

MORTALITY

An ADRIFT text adventure

Written by David Whyld © 2005

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On Playing The Game

Mortality understands the standard commands of any text adventure: north, south, east, west (and their usual abbreviations to n, s, e, w); get and drop; look (l for short) to redescribe the current location; load and save; quit (if you feel so minded); help or hint (for when you become stuck and need a nudge in the right direction); x or exam or examine for studying what you see. There are no guess the verb puzzles here (at least hopefully not anyway).

Conversation is handled in the simple format of “talk to [name]”, which will then display a list of numbered dialogue options to choose from.<wait>Like this:

```
> talk to wilfred
“What do you want?” barks Wilfred.

1:  “I want a rise.”
2:  “I want to quit.”
3:  “I want you to know I'm planning on killing you...”
```

If you wanted to tell Wilfred you were planning on killing him, you'd type 3. If you were looking for a rise, type 1. And so on...

The 'undo' command can also be used to move the game back one move, i.e. effectively erasing your last command and allowing you to choose again what you wish to do.

The Structure Of The Game

Mortality does not play like a standard text adventure. While it understands the standard commands of a standard text adventure, the storyline is structured more like a series of short story fragments linked together into a whole. The timeline is, also, a little unusual. The game begins at the funeral of Wilfred Gamble and then moves back to the night Steven and Stephanie first plan his murder; then forward to Steven's first meeting with the man he will one day kill. At times it might well be a little confusing finding out what is going on, but it should be simple enough to follow the basic storyline through to its conclusion.

The Cast

Major Characters

Steven Rogers

There are no heroes in *Mortality* but Steven Rogers perhaps comes the closest to fulfilling this role. He is the main character. In appearance he is forty years old but seems younger. He is powerfully built and has served in the police force, the army and the SAS over the years. It is perhaps to true that he is not a particularly nice person.

Wilfred Gamble

The ageing millionaire with the beautiful young wife. A cliché? Perhaps. But when you have as much money as Mr Gamble does, who cares about clichés? He might come across as somewhat as a victim in the early parts of the game, but towards the end his true plan is revealed. A victim he most definitely is not.

Stephanie Gamble

Wilfred Gamble's young wife: beautiful, spoilt, deadly. And a skilled manipulator of men who knows how best to use her looks to her advantage. Assume the worst of her, and also wonder at how eager she is to be rid of her husband. Might the same fate befall her new partner if she ever grows tired of him?

Minor Characters

Inspector Hanratty

The police officer assigned to the Wilfred Gamble investigation. From his first meeting with Steven Rogers, it will quickly become apparent that he suspects what has really happened.

Alistair Crimmons

A former colleague of Wilfred Gamble's. But ally or enemy?

How To Win Mortality

Mortality is an easy game to reach the end of. There are no actual ways to die (aside from the very end itself), no real puzzles to solve and no ways (fingers crossed) to put the game in an unfinishable position. But the actual mechanics of reaching the best ending are somewhat... difficult. You might well play through the game several times without hitting one of the two good endings. Bearing that in mind, and if you're not adverse to some serious spoilers that might otherwise ruin the game for you, type the word cheat and see what happens.

EXAMINING YOUR SURROUNDINGS

The general rule in a text adventure is to examine things. Sometimes they contain helpful clues, other times they contain hidden items, other times...

Mortality is different in that there are no items to pick up and use. Whatever items you need you will already have. Your surroundings can, however, be examined all the same. Feel free to try and manipulate them to your heart's content.<wait><cls>

GENERAL ADVICE

The key to getting the best ending in the game is Stephanie. She's your focus, she's the reason you've done what you've done, and she's also the only thing that can save you from a fate quite a bit worse than death. If given the choice of helping or hindering her, choose to help her. Put up with her tantrums, agree with her at every opportunity you're given. She's not always rational and she's seldom heroine material, but if you want to avoid that unpleasant fate, you're just going to have to stay on her good side.

Throughout the game, there will be decisions you make that affect the way the game ends. These are kept note of with the **Stephanie** variable. It begins at 10 and rises every time you do something she disagrees with, and lowers whenever you make do something she wants. By default this is hidden but typing in the **reveal** command will display its current value. Reach the end of the game with the **Stephanie** variable at 5 or less and you're heading for a good ending; 6 or more and you're faced with one of the bad endings. As might be expected, it's far easier for the variable to rise than fall. Fair? No. But then who said life was fair?

About Mortality

Welcome to **Mortality**.

Before you start playing, you should perhaps be aware that **Mortality** isn't a children's game. While there are no actual sex scenes in it, there is a lot of bad language and the while nature of the game is more adult than not. So if you are looking for a nice friendly game featuring singing elves, saving the world and maybe a treasure hunt or two, **Mortality** is clearly not the game for you. If, however, you're in the mood for something a little different, then by all means read on.

Mortality is the story of a man called Steven James Rogers and the events that follow his taking a job working for ageing multi-millionaire, Wilfred Gamble. The job involves acting as the personal bodyguard of Gamble's younger (by sixty-one years) wife, Stephanie Gamble, and the events that unfold when the two of them decide that life without Wilfred would be a nice thing. As you might gather, Steven Rogers is no hero figure. He doesn't set out to kill Wilfred Gamble because Wilfred is evil (although as you play the game, you'll quickly discover he's hardly a saint either) but, rather, because with Wilfred out of the way there'll be no one to stop him getting what he wants. Money and a beautiful woman are what motivate Steven Rogers, so he's a long way from the conventional hero figure portrayed in most games.

Still interested?

Good.

Walkthrough

Mortality

An ADRIFT text adventure by David Whyld

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> 1

"We're going to kill him, aren't we?"

"Of course."

The cemetery matches the mood of the day perfectly: wet, cold and thoroughly miserable. My own mood (and that of Stephanie's) was considerably more cheerful but it wouldn't have been the done thing to let anyone know that. So miserable we were as well.

A footpath wends its way through the cemetery to the parking area where our cars are parked and a crowd of mourners have begun to make their way there already. The funeral has pretty much finished; the coffin containing the departed has been lowered into the ground; a couple of burly gravediggers (they do things the old-fashioned way here, no machinery if they can avoid it) stand around waiting for the inevitable "filling-in" process.

The footpath leads away to the east.

Stephanie stands to one side of me.

> e

It wouldn't really be appropriate for myself and Stephanie to walk hand in hand from her husband's funeral so she walks ahead and I follow closely behind. The curves of her buttocks show through her long black dress and despite the surroundings and the occasion, I find myself growing aroused.

...press a key...

"Now is hardly the time for second thoughts."

"I know. It's just-"

"Just what? You want to back out and let him live?"

"No, of course not."

"Good. We're agreed then."

"We're going to kill him, aren't we?" Stephanie says.

The words seem to linger in the still air of her bedroom for a few moments before slowly drifting away.

Reclining at the side of her, one of Wilfred's custom-made cigars in my hand, I give a gentle nod. "Of course."

Stephanie rolls over to me. She really is the most stunning creature and it's not hard to understand just how an ageing millionaire could be drawn to her - a woman young enough to be his granddaughter - despite common sense telling him otherwise. Men do foolish things for beautiful women, I remember my mother once telling me years ago. They might be clever and intelligent and sophisticated, but when a beautiful woman walks into the room... well, everything else is set aside.

...press a key...

I never knew if she was talking about my father or just talking in general, but she knew what she was saying all the same.

"I've got several ideas," I say. I take a puff on the cigar and blow smoke rings into the air. Foul thing. If it wasn't one of Wilfred's - and a prized possession to boot - I wouldn't have touched it with a barge pole. "I considered poison in his food - but poison is so easy to trace. I considered a sudden scare to induce a heart attack - but who knows how fragile the old bastard's heart is? I considered hiring someone to do the deed - but then I don't know any assassins for hire and I doubt you do either." I puff on the cigar some more.

...press a key...

"So then I thought: why go for the elaborate methods? Why not keep it simple? Wait till there's no one around to hear his cries then smother him with a pillow or shove him down the stairs."

Stephanie runs a hand across my chest and purrs. "A fall down the stairs? I like that one."

"Simplicity itself. And considering the way the old bastard still staggers up and down the stairs despite his doctor's warnings... well, it's the sort of thing that's almost certain to happen sooner or later anyway. We'll just be speeding up the process a little."

"Doing Mother Nature a favour," Stephanie murmurs. She straddles me, her long blonde hair hanging down onto my chest. "This was the bed where I first had sex with him."

"Please," I say, "can we keep the horror stories for another time?"

Stephanie doesn't answer but I gather she agrees with me as she reaches over and turns out the bedside lamp...

...press a key...

However, later...

"How are we going to kill him?"

"Why?"

"I need to know."

1: "Poison."

2: "An accident."

3: "A faked burglary."

