



a roleplaying game by
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My Girl's Sparrow

In a not so distant future where physical touch is going out of fashion, a small group of people meet to be old fashioned. To touch and be touched, to seek the kind of connection that you cannot make through even the most intricate simulations.

My Girl's Sparrow is a quiet science fiction drama about sex, love and alienation. Two couples and a widow isolate themselves in a house for a few days to swap partners and explore themselves and each other. What's special about this game is that it's primary mode of expressing characters and exploring the situation is through roleplaying sex. Sex isn't an indeterminate mass – it's details matter. What we do together and how we react to each other says a lot about who we are.

My Girl's Sparrow is not a pornographic scenario, though it will probably get the blood rolling in your veins, because there are serious emotions on the line for the characters.

My Girl's Sparrow isn't an emotional extreme sport. It's not about abuse. It's about little but crucial things like loneliness, love and desperate hope.

My Girl's Sparrow is a game about confused, alienated and amazing people.

The premise of the game is that you can get to know people in bed. In play, the game switches between sex scenes and non-sex scenes that include brief, everyday goings-on. How you relate to each other over lunch or by the coffee-maker is coloured by what's been happening in the sex scenes. A number of ritualistic procedures direct and shape the sex scenes, giving them rhythm and a clear beginning and end; these processes focus play on the consequences of sharing yourself. The game uses erotic poetry, partly to set the mood and partly to provide an aesthetically pleasing way to break off or round off scenes. As a whole ritual and poetry structure the game.

Whether the player characters will succeed in getting human connection out of sex is what's ultimately at stake. The game is erotic, but it's not the eroticism of hints and innuendo. It is the eroticism of sex with more at stake than merely well lubricated friction and release. Unlike workaday porn, this game has people, relations and emotions at stake. It may all be fiction, but you'll make it feel real.

Practical details: The game is intended for a game master and five players, though it can be played with four players and a game master. In general it's not recommended for players younger than 18, as the game requires some emotional maturity and a certain ballast of life experience to draw on. Yes, there are 17-year-olds who will be able to handle it and 30-year-olds who won't, but it's a good rule of thumb. From start to finish, the game takes about five hours to play. Characters and poems should be printed on both sides of the paper, and the game master's text can be printed as you prefer. Staple or stitch the poems into a little booklet. Remember to keep some snacks or fruit in store for the debriefing.

Inspiration and credits

My Girl's Sparrow draws on a number of sources of inspiration, among them naturally several roleplaying games. Several themes and techniques build upon my own games *On the Raft* and *Torture*, as well as upon *Towards Zero* that I co-wrote with Peter Fallesen and Morten Greis Petersen. Of the works of others, I must mention *Auto de Fe* by Peter Fallesen for the use of poetry in roleplaying games (I seem to have a hard time writing anything without having *Auto de Fe* sneak in somehow) as well as Jeepform games, among them *Under My Skin* by Emily Care Boss. In terms of form I've drawn heavily upon the techniques and themes of the jeepers, but at the same time *My Girl's Sparrow* is a reaction against some tendencies and priorities of the jeepers, not least the principle of playing "close to home" and the slogan "pillow talk is better than sex". If one central principle has informed *My Girl's Sparrow*, it is that sex is more interesting than pillow talk; people reveal themselves more in what they do than in what they say. The presentation of the characters is inspired by *Superheroes 2* by Kristoffer Apollo and Sebastian Flamant. Naturally a lot of inspiration has come from other media as well, including the ancient poets Sappho, Ovid and not least Catullus, who had much to tell me about sex and love. The title of this game refers to a couple of the poems of Catullus. In literary terms, I also draw upon the science fiction novels of Svend Åge Madsen.

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Guide to the game

Including casting, exercises and debriefing, the game takes five hours to play. Here is a description of the game materials, how to use them and how the different parts connect.

- **The role of the game master.** In which the basics of the game master's tasks and responsibilities are explained.
- **Story.** Contains is found the basic character concepts, including the ways in which they mirror and differ from each other. The core of the game lies in the characters and their relationships; the game master must give the players good starting points for exploring the characters and relationships.
- **The form.** Explains the principles behind the game's concrete procedures. The section includes a description of precisely how sex is supposed to be roleplayed in *My Girl's Sparrow*. This part can function as a handbook during play, a place to find procedures if the players get creative and go beyond basic one-on-one.
- **Safety.** This section lists the tools that the players may use to secure their comfort. A description of how the game master should handle the players' use of their safety tools and prevent defensive play follows.
- **Casting advice.** How best to match players and characters based on what you learned from the warm-up exercises.
- **Warm-up exercises.** In which the warm-up phase is explained in detail. The warm-up takes about an hour, but serves multiple purposes. First, the players get to limber up and loosen their tongues, in general and around the themes of the game. At the same time the game master gets relevant information on how to cast. Then the players learn the form while getting to know their characters. The game starts the moment the warm-up phase starts, and the game master initiates play by reading out the poem *My Girl's Sparrow* in a ritual fashion. This

mirrors the poetry reading at the end, found in the section "exit ritual".

