

Choose Your Own Gift Exchange

A Multiple Choice Friends' End Day Adventure

By James Howarth

GOOD MORNING.

And that is how you woke up. Damn intrusive thoughts. It would be nice to rise with the sunshine or to a text message from a friend. An alarm clock would even do, really, anything but that idea coming out of nowhere, like text on a blank page.

You used to have a clock radio. Even when you had a smart phone and every song or newscast in the world could be your wake up call, you loved that clock radio. It wasn't set to any station, so when it would blare you out of your dreams back in high school it was to the sound of static. It's not a common sound anymore. There's a bit of nostalgia to it. Saturday mornings creeping into the family room before anyone else woke up, flipping the TV to Channel 3, the crunching buzz of snow on the dead channel before the NES fired up. If Netflix put on a TV static stream it would probably get even higher ratings than that burning log.

But instead you get a GOOD MORNING. At least the intrusive thought is pleasant. And it's correct, because later today is Friends' End Day. It is a good morning, and it's going to be a good day.

These last few months have been a bit of a hard go. Time has never been more lackadaisical. It comes and goes at it pleases, wandering about your days without concern for the broader world. Malevolent clocks slow and sneer only to sprint to a far too late hour right in the middle of your streaming binge.

Yes, a good Riley Brothers party is exactly what you could use right now. In person, of course, would be ideal, but this one will be a little different. Everything will be done remotely, which is just lovely of them and certainly a treat for the day.

You cannot go to the Friends' End Day in person because...

The coronavirus has shut down broad segments of everyday life...[PAGE 2](#)

You are a character in a Choose Your Own Adventure and you can't escape the story...[PAGE 3](#)

Schools are closed. Stores are closed. Nobody is sure what an essential service is anymore but everyone knows that it is a slightly deadlier time than normal to order a Big Mac. The phrase of the year, you can predict with confidence, is going to be “social distancing.”

You’ve been shut in for the better part of two months now. It’s hard for you, but it’s been hard for everyone. One of the great things to come out of economic shutdown is the realization that we’re all in this together. It’s a reminder that nobody has it easy, and that all of our lives are complicated at any given time. The coronavirus highlighted all the different ways that we struggle, exacerbating what would otherwise have been the ordinary difficulties of modern life.

But boy, could you ever use a break. Who would have thought that experimenting with all the things you’ve wanted to do over the years but never had time for would be so exhausting? How much heartbreak can one go through in the loss of yet another sourdough starter?

You put on your favorite news podcast while getting out of bed.

To put on All Things Considered from National Public Radio, go to [PAGE 4](#)

To put on Tucker Carlson Tonight from Fox News, go to [PAGE 5](#)

You're going to be attending Friends' End Day alright, but not in person. Rather, maybe not as a person. This would ordinarily be a time of reflection for you, a time to ponder upon fate and determinism. A time to wrack your brain upon free will.

Friends' End Day, you decide, is not about such sophomoric philosophical quandaries. It's about the celebration of art and culture, and a love of creating things. Much better to dive right into this story than to waste precious words on its nature.

You look at your surroundings. Your home. You've always lived here, for as long as you can remember. The familiar stove with the one tricky burner. The rattling from the fridge that you can't seem to find the source of. On the shower head, the third hole from the top left is clogged a bit and slowed down to a trickle and you know all of this because these are the things a person knows about a place after a long, long time.

Outside it's a dreary day. The past winter was mild for New England, but it doesn't seem ready to release its hold; it's unseasonably cold for spring. The buds on the trees are peeking out, hesitant to show their blossoms because the specter of a hard frost still seems to loom about. April showers are instead a thin, chill mist that worms through the meat of a person and into their bones.

That ought to be enough to figure it out, you decide. That kind of setting really only works for one thing. Clearly you are in a...

HORROR STORY...[page 9](#)

MYSTERY...[page 11](#)

The news has a lot of numbers in it lately. Stock market numbers and unemployment numbers. Tested numbers and recovered numbers, and some numbers that are much worse than all of those. It can be hard to listen to, but it's important even if, at times, it feels like all one can do with the information is bear witness to it.

