



A BITTER AFTERTASTE

Murdered lies the timid bird of love
Slain murdered the beautiful shy-stepping creature
And there has come a sorrow –
– into a heart that is sick
there where is the name and the sign of the singer of songs
there has come the hour of midnight.

(Timo K. Mukka)

A BITTER AFTERTASTE

A 1-2 hour Jeepform scenario for about 4 players
by J. Tuomas Harviainen

Two people, in love, on a balcony, right after perfect sex. Both of them afraid that the happiness and love is not meant to be, and already envisioning the worst.

Played as balcony scenes interwoven with imaginary scenes that create a doubt background for the balcony scenes.

The scenario needs one small area defined as the balcony, a larger area in front of it as a stage for the dream sequences, and a place where the extra players and the audience (if any) may sit and see what is happening.

Tell me a story / Where we all change

This is a game about ruined perfection and the loss of hope. A loss that should not happen, yet does, simply due to human insecurity. There will be no happy ending.

There are two main characters, who have been dating for roughly six months and consider themselves a couple, although neither of them has stated that fact out loud. In the beginning they are both madly in love. Right now, they are standing on the balcony right outside the apartment owned by Robert (or, maybe, Ashley), feeling content. They have just had the best sex of their lives. They are showing affection to each other and enjoying the magnificent view over the city where you are currently playing this game.

Soon, doubt will settle in. They will both start to question what has actually happened, and fear the things that may come to pass. In the end, one or both of them will walk away from the relationship.

The two primary characters are of the same gender as their players. Their sexual orientation will include at least that defined by the players' sexes, but may extend towards other options during the imaginary scenes that will unfold during play. The characters are:

Robert (or **Ashley**, if both players are female) is a 32-year old graphic designer. He works at an

advertisement agency, has to travel a lot, and in his spare time plays the piano. Robert has been married once before, but has no children.

Sara (or **Neil**, if both players are male) is a 27-year old lawyer, recently graduated and working for a small business law firm. She is a rising star. Sara has had a few flings, but this is her first long-term relationship. She takes karate lessons six times a week.

One part of the playing area should be designated as the balcony. It is easiest represented by a couple of chairs or an overturned table, but any clear border will do. Players not in charge of the two main characters should sit, when not playing, some distance away from the balcony, so that a suitably large space is left in between for the imaginary scenes that represent the insecurity of the main characters.

This scenario optimally runs with four players: that way there are enough participants to both invent dream scenes and play them out, but no one has to sit too much in the audience.

The advantage of having an audience is that they can provide new ideas for both new scenes and the content of a scene that is currently being played.

Having a game master dictate the scenes makes the scenario much more fluid and easy to play, but may also distance the players from the point of this scenario, experiencing the all too human insecurity that threatens even true love.

We were having the time of our lives

The scenario is optimally suited for four players and requires no game master. It uses three mechanics: inner monologue, insides & outsides, and imaginary scenes. If there is a conflict, the imaginary situation will always be resolved in favor of the option the players (or GM, if there is one) think will stress the relationship the most. If the participants feel more comfortable playing with a game master, one of them can be given

the right to direct the game with verbal commands. This does not change the scenario very much, but will remove some control from the players. Whether this is a good thing depends on the participants. Note that a game master may also manipulate the scenario further, for good or ill, with methods such as claiming not to like certain scenes.

The scenario proceeds with free dialogue between the two lovers. At any point, one of the three players may suggest an imaginary sequence, a vision of what might be that is running at that moment in the head of one of the two lovers. The imaginary scene always deals with something that involves the other lover, and must at all times be something that creates further stress for the relationship. The person declaring, and then starting, the scene states who is envisioning it and, if necessary, the participants may quickly pre-plan, or even pre-script, that scene. The person declaring the scene has the first right to say who plays which character, but people may naturally also volunteer for the roles. Do not be afraid of game breaks – this whole scenario revolves around breaking the primary scene on the balcony, after all. When the necessary preparations (if there are any) are ready, the scene is acted out in front of the balcony area.

There are several rules governing these scenes. First of all, the result has to create doubt. Happily ending fantasies are only permitted if the dreamer later on renounces that result, creating a new scene that has a worse ending. For example, playing a scene where the other lover cheats, followed by a scene where she resists temptation, is not acceptable - unless it is followed by a worse betrayal, creating a “she’ll cheat, no she won’t, yes she most certainly will” train of thought.