- **The house.** It is where the action of the game takes place, and an important tool for setting the mood. Here is all that you need to bring the house to life.
- **Scene setting.** In which the procedure for setting scenes is explained in detail, and then the flow of the game is laid out from beginning to end. After the warm-up, play with this section in front of you, and briefly turn to others to look things up as needed.
- **Exit ritual.** Thus the game itself is ended.
- **Debriefing.** How to wrap up after the game. The point is to get the players to talk about the game afterwards.
- **Game master cheat sheet.** The most important things to keep in mind during the game.
- **The characters.** The characters are presented from two angles: Their positive self-image, that is to say their ideas about how they are really OK people, and then their negative self-image. Though each character has a brief list of important bullet point notes at the front of the second sheet, the self-images are not mere mood text but contain important factual information that the players must use as building blocks for their interpretations of their characters. Read them, get to know them well. They are the heart of the game.
- **Handouts.** Erik's poems and Nanna's list. The poems fold up into a little folder that you can stitch in the back to make a booklet.

The role of the game master

My Girl's Sparrow contains hardly any traditional NPC's for the game master to play, just one for a minute or two of warm-up. There are, however, many other important tasks. A lot of this might be obvious, but here it is anyway:

The tasks of the game master:

- **Teach procedure.** The game master's first and most important task is to get the players on board with the basic idea, to teach them the procedures in the warm-up phase and to support them later on as needed. A small but important matter is enforcing the ban on internal monologue (as per the principle of sensuality, see the section on the form).
- **Description.** Use description to make the surroundings come alive. Don't use long, detailed descriptions, but rely on brief, incomplete descriptions that stimulate the players to flesh things out with their own imaginations. Setting scenes requires description, as do awkward pauses. The science fiction element highlights the alienation theme, and enters play and stays in play through description.
- **Challenge.** Through scene setting, the game master must challenge the players with interesting situations that either subtly confront them with their problems or give them clear and obvious responsibility for seeking interesting play themselves. To do this, the game master should ask leading, provocative or innocent questions – whatever is needed – and then set the scene with description based on the player's answers. *My Girl's Sparrow* has a sandbox play setup, so do your bit to keep it interesting.

- **Affirmation.** During play the players will need your affirmation that what they're doing and saying is good and right. They need encouragement, and they need you to be a fan of them. This is not the kind of game where you should smile big smiles and make enthusiastic outbursts; you need to be subtle. It's simple enough: They'll seek eye contact with you and maybe look a little questioning. When they do (and it's not because they're faltering and need your help as teacher of procedure), you must return eye contact and nod slightly, maybe even smile a little. That is all it takes, but it is really important.
- **Handle the unforeseen.** There's a fair chance that something unexpected will happen. It is the game master's responsibility to ensure that whatever is played is interesting and relevant to the themes and the players. Maybe it will involve adapting the sex procedures to handle unforeseen setups, or maybe it will involve unforeseen overall developments.

Story

The characters are two couples and a widow. The middle-aged pair consists of the strong-willed erotic rebel Nanna, for whom alternate lifestyle and sexuality is a life project, and her boyfriend Erik, who is motivated by love for her – he tries to keep up with her and hold on to her. The young couple consists of Caroline and Omar. Caroline, a high school student, is having the adventure of her life with the bad boy Omar. Omar is trying to live up to the fact that for once, someone sees him as a worthwhile and admirable person. The fifth, Kirsten, is a widow who is trying to turn her life back around after the death of her husband by seeking sexual self-actualisation.

For the most part, the story is embedded in the characters. If you cast well, it will unfold on its own, and if all whys and wherefores aren't crystal clear to everyone by the end, that's OK too. Here are the basics of the story. First and foremost, Nanna-Erik and Omar-Caroline mirror each other in a complicated way. Both Nanna and Omar lead their partners into new, boundary-crossing adventures. Though both Erik and Caroline appear to be the weak partners, they are the emotional driving forces in their relationships. Both Nanna and Caroline struggle against alienation. Erik and Nanna's relationship is locked in a painful pattern while Omar and Caroline's is in a death spiral. Kirsten, as the primary protagonist, explores her own longing and frustration by getting involved with the two couples and their relationships. In different ways, the relationships of both pairs are doomed to an unhappy fate, but Kirsten can redeem them if she understands them and sees beauty in their love. Not that this would stop their lives from being hard, but it would say that love makes it worth the heartbreak. This is very much up to Kirsten's player and the game master's scene setting.

Stereotypes and power differentials are themes of the game. For Erik and Nanna, there are gender stereotypes at stake, and in some ways their power dynamics are a reversal of traditional gender stereotypes. On the other hand there's the gendered question of the moral right to prioritize one's own needs (or, is Nanna a "bitch" for insisting on her lust and her project?). Kirsten has a piece of that theme too. The power differentials between Caroline and Omar are based on class and race. Omar originally picked up Caroline in order to exploit her financially, while Caroline has sex with poor people for kicks, a form of exploitation with much weight of tradition behind it (even though she's very much in love). Omar's implied ethnic background communicates the class aspect of their relationship clearly and strongly to everyone at the table, as class and race are not unconnected phenomena. On top of that it adds a subtle extra layer of fetishism to Caroline's attraction. Nanna is an adopted Korean primarily so Omar won't be all alone as a person of colour, secondarily as additional resonance for her alienation and anger.

