

Prayers on a Porcelain Altar (Demythologized Version), v. 4.0

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NOTE: *This larp may be freely downloaded and run for non-profit purposes, as long as the original author is credited along the organizers. If you do so, please send the author a short report on how the game went.* The text is in .doc format, so that you may adjust the material as necessary for printing.

This game simulates an awful hung-over morning. All of you were yesterday afternoon at the second part of the application examination for the actor-training course of the Theatre Academy, an exclusive drama education institution in (the capital of the country where this game is being run. More or less by chance you ended up partying afterwards with this random group of people. The party was full of booze. Now no one remembers anything about last night, and everyone is feeling ill. You are both regretful and angry. You can't even see the guy (Pink) whose parents own this place anywhere. He's probably gone off to work.

The sense of community you all shared yesterday is now gone. Everyone else here may get accepted while you won't. Plus there's that damn nausea. Let your bad mood properly out – everything anyone says to you here today is probably meant as an insult. Pay them back the same way, and do not shy away from openly mentioning their particular flaws.

You're still feeling so dizzy that getting on a bus is right out of the question. So you'll be here at least an hour and a half more. Upstairs, where you all slept, is a dump right now. You do not want to go there again. Plus the blood-covered sheets in one of the two double beds look really disturbing. Oh, it would also be nice to know what the hell actually happened.

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The game mechanics used is called "FreeComm". Essentially, pain hurts and death kills. If you need to share off-game information, do it with statements that start with the word "Meta", then followed by acting when necessary. (For example: "Meta: I hit you", after which the punch is performed through acting; or: "Meta: We've had an affair, right?" "Meta: Yeah.") Players may freely choose the language(s) they use during play. Playing with language barriers is very much acceptable. The battery of every cell phone at the site is currently out.

You simply do not want to go upstairs, because it's such a mess that you'd immediately be overcome by that nasty hang-over nausea. And for the next couple of hours, leaving the house beyond going to smoke near the door feels like a really bad idea.

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The people here are (you only remember the last names, which were on your nametags at the exam, and a few key traits):

Blue – Energetic, happy, flirting.

Green – Quiet, helpful, very sarcastic.

Yellow – Artsy-type, verbally very mean.

Orange – Aggressive, loud, happy. Applying for the first time.

Red – Polite and restrained; touches people a lot.

Purple – Quiet, doesn't talk with others much.

Brown – Arrogant, but still highly supportive of others.

Grey – Caring, patronizing, even bossy.

Black – Highly physical, always trying to entertain.

White – Competitive, very interested in debating things.

Feel free to choose a first name for your character. And please decide your character's sexual orientation before the game begins, as that may have a significant impact on the larp itself.

The application exam for the master's training on acting is in four parts. There's written work at first (short vita + "why do you want to become an actor") that is prepared in advance. At the second stage you had to learn a slow song, make lyrics for one verse of it, and then sing it while dancing; perform a short, memorized dialogue with another applicant; speak out one memorized monolog, and perform one thing of your own choice that did not have props (please choose what it was). The next stage is in two weeks, if you haven't been dropped before that. Then you'll be doing a monolog you have prepared by yourself. Only a few applicants (13, so about 1,5%) will be accepted, first-time applicants practically never. So most of those who are here will not be selected. Are you one of them?

INSTRUCTIONS FOR RUNNING THIS GAME (GM ONLY)

This game is intended for ten players. If there are less than ten, any of them may be dropped. The plots, if any, will in any case be based on the characters present and their players' dynamics, not any required pre-designed connections between the characters. The character descriptions are brief, so encouraging the players to fill in any holes by themselves may be a good idea.

Each player, when signing up, should pick one character of their own choosing, based on the list provided in the general game info sheet. This way when the relationships of the night before untangle, the players will not blame the organizer for "setting them up". If there are not enough players, Purple may be dropped quite easily (let that player choose again), then pick others who are away at random. The scenario has been run successfully with just 6 characters. Feel free to change the location of the Academy to any place that fits your game, even something like the cursed ballet school in *Suspiria*.