> 2

"He's old and senile," I say, "so an accident is the most likely way for him to die. The way he still totters around, up and down stairs, without a care in the world... well, he's just asking for it."

"Will it be soon?"

I savour the scent of her, smiling to myself in the darkness. "Oh, very soon. Very soon indeed."

...press a key...

"Do you think that detective suspects something?"

"I'm sure of it."

"You know what we have to do then..."

"Yes."

The study is spacious to say the least - elegant works of art line the walls; expensive paintings (each worth more than I make in a year) share space with sculptures and vases; a portrait of the man I am here to meet, Wilfred Gamble, hangs above the man's desk. On first glance he is

not a handsome man and the portrait painter has doubtless not painted this "warts and all", leading me to suspect that the real thing might be quite a bit worse.

The chair I'm seated in, waiting, is little more than a few sticks bolted together at inconvenient angles; the chair on the other side of the desk, where Wilfred will be seated shortly, is more the sort of thing that might have been termed a "throne" in ancient times.

Light from a large window illuminates the study and offers me an excellent view of the mansion grounds while a closed door to the south leads out to a long and dusty corridor.

> wait

I hear the tapping of his cane before Wilfred Gamble limps into the room. My first impression of him brings a twinge of pity but I keep it from my face. If there's one thing I have heard about him it's that he detests pity.

"You Rogers?" he barks, his voice waspish and frail. The way he asks tends to imply that there might be another person waiting for him in his office.

"Yes," I say. "My name-

"I know your damn name." Gamble limps around the desk and throws himself into his 'throne'. His cane he tosses into a corner of the room. Then he puts his hands - I cannot help but notice they are twisted into claws, either by disease or accident - in his lap, and asks, "and what the hell are you here for, Rogers?"

1: "You were asking for a security guard, Mr Gamble."

2: "I heard you needed a chef."

3: "I'm here for the page boy job."

4: "I was just passing through."

> 1

"Yes, I was." I get the impression, right from the start, that he doesn't care for me. He doesn't say so in as many words but the feeling is definitely there that he would like nothing more than to throw me out on my ass. "I was indeed, Rogers. You can handle yourself in a fight, I take it?"

I nod. "Seven years in the army, Mr Gamble. Four with the SAS. Before that I was a policeman for nine years."

"Ever killed a man?"

I have a vision of a young man coming at me with a knife. Another vision of him lying dead on the ground.

"Yes," I say.

"Good." Gamble chuckles as if he finds the idea that I have killed someone amusing. "Let's be frank, Rogers. I need a security guard but not for me."

"Oh?" This wasn't what I was told. "Who for?"

Gamble gives a crooked grin. "My wife."

...press a key...

I hadn't known Gamble even had a current wife although there was no reason to assume he was unmarried. Granted, he was ugly and coarse but he had one redeeming quality that tended to blind people to his other faults. He was filthy stinking rich.

"Your wife?" I say.

"Stephanie. The love of my life." The way he said it made me wonder if he didn't secretly detest her. "She's..." He waves his hand as if looking for the correct word. "Flighty. Hard to control. She has this habit of going out on her own and I don't like it. I've forbade her, but she's a woman and we all know women don't listen."

He laughs and from his tone I think he expects me to laugh along with him.

I give a polite nod.

"I need someone to safeguard her when she goes on one of her... adventures."

...press a key...

The way he says it I get the impression of her swinging on chandeliers, kicking down doors, getting into gunfights.

"Adventures?"

"I don't know what she does," mutters Gamble. "Don't care either." His tone clearly betrays the lie. "All I care about is that she's kept safe. Can you keep her safe, Rogers?"

It seems a direct enough question.

1: "Yes."

2: "No."

> 1

"Good. You start now. You'll find Stephanie upstairs in her room."

And with that he turns away, the meeting apparently over.

I wait for a few seconds to make sure I haven't misread the situation then nod quickly, rise to my feet, and leave the room.

...press a key...

I had expected... what? I wasn't sure really. After all, I hadn't even known when I applied for the security guard job that Gamble even had a wife. If I had thought about the subject, I'd have probably assumed - with my usual lack of insight - that his wife was a middle-aged spinster-like lady. She would come from old money and secretly detest Gamble for his looks and manners (and particularly his swearing) but stayed with him to avoid the shame that a divorce would bring to someone of her social status. She would either hate me because I was a commoner or develop some kind of thing for me because I was quite a bit younger than her decrepit husband. She would be, I guessed, either later forties or early fifties and well spoken to a fault.

In fact, she was twenty-one.

...press a key...

She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And this comes from a man who has slept with women of all colours, all nationalities, all races, from one side of the globe to the other. I've slept with high class dames and drug-snorting whores; professional models (even a couple of top shelf centrefolds); nurses and secretaries; yet none of them, even one, came close to Stephanie Gamble in terms of sheer physical beauty.

She was also - and this is something I have always found a remarkable turn on in a woman - very outspoken.

"Who the fuck are you?" were her first words to me. "Another one of Wilfred's lackeys? Well, let me tell you something..."

And that was how I met the woman who would win my heart.

...press a key...

"I don't like you, Rogers."

"Yes, Mr Gamble."

"I hate you in fact. But so long as you keep my wife safe, you can stay."

"Yes, Mr Gamble."

I don't know how much the bash cost but it was sure worth it. And, besides which, it was Gamble's money so why should I care how much it cost? It's not like the miserable old bastard could take it with him...

The main dining room (yes, I said 'main'. The mansion has several) of the mansion is a huge place, quite a bit bigger than my entire apartment. A table runs down the centre and is piled high with so much food that I suspect world hunger could be cured if it was given to third world countries. Guests mill about, drinks in hand, talking, joking, even laughing. Considering this is a wake - generally a sombre, morose affair - no one seems especially down. Doorways lead to many other rooms in the mansion, to the north, west and southeast. Of Stephanie I see no sign.

> se

I leave the dining room and step out onto a balcony overlooking the gardens. After a few moments, I sense Stephanie join me.

"We got away with it, didn't we?" she says quietly, looking out over the gardens.

I nod. "We did."

The two of us stand in silence for several minutes more.

...press a key...

"Is he dead?"

"Dead and gone."

"Good."

The first time I escorted Stephanie out of the mansion was on one of her 'adventures'. She was dressed (if that was the right word) in an unbutton shirt with tears down one side, no bra, and jeans that appeared, to judge by the amount of arse flesh on display, to be several sizes too small.

"Take a picture," she told me. She didn't look at me when she spoke. I think I had perhaps known her for two months before she even met my eyes. "It'll last longer."

I drove her from the mansion, not in the limo Gamble often used or any of the array of fancy and expensive cars he stored in his football stadium sized garage, but in my own car. It was 'delightfully sleazy' as Stephanie put it. In fact it was a pretty good car but for someone whose husband was worth a cool quarter of a billion dollars, I guess my Corvette just didn't compare.

...press a key...

"I'm going to get laid," I heard from the back seat at one point. I didn't say anything. "Some black guy probably. They're hung like horses."

I still didn't say anything.

"You queer, Steve?" was her next question.

"I was married for six years."

I sensed her lean forward in the seat behind me, felt her breath on my ear. "That's not what I asked. Are you gay?"

1: "No."

2: "Yes."

3: "None of your damn business."

> 3

For a moment there was dead silence from the back of the car. Then, surprisingly, Stephanie Gamble laughed!

"Oh, you've got balls, Steve," she said. "You really fucking have. Anyone else would have given a meek 'yes' or 'no'. God, people are so fucking sheepish around me now. Maybe I ought to fuck you instead." She said this with another laugh but I wasn't sure whether she was joking or not.

"Yes, madam," I said.

...press a key...

The club she picked wasn't the sort of place I would have chosen myself. It was in the hard part of town, and by 'hard' I mean 'damn hard'. The sort of place where you risk your life just by walking down the street. I had been to this club a few times before but didn't much care for it. Don't get me wrong, I've been in some hard places in my time and I've been involved in some seriously bad shit, but when I go for a good night out I like to go to a place with good music and good food. Not some shithole like this place: people get knifed here for looking at you wrong.

And this was where Stephanie Gamble, the woman whose safety I was entrusted to keep, had decided to go to 'get laid'. Worse, she hadn't even let me inside with her. "I'll be a couple of hours, Steve," she said as she got out of the car. "Don't wait up for me."

That was three hours ago.

> out

I step out of the car. The night is cool. No, not cool. Cold. Downright freezing. Considering what Stephanie was wearing, it's a wonder she didn't freeze to death before she got into the club.

I approach the entrance, nod once to each of the bouncers who eye me up as if debating whether to give me some trouble. Something about me obviously persuades them this wouldn't be a good idea as they step aside to let me in. One even opens the door for me.

I step inside the club.

...press a key...

The music is loud. And I mean LOUD! It's so ear-shattering that I find it physically painful to listen to. Not that this is the sort of music you can listen to - it's just one hideous cacophony of sound, music and words rolled into one another. Even attempting to listen to it is liable to drive you completely around the bend.