At least with Friends' End Day today you can talk about something else, with friendly faces. You weren't much of an art person before this party but over the years you've developed a taste for it. More importantly than that, you've started realizing that it's much simpler, and much more accessible than you thought it was. Art is everywhere, and it's a human drive to create. Lately especially you've been trying to find yours.

Over several years of workshops you've tried improv and crafting. You took some pretty helpful lessons home about cooking, and while poetry is still a little beyond you at least you can say you've done it.

This year, though, things are going to be a bit different. You've worked up the confidence to lead a workshop yourself. It'll be a little bit harder to do over the internet, but you've got your class plan in order and a big box of materials to use for demonstration.

You're going to be teaching people about...

ORIGAMI...[page 6](#)

THE ENDURING ETHICS OF ANARCHO-CAPITALISTIC SOCIETAL STRUCTURE
IN THE WAKE OF POST SCARCITY ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN WORLD OF
WARCRAFT...[page 7](#)

You head to the kitchen for a healthy daily breakfast of bacon, endangered condor eggs, triple butterfat microwaved freedom toast, and a grapefruit. You grab your MAGA hat on the way past 40 cases of mega-ply toilet paper, a half pallet of hospital grade Purell, and eight boxes of N95 masks. You say seventy Hail Trumps to the lovingly detailed fresco of the 45th president, hulking physique, wrapping corpulent fingers around the US flag and wresting it out of the grasp of the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. You chortle, as only a demented goblin of a person can chortle.

“The liberals don’t want the economy to reopen,” Tucker says, his bow tie somehow gleaming through the sound waves. “They want you to never eat at the Cracker Barrel again. And you know why? It’s because they’re socialists.”

You nod vigorously. Socialists are, historically, the worst. You read a headline once in a Facebook group from nationalstormonlinereport.com that said the Mongols were socialists.

“It’s time to show them we want our freedom back, and the government can’t take it away. Go to your state capital, and tell them that we the people demand the right to go to the lawn and garden outlet,” Tucker finishes.

He’s right, you decide. Of course he’s right. It’s time to fight back.

There are a few dozen people at the protest. They are demanding their right to work. They are demanding their right to chicken strip baskets. One man has a cut off sleeve t-shirt, which establishes him as the leader at these sorts of things.

“Our freedom is our freedom,” he yells, lips pressed furiously into the megaphone. “It’s our freedom, as Americans, to be free.” Such eloquence and grace in such a fleshy and pink form.

Next to you, a man coughs mid-cheer. His spittle laces you across the cheek and you’ve never felt such a fine spray of independence.

You have contracted coronavirus. The ventilator you needed has been diverted to Jared Kushner’s private hospital yacht.

THE END. [GO TO PAGE 1 TO TRY AGAIN.](#)

The art of paper folding. It's such a serene activity. There's peace in exact folds, and gentleness in working with such a fragile medium. At the end of the workshop, everyone will have their own paper cranes.

You're lucky it translates so well to the online format. Everyone will probably have paper, after all.

The hobby has been in your family for quite some time. In the ancestral manor, your grandfather's grandfather Thomas of Origami liked to have fun with the servants by requesting his evening hot towel in the forms of various animals. He gave out hazelnuts to the makers of the best of the folded towels, and furiously beat the ones who displeased him. It came about later that he was addicted to a cocktail of laudanum and wormwood.

When the cotton supply was interrupted during the Civil War, he was unable to get fresh towels, and so the servants began folding his newspapers instead. The Prussians continuously raided and burned lumber in those times, and so newspapers were exceptionally tiny. Thomas loved the small folded paper cranes and boxes so much that he had the servants teach the craft to his sons in the Childrens' House.

It's the only thing the Origami family has left, really, and you, their last scion. For so long this secret was jealously guarded and unknown to outsiders. But today is the day you share it with your closest friends in hopes of getting them through these trying times.

Just kidding, you learned it in high school art class.