Before the game begins, ascertain that people understand the rather simple rules system. Everyone should have at least a mug or cup of some kind and access to both drinking water and a toilet. The game does not include or need any props besides the drinking vessels, and absolutely no character should have a weapon of any kind with them. I nevertheless recommend providing a few cans of juice and some snacks, such as salted nuts, to the players. Those not only enhance the "hang-over" feel of the situation, but also provide some extra impetus for the players to move around.

The playing area should preferably be a single room. If possible, make it a bit messy, so that it looks the right way. Have far less chairs than there are players, so that some will always be uncomfortable. The game begins with the people waking up at various spots in the room. Players who need to acclimatize to their characters may want to "stay asleep" a bit longer, and you should tell everyone that it's completely appropriate to do so. Lead them into the game by describing, slowly, how they are waking up and feeling awful.

Experience has shown that this is optimally a 1,5 hour game. If there is a suitable moment near that mark, feel free to end the game. The discourse will very likely start to go on circles with nothing apparently happening well before that, but let the situation run its course. Do not interfere with the game in any way while it is being played, but if players want discrete clarifications on some points, do give them. If someone, despite the basic instructions, wants to go upstairs, tell them that it's messy, there's about one liter of blood on the bed (enough to create questions, but not so much that it cries out "someone is dead" at once), and absolutely no clues as to what has happened.

The game is intended to create a plot out of the pieces the players dig up, and to create a feel of boredom broken by personal insults. You may therefore need to emphasize the fact that in this scenario, people are recommended to be mean to the each others' characters *also* based on traits that the character shares with its player. This means that it is completely legal to, say, call the character of an overweight player "fat" or make racist and gender-discriminating remarks if it fits one's own character.

The scenario may therefore become quite nasty, especially if the players do not emphasize the murder mystery –like aspects too much, so make sure there is plenty of time and support for apologies afterwards. Remind the people that it's the intent and contexts of the insults that counts, not what is being said by whom. It's a game. And do stress these facts in the pre-game briefing, too, so that any player with significant insecurities may leave before play, and can do so without feeling stigmatized as a bad player for it.

As far as practical design is concerned, this larp has three purposes: One, it is supposed to create entertainment out of boredom. Two, it permits a style of mean play that's not normally possible within the social contract of larps. Three, it may relieve some tension between players with self-image issues – but it may also evoke those in a bad way. So be careful with running this larp, and while interrupting it is not recommended, if you see a player (and definitely not the character) reacting to something that is said too severely, do not fear to step in.

From both a researcher's and a GM's perspective, the fun is that the script allows the game to mutate heavily from one run to the next, and the game may thus be extremely different during different runs. During the debriefing, please ask the players what the situation felt like, and how did being insulted via their characters affect them, if any of that happened.

This the "Demythologized Version" because a ghost story that was included in the original run at Ropecon 2007 has been completely dropped from the game concept.

Blue

Nature: If you believed in God, you'd consider yourself his gift to the world. Now you consider yourself just an incredibly fine person. You are both excellent company and absolutely irresistible to (the sex you're interested in). You flirt a lot, are quick with words and often also polite. Despite your arrogance, you actually are quite often a rather nice person. You just happen to be in a foul mood today.

Background: A middle-class family in (your native country's capital); an only child. You would have wanted to attend a high school with an emphasis on performance arts, but your parents saw no point to it. You doubt they'll ever accept your choice of profession. You have been working small-time jobs here, away from them, and are now applying for the second time to the Theatre Academy.

The Exam: Went rather well,. Having experience from last year was nice. You did especially well on the singing. You think you'll get chosen for the third stage. Knowing that some of the more annoying people here today may get chosen, and you possibly won't, irks you a lot.