My Girl's Sparrow is science fiction, set twenty years in the future, when Virtual Reality has become so good that virtual sex is replacing physical sex for people who aren't too poor to afford the technology. Some people, however, see the simulations, which filter away both inconvenient fluids and bodily imperfections, as alienating. Thus, the stay in the summer house is a rebellion against perfect virtual computer sex and against impossible standards and technological quick fixes that cut people off from themselves and each other. The futuristic element of the game comes across through its carefully arranged absence in the summer house; through its absence, it directs attention to the quietly heroic rebellion. Literarily speaking, the game draws on *social science fiction* that criticizes the politics and society of here and now.

The form

This is the handbook on how to shape the game, and in particular the sex scenes.

The poems

The poems set the mood and to provide an aesthetically pleasing way to frame and interrupt scenes. They are all ancient Greco-Roman poems in translation. Their rhymes run on rhythm rather than alliterations or endings, but both game master and players should just read them out with the best flow that they can manage, and not worry too much about doing advanced systems of rhythm correctly.

Sensuality, point of view and awkwardness

The truth is concrete. Inner life is off-limits. At the gaming table, players may only describe things that can be seen, heard, felt, smelled or tasted. Inner life and sensuality do meet in one particular way, *point of view* play, where the players describe something from their characters' points of view. This means that the player sorts what is important and what is not, and can put in a loaded adjective or two. For example, the players start sex scenes by describing their characters based on the characters' own opinions and self-image. Sensuality is so important because the game revolves around human contact and really we never have direct access to the thoughts of others; we always have to interpret their words and actions.

Internal monologue and player statements about inner life would short-circuit this aspect of the game. Point of view play breaks the sensuality in a controlled way to highlight the potential for human understanding and contact through sex, in a way that lets everyone at the table follow.

Awkward silence brings the house to life. If there's awkward silence for more than five seconds or so in a conversation scene, or if a conversation covers the same ground once, the game master should describe something in the house, the shaggy orange carpet or whatever. This is not punishment, just highlighting!

Sex

In sex scenes you should play the highlights rather than go blow-by-blow. The game master directs, though more by nudging players than by cutting hard without input from the players. Conversation scenes don't need to be that fast paced, but still represent highlights. Idling should be played. You can cut back and forth between scenes, but sex scenes should not be split into more than two parts.

Generally a single sex sequence should be limited to three exchanges, possibly with a fourth if the players are being really interesting. Mostly, cut after three. Three is the target.

Before sex, the players taking part introduce their characters in the situation with description, done point-of-view style, but still without internal monologue. The introductions should take no more than a minute, preferably using three sentences or less. Note the contrast with the end of sex scenes, where the players describe each other's characters. Use this opener in the first couple of sex scenes, and later if it seems relevant and interesting to you.

Basic sex, two people together, alone.

- The players hold hands for the sake of the physical contact.
- One player must describe a concrete caress. The other player describes how their character reacts to the caress in a purely physical way, that is in a way that the other character would be able to sense (e. g. a smile, a shiver, a sigh), and then describe a concrete caress. The first player must then state a concrete reaction to it. This is one exchange. Then the first player describes a caress again, so "the ball" passes back and forth between the players.
- Use three exchanges to take care of foreplay/undressing/initial fumbling (or four if it's relevant), then cut to highlights of the action, or cut to another scene.
- The meat of the sex, once they're going strong, should be done in three, at most four exchanges.
- You can ask for another, third set of three-four exchanges if there is something specific that you are curious about. For instance, if the first real sex act has been oral, it could be interesting to see if the act is reciprocated or followed up, or if it remains one-sided. This shouldn't be a separate scene, though, but a "fast forward" to later within the same scene.
- Internal monologue and lengthy descriptions are forbidden. Sex is physical and should sound that way.

One-sided sex acts (that one party enjoys entirely passively) are handled by one character acting and the other reacting. Then the first character acts again (now with a reaction to go on), and so on for three exchanges in all. Don't prolong these.

Group sex follows the same basic principle as sex for two. You receive a caress, react and pass on a caress to someone else. Yes, this makes it possible for someone to get shut out. The physical touch of holding hands can be used to signal a desire for space, by pushing, poking or the like. If there's someone who is shut out and doesn't push for space, it becomes...

Sex with an audience, two variants.

- One is with an audience that feels excluded by the lovers, who ignore the onlooker (it might be group sex where a participant has slipped out of the action). The other is sex that is essentially performance for the audience. The game master can interrupt briefly to clear up which is the case, if in doubt.
- With an **excluded audience**, the game master briefly cuts to the audience to ask that player(s) to describe their onlooking character(s) (remember, no internal monologue!), while the game master supports with description of the surroundings (smell, creaking bed, texture so the onlooker isn't floating in space). At the end, audience players describe their own characters, point-of-view style. This highlights the isolation of being outside the play.
- With **performance for the audience**, onlookers describe their own characters once at the beginning. At the end, audience players take over and describe how the lovers finish the act, to highlight that this act is all about the spectators.
- It might be both at once (one lover performing for the audience, another lost in the act). In that case, pick the angle that is most interesting to you.