The club's interior is gloomy; poorly lit by flashing lights in the ceiling which don't so much disperse the shadows as add to them. People throw themselves about with wild abandon. Of Stephanie I see no sign although a couple of doorways - northwest and northeast - lead deeper into the club. The door I entered through is at my back to the south.

> ne

I step through the doorway and find myself in another room, roughly the same size as the first. More people throw themselves about as is in some kind of-

A sudden scream tears through the club, shockingly loud. Strangely, no one else seems unduly bothered by it. Stephanie? Or someone else?

Feeling tense, I hurry back and plunge through the other door.

...press a key...

"Don't do it, Rogers! I can pay you! I can!"

"You can die, Mr Gamble."

"Black magic?" I say. "You're joking right?"

"Oh, hardly," says the man. "I'm perfectly serious." He lights his cigar and lets rings of smoke float away to the ceiling. "Our dear Wilfred was quite the black magician."

It's after the wake. Most of the guests have gone home and there are just six of us left: myself and Stephanie, Crimmons (the speaker) and three others who have barely said a word all night.

"It was one of his... quirks," says Stephanie. From the way she says it, I get the impression she was intending to say something else. "You must have heard him mention it, Steve. He was quite fond of the subject."

...press a key...

I nod without saying anything. I seldom listened to a word Gamble said to me that wasn't an order and I didn't listen to them if I could avoid it. The old fool was so senile he was never sure whether I was listening or not and he never made an issue out of it because he would often forget his own questions.

...press a key...

"Black magic," says Crimmons. "Ah, Wilfred so enjoyed the practice of it." He turns to me. "What about you, dear boy?" he says in that queer ass way of his that makes me want to throttle him. "What are your views on the whole black magic issue?"

1: "I think Wilfred Gamble was a confused old fool and didn't really understand what he was doing half the time."

2: "I hardly think this is the sort of thing we should be discussing at his wake, Mr Crimmons."

3: "Tell me more. I've always been interested in the subject."

> 2

Crimmons frowns at me and looks about to say something but Stephanie flashes him a warning glance.

"Yes, Samuel," she says, her voice cold and hard. "I don't think this is the time or the place. My husband is dead. Today we buried him and tonight you sit here talking about black magic. Please," she emphasises the word so no one can misunderstand her meaning, "now is not the time."

Crimmons is at once apologetic but I can sense from the glances he flashes at me throughout the evening that he is not at all pleased by the way I spoke to him. I can't say as I'm particularly bothered by that; after all, the views of an old faggot have never particularly concerned me. And speaking to him in that way will hopefully make him believe, whatever else he thinks about me, that I genuinely cared for Wilfred Gamble.

The guests depart soon after.

...press a key...

Stephanie comes to me when the last car has driven away.

"Oh, Steve," she says, kissing me on the neck. "That was fucking hilarious. Y'know, I almost laughed when you told that old queer where to get off."

"Just doing the right thing," I say. I let one hand travel down her back, cupping her rear. "As a loyal and faithful bodyguard, it was the only thing to do."

"Loyal and faithful bodyguard," she says. "I like that." She looks up at me. "Well, Mr Bodyguard, I've got an order for you and I won't take it well if you disobey it. You ready for it?"

I nod.

"Say it."

"I'm ready for it, ma'am."

She unhooks her dress and it falls to the floor. She is both naked and beautiful beneath. "Fuck me," she orders.

...press a key...

"Do you ever regret what we did?"

"Not for a second."

An unpleasant scene awaits me. Stephanie is crouched in one corner, her dress torn; the mark of a hand is imprinted on the side of her face; one of her shoes has come off. A couple of men - one with the jaded look of an ex-boxer, the other a streetwise punk - stand over her. The hand of the punk is raised to strike her.

The boxer glances at me as I step into the room and grunts, "beat it, pal, if ye know what's good for ye."

Stephanie gives a terrified gasp and I realise I have a split second to act.

> hit boxer

The boxer sees me coming but he's too slow on his feet to do anything about it. My fist connects solidly with his jaw and he's down before he even knows what has hit him. The punk takes a step toward me but something makes him stop.

"Get out," I say, "while you still can."

His nerve breaks and he runs for the door. I wait till he's almost through it then slam it as hard as I can on his arm. I don't know whether I succeed in shattering any bones or not but from his animal shriek of pain I'm guessing I got a few.

After planting a meaty kick in the unconscious boxer's groin, I turn to Stephanie.

"Are you okay?"

She accepts my hand and I pull her to her feet.

"Fuckers!" she gasps. She sounds more angry than scared although it was definitely fear I saw in her eyes when I entered the room. "They were going to rape me!"

"I thought you came here to get laid," I say.

Stephanie gives a harsh laugh. "Not from those fucking mongrels I didn't." She raises a hand to her face. "Have I got a mark?"

I nod. "But it won't scar."

"It better fucking not. Wilfred didn't marry me for my charm and personality." She laughs. "C'mon, let's get the hell out of here."

...press a key...

I come to suddenly.

For a few seconds I lie there, not even sure what has awoken me. At my side, Stephanie sleeps on. She has always been a heavier sleeper than myself.

I wait a little longer, wondering if I heard anything at all or if it was merely some dream I was having-

A sound from above. Someone is in the attic!

The bedroom is dark, illuminated only by the dim light from the moon hanging in the sky outside the window. Stephanie lies on the bed at my side, still asleep. A door, closed, is the room's only exit.

> open door

I creep out of bed, eager not to disturb Stephanie, and make my way to the door. I hesitate there for a second, holding my breath. I hear Stephanie's breathing but nothing else-

Ah. But then I hear the sound I heard before. Someone moving around in the attic.

I close the door behind me.

The corridor outside the bedroom is long and empty. And very, very dark. To the north I can just about make out the main staircase leading down to the ground floor. The other way leads to where the attic is. Stephanie's bedroom is back to the west.

> s

I move south.

Above me is a trapdoor in the ceiling which leads to the attic. A corridor stretches away north back to the area outside Stephanie's room.

> x trapdoor

I see a chain hanging down.

> pull chain

I tug on the chain and the trapdoor opens, allowing a ladder to slide down.

> u

I climb the ladder and step into the attic.

Strangely enough, the attic light is on though I have never set foot up here and neither has Stephanie (to my knowledge). I know for a fact Gamble never came up in the recent months before his death as there was no way someone as fragile as he could have climbed that ladder. So how long has the light been on? Or is there a more sinister explanation for why it is on?

> 1

The attic is large but gives the impression of being so much smaller due to its incredibly cramped state. All manner of junk has been piled in here - from ancient gramophones to boxes, from works of crumbling art to musty old clothes; in no discernible order. It seems Wilfred Gamble was a man who believed in hoarding stuff and never throwing anything out.

What caused the sound I heard earlier on I cannot say as there does not appear to be anyone else here.

> get boxes

The moment I reach my hand out, I experience a churning sensation from the pit of my stomach and something - I do not see what - slams into me from behind. Thinking I am about to be attacked, I spin, fists at the ready... and find myself facing the same empty attic as before. Of my attacker there is no sign.

Unnerved (and wondering if I didn't have too much to drink earlier on today), I quickly leave the attic, turning off the light first, and return to bed. Stephanie is still asleep and I say nothing to her.

...press a key...

"I'm sorry it had to end like this."

"Just a few routine questions," says the inspector. He smiles but in such a way that the smile never touches his eyes. It is a smile that moves the lips and nothing more. "I'm sure you understand."

Stephanie, seated across from me, gives a soft nod.

I nod myself. "Whatever we can do to help, officer," I say.

"Good, good." The inspector shuffles the papers in his hands, carelessly dropping a couple in his haste. I see through his clumsiness as an act designed to make us feel he is a bumbling clod. In fact he gives the impression of being very capable. I had best be careful.

"Tell me," he says, looking not at Stephanie but at me, "what are your views on how Mr Gamble died?"

1: "It was an accident, pure and simple."

2: "I suspect foul play."

3: "I really don't have an opinion on the matter."

> 1

"That's what I thought," says the inspector. "Mr Gamble was - and let's not beat about the bush - not in the best of health, was he? It might even be true to say that he was going a little senile?"

1: "I would guess so."

2: "I doubt it. He seemed competent when I last saw him."

> 2

The inspector shrugs but makes no further comment to that. "What of you, Miss Gamble? Do you think your husband... sorry, ex-husband was a little senile?"

"I hardly think that's an appropriate question to ask, officer," says Stephanie, looking him full in the eye. "I loved my husband and I'll thank you to remember that. To you he might have been 'senile'. To me he was my love."

I inwardly wince at that. We had talked about his beforehand - what to say, how to respond, what questions of our own to ask - but one of the things I had cautioned Stephanie on was not appearing to be too much in love with Gamble. He was 84, she was 21. It didn't take a genius to figure out there was little actual 'love' between them.