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After the introduction of the Naga as a playable race in patch 8.994202 the sunken Temple of Azshara introduced a new currency in the form of undersea lichens imbued with the chaotic essence of the dead master of the Burning Legion, Sargeras himself! This was by far the boldest gameplay decision on the part of Blizzard, as the chaos lichen was farmable by high level toons at a much faster rate than traditional gold farming. Combined with instanced dungeons and new top tier loot on relatively simple dungeon bosses, this resulted in a flood of endgame equipment available to everyone. When players were no longer forced to compete with each other for resources in a closed market the futility of economic scarcity began to spread among the raiding guilds, led by a bearded Orc player who called himself Ma'arcks. The resulting economy was, rather than Horde vs. Alliance based, instead a series of specific in game tasks designated to individuals within the guild structures. Players chose to no longer race to the highest levels or the best gear, but instead crafted within the professions that made them the happiest. They married across faction and racial bounds and even when they could not communicate they would stand together and stare at the rising and setting sun from the towers of Stormwind Castle. NPC guards who intervened with these peaceful settings would be dealt with swiftly and with great hostility by both factions, suggesting the authoritarian hand of the government was no longer welcome in the new order of Azeroth.

Patch 8.994202 also introduced the flying Gnomish motorcycle mount, a perk of the Engineering tree, which by most accounts was pretty dope.

Go to [PAGE 8.](#)

You take a look at the schedule for the day again to make sure you have your time slot right. You have to make sure you have your custom background is up, after all. That's when you see the time set aside for the gift exchange.

The world drops out from underneath you. If there were a word for this kind of feeling it would have a "myeugh" kind of sound to it, with maybe a thud at the end. It would be simply awful to pronounce, anyway. You've forgotten to get a gift for the exchange ahead of time, and you signed up for it weeks ago.

You run around frantically looking for inspiration. There's a box of Froot Loops, but even the with sexual majesty that is Toucan Sam is you aren't sure if it qualifies as art. There's a gently used tongue scraper, but maybe this isn't the best time to be sharing hygiene products. There's an original oil painting by Dutch Master Friedrich Mikkelsen but you've always found the brush strokes heavy handed and his creative vision to be, at best, derivative.

No, nothing is quite right. Looking around doesn't help you, but it does make you think. What do you consider art in the first place? Does it have to be beautiful? Does it have to be intentional? Is art the monolithic vision of a creator or does the experience of the consumer change it?

Art is the work of a creator, but anyone can create...[PAGE 21](#)

Art is the name of your high school guidance counselor...[PAGE 22](#)

Art is what it is. It's art. It's shaped like itself...[PAGE 21](#)

You try to wrap your head around the home that seems so familiar, but spatially none of it fits together. You know there's a faulty stove but you don't know if the bedroom connects to the living room. Is there a hall? Is it just one hall that goes on and on? The puzzle of it all comes together when you look directly at it and fragments as soon as you turn back around. You have to get out of here. You do not feel safe in the place you're supposed to feel safe.

You grab your jacket and head out into the morning. Frost isn't quite forming on the windshields of the cars outside, but it taunts them nonetheless. The street is so quiet for this time of day, usually buzzing with the early shoppers and the salary workers pulling their coats tighter in the rush out the door. The few people who are out are eyeing each other and staying well apart.

Discarded gloves are strewn across the sidewalk even as the trash bins are empty. Nobody waits at the bus stop. You stop outside of your favorite café. If anything can get your head straight and the cold out of your bones, it will be a hot cup of coffee.

The familiar sign greets you, red and white lettering on a green and white background with two steaming mugs beside it: Central Perk.

The door creaks as you enter. The room is in disarray. Newspapers are strewn about the floor, yellowed and weeks old. Behind the counter the once glistening espresso machine is smashed, dented, covered in a rusted red spray that can only be one thing. It smells like an abattoir.

Among the turned over chairs and ruined wall decorations the couch in the center is untouched. Facing away from you are six robed figures standing around the coffee table, pleas and whimpering come from a figure prone before them. Candles are lit all around, and sigils are drawn on the floor in what appears to be sugar.