Situation: Your head aches and you feel slightly dizzy. As usual, you have probably turned aggressive once you got drunk. Your knuckles hurt.

State of Mind: Unsure, restless, You may have had unprotected sex last night with someone you loathe. Not good. Plus the nightmare about beating someone with a tire iron you had just before waking still bothers you. Some flirting might cheer you up. As would answers.

Memory Glimpses: You remember punching someone playfully in the stomach. Yellow and Grey were kissing at some point. Someone argued with Green. Could have been you, actually. At the very least you wanted to beat up Orange, who repeatedly claimed he/she would pass the example the first time. Black told some really racist jokes in the kitchen with a straight face. Could have actually meant what he/she said. Someone said they'd seen Purple give oral sex to someone under a blanket upstairs

Green

Nature: A quiet person, mostly, but when you get excited about something, you tend to talk a lot, and often much of it also makes real sense. You have a habit of making sure that things are done as they were agreed upon and that no one is left out or behind. You gladly offer constructive criticism when others aren't doing their part, and can be rather cruel, when that's necessary. Your mind does occasionally drift, though, when there is not enough stress to give you a good focus.

Background: From a small town very near your home country's capital. Eldest of three children, which has had a definite impact on your nature. You have worked doing routine programming jobs for the last couple of years, while waiting that you pass the Theatre Academy's entrance exam. Dreaming about being an actor is the central point of your life. You are seeing someone, but not really seriously.

The Exam: The second stage did not go as well as you'd hoped, but you are still nurturing a hope that you will be selected to continue.

Situation: Nausea, your stomach is turning. You feel precisely like you've forgotten something really important. Your body aches in a way that strongly suggest you had sex last night. You're hoping that you remembered to use a condom this time.

State of Mind: You are at the moment angry at the whole world. You have probably fucked up the exam, have certainly done some stupid things last night, and now you are here with a bunch of assholes, some of whom will be selected while you won't.

Memory Glimpses: Blue was trying to pick a fight with everyone. Orange was boasting that (s)he pass the exam on the first try. Some people were having really loud sex upstairs. You and Brown were slapping each other's backs and praising each other's performances. You hadn't seen Brown's

performance at all, though, but that did not matter. You flirted with Black, but (s)he went up with someone else. You threw up three times, and one of those was directly onto someone else's belongings.

Yellow

Nature: Artistic, you try to present yourself in everything in the most creative way possible. You also therefore correct other people's words, when they can be polished. You were born to perform and to get attention, yet you are also smart enough to choose the right way to perform in each environment. You can be a diva, of course, but that is not typical of you. You treat other people as your audience wherever you go, but that does not mean you won't occasionally respect them as well.

Background: From a small industrial town, child of small entrepreneur family. You moved to the city where the Academy is (well, to a cheap apartment near it) as soon as you could, and live by doing manual jobs between Theatre Academy exams. You have just ended a long (according to your standards – two whole months) relationship, and you are looking for a new one. This is your fifth time applying to the Academy. You are not studying anything else, because you want to devote yourself to your true theatrical calling.

The Exam: So far everything's been going well. Every year thus far you made it to stage three before being cast out. You despise the selection board, because it's obvious that they do not recognize real talent when they see it.

Situation: Dizzy, you'd really like to lie on someone's lap, being petted and given attention. You still feel a bit like throwing up. Your ass hurts – it's probably either been fucked, or you've eaten really spicy food yesterday. Neither of these is a habit of yours, so it seems more than a bit strange. Anyway, you haven't slept much last night. You feel very tired.

State of Mind: Tired and annoyed, somewhere between amused and hang-over irritation. In addition, you're feeling very inquisitive; the tone of your questions just changes with your mood.

Memory Glimpses: Someone punched White in the stomach. At some point, you were hugging Black. Someone threw on you expensive bag. Red was really going over the top, aggressively. At some point during the evening, Orange started to look very attractive. Someone told someone really loudly to put something down. You think you were upstairs when you heard that.