"My own wife's quite a bit younger than me so I understand," says the inspector, smiling again. "I'm 54, she's 42. The age difference has been a little trying over the years." He lets that register then turns back to me. "And you, Mr Rogers. You've not worked for Mr Gamble for long, have you? Forgive me for saying this, but you were a bodyguard, right?"

I nod.

"And a few months after you join his service, he dies." The inspector smiles. "You didn't do a very good job, did you?"

1: "I wasn't Mr Gamble's bodyguard, inspector. I was Mrs Gamble's bodyguard. And as you can see, she is in perfect health."

2: "I did the best job I could do under the circumstances. Wilfred Gamble was old and his death was an accident. Some things just can't be guarded against."

> 2

"I'm sure," says the inspector, sounding anything but. "Mr Rogers, where were you on the night Mr Gamble died?"

"Right here in the mansion. I walked my rounds-"

"Your rounds?"

"Sorry. Old police term. I walked around the grounds of the mansion, checking for possible breaks in the security. When I found none, I returned to the mansion and checked the security system was fully operational."

"Was it?"

I nod.

"And then?"

Then, of course, I had killed Gamble and made it look like an accident. Afterwards I had fucked his wife. But I didn't think it would be wise to tell the inspector that.

1: "After that I went and checked on Mrs Gamble."

2: "I went to see Mr Gamble."

> 2

"And?"

"And he was fine."

The inspector looks at me and I look back at him.

"That's nice," says the inspector. "And Mrs Gamble, was she fine?"

"Yes," says Stephanie coldly. "Mrs Gamble was fine and dandy. She was in high spirits. Is this going somewhere, inspector, or do you just have a liking for macabre questions?"

"Every question I have has a relevance, Mrs Gamble," says the inspector. "I can assure you of that. You'll have to forgive an old cop who's used to questioning murderers..." He hesitates as he says this and smiles once more. "Old habits die hard."

I can sense Stephanie losing her cool. She's always had one hell of a temper and it doesn't take much to set her off. Quickly I say, "Mrs Gamble is upset, inspector, as you can probably imagine in the circumstances. Can we hurry up with the questions?"

The inspector keeps looking at Stephanie a moment longer, then shrugs as if it is no big deal and turns to me.

"Who found the body?" he asks.

1: "I did."

2: "Mrs Gamble did."

3: "One of the servants did."

> 1

"And what did you do then?"

"I checked him for a pulse and, upon finding none, I called the police."

"Ah." The inspector taps his pen on his knee as he says this. "Interesting."

I frown, not liking the sound of that. "What is?"

"You found Mr Gamble dead and your immediate reaction was to call the police. Why? Did you suspect foul play?"

1: "Of course not, inspector, but Mr Gamble was rich and the first thing that occurred to me when I saw him like that is that he had surprised a burglar."

2: "I had my suspicions."

> 1

The inspector looks at me. I can't tell for certain but I get the feeling he is disappointed with my answer, as if he expected me to say something else. He frowns. "I don't believe I have any other questions for now." He nods to the two of us and rises to his feet. "Oh, one last thing..."

I find myself leaning forward to listen to what he has to say.

"You're not planning on taking any trips, are you?"

Stephanie frowns. "Trips, inspector? You mean abroad?"

A quick nod.

"No, we- I'm not. Why - am I considered a suspect?"

The inspector merely shrugs. "At this stage, Mrs Gamble, Mr Rogers, everyone is a suspect."

...press a key...

We sit in silence for a few minutes after the inspector has gone, neither of us speaking. For myself, I am beginning to wonder if killing Wilfred Gamble was such a great idea after all.

Finally Stephanie breaks the silence: "fuck!"

I look at her. "That didn't go well."

"Well? It went fucking awful! Shit!" She gets up and paces. "He suspects something."

1: "He's an inspector investigating a possible murder. He was just asking questions. He can't prove a thing."

2: "I agree. We should deal with him."

3: "I agree but what can we do? I suggest we sit tight and hope for the best."

> 3

"The waiting's the worse part," Stephanie says. "Sitting here and wondering just how much they know. Fuck, Steve, they could know enough to put away for fucking years!"

"Calm down," I say. I sound calmer than her but I'm worried all the same. "They don't know a thing. We're fine."

But Stephanie looks less than reassured.

...press a key...

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

"About what?"

"About anything."

I'm crouched partway down the main stairs. They're wide, fifteen feet, and narrow enough so that, a couple of times, I've almost slipped on them myself. How some frail old fellow like

Gamble, who hobbles everywhere on a cane, manages to get up and down them is a mystery. A bigger mystery is the fact that he hasn't slipped and fallen down them himself.

I like to tell myself that I'm not really killing him. I'm just... well, hurrying on the natural progression of things. He's bound to slip and fall sooner or later. I'm just steering things towards the sooner.

I've been waiting almost half an hour, cramp digging into my back, when I hear the thump of his cane as he approaches the top of the stairs. About damn time, too. All I have to do now is...

...press a key...

The Night Of The Murder

I'm crouched partway down the stairs. They're wide, fifteen feet or so, and too narrow to be deemed safe.

> wait
A little time passes.

I duck back into the shadows as Gamble starts down the stairs, his cane thumping as he moves. He walks quickly, surprisingly quickly for a man of his years and apparent frailty, but then there are several things about miserable old Wilfred Gamble that I have never really understood.

Down the stairs he comes, down, down, and steps onto the patch of stairs I have varnished... and then carries on.

What the-

I almost curse out loud in annoyance. The stairs are so slippery you could practically skate down the damn things. And an eighty-two year old man with a bad leg and leaning on a cane has just stepped onto a patch of varnish and not even fallen?

"You," I hear a voice say.

...press a key...

Gamble has stopped and turned and is looking at me. I'm dressed all in black and hidden in the shadows but he's seen me all the same. (Later on, I'll wonder at that but right now I'm too tense.)

"You bastard," Gamble hisses, starting towards me. "Damn you, you bastard! You-"

That's as far as he gets before I surge at him. He raises his cane to strike me but I see it coming and grab it. For a second we struggle back and forth and there's a worrying moment when it seems he might even get the upper hand. An eighty-two year old man stronger than a man of forty in great physical condition? It hardly bears thinking about. But then I shove against him and Gamble stumbles, loses his balance, and falls. He crashes down the stairs. He makes an unholy cacophony as he goes. At the bottom, he comes to a rest against a wall and lies there. Unmoving.

...press a key...

And, finally, Gamble is dead.

I wait a minute or two, just to make sure he really is dead and not just unconscious. Whoever thought the old bastard had such fight in him?

I take a deep breath and study the crime scene the way I used to when I was a cop. I never did detective work - I was more a plod who worked the streets and called in the big boys every time something serious went down - but I was present at enough murder scenes to know the sort of things that are checked for.

I do some tidying up. I move a few things. I rearrange Gamble's body and smooth out the lines on his face. I check him for bruises (precious little I can do about them but it makes me feel a little better when I don't find any). Then, finally, I decide everything is ready.

"Mrs Gamble," I say into the intercom which links every room in the house. "I'm afraid I have some terrible news..."

...press a key...

"We have to be careful."

"Of course."

"We have to go about our business as if nothing has changed between us-"

"Of course."

"It was delivered this morning," says Stephanie when I ask her about the chest. "Some delivery people dropped it off."

"Who sent it?" I ask.

"Wilfred."

I approach the chest and check the delivery order that came with it. Wilfred's scrawl, barely legible but definitely his, is on it.

"Someone's messing with us," I say. "What's inside?"

Stephanie shrugs. "I haven't opened it yet." She doesn't meet my eyes. "I wanted to wait till you were here."

But a second later she excuses herself and leaves me alone in the room.

...press a key...

There are many rooms in the mansion I have never entered before and this is one of them. The maids sometime use it as a storage room for supplies and so the ever present smell of cleaning products permeates the air. The room itself is small and unremarkable: there are no windows and nothing in the way of decoration or scenery. A table pushed against one wall holds the chest that was delivered this morning.

> open chest

It takes several attempts to get the chest open. The hinges are stiff and at first I think it might even be locked, but then when I exert a bit of extra pressure I manage to force it open.

A rancid smell shoots out and I choke on dust. Waving my hands to clear it, I open wide the door to let the dust disperse. Then I approach the chest. It is empty aside from a scattering of the dust which flew out when I opened it, and a book, perhaps a diary of some sort, lying in the bottom.

> get diary

I flip through the pages, all of which seem blank. Ah! Near the back are a few entries:

8th June 2005

R thinks I'm a fool. But I'll show him. Just let him wait and see.

14th June 2005

Spoke to S. The bitch lied to me when I asked her where she'd been. She was 'at the library'. She must be mad if she thinks I'll believe that. I know she was with him.