He's wearing a loud shirt and a truly hideous tie, with short silver hair and a slightly pudgy face.

"Please," he cries, "please don't do this." He looks to one of the figures, the slight one with the perfect hair, "I loved you. All I wanted was your..."

The biggest of the figures kicks him viciously, cutting him off. As the man coughs and gasps, he sees you by the entrance. You remember that barista, remember his excellent lattes. And he remembers you.

He lays back before they can see where he's looking and he cries out, "You won't get away with this! The Four Idols will stop you! The Detective already has them and..."

The big cultist brings his hands down, a wicked knife flashes and disappears into the barista.

And now he's gone. Before you can cry out, the willowy blonde of the group begins to chant.

"Smelly cat," she says.

"Smelly cat," the other five recite as one.

"Why aren't they feeding you. Smelly cat," she says.

"Smelly cat," they repeat.

"It's not your fault," she exults at the end of her incantation, her arms spread wide in welcome and a wild grin distorting her fair features. "He comes."

Outside, screams carry from the distance. First a few, then more and more, louder and closer. The cultists turn to the window at the front of the café to look upon their work, and see you for the first time.

The one with the big forehead spots you first. "Could you BE any more doomed," he quips. Somewhere, from all around you, laughter echoes at the non-joke. It consumes you, the mad laughter at nothing.

The biggest of the cultists comes for you first, a brute with a doltish face. He closes the short distance of the café quickly. "How you doin'," he says.

You don't intend to answer.

To run out of CENTRAL PERK, go to [PAGE 13](#)

To attack the CULTIST, go to [PAGE 14](#)

You've got a pounding headache. And a bit of nausea. It stings when you blink and your hand shakes. You know how to fix all that, it's just a matter of the order you do it in.

You rifle through your pockets for an errant smoke and come up empty. Through the haze of your brain trying to burst its way out you head into the kitchen. There's a pot of stale coffee on the hot plate and you don't bother to warm it up, but you do take a minute to grab the nearest half-empty bottle of whiskey to pour into it. It's as thick as marmalade, and it's burnt and it's cold and it's gone in forty-five seconds. You grab the rest of the booze on your way downstairs.

You managed to make it upstairs to the apartment somehow last night but most of the time you don't even bother. Must have been feeling sentimental in the arms of Mister J-D. The office is in shambles. Unread letters piled up on the gouged and singed desk. Threadbare rug that you're pretty sure came with the rental. Blanket askew on the stained couch. If you can ever afford to bring Ms. Farnshorne back you've got to give the old lady hazard pay for setting up shop in a dump like this.

You'd need a client first. Either the world outside don't need any more investigating these days or you've finally done enough damage to sully your reputation around town. The cops won't even talk to you anymore and you're pretty sure if you show face in O'Hagan's that Kate is going to treat your kneecaps with a particular unkindness.

You sit behind the desk to search your drawers for that smoke and knock the mouse. The screen comes awake at the approximate lumen output of the sun. When you finally recover there's a list of messages in your inbox, all from the same address, BaristaG@centralperk.com. Isn't that the café down the street? How long have you been out?

- Available for Investigation?
- Need PI Please Help
- Urgent Please Respond
- Stopping by Office – Still Open?

This gent had been trying to make an appointment for six days. In his last e-mail, he said he left you a package on the steps. You get up to check it out when there's a knock at the door.

You open it and see the sort of dame that a sizable fleet of Greeks would have once gone to war over. She ought to come with a Surgeon General's Warning. Whenever you're looking at a part of her and think it can't get any better than this, it does, and by the time you're done with the next bit you've forgotten the last. By the expression on her face, she does not feel the same about you.

She strides past you with barely a glance before settling in the chair by your desk. She doesn't wait for you to sit.

"I'm glad you're finally open," she says, voice like butter and cinnamon. "I'm Veronica Collins."

"Charmed, I'm sure," you mutter. You walk back to the desk. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, there's been a break-in. At the family estate."

