.

That happened the same week that my cat died and Rachel told me she didn't want to be friends. My desires had reached a new level of mania – as my anxiety grew, so did my libido. I would even watch porn at work, at first discreetly and then openly, which was fine because people thought that my job had something to do with sex.

I didn't really have any sex, despite this, even though I was in the twentieth percentile of desirability and had no end of offers from all kinds of men. None of them were like the men in my fantasies. They never looked like the men I'd see online or in magazines or in films, and on the rare occasions they did, they never acted like them. The whole thing would be ruined by the time they opened their mouths. It was worse if things went well and they got close enough for me to see into their eyes. Then I would see myself, doubled and dead-eyed in the black spheres. And I would not be like the me in my fantasies.

But I kept watching porn, and studying the men I saw online and in the media, but none of them were quite right either. There was always some element missing. I thought I could collect parts of them in my mind, the parts that were working, and discard the rest. Then I would assemble all my precious pieces into some kind of collage and I would know, and therefore be

able to satisfy, whatever this urge was that was solely able to distract me from my surely impending pain, discomfort or death.

This desire was like a mouth that kept opening wider and wider in anticipation until it began to tear at the sides. I thought my body would split itself in two sometimes. This wanting was bound up with a series of other desires that were always coiling through me, reinforcing each other – the desire to have the perfect apartment with the perfect furniture, the right clothes, the right hobbies, to purchase with mindful intention and not empty-headed consumerism. The right therapist and the right physical regimen to reach a mythical state known as ‘healthy’. I was not sure what this state comprised of, exactly, but it was always a pound or two lighter than I was, always one more breakthrough disclosed in perfect monotone at the therapist’s office away. Once I had all the pieces of my desires I would place my perfected self with my perfected man into my perfected life; then we would be finished. I wasn’t sure what was supposed to happen after that.

Something horrible, my fear would promise, when my longing wasn’t loud enough to drown it out.

I met Ralph towards the end of that week. We had met on Tinder, and he had, at least visually, fulfilled some element of my fantasy. He was tall and well-dressed. We met for drinks. I found out my mother’s illness had taken quite a dramatic turn for the worst just as he arrived at the bar but still managed to place my phone down gracefully and smile as he approached. Since I had learned of her sickness I had spent an inordinate amount of time imagining her final agony and suffering, the suffering it would cause me, the way I would twist and wail and be undone in hospital corridors and funeral parlours. But the news had arrived at altogether too inconvenient a time for any of that to go ahead now, and I wondered what sort of person that made me. I already had nightmares about being exposed as a terrible, unfeeling person in front of my peers.

Ralph was a nuclear scientist, which I found attractive. He talked about it eloquently but with self-effacing humour, and didn’t go on about it too long to bore me. I managed to bluff my way through describing my work and my feelings about it without having to specify exactly what it was I did, and he was probably too embarrassed to ask for clarification because then he would be admitting that he didn’t know what my job title meant. Current events came up, and we both chuckled about being sick of talking about them, but then we did anyway, in a light, not particularly probing way. He felt the same way I did about many things and expressed himself well without seeming like a know-it-all.

I wondered about taking him home. He really did seem like a good fit. But how would I know he was the right one? In my mind, at least, he certainly slid into the role easily. But there were other men in the bar who were strong candidates, and for a few minutes, despite myself, I thought of each of them in turn in the starring role. Ralph didn't notice my lack of concentration, or if he did, it didn't stop him from speaking at length about the refugee crisis.

I realised I had forgotten to respond to the text about my mother. It was hard to know what to say to whatever healthcare worker was on the other end of the text chain.

*Thank you for keeping me informed*, I said, finally, although I resented them for it.

'Have you ever lost someone?' I asked Ralph.

'Yes,' he said, 'my parents died when I was very young.'

'Oh,' I said. 'My cat died on Tuesday.'

'Oh,' he said. He ate a piece of steak and had difficulty swallowing it, and I froze momentarily, wondering what I would do, how I would be changed if I watched him choke to death in front of me. I could save him – I had that resolve, and I had taken a health and safety course at work a few months prior, just to fill the day. But he managed to suck it down. I felt a little cheated of my moment to shine, or at least fail in a tragic, heroic way.

Ralph's parents had died in a car accident when he was a small boy. This was a scenario that I had also dwelled on compulsively since I had first read *Harry Potter* at nine, though I was sure that my parents wouldn't be revealed to be something more wonderful than I thought they were after their deaths. For his part, he said that it had been difficult for him as a child but he didn't go into any more detail, and I asked for none, despite being ravenous for it.