After sex. Each player briefly describes the (/an) other character using point-of-view style, with no internal monologue. With group sex, take care that it doesn't turn into long lists. The point is the subtle consequences of sharing oneself. Excluded onlookers describe their characters' faces in extreme closeup, before the lovers exchange descriptions. Yes, it can feel a little weird. That's OK. After performance for an audience, the lovers describe the audience together, after the audience has described the climax.

Cut scene. If it seems like a good idea, the game master can insert a short cut scene after the foreplay. It might be a cut to partners of the participants elsewhere, to highlight the relationships. It might be to sex elsewhere or to conversation. Don't make it long.

Safety

The player instruction goes: If your personal lines are crossed in an unpleasant way, there's a number of mechanisms for signalling this to the other players. Use them if you feel the need, and do pick up on it if the other players use them. It's OK if play feels a little difficult sometimes – use the tools if it starts to hurt.

- If you would like the other player in a sex scene to turn it down a notch, you can pull back from the physical touch. The scene goes on.
- If you would like to break off a scene, but not play, you can say the key phrase "I'd like to share a poem with you." The scene ends. Then read out the poem at the back of this sheet. If you need more poems, the game master has more. The poem will see use later in any case.
- If you want to break off play for now because something seems very wrong to you, say "Stop!" and hold up a hand palm out. Then you will discuss what can be done.

Additional game master instructions:

If a player uses the poem mechanic, the player reads out the poem and then you set the scene: The characters are sitting together in the living room (in the evening, if that makes any sense), and the reader has just read out a poem from Erik's poetry collection. Let ten seconds pass, or let the others react fairly immediately (but not with not with lengthy discussions), and then cut back to the next logical point after the interrupted scene would have ended.

As game master, you should be on the lookout for two kinds of inappropriate play: Defensive play and abusive play. Defensive play usually presents as either convoluted clinical language, humor or porn play. When shutting down defensive play, be firm, polite and serious. Say that this specific way they play (and do be specific and concrete!) is reducing the intensity of the game and distracting from it's themes, and would they please try to not do that.

- If the players speak of the insertion of the penis into the vagina or the like, it's probably classic distancing clinical language, and you should gently and discretely interrupt and nudge towards less clinical terms. As in, breasts and cocks are probably a fitting level of terms.
- A bit of humor might be OK, but on the whole it should be avoided. Ask people to leave it be if it's used to create distance and seems like a problem.
- Porn play is usually a distancing reaction too, and it is that the players turn sex into a hard-pumped performance for an outside-the-fiction audience rather than an exchange between the involved characters. It's usually not hard to recognize. The word "tits" spoken out of character is usually a sure sign.
- It is incredibly easy to get intense play out of abuse, and it is not the theme of *My Girl's Sparrow* (sex as communication and human contact is). Politely and respectfully shut down play that centers on abuse. Only intervene directly in scenes if the players don't use their own safety tools and it's obvious that someone is getting hurt.
- If someone says "Stop!", break off play and discuss together if the game can be salvaged and how. Should the player leave the game or should play cease altogether? Or can you all save it for everyone?
- Strictly speaking, this is not a safety issue, but remember to enforce the ban on internal monologue. It undermines the theme of the game.

Casting advice

Generally, the physique and sexual orientation of the players shouldn't play too much of a role in determining the casting, and I strongly advise against casting on the basis of gender. The characters are best matched with players based on the social and gamewise inclinations of the players, as revealed by the start of the warm-up phase. And some cross-gender play can be helpful in establishing that sex in this game is between the characters, not the players, if that can fit with the characters and the players at hand.

Look out for how extroverted or introverted the players are, how secure they seem in the situation and around the topic (insecurity can laugh out loud!), and whether they take initiative and are easily able to improvise, or not. Two of the characters are pretty sharp types, the domineering "bitch" Nanna and suave "lover boy" Omar. Players can easily end up getting typecast pretty hard into those roles. If people ham up the stereotypes hard, which is easy to fall into if players are obvious fits for the stereotypes and used to playing to them, it can be detrimental for the subtle nuances of play at the table. For this reason it would be a good idea to cast these two roles a little *off*. That is to say give the role to a player who can fill it but isn't the most obvious match for the type. Identify the most obvious players for Nanna and Omar, and then consider if simply switching them looks workable.

Kirsten should go to the player with the most initiative, one who can take any situation and run with it. In particular, see if there's a player who doesn't hesitate in the association exercise.

Nanna should go to a player who seems reasonably organized and able to fill Nanna's leadership role in the game. Extroverted. Remember to cast off.

Omar should go to an extroverted show player not inclined toward silent awkwardness. Remember to cast off. Might be nice in the hands of a woman or at least a player with an idea of what is hot about a James Dean type.

Caroline can be played by a somewhat introverted player, who hesitates a bit to come up with something good in the association exercise. Give her to someone that you, irrespective of gender and age, want to see as a teenage girl in love.