"Well Miss why don't you start by telling me--"

Before you can finish, the door bursts open. It slams against the wall and that dusty commendation award from the Mayor falls to the floor. Veronica Collins jumps up with enough grace for you to register envy before you tilt backwards in your chair and spill onto the floor.

"Now just what in the damned," you say, before you see who barged in. The intruder is familiar. Very familiar. Sweaty, gasping, with a shade less of a hangover maybe, but so shockingly similar that you touch your own face to make sure you're still there.

"Relative of yours?" Veronica says.

"Detective," the newcomer pants, "detective...the cultists, at the coffee shop, they...the barista...need to find Four Idols," then a wild gesture, and a dead run back out the door without looking back.

You look back to Veronica, who is already herself leaving at a brisk pace.

"I'm sorry Detective but I must be going."

And just as quickly as your office filled up, it empties again.

To follow the fleeing DOPPELGANGER, go to [PAGE 17](#)

To follow VERONICA COLLINS, go to [PAGE 18](#)

You decide that on your own you don't stand much of a chance against six cultists, at least one of whom is armed. As the big stupid one comes at you, you turn and run back out of the café, leaving the grisly scene behind.

Before you can even pick a direction, you notice the smell. It's so intense that it's stunning. It's so all-encompassing that you nearly forget to run past the door, away from the knife wielding cultist. The odor seems to change like a song, constantly swirling from this stench to the next, washing over your senses anew with each mutation. You can taste it. It invades your thoughts and seems to know and to corrupt all of the best smells of your childhood: barbeque and books, mint and fresh cookies all tainted and taunting, rotted and warped.

From the direction of the screams, and the smell, comes the low, awful meow. The thing called smelly cat is coming.

You take off running, away from the monster, away from the cultists, but you don't quite know where to yet. What did the poor barista say? The Four Idols? The Detective?

Smelly cat wails behind you. Why aren't they feeding it? It's not its fault.

You know there's a private investigator around here, but you can't quite remember where. It's like that feeling you had at home where nothing quite fits together. You run down the street, sucking down putrid air and pumping blood so hard it pounds in your head, beats against your eardrums in tune with your shoes hitting the pavement. You can't keep this up. The edges of your vision are turning gray and faded.

Somewhere in that ether of exhaustion, you remember something about a mystery.

Smelly cat screeches again. There's a human sob and the sound of crunching, then a horrible purr. Why aren't they feeding it? It's not its fault.

Mysteries have to have detectives, don't they?

To turn back around and FEED SMELLY CAT, go to [PAGE 15](#)

To interrupt the MYSTERY STORY, go to [PAGE 16](#)

Someone told you once that when you hit someone, you have to follow through. It's the difference between a jab and a haymaker. You don't remember anything else in the few seconds it takes for the big cultist to close the distance, but when you lash out with the kick that could save your life, you remember to follow through.

It lands squarely in his groin. As his eyes roll back in just shocking pain, you vaguely recognize him. Wasn't he that doctor on that soap opera?

Before he hits the ground, the other five are ready for you. Whose idea was it to take on six cultists? Something clangs against the glass just to your left. A chef's knife tumbles to the floor, thrown by the skeletal form of the woman with black hair.

The two remaining male cultists come for you. You dive and reach for the knife on the floor, but they get there first, kicking it out of your reach. As much as you struggle, you can't break free from their grip.

One of them, the goofy one, says, "This must be the one with the innocent bystander." The inane laughter from earlier returns.

You have time to see the rest of the robed figures roll their eyes before it's over.

THE END. [GO TO PAGE 1 TO TRY AGAIN.](#)

You stop running.

The way is clear.

You turn around.

The cultists spot you, but they do nothing. They know what you're about to do by the look on your face. Tears run freely from the powerful odor of the great and terrible cat, from fatigue, and from joy.

Why aren't they feeding it?

It's not its fault.

Smelly cat.

(smelly cat)

As you near the huge thing the stench of it becomes your world. It envelops you completely. You cannot feel the cold in the air and the crushing sense of wrongness to this whole morning melts away in that sensory embrace.