Each return to a subject that has already been dealt with in an earlier scene has to be worse than the one before, excluding the happy interludes mentioned above. Things always escalate. If Robert was seduced by a co-worker in an earlier fantasy, the next time he must be either seducing her himself, marrying her, or something similar.

Any participant except the person in whose head the scene plays may suggest changes to the imaginary scene, as long as they follow the rules on escalation. The purpose of this is to model the

way the fantasies spin out of control as things proceed. The dreamer, in turn, may request a pause at any point during the scene, and speak an inner monologue. This is done by the dreamer facing away from where the partner would be located at the balcony or exiting the balcony, whichever works best, and stating out loud her feelings about the imaginary scene being performed. That monolog is not heard by any other character in the game, just the players.

Likewise, the dreamer may comment on the scene by way of “inner gestures” that the other person on the balcony does not see. When the dreamer speaks, all other action pauses until he or she has finished the inner monologue. If the structure of the playing area requires it, a keyword such as “pause” can be used to assist in the transition, but that is not normally necessary.

A scene may also feature both of the main characters, or neither, or several of one (such as a self-centered Robert marrying himself). In such cases, there is still a designated dreamer, who is the only one permitted to perform an inner monologue or “inside” gestures while the imaginary scene lasts. As the scenes are free in form, any character in a fantasy scene can of course also use the techniques reserved for the dreamer, but those will be *a part of the scene* and thus known to the dreamer.

No scene may define facts about the pasts of the two main characters, just create uncertainty about them. For example, “he’ll cheat on me, because he cheated on his wife” is not permitted, but “he probably cheated on his wife, so he’ll end up cheating on me too” most certainly is. (The difference here is that between a scene where Sara would say that Robert has told here when they met that he has cheated on his wife – or a scene where Robert and Sara are in bed while he’s still married! – and an imaginary scene where Robert cheats first on his wife and then Sara.) This way the game won’t be bound down by facts that cannot be questioned by future scenes, but instead filled with potential ideas the new scenes can be quite freely built upon.

After each scene, the situation and discussion on the balcony should move to reflect the themes of that particular scene, as an addition to what the characters talked about before the break or as something that completely takes over the situation. For example, if there has just been a

scene about doubting whether Sara actually did enjoy the sex, Robert should at least do a thing like asking again whether she had a great time.

Finally, the scenario must *always* end in the lovers breaking up. When one of the players feels that his or her character can't take any more of the doubt and insecurity, he or she will announce in some way to the other that the relationship is not going to work, and then walk away.

When one of the characters leaves, an end scene is played. In it, the other character gets to have a final comment about what just happened, about how he or she feels at that particular moment. No imaginary scene may be added to that monolog.

After the end scene, the scenario is over. No further material or explanations to the scenes that have been played should be added, with the exception of a player sharing the real-world basis of a scenario or a reaction to one he or she suggested or went through.

A quick summary of the rules:

- Any player can call for an imaginary scene at any time when one isn't being played, but never for his/her own character.
- The dreamer must always react to a vision after it ends
- Conflicts always resolve in the manner that provides the most stress.
- If there is a happy ending to an imaginary scene, there must be another imaginary scene that ruins it.
- Scenes with a theme that has been used before must be worse than the preceding ones.
- Anyone except the current dreamer may suggest changes to the imaginary scene. The dreamer can mandate a pause in order to comment on the fantasy.
- No scene may define facts about the characters' pasts, only suspicions.
- The scenario must always end with the relationship being ruined and one of the characters leaving..

Each group will have to find their own balance between time on the balcony and the imaginary scenes. The optimal split cannot, unfortunately, be predicted in advance. A good rule of thumb is to always give the players on the balcony enough

time to react to what has happened so far, and only start a fantasy scene when the discussion begins to die down.

I know they're still talking, the demons in your head

What follows is a collection of sample imaginary scenes. Each of them can be run for either of the two lovers, or even both, if some changes are made. These are just a starting point, as the idea of this scenario is to create a personal experience of emotional insecurity. It is highly recommended that the participants draw further material from their own lives. It is essential to keep in mind that there is no script. These scenes are *suggestions*, nothing more. Their purpose is to pave the way until the participants come up with something of their very own. *A Bitter Aftertaste* can of course be played through by using just (some of) the material here, but it won't be as powerful an experience if there are no personal issues involved.

These sample scenes intentionally mirror common stereotypes in sex and gender, as in many cases those would indeed form the basis of the insecurities that this scenario is about. Likewise, they are mostly about the other person not really being what he or she seems, which fits the situation quite well.