Erik is a character that it's possible to put rather different things into, but a quietly charming player would be a good choice. Erik might be good for a female player who is feeling a little awkward about the situation, since cross-gender play might give a convenient extra little bit of distance, and the character can bear it. Note that casting a man as a female character is fine too, but is usually not a remedy for awkwardness.

Warm-up exercises

The warm-up phase is important and will take some time, and that should be no secret. It yields information to base casting on, and the players get to talk themselves into feeling good and ready, and learn the game's mechanics. Explain the format and purpose of each exercise before beginning it. The warm-up phase should take just under an hour. That sounds like a lot, but the warm-up includes a fair bit of actual roleplaying.

To begin, explain the basic concept of the game to the players; you don't want people surprised by that later. Also, introductions and niceties.

Point 1, My Girl's Sparrow. Explain that the warm-up is part of the game too, and that you will be playing in character well before the warm-up is finished. The game starts when you read out the poem "My Girl's Sparrow".

Sparrow, my girl's darling,
whom she plays with, whom she cuddles,
whom she likes to tempt with fingertip
and teases to nip harder
when my own bright-eyed desire
fancies some endearing fun
and a small solace for her pain,
I suppose, so heavy passion then rests:
Would I could play with you as she does
and lighten the spirit's gloomy cares!

Point 2, greetings exercise. It presents the players to each other and loosens them up a bit. It should be done standing, away from the table. The game master takes part.

1. Greet the person to your left with a good, firm handshake. Go around.
2. Now greet the person to your right with a friendly pat on the shoulder, like you are old friends and haven't seen each other in a while. Go around.
3. Now greet each other with warm and hearty hugs. Go around.

Point 3, association exercise. You say a word, the person to your left says the first word that comes to mind, and then the next does the same, and so on. The only wrong thing to do is think about it and hesitate. The game master starts, and then it goes around the table three or four times. Start with sex and emotions, and if you can do it smoothly, pull it back there if it strays. The purpose of the exercise is to warm up voices, creativity and interaction.

Point 4, talking about sex and love. It is important that this doesn't have to be autobiographical, it is completely OK to just make it up. Fiction is fine. In doubt? Make it up! Every player must say something briefly, in a few sentences, no more than three. It doesn't have to be brilliant, as long as it's prompt. The purpose is getting the players thinking about sex, feelings and relations. Go around.

1. The game master starts out by saying something about feeling lonely in a relationship.
2. A player says something that is good about sex.
3. The next player says something that is sad or frustrating about sex.
4. The next player says something that is good about romantic love.

5. The next player says something that is sad or frustrating about romantic love.
6. The last player says something about relationships breaking.

Point 5, science fiction. Briefly introduce life two decades from now, which is much like now, except as specified. The innovation which interests us here is Virtual Reality with stimulation of the sense of touch. This has become the preferred way to have sex for pretty much anyone who can afford proper equipment. Only freaks and poor people actually touch each other in order to have sex. As a group, ask the players what young people are calling virtual sex, and use that term later. Then have the players each tell about a consequence of VR with touch. The purpose is to give the players an opportunity to move into the situation of the characters, and to take co-ownership of the setting, as well as to gather material for scene setting later. Take notes!

Point 6, description. There's a difference between telling and describing. When you tell, you impose your point of view upon the tale told. When you describe, you state external characteristics. In this exercise, the players must each describe a person who has a certain condition. They get a note saying what the condition is, but they're not supposed to tell! Also, they're not allowed to mime the person: They must describe the person. The purpose is to get the players on board with the principle of sensuality and the ban on internal monologue.

All the people are old ladies in everyday situations outlined by the game master: On the street, in a supermarket, in a pharmacy, waiting for an elevator, on the street again. The conditions are: *Stomachache*, *madly in love*, *nervous about an unseen pursuer*, *angry*, *thinking about a really funny joke*. Make notes with the conditions and pass them out. Have the players take turns describing, and after each description have the other players try to guess the condition before it is revealed.

Point 7, casting. Taken together, the preceding points should give the game master enough of an impression of the players to cast them. It is REALLY OK that players and characters don't have the same gender. See casting advice, and remember to cast Omar and Nanna off.

Point 8, the players read their characters. The characters should not be skimmed, they should be read, as there is important information in the main text. Say it! And give the players no less than ten minutes to read thoroughly. Remind them to read both sides of both sheets, and direct their attention to the sentence "*This is not a lie. It is also not the whole truth.*" It is really important. So is the right to later interpret within the limits of the character as written.

Point 9, outline the principles of the game. This is already on the character sheets, but bears repeating:

This is conceived as understated psychological and erotic drama. Dramatic, life-altering events are not the name of the game, and violence and abuse are forbidden. The goal of play is exploration and interpretation of the relationships between the characters, so by the end of the game you will get to know them as people, in and out of bed. Understate your heart out!

Point 10, introduce safety tools. The safety tools are arranged in escalating steps. Breaking the physical contact during sex scenes, interrupting the scene with a poem, interrupting the game with STOP! It is important to underline that it is OK to use the safety tools, especially as the first two steps make no ugly breaks in the game experience (but please do use the third too if needed). Also ask the players to refrain from defensive play and from introducing abuse into the game. Briefly explain, based on the game master's safety instructions.