It waits now in its feline wisdom, eyes of vast amber, ragged tail swishing against the street.

Why aren't you feeding it?

You know its hunger like it is your own. And then, with the swift bat of its paw, you know nothing else.

THE END. [GO TO PAGE 1 TO TRY AGAIN.](#)

It started with an intrusive thought, and then a choice, and you chose wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong. But there was a choice after that, and a choice after that, and now you're panting on the street with an abomination of a feline upending the world behind you. Nothing makes sense, but if you could go back to where it started maybe you could choose again.

You run back home. How many miles is it? One? Four? Like the time these last few months, space isn't entirely your ally either.

As you near your door a painful stitch hits you in the side. There's a box on the step. Deliveries, in these times? It reads: Urgent – G. You burst through the entrance to your place. The door slams against the wall and something crashes. Nothing is as it should be.

The house is your house but the room is not your room. It's an office, messy and smelling of cigarettes and weak around the edges of your vision, like it's not quite real. A woman, a very beautiful woman, sits by the desk before jumping, rather gracefully, at the sound of the crash. Across from her, falling out of the chair, is you. You, but bleary eyed. You, but worn out. You, but obviously a private investigator meeting with a client and not fleeing a cult and its demonic cat.

It's too strange, even for this day.

"Now just what in the damned," the Detective says, before seeing who you are and stopping very suddenly.

"Relative of yours?" the woman says.

"Detective," you pant, "detective...the cultists, at the coffee shop, they...the barista...need to find Four Idols," then you point back to the Central Perk and bolt back out the door. Fleeing back down the steps, you grab the box. Which if you it belongs to is tricky but it must be for you, after all.

You need to get somewhere quiet and collect your thoughts, away from clones and cults and, just, every cat in the world. And after a few minutes to breathe, maybe a decade or two of sleep, all of this is going to make sense.

Not far from home, however, it gnaws at you. You sit on a nearby bench, and you open the box.

Go to [PAGE 19](#).

You've seen this movie before. That superbly constructed broad power walking down the street is the classic femme fatale. There's no way you're getting involved with that one without a double cross or two along the way.

A body double, however? That's a new one. You're going to follow that lead if only to get a second look. No intention of running after it though. That's one of the perks of being a private eye; running's for coppers. With a bit of sleuthing you can figure out where the subject is going to be. Then it's just a matter of waiting. Besides, what's the hurry, isn't finding one's doppelganger supposed to be bad luck?

The whole thing makes your head swim. You grab the handle of sour mash, take a deep swig and, reluctantly, put it back down on the desk. You open a drawer and take a long look at the .38 Special before closing it again. Thing about guns is they don't mix well with nut jobs. After this morning you might be well on your way to being one yourself, matter of fact. But you do grab your notebook.

On your way out the door, you kick a small package on the steps. Of course, The Barista Express delivery. Scrawled across is some big black lettering that reads: URGENT – G. It rattles as you lift it up.

It all comes back to The Barista. He contacted you in the first place. He said something to the doppelganger to get all of that going, something about the Four Idols, which were apparently stolen from the Collins Estate. You've got to get to the coffee shop to get to the bottom of this.

But you ought to open the package first.

You've had enough wackos in your life that you don't need one looking just like you to broaden your horizons. Plus, Veronica's got money. The Collins Estate across town was built on old publishing bucks back when newspapers were making up wars. Great Grampa Collins took a payout from Hearst himself and kept a chunk of it invested well enough that it had a few generations of forward momentum.

Of all the valuables that could be carried out of the place by a decent heist, they took these Four Idols. Must be worth a pretty penny.

You don't trust the broad, though. Something cagey about her underneath all that poise. She's hiding something. You reach over onto the desk and take another swig of sour mash. Going to need a clear head, after all, if you're rubbing elbows with the local aristocracy.

On your way out the door, you kick a small package on the steps. Of course, The Barista Express delivery. Scrawled across is some big black lettering that reads: URGENT – G.