16th June 2005

S threatened to leave me after I hit her. I'm stronger than I look. Felt good. Breaking her skin with my cane. Teach the bitch to disobey me. Told her sorry but lied. Not sorry. Looking forward to doing it again.

22nd June 2005

S's bed smells of sex. Not mine. Bitch. I'll kill her for this.

...press a key...

R? S? It's pretty obvious whose diary this is and that R is myself and S Stephanie. So Gamble wasn't quite as oblivious to our goings on as we thought. And Stephanie certainly never mentioned that he had hit her. Just as well. I'd have killed him a lot earlier if I'd known that.

I flick through the rest of the diary entries to see if there are any that are relevant. Nothing jumps out at me. Just Gamble's ramblings about his 'bitch' of a wife and how R was after his money. And your wife, you old bastard, I think with a smile.

Then I happen to glance at the final entry in the diary, and experience the kind of thing that I've often read about but never experienced before today: cold fingers running down my spine.

Today

Thought you'd killed me, did you, R? You stupid bastard. You don't know who you're dealing with. Look over your shoulder. I'll be coming for you soon.

...press a key...

"Like you said, someone's messing with us," says Stephanie. "We'll probably get a note demanding money or they blab on us next."

"That's what I thought initially," I say, "but now I'm not so sure." Something about the diary disturbed me. "Gamble knew about us. Why didn't he say anything?"

Stephanie shrugs as if she doesn't know or doesn't care. "Because he was senile. Because he was old. Because... oh, fuck, I don't know. Because he wasn't senile enough to think I really gave a shit about him but knew that he was still getting what he wanted - fucking me - so he didn't care about the rest of it."

1: "You never told me he hit you."

2: "We need to decide what we're going to do about this."

> 2

"Do? Nothing. I'm not paying a fucking thing." Stephanie reads over the final diary entry. "This isn't much of a fucking blackmail tool anyway. So Wilfred knew I was cheating on him? So what? It's hardly going to stand up in a court of law as proof that we killed him. That's assuming it's even his handwriting. It could be faked."

"It looks like his handwriting," I say.

"Who died and made you a fucking handwriting expert?" Stephanie throws the diary onto the floor. "Fuck 'em. They're not getting a thing."

...press a key...

"Black magic? Voodoo? Life after death?"

Gamble was watching a porn film when I entered his room. He was lying in bed, so wrapped up in blankets that he looked like an ancient mummy. His nurse hurried past me and out of the room. She looked like she'd been crying. (What qualifications she has to be a nurse I'm not sure but she wouldn't have looked out of place in a Playboy centrefold.)

"Sit down, Rogers," Gamble says, his attention focused not on me but on the 50" plasma screen where a couple of lesbians appear to be getting well acquainted.

I sit.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" he says.

I glance at the screen and nod. There's something deeply unpleasant about an eighty-two year old man who can't walk unaided spending his days watching women young enough to be his great grand daughters having sex with each other. If he was still capable of an erection, I imagine it would be lifting the bedclothes by several inches right now.

...press a key...

"My wife's beautiful, isn't she?" Gamble says.

He's asked this before and it doesn't bother me as much as it did when he first asked it.

"Very, sir."

"She'd be doing that sort of thing if I hadn't taken her in." He nods to the screen. "Filthy bitch she is. She'd fuck a dog if it paid her enough."

I maintain a carefully expressionless face.

Gamble goes on, "she fucks me after all. You fucked any beautiful women, Rogers?"

I nod. "A few, sir."

"I bet you're not still fucking them when you're my age." He gives a horrid croaking sound which I interpret as laughter. "Press the button."

I blink. "The-"

"On the video. Fuck, Rogers. I'm eighty-four and I know what I mean. Don't tell me senile dementia sets in early in your family."

I reach over and press the button. The picture on screen changes.

"This is a good one," says Gamble. "You'll like this one."

...press a key...

A woman walks onto the screen wearing nothing more than the kind of collar I've seen before in extreme bondage films. My mouth goes dry.

Stephanie.

"Take a look at what you'll never have." Gamble gives his dry, croaking laugh again. The Stephanie on screen begins to play with her body, exposing herself to the camera. Though I'm no stranger to porn, I find myself disturbed by this and look away.

Gamble laughs again. "Told you she was a fucking whore."

In the end, the decision to kill Gamble was an easy one to make. Not grabbing hold of him and snapping his scrawny neck there and then was the difficult part.

...press a key...

After the diary had showed up, I expected to receive a blackmail demand in the post the next day. When it didn't, I expected it the day after. It didn't. When a week had gone by, I found myself pacing the halls of the mansion and becoming steadily more frustrated. You might have thought that no blackmail demand would have calmed me down, but it didn't. The very fact that someone was playing games with us had me on edge and without a visible target to strike at, I was left feeling helpless. A blackmail demand would at least have given me something to focus on.

...press a key...

Corridor

A short corridor, nothing more than a connection between a study to the west and the dining room to the east.

I hear someone call my name from the dining room. One of the servants? It certainly wasn't Stephanie.

> e

I step into the dining room. It is empty. But as I look around uneasily, I catch sight of the door on the far side of the room swinging shut.

Dining Room

A table occupies most of the floor space in the dining room. Other than that, the furnishings are irrelevant aside from the doors to the west and north.

> n

I hurry through the door and find myself in another short corridor. But this one is dark. The bulb must have failed. As I look around, squinting in the darkness, I catch sight of a figure standing over by a covered window.

"Hello, Rogers," says a voice I know all too well. "So nice to see you again."

"Who are you?" I say, trying to see the figure but it is too dark here and the figure is wearing some kind of cowl which covers its features.

A dry, croaking laugh. "Oh, you know who I am, don't you?"

And I do. At least, I recognise the voice.

Wilfred Gamble.

...press a key...

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" I demand, trying to put as much force into my voice as possible. In a way, I'm glad I finally have something to take my anger out upon. Whoever this joker is, he's going straight from here to the morgue. "Step away from the window now-"

"Or what, Rogers?" the figure says. "You'll attack me? Your former employer?"

1: "You expect me to believe that you're really Wilfred Gamble? Try again. Gamble is dead."

2: "You're damn right I'll attack you. Now step away from the window if you know what's good for you."

3: Attack him and be done with it.

> 3

Almost before I realise what I'm doing, I lunge at the figure in the shadows and grab him by the throat. Or try to anyway. For the moment I seize hold of him, a stunning blow catches me on the back of the head and I find the shadows around me growing darker and darker and...

...press a key...

I come to later. I'm not sure how much later at first because all I can tell to begin with is that the back of my head hurts like hell and I'm lying awkwardly on the floor. My left side feels numb and I have to lie there for a minute or two before enough feeling returns for me to clamber, clumsily, to my feet. Of my attacker, there is no sign.

As I am trying to reason out what has happened, my mobile rings and I answer it with shaking hands. It is Stephanie: "Steve... come quick... something..."

The phone goes dead before she finishes.

...press a key...

Above Stephanie's bed hangs a portrait of her, painted when she first married Gamble. It's a very stylish portrait. The artist, whoever he or she was, has captured her perfectly. She's sitting astride a horse (she was actually on a chair but Gamble fancied the idea of her on a horse so he had the artist make a few adjustments) and waving a hat in the air.

That's the portrait that usually hangs there. Only today there is a different one in its place. Or, rather, the original one is still there but it has been altered.

"I heard something," Stephanie says, arms crossed. She's pacing, which she does when she's either very angry or very worried. Right now she doesn't seem angry. "And when I came to see what had happened, the paint was peeling off. Underneath... well, you can see what's underneath."

I can indeed.

...press a key...

It seems the canvas had been used before and the first portrait was not as flattering as the later one. Stephanie is naked in this one, riding a naked man (who, I notice, bears a remarkable resemblance to myself). Instead of a hat she has a knife in one hand. There are cuts and scratches all over her body which look to have been caused by the knife.

"What the fuck is this?" she says. She looks at the defaced portrait and shivers. "How in hell did someone get in here and mess it up like this? Haven't we got the best security in the country?"

I nod distantly. I'm not sure what to say myself.

"And were where you? I've been trying to call you all afternoon."

"I met someone," I say vaguely. Then I blink and come back to myself. "Or, rather, someone called my name and when I followed them, they... claimed to be Wilfred."

The look on her face tells me she doesn't know what to believe. "Wilfred? But he's..."

"Dead. And yet, this afternoon, someone broke into the house, bypassing the security systems, and masqueraded as Wilfred Gamble. And when I tried to grab him, he..." I can't say 'disappeared' because that would make me sound crazy. "Got away."

...press a key...

Stephanie looks at me. "You're bleeding," she says. "The side of your head..."

"He hit me. Whoever he was. But it looks worse than it is." A lie. It feels a lot worse than it looks.

Stephanie gives me another look. I sense she knows I'm holding something back but she's too shaken to press me for details right now.