Point 11, in front of the mirror. Also, the start of in-character roleplaying.

Describing the world from your character's point of view is the closest that you get to playing out inner life in *My Girl's Sparrow*. The exercise is describing your character fairly briefly, focusing on what is important to the character, and possibly adding value-loaded adjectives. Have them take turns playing that they are standing in front of a large mirror, naked, and describing what they see as they look at themselves. Remember, no actual internal monologue! Start with Nanna, and say that the player will, for instance, have to consider whether the fact that Nanna is an adopted Korean is important to her as she looks at herself in the mirror (and thus it is firmly established that Omar isn't the only character of colour).

Point 12, fictitious kisses. The basic procedure for sex is demonstrated in character by means of kisses between the respective partners. The game master sets the scenes. Let them run three exchanges.

1. Kirsten makes out with a concerned male friend, played by the game master, in the Rose Garden in Valby Park (or whatever, if you set the game elsewhere). He breaks off contact because he has to deal with an angry child elsewhere, and disappears from the simulation (thus revealing to the players that this IS a simulation). First actual taste of science fiction! Make it concrete and a little clumsy, and let the friend bump his front teeth into Kirsten's in the second exchange.
2. Omar and Caroline, on their way to a poker game, stop as they are going down a flight of basement stairs and kiss. Nothing technological here.
3. Nanna is in India (in the flesh) on account of a case, and calls home. Erik has set up a simulation with a roaring fireplace in a large, dark, stone hall, and a polar bear pelt in front of the fireplace. They kiss in the simulation, and can go as far as they feel like going in the space of three exchanges. Start with lips

meeting lips, not with an occasion for an ideological argument, and round it off by describing the heat of the fire on one side and the chill of the hall on the other.

The purpose is of course to learn the basic procedure, and to become familiar with the idea of sex shaped by procedures. Tell them that there are procedures to cover pretty much anything they might think of: In the game they should go for what seems good in the fiction, and then follow the procedural directions of the game master.

Point 13, ordinary life in a relationship. Each couple plays out a scene where nothing much is happening, just to see them doing something that isn't about sex.

1. Caroline and Omar sit on a bench in a park on a sunny but slightly chilly early spring day, sharing a sandwich.
2. Erik and Nanna have a cup of coffee in their apartment, early in the morning before they go to work.
3. Kirsten tidies up after her five years old son Janus, who has just been put to bed. The player describes it.

Point 14. If you feel the need, now is the time for a short break. Otherwise you are ready to play in the summer house.

The house

The summer house is an important tool for setting the mood. By describing the house, you frame the characters' time together, and fill and highlight awkward silence, as described in the section on the form.

Erik and Nanna have borrowed the house for the weekend from friends. It is a mid-sized single-story summer house from the mid twentieth century, situated somewhere near the north coast of Zealand, north of Copenhagen (or in some other neighbourhood of moderately posh leisure housing in the not-too-close vicinity of some other city, if you prefer). The grounds are large, with a number of fir and larch trees, and a lush, green lawn that is about half grass and half moss. Tall hedges and shrubbery afford some privacy from the neighbours.

The house:

- Hall, with a couple of cupboards.
- Large main room which is a dining room at one end and a living room at the other, with a sofa, a couple of armchairs and an iron stove for a comfy fire. There's a large entertainment unit, disconnected by Erik.
- Kitchen, small and rather old fashioned, with a gas cooking stove. The most advanced piece of equipment in the kitchen is a microwave oven.
- Bathroom with a toilet and a shower. The hot water tank is not big enough for long showers.
- Two bedrooms. In one there is a double bed, in the other there are two single beds fixed against the walls. In the room with single beds, there is a Bang & Olufsen Virtual Reality unit, also disconnected by Erik.

- Terrace, half covered and facing south, with a stack of expensive but somewhat aged pieces of wooden garden furniture.
- Tool shed, facing the terrace.
- Long, gravelled driveway.

The house has been furnished and decorated by a couple of generations with money and good if somewhat heterogenous taste. There are pieces of designer furniture, decorations and practical gadgets that have been fashionable in every decade since the 1950's.

Examples:

- Shaggy orange Rya rug
- Leather armchair
- Marble tabletop (a bit scratched)
- Hans Scherfig painting of tapirs in a jungle (somewhat naïve in style)
- A couple of Moroccan hand-knit carpets
- A wine shelf made out of thin brass rods, from the 2020's

Do make up more at whim or need.

Scene setting

There are two types of scenes, sex scenes and conversation scenes.

When the main part of the game starts after the warm-up phase, the characters arrive at the summer house on Saturday before noon. The game ends when they leave it on Sunday afternoon, or if the interesting dramatic themes have been played out. In between these points it's pretty much free play, organized and structured in collaboration between the players and the game master. The game master structures play using three principles: **Questions**, **science fiction** and **variety**. Also the game master should push for a scene in which the book of poetry appears, in the first conversation scene after lunch Saturday, to get the poems in play.