It all comes back to The Barista. He contacted you in the first place. He said something to the doppelganger to get all of that going, something about the Four Idols, which spurred Veronica up off her antique chaise lounge and through your door. You've got to get to the coffee shop to get to the bottom of this.

But you ought to open the package first.

Go to [PAGE 19](#).

Something, maybe it's another intrusive thought, maybe it's your senses working on overdrive, something tells you that you already know what you're going to find in the box. It's about a pound, total, and it rattles as you maneuver it around to unwrap it.

Inside is a note, and four figurines, each about the size of a chess piece. They're roughly carved out of some oily, charcoal colored wood that you can't quite place. They're much heavier than they seem.

The first one looks like a medieval peasant. It's got a broad hat and it's holding a long spade. The second one has its mouth open like it's singing something. The third is the most impressively made. It's completely smooth, blank of feature or expression. The fourth, it's hard to say, it may be some kind of early automaton. It's got a boxy body and a not quite human expression as a face.

The note reads:

Detective, this is going to be the easiest case of your career. These are the Four Idols: The Chanter, The Synth, The Offspring, and The Farmer. A woman is going to come see you about finding them. Her name is Veronica. She's not what she seems. They weren't safe at the house. All you have to do is give these to Veronica and tell her to come see me at the Perk. -G

You sigh. The damn coffee shop. Resigned, you pocket the figurines and take off down the street. You're tired. You could use an espresso right about now. It's been hours since you woke up but the day doesn't seem to get any brighter. It stinks outside, and it's extraordinarily quiet. Much quieter than the events of the morning would suggest.

Four blocks away from the Central Perk you cut down a side street. No way you're going in the main entrance. It's bad enough that whatever you're up against has considerable resources without giving them another advantage by acting stupid.

You keep low and walk as quietly as you can as you move past the dumpsters behind the building. The entrance to the kitchen is slightly ajar. Someone took the time to leave it just so. They're being cautious, but they're in a hurry. Or they're expecting someone.

The kitchen is small, minimal. It's for making breakfast sandwiches not for making entrees. It's dark. You maneuver around appliances and counters, heading toward what you think is the main room of the café.

"Stop." A woman's voice, from your left. It's whispered and unfriendly, and made more so by the sound of a hammer being thumbed back on a small pistol. She sounds familiar though. From the office, maybe?

"Veronica," you guess.

"Oh it's you," she says. "Come on then, if you really must be here." You can make out her form moving toward the much brighter café. She does not put away her weapon, you noted. Not what she seems indeed.

The room is clear, at least of the living. There's the body in the center of the coffee table, and then there's the trash and blood strewn about the place. Your hand goes to your jacket pocket and brushes up against the figurines hidden within. Veronica freezes, then turns to you.

"My family," she says. She's talking normally now that she knows you two are alone in there. "We've been doing some work for a long time behind the scenes. Very specialized work. The kind of work," she gestures to the room around, "that might mix you up with the sorts of people who do their best to make sure there aren't very many of you to do it."

She holds out her hand to you. "The Idols, please," she says.

Well, The Barista wanted you to give them to her. You grab the four figurines from your jacket and reach out to hand them over. You pause, just for a second, and drop them in her outstretched palm.

Veronica relaxes considerably. "Thank you," she says. "I'm going to need these to stop what's been set in motion today." She thinks for a moment. "But maybe not all of them. Take one, for your reward, and then get the hell out of here. The back way. It's not going to be pretty out front."

To take THE CHANTER, go to [page 25](#).

To take THE FARMER, go to [page 26](#).

To take THE OFFSPRING, go to [page 27](#).

To Take THE SYNTH, go to [page 28](#).

Maybe defining something that's so subjective, and so personal, and that has changed so drastically over time is not a fruitful endeavor. Maybe it's beyond you. Maybe the rare combination of heroic chest and flamboyant beak really does make Toucan Sam a unique sensual icon. Your mind is wandering.

This is the age of digital downloads. Even if the pandemic is preventing you from going to the artist co-op to find something, you can still support independent creators with virtual gifts. You have something in mind when the doorbell rings.