Yes, it must have been very difficult, as if what I thought it must have been like mattered at all.

He seemed to hold no ill will against me for indirectly comparing the death of his parents to the death of my cat, for which I was both grateful and slightly disappointed.

It had all gone so well that, barring the cat thing, I decided to go home with him. I felt like my fantasy, finally, was here. I had brought several men home recently, but things had stalled after they had crossed the threshold of my apartment. I was starting to become afraid it was just too dingy to ever be the setting for my fantasy fulfilled.

Ralph's apartment, however, matched the man perfectly. It was pristine. I experienced a moment of intense déjà vu before I realised I *had* seen it before. An interior designer I followed on Instagram had posted a photo of it in between pictures I resented of their perfect life. I had immediately added the image to my dream vision board. This board was a collection of every image, quotation or aphorism I could find that helped me hone even a little closer in to whatever

it was I wanted. I displayed this board on one of my monitors at work – the other displayed my horror vision board, which was mostly a collection of news headlines about foods that caused cancer and pictures of people who had died from complications after minor surgery. A few things moved back and forth between the two boards – the police robots, for instance, which had killed several people at random before a firmware update had been deployed to fix the bug.

But now I was standing in my dream board. Ralph explained that he had hired the designer, and complimented me on my good taste in liking them. This was a roundabout way of complimenting himself for liking them, but I was too taken aback to be annoyed.

He sat back on a very tasteful, retro-but-not-kitsch fainting couch and I knew what the look in his eyes meant, what he wanted from me. Deja vu returned; I was sure I'd seen this pose on Instagram too. Not that I cared. The picture was too perfect; I stayed on the precipice of giving in to our desires for as long as I could tolerate it.

He did a very strange thing, once we'd gotten things on the road, as it were. He asked me what I wanted him to do. In a hushed, embarrassed tone I quickly sketched as accurate a vision of the actual sexual component of my fantasy as I had been able to figure out. This was the least developed aspect, details-wise. But he did it all, quite expertly. Usually, once it was time for the clothes to come off, I got cold feet. But I was still shocked that it was all happening exactly how I wanted it.

Once that feeling passed, and it was still going on with no sign of it ending soon, I realised I was bored and began to study the ceiling. I started to worry about there being some structural damage in it, something invisible that had crept in over time, that would cause it to collapse on top of us. I had read about something similar happening in Japan that morning. As I stared at the cracks in the paint, I thought that each of Ralph's slow thrusts was causing the ceiling to shake, for the cracks to grow a little wider. For some reason, I began to enjoy myself more, even as every thrust made me even more certain of the imminent structural collapse of potentially the whole building, each movement bringing me a little closer, my fear twining around my desire, until I was certain that both would keep climbing until one final push from Ralph would bring me to the most blistering climax of my life and the entirety of the building down upon our heads.

But neither thing happened.

We flopped onto the couch after he had finished and turned on the television to some news channel – we were sick of politics, obviously, but it was impossible *not* to pay attention to the worsening political situation, we both agreed.

Between inhaling greedy gulps of sickening details about the crises that were apparently about to come down on all our heads, I could think only of ways to refine my malfunctioning fantasy, alongside flashes of panic about whether or not we'd be able to buy food next week. But I stopped being truly moved by the details of the emergencies even before the broadcast ended. I went on my phone, barely responding to Ralph's attempts at conversation, and started looking at models I found attractive, and new podcasts, trying to think of some way to fix my fantasy, some way to make it satisfying, now that it seemed my best chance at realising it was finally here. There was always just a little more to want. It was difficult to find what I was looking for on Instagram – there had been some kind of technical fault at a nuclear reactor in the States. There were many scenarios in which the radiation could reach us. Almost everyone was posting about that.

The television continued to play news updates – I had switched to a CNN stream, as advised by a friend in a group DM – RTE was useless. And as the text informing me of my mother's death battled with Twitter notifications about the further potential for nuclear apocalypse and reports of drone strikes in London, as Ralph tried to distract me from all the awfulness with the comfort of his beautiful body, as all of my fear and want reached a horrifying crescendo followed by the realisation that they would never truly peak, just keep climbing on and on, dragging me along with them like a cat chasing a laser pointer, all I could think was: what else is on?

### **Lurking In Hellworld**

*Lurking in Hellworld* is a non-fiction essay about Twitter, irony, and brainrot published in Fallow Media, an Irish online literary journal. It can be read here:

<https://fallowmedia.com/2023/06/lurking-in-hellworld/>