"Someone's messing with us," she says, echoing my words when the chest was delivered to us. "Someone. Is. Messing. With. Us." She clenches her hands into fists. "Do you have any idea who?"

"No." I stare at the painting, at what has been done to it. I remember the figure I saw earlier today. I'm not a man who scares easily but, right now, if Stephanie was to suggest that we pack our bags and flee, I'd be the first one out the door. "No idea at all."

...press a key...

Segment of report written by Detective Hanratty:

'Believe that Steven Rogers killed Wilfred Gamble. Not sure about wife. Shall keep a close eye on them both...'

I was checking the surveillance equipment when the inspector returned. I was going over the events of the previous day, trying to find some sign of my mystery assailant. And I was finding... nothing. It was impossible, of course, that the figure didn't show up on any of the security cameras around the mansion. Sure, they didn't cover every square inch of the building - there were always blind spots - but I was clearly visible on them. It was just the figure missing. There was even a worrying clip of footage, less than a minute long, where I can be seen talking, and then pausing as if someone is speaking to me, and then I am talking again. But who I am talking to is both invisible and silent.

...press a key...

I'm no expert when it comes to surveillance equipment unfortunately. I know how to set up a system and how to use it, but the intricacies of an advanced security system are beyond my meagre knowledge. But even I know that no one could have broken into the mansion again last night and edited out any reference or mention to himself in the footage, at the same time as leaving me and the rest of the surroundings intact. So what does that leave? That I followed a man who is both invisible and silent to all manner of surveillance equipment? Or, simply, that he wasn't there at all and I am losing my mind?

When the knock on the door came, it was almost a relief because it broke me free from my thoughts. But when the maid showed in the inspector, my relief rapidly evaporated.

"Mrs Gamble is out shopping," I said.

"It's you I'm here to see, Rogers," said the inspector. 'Rogers' he called me. Not 'Mr Rogers'. Just 'Rogers'. "If you have a moment..."

...press a key...

I'm tempted to tell him I don't but that would be foolish. At present he might have his suspicions but he has no evidence or he'd have hauled my ass down to the police station before now. So long as I keep him just suspicious, I'm fine.

"Sure," I said. I waved to an empty seat. "Please..."

He sat down. Then he looked around the room. "Nice setup here. All this surveillance equipment. Pity none of it showed Mr Gamble being killed."

1: "As I explained to you before, inspector, the equipment isn't perfect. And there are blind spots. Mr Gamble was just unlucky."

2: "Mr Gamble wasn't killed, inspector. He was merely old and he died of natural causes. As simple as that."

> 2

"My friend is a coroner," says the inspector. "Nice fellow. Has a couple of dogs. Good with children. I had dinner with him last evening and we talked over the case, as we often do. It's good to air your views and listen to what others have to say about them. He's not entirely convinced that Mr Gamble's death was natural causes. He thinks there might be some suspicion of foul play. He suspects Mr Gamble might well have been killed in such a way as to make it appear to be of natural causes. Now, my friend likes to read detective novels and is forever seeing skeletons in the closet where none exist. He likes to jump to conclusions without first researching his theories. I am not like my friend. I am slow and methodical and exact. But I, too, believe that there is more to the untimely demise of Mr Wilfred Gamble than 'death by natural causes'. I was especially interested to note the reference to you, Rogers, in Mr Gamble's will."

1: "I was mentioned in Mr Gamble's will? You must be mistaken."

> 1

"No. Not mistaken at all, Rogers. You seem surprised. Why, if I didn't know better I'd swear you'd read it."

I say nothing and keep my face carefully neutral.

Unfortunately, the inspector doesn't care to enlighten me any further. Instead he says, "you've got a chequered background, Rogers. I've done some digging and you're hardly an angel, now are you?"

1: "I've served in the police, the army and the SAS, inspector. I've been called upon to do some... unpleasant things. It goes with the job."

> 1

"Yes. Impressive record. But it's not the things you've been called upon to do that interests me, Rogers, but, rather, the things you've decided to do that I'm sure you never ordered to."

"Such as?" I have to admit, he has me rattled now. That comment about me being included in Gamble's will has thrown me off balance. And he's right about my background being chequered. I just wonder how much he knows.

"Oh. That fellow you killed. What was his name...?"

1: "Seamus O'Riley."

> 1

"Yes, that's the fellow. You killed him in a pub brawl from what I gather."

I shrug. "It was unfortunate what happened but the courts exonerated me afterwards. It was self defence."

"Lucky for you I wasn't on the jury," the inspector says, and the smile now is definitely gone. "You were trained by the SAS to kill a man with a hit to certain nerve centres and then you get into a fight with a man and, accidentally, kill him."

I shift uncomfortably. "It was self defence. I was tried and found not guilty. End of story."

"Is it?"

1: "It is. Now if you don't mind, inspector, I have work to do..."

2: "Why don't you cut to the chase and tell me what's really on your mind, inspector."

> 2

The inspector studies me closely without any expression registering on his face. Then, finally, he says, "I could arrest you now, Rogers, and drag you down the station and question you in a horrible little room we call 'The Box'. It's quite dark in there as the light doesn't work very well. It's also cold and drafty. And, I might add, somewhat dank. But I get the impression that you're the sort of man who will lawyer up at the first opportunity he gets, so that's one card I'm going to save for later in the game. At the moment, I suspect you killed Mr Gamble in order to allow his wife to inherit his fortune. But, lucky for you, Rogers, I can't prove it yet. But I will. Given time, I will."

I keep a carefully neutral expression until he leaves, then the moment he is out of the door I put my head in my hands and wonder just what I am going to do.

...press a key...

... fragment scribbled in the margin of a journal of Wilfred Gamble's, found not long after his death...

"I believe I have discovered a way...

...to live again..."

They had had a blazing row. Now there was nothing unusual in that, as Gamble and Stephanie tended to have blazing rows almost every day. In fact, an entire day that went by without a row was a rare occurrence. But this one was a real bastard of a row and even though I was in my quarters at the time, at the far end of the mansion, I could hear them yelling. For an old guy, Wilfred Gamble sure knew how to yell when he felt the need.

My usual procedure during the times when the Gambles rowed was to quietly carry on with my job and pretend I wasn't aware of anything. All the staff did that. I had once held a discussion about cricket with the gardener while Stephanie had smashed a priceless china set in the next room because of something Gamble had said to her.

But this time...

I was aware of my breathing a sigh of relief when the argument finally ended. My job here was to protect Stephanie, and every time they had one of their rows, I wondered if this was going to be the time when she left him. And I ended up out of a job. So when the argument ended without Stephanie storming out of the mansion, I relaxed a little.

A second later, the door opened and in she came.

...press a key...

She had been crying at some point but her face was livid. She still looked beautiful though. Heck, you could have covered her in horseshit and she'd still have looked better than any of half a dozen centrefolds I could have named.

"Stephanie-" I said. She had insisted I call her by her first name as Mrs Gamble made her sound like a crotchety old hag.

"I hate him," she said. She paced back and forth. I could practically hear her teeth grinding together. "I fucking hate him. So help me god, if I had a gun-"

...press a key...

My Quarters

They're nothing special, my quarters. Gamble has a mansion with over a hundred rooms and a good two dozen of these are the kind of suites you get in five star hotels, but the quarters he had given to me were functional (and that was being kind). Take away the TV, stereo and bookcase and the room would be just about empty.

A door to the north leads to my bedroom and another to the west to the corridor running along the length of the mansion. Both are currently closed.

Stephanie is here, looking more agitated than I have ever seen her before.

> talk to stephanie

"That miserable old cunt," she says. "That... miserable... old... cunt!" The last word is almost shouted. "I hate him, I hate him, I hate him. God, give me a fucking gun and so help me god I'd."

1: "What did he do?"

2: "You need to calm down."

> 1

"What didn't he do? He's always been a sick old pervert, but today..." She shakes her head. "Let's just say that there are certain things I'm not doing, and I don't give a fuck if he divorces me and kicks me out into the street without a damn thing, I'm not doing them!"

1: "You need to calm down."

> 1

"Don't tell me to fucking calm down, Steve! You don't tell me what to do! I'm in fucking charge here! I'm..." And then, like a balloon being burst, the anger just goes out of her and she sinks into a chair and puts her head in her hands. She mutters something.

"Stephanie?"

She looks at me. Her eyes are red with tears and her makeup has run down her face, giving her a horrid Gothic look. "I said sorry. Make the most of it. I don't apologise very often."

Which is certainly true but I don't point this out.

"It's not your fault," Stephanie says. "God knows, I imagine you hate the old bastard as much as I do."

Also true. But I've never been sure about speaking ill of Gamble in his mansion. I know about his surveillance equipment and the way he likes to eavesdrop on Stephanie's conversations.

But is he really likely to be eavesdropping on this one?