Nearing the door, you hear the hurried scraping of feet on the front steps and quick, shallow breaths. By the time you open it, nobody is there. A package sits in front of you with big black letters on it spelling: URGENT – G. You don't know what this is, but it's clearly not for you. You leave it for the right person to find.

Where were you? The gift! You've been playing a great mobile game recently you'd love to share, but it comes back to the subjectivity of art dilemma. Are video games art? Can you remember ever seeing one in the gift exchange?

YES, video games are art and you'll send one to your exchange recipient...[PAGE 23](#)

NO, video games are just entertainment and don't quite meet the standard of art...[PAGE 24](#)

Wow, really? What a great guess.

What are the chances?

Hey, do me a favor.

GO BACK TO [PAGE 21](#).

Video games must be art. Artists make them. Writers pen the plot and musicians compose the music and graphic designers, well, design. There are characters and environments and shadows. How could the sum of the efforts of creators who are all individually artists be somehow less?

When film first started getting big, it wasn't considered a form of art either. Art is driven by technology as much as everything else.

Besides, what is a 360 no scope if not poetry?

You've decided then, you'll be gifting:

The CHOOSE-YOUR-OWN-ADVENTURE text game...[page 28](#)

The peaceful ROLE PLAYING GAME about simple living...[page 26](#)

(Yes you are being tricked into choosing your own gift.)

If video games are art, then what else is? A swing set? A chess board? Art can be interactive but if the interaction changes it then what does that make it? Maybe some games are art now, or maybe they'll get there eventually, but as a whole they're just a perfectly fine hobby.

You're also not sure if your gift exchange recipient will appreciate a game. It's not for everyone. You also only pre-ordered one copy of Retro Fire Truck Simulator 2020: Vroom Vroom Edition and you'll be damned if you're giving that gem away. It comes in a limited edition case!

You decide to go a more traditional route and pick:

That new ALBUM from your favorite singer...[page 25](#)

The weird little ANIMATED SHORT you saw a few years ago...[page 26](#)

(Yes you are being tricked into choosing your own gift.)

The End.

Hey there, thanks for reading the story! I hope you had fun with it. It was a blast to write and a completely new format for me. However you ended up on this page, your choices brought you to one the four gifts for Friends' End Day 2020. All of them are digital downloads, so all you have to do to redeem your gift is shoot me a text (508-742-7479). We'll figure out the details on the format when we get to that point.

This page is for Fiona Apple's newest album Fetch the Bolt Cutters. Maybe you're lucky and have been following her career since she got started, or maybe you're like me and forgot about her for a while after she first put out Criminal only to rediscover her much later on. Either way, it's a great album. I was lucky enough to see her live a few years ago and it was one of the most intense and intimate shows I've been to.

Not interested? Don't sweat it. Flip to any of the other ending pages and take your pick. Or do another read through. It's meant to be fun, not final.

Oh, but if you're not the recipient of the gift exchange copy of this story and you're just reading this on its own, sorry but no downloads. I still hope you had a good time with it, though.

See you at the next party, hopefully in person.

-James

The End.

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This page is for the video game Stardew Valley. At its core it's a simple farming simulator, but everything about the game exudes the love that its creator put into it. It's a peaceful little bit of escapism that Kellyanne and I have played for a staggering number of hours.

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This page is for the animated short film World of Tomorrow by Don Hertzfeldt. This is a strange one, fair warning. It deals with heavy topics about the role of technology and being human. It's funny, it's sad, it's beautiful, and it's one of my favorites. If you haven't heard of him, look up Rejected on YouTube to see if Don Hertzfeldt is your cup of tea.

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This page is for the video game Choice of Robots, by Kevin Gold. It's a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure text game about creating and raising your own robot, written by a professor of computer science and artificial intelligence at Northeastern. He's also my brother-in-law! Kevin's got a fun writing style and a lot of practice at game design. I played it years ago but it coming up in conversation recently may have inspired me to write this story of my own.

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