Other approaches are of course also possible: for example, exploring "her family will never accept me", "he is marrying me just for my money" or "maybe what he really wants is a heterosexual relationship" are just as good as starting points than the types of scenes presented here.

When reading these sample scenes, keep in mind that when they are played, they are *fears running in the other person's head*, not facts about the other character. Undeniable facts that aren't stated in the opening section of this scenario are, after all, forbidden.

To illustrate the freedom given to players in designing the events, the samples below contain both simple and complex scenes, as well as scenes that are closer to plots or story arcs than "scenes" in the traditional, theatrical sense.



Immediate Scenes

Immediate scenes are ones that need no starting point. They are not in any way of lesser value, or easier to play, than the examples of Elaborate scenes below.

I just wanted to stay

Sara starts neglecting her karate lessons, in order to spend more time with Robert. She wants him to do the same. At least that's how it starts. Next thing you know, work isn't as important as spending time together – neither his nor hers. She wants him to show commitment, too, by displays of her being the most important thing in the world. The promotion? Refuse it. The important business trip? Cancel it. Kids? Let's just be together, you and I. Never mind work or money, if we are together, everything will turn out just fine...

or

She wants to commit, but he doesn't. He never will. There is talk of a marriage, talk of a mortgage, talk about having children. But that is all they ever will be: talk. Empty promises, made in the hope that he will someday change his mind, and received the same way. With enough imbalance, enough unfairness, enough dishonesty, there will be hatred in the end.

You didn't have the time, so I softly slipped away

Perhaps Robert's work requires him to move to a different city for a couple of years, and Sara can't follow him due to her own. In a while, the calls get less frequent. The weekends are preoccupied with the thought "we must have sex", and it all becomes a chore. Eventually it is easier not to call, not to travel. Not to put effort

into the relationship. He says he's not looking for anything new to replace this one, yet seems to be more content to leave this troublesome affair behind than try to keep it up. Eventually, there will be no love left. If Robert and Sara are lucky, they have by then slipped away from each other so thoroughly that there isn't any hatred, either.

or

Maybe they already live far off, and cannot move in together. That's why they'll never get married, never even learn each other's everyday habits. Everything dies, because it is based on just speculation on what is happening at the other end of the phone, at the email terminal.

I felt so vacant, you treat me like a child

When they move in together, Sara turns into a control freak. Decorating the house, furniture, the way Robert dresses. When they eventually have kids, she will dominate their life, from baby to adult. In the end, she will be an aging matriarch spreading emotional wreckage around her, a malevolent force of nature.

or

Robert is suddenly left unemployed, grows bitter and starts drinking. He says he is looking for work, but isn't. He stops showering, complains and smells of old liquor at all times. Sara is kind at first, then blunt, then hostile. He calls her "patronizing", she thinks he is permanently flawed.

No regrets, they don't work

She is introduced to Count Raasted at a party. He's not that tall, but dark and handsome nevertheless. They talk, and really hit it off. He is half the gentleman, half the rascal, and knows exactly how to treat a lady. He is also a firm believer in the Campsite Rule, always leaving people he meets in better shape than in what he found them. Sara and the Count spend hours together, finally ending up in his hotel room. They make love. This is not a random hook-up or a cheap fuck. They *make love*. When Sara returns home the next day, she is a different woman.

or

Robert has known this co-worker for a long time. They end up chatting at an office party, and one thing leads to another. Sara spends the night worrying about him, as he does not come home before noon the next day, and has closed his mobile phone. When he finally returns, hung over and ashamed, Sara and Robert fight. She drives him out. Before they can make up, Robert has sought help in the arms of the same woman he just slept with.

Well thank you, it was a real blast

Sara is standing in a bar, chatting with a friend. She tells her how Robert wasn't that good in bed, really, and she had to pretend. Felt that she had to pretend. She would have wanted him to be more assertive, more aggressive, more manly. Tender love-making just doesn't do it for her. Sara says that if this continues, she will have to start looking for a new, better lover.

or

A friend of Robert's is asking what Sara is like in bed and, surprisingly enough, he actually answers. He says that she's too much a slut, a control freak, always speaking the wrong words. That he really wants the sex to be good, but it just isn't. But he simply likes her too much, and does not want to tell her how lousy their sex life actually is. Robert firmly states that he hopes his libido will eventually weaken, so that sex won't become an issue that drives a wedge between them.