When about to set scenes, ask **questions**. Not about inner life, but about where is (your character)?, with who, doing/talking about what? This is NOT supposed to be a game planning committee, so mainly target one player with the questions, and promptly set a scene based on the answers. It's fine if players want to take the initiative to start scenes, in this case target them with questions (the principle of variety permitting). You can ask questions about activities and the direction of a character's gaze, but not about inner life. The players control and describe their characters: *theirs*. The game master describes the house and the garden. Ask questions based on which direction you want to nudge the game in, and on what you are personally interested in hearing more about. When the players interpret their characters in ways that you find interesting, use questions to pursue your interest. In the same vein, you are free to skip things that aren't interesting in and of themselves, unless the players *really* want to pursue them in detail. Ask Kirsten a lot (see scene setting and specific characters).

Science fiction must be an element in all conversation scenes (and I do mean each and every one!), either as a part of leading questions or as a part of your subsequent scene-setting description. This could very well mean references to the carefully arranged absence of high tech in the deliberate isolation of the old summer house. Build upon the elements and consequences that the players have come up with, and make up more yourself as needed.

There should be reasonable **variety**, both in the types of scenes played – there should be sex scenes and conversation scenes – and in terms of the characters in focus. It is OK if players take the initiative in setting scenes by having their characters say and do things, but the game master should see to it that no one is sidelined for too long. You can use leading questions directed at players whom you want to spotlight, or you can appeal to Nanna's player to bring them in. It's OK to have more than one sex scene in a row, or more than one conversation scene, if it seems right otherwise.

Scenes should be kept reasonably short and sharp. As game master, you must highlight embarrassing silence (lasting longer than about five seconds), or the first time a conversation covers the same ground, by describing the house and interior. This emphasizes and fills the void, as described earlier in the section on form. It is OK for players to dwell on a moment, but if they fumble or the conversation keeps going in circles, mercilessly cut the scene. Cut conversation scenes after the interesting bits have been said. Sex scenes are cut based on the number of exchanges, and as it feels right. Any cut scenes are inserted after foreplay.

Example of scene setting

Game master: *Erik, where are you while Nanna and Omar are together in the bedroom? Are you in the kitchen?* [leading question]

Erik's player: *Yes, I'm making coffee.* [could have placed himself elsewhere, but plays ball]

Game master: *Who else is in the kitchen?* [looks inquiringly at Kirsten and Caroline's players]

Caroline's player: *I join Erik in the kitchen.*

Game master: *The smell of coffee is a bit more bitter than in that ad, but also fresher* [sci fi, ads mostly don't smell of anything yet, perhaps other senses have been mentioned during warm-up?], *and Erik's little book of erotic poetry (it's real paper!) is lying on the kitchen counter while Erik stirs the pot.* [more sci fi, and a possible topic of light conversation] *Play!*

Caroline's player: *I pick up the book* [seizes the handout] *and say: "Nice little thing, I love real books..."*

Scene setting and specific characters

Kirsten has a structuring function in the game, and as such will likely get more than her share of scene setting questions. This is what she gets instead of a deep relationship with another player character, and it's something that everyone else gets to draw on. Kirsten should have at least a third of the scene settings, basically every one where it isn't obviously necessary to pull in others. There's a certain kind of question that it is good to give out to Kirsten: *What do you see, when you look at the others as couples?* Point of view, not internal monologue, of course. Ask when she has had a chance to see the others together. This is a truly central element of the game! Here, Kirsten has the power to sit in judgment over the others' relationships, for

better or worse. By all means do ask leading questions about how Kirsten sees the others as lovers. The others get their opportunities to present their view of Kirsten after sex.

Nanna can be used as a tool to activate sidelined players. Organizing Nanna will tend to pick them up or set them up. The game master can make use of this by activating Nanna with leading scene-setting questions about whether Nanna has her eyes on/does something about the one who is sidelined. Remember to keep hands off inner life! The direction of the gaze is the limit. Hopefully Nanna's player will play ball and along the way fill this function of her own accord.

The sequence of events

- **Arrival at the house/lunch Saturday**
- **Dinner Saturday**
- **Who sleeps where**
- **Breakfast Sunday** (focus on Erik and Nanna!)
- Lunch Sunday
- Tidying up
- Departure

Some of the points can be treated very loosely. You don't have to make scenes out of those that aren't bolded, the game master can just briefly talk past them. If the interesting drama feels played out, cutting to the exit ritual is fine, even if you haven't played all the way to the departure.

Arrival at the house/lunch Saturday

The clouds are heavy with rain, but it's not falling just yet, and everything is cool and very green. Set the first scene with Kirsten walking up the gravelled driveway, but cut before she rings the doorbell. Then ask Nanna: Who has prepared lunch, who is answering the door? What's on the table? Game master, describe the house. Have them arrive, dispose of baggage, sit at the table and talk. When they have talked some, and the players have had a chance to present their characters in a social situation, look expectantly at Nanna (if she doesn't speak up of her own accord, to lay down the law with the help of her list). This is fairly traditional talky roleplaying to let the players gather speed. Let it last for a while, but push discretely if it starts getting boring. Do they arrange who is going to sleep with who at the lunch table? If not, that's up for subsequent scene setting. And one more thing: Nanna remembers having seen Omar before. It was maybe a year ago, at a fetish party where Omar accompanied an elderly gentleman. This is on Nanna's sheet. You might want to have Nanna look in Omar's direction in a later scene setting, but as always, hands off her inner life.