Orange

Nature: You can't help it that you boast. It's something that you've been doing since you were a child, and you have suffered for it. One half of that habit comes from your limitless self-confidence, the other half is covering up your weaknesses behind a wall, something you picked up from your older brothers. You are talented both verbally and visually, and remarkably smart, but your social sense isn't exactly one of the keenest in the world. Having someone give you orders would do you a lot of good.

Background: Third child of a family of farmers, with two younger siblings as well. Went to high school nearby your rural home, then moved to the town where the Academy is so you could attend the entrance exam. You are absolutely sure you'll pass. You have next to no actual life experience.

The Exam: Second stage went perfectly, as did the first one. All talk about passing on the first try is just bullshit. You'll be selected, and you're not ashamed to tell that to others.

Situation: You drank way too much, and will probably now have to explain the things you did a bit. You're still somewhat nauseous and feel like throwing up. And you've got that hang-over horniness your friends who have actually had sex have been occasionally talking about. You drank away your money for your return ticket yesterday (you bought vodka from the host, Pink), and do not know how you're going to get home from here.

State of Mind: Ashamed, but you're not letting it show. You are extremely curious about what happened yesterday. You feel like picking a fight, in order to spend all the angry extra energy you currently have.

Memory Glimpses: Yellow attacked you yesterday. You do not remember with what results. White and Black had a fight upstairs. At some point someone stole all the host's booze from the fridge. Green called you a naïve brat, which made you want to hit him/her. Someone kicked Brown, who had passed out by the couch, in the stomach and laughed. It was probably Red.

Purple

Nature: You are a mean person, but hide it behind a quiet mask. You pretend that you are coy and shy, yet aren't. You are also a control freak, which is why this party annoys you very much. You lost control and drank too much, and you don't know why. As always, you take that out on others, by way of short, mean little statements calculated to hurt other's feelings. You're especially fond of provoking fights between people with small, hopefully undetectable lies.

Background: Youngest child of a very religious family. You have learned very early on how to manipulate others. You got through schools with mediocre grades, more due to a lack of motivation than a lack of talent. You currently work as a sales clerk in a huge hardware store, and while you do get praise for being very good at your job, you are not liked by your co-workers. Which is something you do not mind. You've recently decided that your manipulative talents might make you a good actor, and have thus applied to the Theatre Academy.

The Exam: You think you've succeeded so far, but aren't certain. Acting is very natural to you, but the other parts – the ones that need preparation – were far harder than you expected. You naturally won't be admitting to that today.

Situation: Dizzy, somewhat nauseous, in need of attention. You weren't the least bit in the mood for sex yesterday, but right now you're quite horny. Your legs ache, as if from lots of exercise, and your throat is very sore.

State of Mind: Less confident than usually. You wonder how you got so drunk, and what you have done. You hate the idea of being manipulated yourself, so the loss of control terrifies you. You want to know what happened. And you need amusement through being mean, as well.

Memory Glimpses: Blue called Pink a "fucking bastard and a traitor". Green tried to get into your pants, with no luck. You told Orange that Grey had a crush on him/her. You woke up to someone carrying something very heavy downstairs.

Grey

Nature: You are very bossy, because you know you are right. Your knowledge base is maybe slightly limited, but you are very good at analyzing situations and reacting to them in the right fashion. You usually try to dominate all social situations and to guide them to the best results, regardless of whether you have something to gain from it or not. You think you are a tolerant person, but you are not.

Background: A child of two teachers from southern parts of this country. An idealist, you think that you will educate people and offer them better cultural values when you are an actor. This is your first time at the Theatre Academy's admittance exam, but you're smart enough to keep your mouth shut about that fact.

The Exam: Went OK, but you feel uncertain. The dialogue could have definitely been better. And you are quite ready for rejection anyway, because you know it's your first try, and you are thus at a disadvantage.