A possible variant of this scenario is to have different participants play the two main characters on the balcony and the two in the dream sequence. This way there are fewer game breaks, and the people on the balcony can constantly react to the visions of insecurity. On the other hand, it may also lead to chaos as the participants cannot follow everything that is happening. This method is therefore only suggested for experienced Jeepform players.



Elaborate Scenes

Elaborate scenes build upon material that has already come up during play, in the form of balcony dialogue or an earlier scene of any type. They are not in any way essentially different, or more complex than, the Immediate scenes above. And many of them can be played to a lesser extent without earlier references. Immediate and Elaborate scenes can be picked, invented and mixed in any order the participants see fit.

Write me a love song

After Sara's affair, Robert gets curious. He soon finds out that he was just a number in a long line of lovers. Sara is the kind of a person who falls in love in a row. She's not exactly using Robert, and truly loves him. It's just that her affections come and go really fast. One day she loves him, the next day it's someone else, then it's maybe Robert again. Sara is not one for an open relationship – it's new loves she seeks, not cheap flings.

or

Robert grows obsessively jealous. At first he seems simply curious about Sara meeting people outside of work. Then it's also about work, about meeting men in general, then about any friend. He is certain that she either is, or will be, cheating on her (possibly again), and wants to make sure she will not have a chance to do so. Eventually he will be hiring private detectives, spying on her himself, and checking receipts for where she's been. When will he turn violent?

I loved the way we used to laugh

Everything has gone cold. The good moments are gone, as are most of the bad. Everything is just bland and average. There is no love, not even attachment. And certainly not friendship. There is only routine. The children sense this, and are feeling ill. Trouble in school, therapy, acting out. The pills in the medicine cupboard are more attractive every day. Sometimes even taking all of them at once seems like a good idea.

or

A bad thing has happened, and everything is changed. Maybe it was a death in the family, or

being mugged, or raped. Maybe it was the onslaught of a mental illness. What is certain is that this event dominates their everyday life. Things are left unsaid, there are bouts of sadness, and what was once love has turned into a support relationship. Maybe it's the person who suffered that needs the support, but it may just as well be that the other one can't handle the situation. What matters is that the relationship is now a duty, not a pleasure.

I don't want to hate, but that's all you've left me with

Sara sits in a church, pretending she is happy. Robert is getting married to someone from an earlier imaginary scene. The couple believes she is one of their closest friends. An older woman next to her whispers in her ear: "Don't they look just lovely? So in love!" The rage inside Sara needs to find a way out. Now.

or

They have agreed to move on, but still cling to each other. This isn't a relationship, it's a war. Nagging is long past, this is the time for direct insults. Preferably with a suitable public. He calls her a slut, she says he's impotent. Soon one or both will resort to violence, even though neither of them is of the spouse-abusing kind. This is not cruelty, but a matter of life and death.

Absurd Scenes

Under most circumstances, Absurd imaginary scenes break the feel of the scenario. Using them is not recommended, never mind that people actually imagine these sorts of things. However, they may come in handy in situations where the

game has become locked into a single line of thought that does not seem to create the necessary emotions for the scenario to end. In such a case, breaking the situation by using a fantasy like these can be a good move. These are not scenarios that can, or should, be built upon, but rather tools for re-examining the storytelling situation at hand.

Someone else instead

Robert is actually a spy, working for an enemy government. He is using Sara to get into the right circles. He will guide her towards the "right" career choices, leading her to an important government position. Then, when he's found out everything he needs, he will brutally kill Sara and return to his home country.

or

Sara is actually a transsexual. Maybe she has already undergone the transition from male to female, and the problem is either prejudice or that they will never have biological children. Or maybe Sara will only understand this later on, when they are already married and have kids, and their whole lives will change.

Always keep in mind that there is absolutely no script beyond the start and the end point.

The scenes presented here are just examples.

The participants are free to use any scenes they can think of. And drawing from personal experiences or insecurities is not only possible, but actually recommended

I guess the love we once had is officially dead

Originally designed in Espoo, 2006; re-written in Milan and Turku, 2007.

Quotes adapted from *No Regrets*, by R. Williams & G. Chambers, unless specified otherwise.

Photography by Jaana-Mari Block, ©2007, www.blockblock.net

For more on Jeepform and the techniques used here, see <http://jeepen.org/dict/>

My special thanks to Heidi Westerlund and Tobias Wrigstad for their invaluable feedback on developing this scenario.