Then play a series of sex scenes and conversation scenes. There should be at least one sex scene before dinner, preferably two. The first sex scene should be a perfect specimen of the basic procedure, complete with self-descriptions before and exchange of point of view descriptions after. In conversation scenes, it is now relevant to ask Kirsten how she sees the others. This can give the others something to play off. If the players, especially Erik, don't put the poems in play of their own accord, you can do it with scene setting from now on. If anyone asks for a literary topic, suggest the poems. You could use a leading question.

Dinner Saturday

Start the scene with dinner in full swing. Ask Nanna, what's for dinner? Don't ask about the conversation – at this point it might be more fun to have the players work it out in play. Now they have actual sex to talk about. Do they? A social scene with everyone there.

Again, there should be at least one sex scene during the evening, preferably two. And of course conversation scenes to dwell a little on the characters and let them talk (or not talk!) in or across relationships. Ask, ask, ask.

Who sleeps where?

It's raining outside. Ask the players one by one where they sleep and with who. Start with Caroline, then Kirsten, then Nanna if it's not already obvious where she sleeps. Of course people can refuse to be slept with. Has anyone been left out? And does anyone feel like starting something? Of course it's up to the players, but this might be a bit sweet. Smile sweetly. Ask softly.

Breakfast Sunday

This is a fairly central scene for Erik and Nanna, and appears prominently on their character sheets. They are up early, and sit together drinking coffee. The morning sun is shining in the window, and Nanna is basking in it. Ask questions of Erik.

Then you can briefly ask the others how they slept, if there are interesting little scenes in the air. Kirsten should be asked if she has dreamt (non-remembered wet dreams appear prominently in her text), but not what, as that is inner life. Adapt to where she sleeps and with who. If she has slept with Erik and/or Nanna, she wakes alone (because they are already up drinking coffee).

Sunday day is the time for the players to create any a-ha experiences and subtle high points they might wish. There is a good chance that the really interesting things have already seen play by Sunday morning. In that case, don't hesitate to skip to the exit ritual.

Departure

If you get this far, the questions should certainly go to Kirsten's player. The questions should be concrete, but the interesting thing is whether Kirsten returns to her life with inspiration and fresh courage, or even more alienation. And why. What is said, and what conspicuously isn't? Everyone is there, obviously.

Exit ritual

When the characters have left the summer house, say that it's time to end the game with a little ritual. Have them read out their poems in turn, ending with Kirsten. When everyone has done this, the game is over. In this way, people get a chance to complete the game by withdrawing from their characters with an act that is ritual but not in character. The readings mark the ending clearly, and in an aesthetically satisfying manner.

Debriefing

After the game, take a moment to debrief the players. Thank them for the game, and get them talking. Put some snacks, fruit or the like on the table – it makes people relax and loosen up. You need to use your game master authority to establish that it is OK to have and talk about feelings about the game, and also to create a social space where they can say what they need to say without doing it to seek your approval. Therefore, use non-dominant body language and voice in setting up the debriefing. Unless the players start enforcing a consensus that WE are cool and not affected, because WE aren't poor/weak/inexperienced roleplayers; if that happens you need to shut it down as forcefully as necessary – with as dominant voice and body language as you can manage.

Start out by something like this (you don't have to actually read this out):

After intense and emotional play, you might need a little help getting back to your ordinary headspace, and it's possible that either now, or later when the experience has had a while to settle, you might feel a little weird about the experience and what it might have touched in you. *That's OK.* You're not odd, weak or a bad roleplayer because you feel something. There's also nothing wrong with *not* feeling weird; people and situations are different. Usually there's a remedy that can prevent or handle unpleasant emotions over roleplaying: Talking about it. Talk about it with the other players, talk about it with your friends, talk about it with whoever will listen. Talk about it now, talk about it later.

Give the players a chance to talk before you part ways, and remember that even if you are the game master, you are also a player and the advice applies to you too.

Game master cheat sheet

Remember to crack down on internal monologue and defensive play

Scene setting principles

- **Questions.** Ask out of curiosity, ask leading questions. Set the scene based on the answers.
- **Science fiction.** There *must* be a science fiction element in the setting of all conversation scenes. Use the ideas and elements made up by the players in warm-up.
- **Variety.** There should be a reasonable variety of sex scenes and conversation, and of characters in focus.

Important to bring into play

- Erik's book of poetry, also a handout, so the players can start using it.
- Kirsten's view of the others as couples, once she has had opportunity to form an impression.

Most important procedures for sex

- **Before sex** the players should present their characters point-of-view style, in the first couple of sex scenes, and later if you are interested.
- **One exchange** is that one character makes a caress, the other presents a reaction, the other makes a caress, then the first reacts.
- **Three exchanges** make a sequence, with a fourth exchange if they need it. One sequence for foreplay, one for highlights, possibly a third to find out something you are interested in finding out.
- **After sex** the players should present their characters' points of view of their partners.