Situation: You seem to have ended up in bed with someone last night. You feel really ashamed. You are nauseous and you have a headache. Which is strange, since you had very little booze with you. You have either somehow acquired more, or someone has intentionally gotten you drunk.

State of Mind: There needs to be some order in this chaos. The worthless bohemians around you will most certainly get nothing done. You want to make some sense of what has happened and who did what. And at the same time, mentally force each one to the position they deserve, by telling how things work in the real world they've obviously never seen. You regret even coming here yesterday a lot.

Memory Glimpses: White and someone were arguing furiously. You found something somewhere that made you very happy. You were on top of someone, naked, upstairs. Someone was playing with a very big knife in the kitchen. Orange asked for your phone number, and when you did not give it, went and asked for Black's.

Brown

Nature: You are extremely talented in many fields, both mathematical and creative. That's part of the reason why you wanted to become an actor, because that is not one of your prime talents. You thrive on challenges. You are an adventurer at heart, more than a bit arrogant, but also always willing to support others in overcoming their unnecessary personal limits. Sometimes that causes trouble, though.

Background: From a medium-sized city, oldest child of a middle-class family. You went to a performance arts emphasizing high school, and then did a couple of years of various odd jobs in order to have time to think about a suitably challenging career – and to finance whatever extreme experiences you wanted to try. This is your fourth time applying to the Theatre Academy. You play the piano, but you never sing.

The Exam: Went really well, once again, but so it also did during all the previous attempts. This time you're probably make it, though. It just feels that way.

Situation: Tired, dizzy, laughing. Your neck and back are sore – you have probably passed out on the floor. And your stomach hurts a lot. Not in a nausea sort of way, but in the sense of a painful injury.

State of Mind: You are extremely curious about what went on last night, especially about whether you got others to cross their personal lines of conduct. If someone did something special, it was you who helped them achieve that. Except that thing with your stomach. You should probably see a doctor when you've recovered from your hang-over.

Memory Glimpses: You intentionally tried to pick a fight with White. Someone said that he or she had a big crush on Orange. You really wanted to fuck last night, and spoke openly about it. Yellow spent a long time upstairs with someone. Grey kept complaining about there being no alcohol left. Black bragged that he/she is an incredibly great lover.

Black

Nature: You're the mandatory stand-up comedian in any group. You entertain others almost reflexively, and your jokes tend to be quite raunchy and politically incorrect. The best way to fight prejudice is to flaunt it in the open and to make it look ridiculous.

Background: Youngest of four children, from a socialist working class family. Your whole extended family supports your interest in performance arts, as they see theater as an ideological extension of leftist world-view. You are yourself interested in politics, but not able to really choose your stance on issues. Outside of home you were constantly getting beating by others during your childhood and your youth, as you are incapable of keeping your mouth shut. This is your third attempt to get to the Theatre Academy.

The Exam: Went badly, but that is just something more you can laugh at. The same thing with the successes or the failures of the others, they too should adjust to life's uncertainties with humor. If anyone whines about how the exam went, you will pick on them mercilessly with brutal jokes.

Situation: A royal hang-over, straight out of bad comedy movies. You feel like throwing up, have a headache, and are quite dizzy. You take that out on both yourself and others through nasty humor. Your jaw hurts a lot. Perhaps you've been fighting?

State of Mind: A bit confused, yet full of self-irony. The complaints of others are depressing you, so you want to lighten the mood. And by saying small truths, you can possibly lure others into telling bigger facts about what happened yesterday.

Memory Glimpses: You were bragging about your expertise in things you actually know next to nothing about (such as sex). Brown was really begging to get punched, but whether someone actually

did hit him/her, you don't know. You told really obscene jokes in the kitchen at some very late point during the night. Someone other than you fucked Yellow, which was a big disappointment. And White got you to talk seriously about politics for a while.