1: "I hate him as well."

2: Say something non-committal.

> 1

Stephanie looks at me. I'm not sure what to make of the look on her face. It's cold, calculating. I can see her thinking about something.

Then she says, "you've killed men before haven't you, Steve?"

1: "One man. Years ago. In self defence."

2: Say nothing.

> 1

Stephanie leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She's wearing a low cut dress (the only kind of dress she ever seems to wear) and her breasts strain against the fabric.

"What was it like?" she asks.

"Killing the man?"

She nods. "Tell me. I've heard it's like the best sex you ever had. The adrenalin rush. The feeling that you've just killed another human being. But what's it really like?"

1: Tell the truth. The loathing I felt for myself afterwards, the sickness. The regret when I met the man's parents.

2: Say it was the best damn thing I ever did.

> 2

"Fuck, I bet it was," says Stephanie, eyes aglow. "I've read about it, of course. There's a bit in your file about it, but it's all cold and lifeless. It's not like being there. Nothing like it." She walks over to me and sits in my lap. I can feel her body pressing against my own and, damnit, I can feel my own body reacting. "Was it better than sex?"

I try to say something but instead she lowers her mouth onto mine and kisses me and, after that, all further thoughts of conversation just seem irrelevant.

...press a key...

I relived the killing dream from time to time. I'm not sure why. I don't feel any special remorse for the man I had killed - after all, he was trying to kill me and if I'd been a fraction slower, it was me that would have died that day. But it's surprising just how often the dream comes back to me and disturbs my sleep. Sometimes, I'm a helpless spectator, able to see what is going on but unable to affect the course of events one iota. Other times...

...press a key...

Before...

I'm seated at a table in the corner of the tavern, sipping a cold beer that tastes like sludge and looks worse. The rancid smell of too many pipes hovers in the air. Somewhere, someone is

dancing a jig and people are laughing and clapping and someone else is playing an instrument. Everything seems very jolly.

> stand

I leave my seat and go to stand by the bar.

I am by the bar, along with four other customers who do such a good job of ignoring me it's like I have been suddenly struck invisible. The bartender, a gruff fellow with ruddy cheeks, does his likewise best to pretend he has not even seen me, despite the fact that he served me a drink not more than ten minutes ago. A door to the west leads outwards.

> wait

Time passes...

> wait

Time passes...

> wait

Time passes...

The door bangs open and in staggers none other than Seamus O'Riley, the local hothead. I was warned about him when I was posted to this small village in the middle of nowhere. "Dangerous", someone told me. "Crazy", another said. Seamus is only sixteen but big for his age, and strong, and with a temper that explodes faster than dynamite when provoked. And it takes little to provoke Seamus O'Riley into a temper.

As I am about to discover.

"Beer! Now!" he barks, and from tone, and the look in his eyes, I can well imagine this won't be his first beer of the day.

The bartender frowns but pours Seamus a beer.

Seamus takes it, spills half of it over the bar and curses.

"Ye!" he snaps, looking at me. "Ye nudged me arm, ye bastid!"

"I did nothing of the sort," I say.

"Lyin' bastid!" He steps up to me, no doubt hoping to impress me with his size. He might be ten years my junior but he tops me by a good six inches. "Buy me a beer, ye bastid, or I'll black ye eyes, so 'elp me God!"

And the rest of the tavern, predictably, goes on doing its level best to pretend I am not even there.

> kill seamus

It seems Seamus intends to cause trouble and, right now, I'm more than happy to oblige. I raise my hands in a placating gesture, then draw them together over my head and slam them down into Seamus' forehead. The blow should drive him to his knees or knock him outright unconscious. Either suits me fine.

Only it seems I underestimated Seamus' strength because while the blow staggers him, it doesn't knock him from his feet and it certainly doesn't send him crashing into unconsciousness. Instead, he fumbles in his pocket for a knife, snarls, "gonna cut ye, bastid!"

Gonna cut ye good!" and comes lumbering at me. I grab for the knife. The two of us grapple for it, back and forth along the bar.

...press a key...

Seamus is bigger than me and stronger, but he's never been trained to fight. I have. I ram my fingers in his solar plexus and slam my other hand against the hand he is carrying the knife with. He gurgles and staggers back. I grab the knife off him. Seamus roars, seizes a mug of ale from the bar and swings it at my head like a club. I dodge but beer splashes in my eyes. Then the big man is crashing into me and we are smashing into a table and falling to the floor, and, somewhere in the back of my mind is the knowledge that I have a knife in my hand and Seamus' throat is bare inches away from me, and I raise the knife and stab and stab and stab and...

And then I am crouched in a corner of the tavern and Seamus is lying several feet away from me, his throat a bloody mess. One hand opens and closes spasmodically but Seamus O'Riley is no longer a threat.

...press a key...

Requiem

I hadn't even been aware that the phone was ringing. It was only when I heard Stephanie talking to someone that I came to my senses enough and realised she was on the phone. She was sat up in bed beside me, the phone pressed to her ear, her face shadowy in the darkened room but looking worried.

"... I understand," I heard her say. "But... I don't... how can you..."

I blinked away tiredness, ran a hand over my face, and sat up.

Stephanie didn't even seem to notice me.

"Stephanie," I said. "Who is it?"

She didn't answer me.

"Stephanie?"

She handed the phone to me without a word.

"Who is this?" I asked. "Why are you calling us at this time-"

The voice, when it spoke, stopped me dead in my tracks.

"Hello again, Rogers," said Wilfred Gamble.

...press a key...

It is cold beneath the apple tree. Cold, damp, dark. The mansion is visible off to one side, silhouetted against the sky, the moon hanging above it, its light chilling me even more. Stephanie stands to one side of me.

"I'm frightened," says Stephanie.
I don't respond.

> wait
Time passes...

> wait
Time passes...

> wait
Time passes...

> wait
Time passes...

A cool wind blows and suddenly I am aware that someone else is here. Where before there was just the two of us, Stephanie and myself, now there is a third person here. He stands in the shadows, clad in what appears to be a long overcoat.

"So nice of you to agree to meet me out here," says the figure.

1: "Who are you?"

> 1
The figure takes a step forward, and the light from the moon shines on the face of Wilfred Gamble.

Stephanie gives a cry and sinks to her knees on the ground.

"You seem surprised to see me, Rogers," says Gamble, looking at me with a sneer. "Did you think I was dead?"

1: "I know for a fact you're dead. I killed you."

> 1
"And yet here I stand, to all intents and purposes alive. It seems you were mistaken when you thought you'd killed me-"

1: "You're not Wilfred Gamble. I don't know who the hell you are but Wilfred Gamble is dead."

> 1
The figure smiles. It's the same smile Gamble used to display when he was amused about something. "Yes. He is. Or, rather, I am. Or was." He smiles again. "It gets so confusing. You'd think after this many times, I'd get the terminology right."

1: "You're making no sense, Gamble."

> 1

"Ah, so you're calling me 'Gamble' now. That's a start at least."

I take a step back as the figure moves towards me. He looks like Gamble, he talks like Gamble, he even has Gamble's mannerisms, but...

1: "You never died, did you?"

> 1

"Oh, but I did. I died, Rogers. You killed me. I'm hurt you seem to forget the incident, but then you weren't the one pushed down the stairs, were you? You bastard. I'd hate you, Rogers, if I hadn't had the same thing planned for you all along."

1: "What are you talking about?"

> 1

Gamble laughs. "Why don't you tell him, Stephanie?"

I look at Stephanie where she kneels on the ground. Her face is downcast. Her hands curled into fists.

"I thought you were really dead this time," she says.

"What are you talking about, Stephanie?" I demand. "Damn it, you're making even less sense than him!"

"This was planned all along, Rogers," says Gamble, and I look back at him. He's moved closer, taking two steps towards me for every one I take away from him. "You just moved faster than I thought."

1: "What was planned all along?"

> 1

"I'm old," says Gamble. "Old and dying. I hate this body. This withered, twisted, decaying, desiccated corpse. It's weak, it's painful to keep breathing, to keep moving. To keep... alive. But you, Rogers. You're young and healthy. Yours is a body I could live in quite easily."

1: "What-"

> 1

"Do it, Stephanie," says Gamble, and I turn as I sense a movement behind me.

Stephanie stands there, an iron bar in her hands. "Wilfred-"

"Do it, you stupid whore!" Gamble hisses. "Do it now, or so help me god, you'll suffer the same fate as this fool!"

Stephanie wipes a hand across her face, clutches the iron bar, and takes a step towards me. I try to move away, but my body betrays me, it stands there, it refuses to duck, or turn aside, as Stephanie raises the iron bar above her head and-

Brings it crashing down on Gamble's skull with a sound like a gun firing.

...press a key...

The paralysis breaks and I can move again. I stagger, almost fall. Stephanie is hitting Gamble again and again, even though he has collapsed, pounding the bar into his head and back and

shoulders. She is panting from the exertion but seems determined to keep on hitting Gamble till there is nothing left.

"Enough," I say, and grab her arm.

She spins to face me, and for a moment I fear she is about to attack me. But then she gives a cry, throws the bar down and herself into my arms.

"We need to burn the body," she says.

"Stephanie, he's dead-

"Burn it!" she repeats. "Burn it till there's nothing left."

"Very well."

...press a key...

"You want an explanation," she says.

I nod.

It is the next day. I feel tired and drawn. Last night was spent burning the corpse of a man I had already believed dead. Then burying the charred remains. I can smell the stench of burnt flesh on my clothes and body and suspect that no amount of cleaning will rid me of it.

"I saved you in the end," says Stephanie, offering me a nervous smile.

"You almost caved my head in with an iron bar," I tell her.

She stops smiling.

"Tell me what this was all about."

Stephanie takes a deep breath and begins, "I don't understand it all myself. The things Wilfred could do, the things he knew, or even how old he really was. I just know what he told me, and I bet the bastard didn't tell me the half of it."

1: "What was he planning to do with me?"

2: "Was that really Wilfred Gamble we buried last night?"

> 1

"His body was dying. He wanted another one." She looks at me and says, "he wanted yours."

"As simple as that? He just intended to... what, rip my soul out and step into it himself?"

"Something like that."

1: "And what would have happened to me?"

> 1

"He never told me, but I think the whole process involves some kind of... transfer."

"I don't follow you."

"A transfer. If his soul goes into your body, I think yours goes into his."

"So he becomes forty and I become eighty-two?"

She nods. "But without any of his knowledge."

1: "How does he do these things?"

> 1

"You think he told me? He didn't. He was paranoid as hell about stuff like that. But I used to sneak into his study when he wasn't there, and I had spares cut of all his keys, and I found a lot of stuff that put two and two together for me."

1: "Such as?"

2: "Forget that. Why didn't you tell me about this beforehand?"

> 1

"Books. Really old books. Some were hundreds of years old and there were a couple that felt like..." She grimaces. "Like they were made from flesh. Human flesh. I felt sick just touching them. There were passages in each of them that Wilfred had marked, passages on resurrection and soul transfer and life after death. There was your name there as well."

1: "He'd been planning this since I first came to work for him?"

> 1

Stephanie nods. "He said you were ideal. Young, strong, no history of disease or disability in your family. You didn't smoke or drink heavily. You didn't do drugs. No heart problems and you were very rarely ill."

"I feel like something he saw in a shop window and decided to buy."

"In a way you were. That's how he saw you anyway, Steve. You were what he needed, so you got the job."

"And if I'd been older, or uglier, or..."

"He'd have hired someone else."

"Shit." I run my hands over my face.

1: "Why didn't you tell me about this beforehand?"

> 1

"You wouldn't have believed me. I can see it in your eyes, Steve. You don't really believe it now. Even though you saw Wilfred last night, a man you killed and who was buried two months ago, you're still trying to figure out if this is some kind of elaborate hoax. Well, it's not. It's real. It happened. Deal with it."

1: "That's not the whole reason you didn't tell me."

> 1

"No, it isn't." Stephanie looks away and sighs. "I was afraid. I hated him. I fucking did. I hated everything about him. The way he was, the way he talked to me, the things he made me do..." She winces. "I wanted him dead and I wanted you to be the one to help me kill him."

1: "But why not tell me the truth about him? Even after he was dead, you didn't tell me what was going on."

> 1

"Like I said, you wouldn't have believed me. If I'd come to you, Steve, the day after we killed Wilfred and told you he wasn't really dead. That we might have killed his body but his soul, or his spirit, or whatever, was still alive, would you have believed me? No. You'd have thought I was mad. Or that I was worried over what we'd done and was trying to justify it somehow. I didn't want to get on your wrong side, Steve. You're a scary man. So I just kept quiet and let you believe he was really dead, all the time I tried to figure out just what the fuck we did next."

1: "How did he do it then? His returning from the grave trick?"

2: "You could have warned me, Stephanie. Damn it, I could have died last night and would have without the slightest clue what was going on."

> 1

"I wish I knew. I thought that when he died, that would be it. I wasn't sure, of course, as I'd read his journals and his other books, but I hoped it was true. That he was dead. That I was rid of him. I don't know how he managed to come back. Maybe..."

1: "Maybe what?"

> 1

"The graveyard. Was his body really in the coffin?"

I shrug. "I don't know. It was a closed coffin funeral so no one saw inside the coffin. But what are you suggesting? That he crawled out of the coffin and filled it with someone else's body so none of the pallbearers would be any the wiser? That sounds more than a bit unlikely, Steff."

"Then I don't know, Steve. I don't know how he did it. Maybe he just made himself another body. Or found one and changed it so it looked like his."

1: "And now... is he well and truly gone or are we going to face him again soon?"

> 1

"I..." Stephanie shrugs and I can see in that one small gesture just how scared she really is. "I don't know. Shit, I don't. We burnt the body but whether that killed his soul, I don't know. I... I guess we just wait, and hope, that this time he's really gone."

1: "Let's talk about last night. You had that iron bar with you, and if I'm not mistaken, you were going to use it on me. What changed your mind?"

> 1

Stephanie frowns. She doesn't say anything for almost a minute. She just sits there, marshalling her thoughts. Then she says, "I think I fell in love with you, Steve."

I wait, sure there's more.

There is.

"When Wilfred first contacted me and I found out he wasn't dead, he told me what he wanted me to do. He told me how everything was going to play out and if I didn't want to share the same fate as you, I'd go along with him. I agreed."

1: "After I'd killed him for you, you agreed to kill me for him."

> 1

"But I didn't!" she says. "I couldn't. Not at the end. It was either him or you, Steve, and I chose you. I chose you!" She comes to me, kneels before me, puts her hands on my legs. "Don't leave me, Steve. Not now. I killed him for you. For us. So we could be together..."

I look at her. Stephanie Gamble: beauty, exciting, sexy... and deadly. I thought I knew her, thought I could read her like a book, but she has hidden depths I never even guessed at. Under the circumstances, I guess I can understand why she did the things she did, but at the same time I'm not sure I can ever really trust her again. What if Gamble isn't really dead and offers her a proposal: slit my throat during the night and he'll forgive her? Or what if something else

happens that makes her question where her loyalties lie. She is treacherous, I realise. Beautiful but treacherous.

1: "I think this is where we go our separate ways, Stephanie. Goodbye."

2: "Let's give it another try."

> 2

Stephanie smiles. "You won't regret this, Steve. I promise you you won't."

I lift her up and kiss her. "I know I won't, Stephanie. Not for a second."

...press a key...

That night, I lie in bed next to her, staring at the ceiling and wondering. Wondering if I have made the right decision. I feel tense and uneasy. Unsure. I am not used to being unsure. I am usually in control of my emotions, of my life, of my destiny. Having doubts is a new sensation for me, and not one I care for.

I caress Stephanie where she lies, running my hand over her naked form, drinking her in with my eyes. I will watch her, this treacherous bitch whom I have chosen to stay with. I love her... but I don't trust her. I doubt I ever will. I will watch her like a hawk. I will follow her, I will listen in on her telephone conversations, I will read her mail, I will run background checks on everyone she meets or does business with. And at the first hint that she is anything less than 100% with me... I will break her neck.

...press a key...

> 2

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...press a key...

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...press a key...

Mortality has ended, and if you are reading this then well done. You've managed to reach one of the two good endings in the game.

Thanks for playing and I hope you enjoyed it!

Game Information & Credits

Mortality written with ADRIFT V4, Release 46
Started: December 2003; Finished: August 2005
The latest version of this game can always be found at:
<http://www.shadowvault.net/mortality.htm>
E-Mail: dwhyld@gmail.com

KB: 70; Rooms: 32; Objects: 139; Tasks: 473; Events: 5; Characters: 4

Beta-tested by Stefan Donati (Shuarian), Robert Rafgon and Timmon. Thanks also to Mark J. Tilford for fixing a problem that prevented the game working under jAsea and general advice.

Information For Players New To ADRIFT

If *Mortality* is the first ADRIFT game you've played, the following might make it somewhat easier to get things working the way they should.

(Note: this applies to the ADRIFT Runner working under Windows)

The ADRIFT default is green text on a black background. If you dislike this, you can change it to something better by selecting Options -> Display & Media from the toolbar at the top of the screen. The various colour settings can be changed here.

Mortality's font is set to Times New Roman point 12. This can also be changed in the Options -> Display & Media panel. Select Always Use My Font then change it to something more to your liking.

To turn on ADRIFT's transcript facility, select Adventure -> Start Transcript. By default, transcripts are saved in the same directory as where the ADRIFT program files are stored (i.e. C:\Program Files\ADRIFT).