White

Nature: All life is a race to you, a race with and against other people. You want not only to win, but to be properly challenged in everything. You are smart and quick with words. You can be polite when you want, but right now probably don't. You have absolutely no respect for authority.

Background: From a large city, only child of two doctors. You went to a math-emphasis school, but have nowadays chosen to compete in other fields. You have always gotten into fights, intentionally, for the sake of the challenge, not the violence. This is your second time applying to the Theatre Academy, a place you chose purely because it's so hard to get into. That too is a good competition.

The Exam: Yeah, it went well enough, but you probably weren't at the very top. You have to pick up the slack in the future. You don't feel like listening to others talking about the exam right now, since none of you are participating in the competition until the next results are announced.

Situation: You have probably been fighting, as your left wrist is in pain. You have a headache, nausea and a need to say mean things to other people.

State of Mind: In a foul mood, looking for a way to compete again. The key thing, though, is that you do not settle for little – the challenge needs to be significant enough. Beating someone weaker than you, mentally or physically, is just boring. Hopefully when facts about yesterday are revealed, they will provide you something to work with.

Memory Glimpses: A very likely got into a couple of fights. During one of those, people were having sex upstairs. During the other, someone shouted "that's FUCKING ENOUGH!" up there. Red probably stole your host's booze from the fridge. Black tried to pick up Yellow. Orange kept boasting throughout the evening, which you found very entertaining.

Red

Nature: From the outside you seem always nice, polite and friendly. You help others, talk both deep stuff and small talk with equal ease, and respect your fellow man. Inside, you are a seething cauldron of frustration that erupts when you've had some alcohol or are severely stressed. Yesterday was a combination of both. After freaking out you usually try to make up for it by being even nicer than usual. Yet you do not necessarily admit that you've done something wrong. You laugh at the stereotype of an upper-class brat, because you're from the richest family you have ever met. You are also a bit of a racist, when you get in the right mood.

Background: You come from a fine, extremely wealthy family living in the capital city. You have never lacked anything, as far as owning stuff was concerned. Yet you have led a life that, if not sheltered, was at least constantly under a watchful eye. And that frustrates you a lot. You naturally went to the finest schools, and were supposed to get to the Theatre Academy on the first try, yet got cast out from the run during stage one. You have spent the year between then and now by doing nothing in particular, as you can afford an easy life without working at all.

The Exam: Went better than last year, but you think you just flunked. The slow song went really badly. You are extremely angry about the idea that someone else here may actually get admitted.

Situation: You quite likely went apeshit last night. You either made a pass at someone, or beat someone up, or both. You're feeling quite good, but are not in the mood to take responsibility for anything. You get terrible headaches now and then, but that'll hopefully pass. Luckily enough you do not feel like you're going to throw up.

State of Mind: A mixture of remorse and pleasant ennui. You are still angry about probably not passing the second stage, and jealous of those who have a better chance than you. You regret your potential bad behavior, but hate everyone here, so you fluctuate between polite and extremely offensive.

Memory Glimpses: People were fucking upstairs so hardly that the roof creaked. At some point you tried to hit White with a beer bottle. You flirted with absolutely everyone, regardless of gender, just to annoy them. You also tried to steal the host's booze from the fridge, but someone else had already stolen all of it. You think Black and Orange were fighting.

Suggested advertisement text:

Prayers on a Porcelain Altar by J. Tuomas Harviainen (FIN)

A larp about waking up hung over and feeling mean. You do not remember much from last night, but maybe the others do. Did you punch, or fuck, someone last night? Or, maybe both? While finding out, why not call that ugly guy next to you some bad names, and have a good laugh at his expense? Everyone here, including you, wants to become an actor. It's fun to keep the competition on its toes.

A discourse-oriented mini-larp for 8-10 players, about insulting others and maybe finding out what you have done last night.

This scenario has been run in Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Norway and the Netherlands, and work both as a separate event and as a small convention game.