Last Thanksgiving

A brief roleplaying game
by Tim C Koppang

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A Brief Roleplaying Game for Two People by Tim C Koppang. You will need a friend, a deck of cards, and a comfortable space.

First, prepare the deck of cards by removing all the ♠ and ♦. Likewise, remove the 10♣ and 10♥. You will now have a deck of 24 cards consisting of the A through 9, and J, Q, K, of ♣ and ♥. Shuffle the deck and divide it in two. Add one Joker to each half, shuffle the halves separately, and then stack one half on top of the other. Place the full deck face-down in the center of the table. Deal three cards face-up such that the deck and face-up cards form the four points of a compass. If a Joker turns up in the initial deal, draw another card before slotting the Joker randomly back into the top half of the deck.

Second, read through these instructions and let your friend know that both of you will be telling a joint story with one main character. You will both share this main character, each fully in control when it is your respective turn. When it is not your turn, you are expected to give suggestions and play the other characters in the story.

Third, begin the game by reading the following aloud to your friend, who will start in the role of the main character:

It is a cool day in November, nearly Thanksgiving, and you are on your way to visit with family. You are walking along a wooded path, one you've travelled before. The sky is bright, but the remaining foliage overhead scatters the light on the gravel path in front of you. There are no forks; the path is straight and stretches onward beyond your vision.

Fourth, your friend should take a moment to define a few things about the main character in this story because, as of now, both of you know only the sparsest of details. Name? Clothing? Gender? The sound of their voice? Decide quickly, and leave all other features for later. Then have your friend read the following aloud to you:

As I walk, I feel the wind cut to my skin with a familiar chill. Hugging my outer layer, I turn to adjust the collar of my shirt and notice an old tree stump. "Let's sit a while," I say to you. Wait, how did you get here? Now that I'm thinking about it, how did I get here in the first place? I know this path, for sure. I know my family is down that way. I know you — at least I think I know you. In the trees to my right there is a rustling and the glint of… Water? An animal? Or another visitor? Let's try you: "Who did you say you were again? I'm sorry to offend, but my head feels a bit woozy. Too much travel, I guess." That's it. No suspicion. Don't give anything away. Keep a straight face. Better be careful.

Fifth, answer the main character's question however you like. Make an introduction, or don't. The choice is yours, and the game is now properly underway. There are no wrong answers, but you should both work to drive the story forward. Perhaps there is something in the woods. Perhaps you are not the only ones there. Narrate as you like, either from the perspective of your characters or in general. Fill in the details, and take chances. However, you may not reach your destination until the end of the game, and whenever you want to know more about the main character's history, you must do two things. Read on.

Sixth, to find out about the main character's past, you must select a face-up card and then switch roles. Whoever asks the question, points to a face-up card and then draws a random card off the top of the deck. The card selected determines the memory, which you should outline with specifics before drawing. The card drawn determines whether that memory is lost or found. After assessing the cards, but before narrating further, switch roles. If the memory is lost, move on without further narration. If the memory is found, play it out briefly as a flashback. Find some way to relate the flashback to the ongoing story; then return to the present time, using any new information gained as you like.

If you draw a ♣, the memory is about yourself. If you draw a ♥, then the memory involves someone you know (or knew). Face-cards always involve someone close to you. The card rank defines the shape of the memory:

A	A struggle to overcome.	7	A tragedy, found out too late.
2	An excursion.	8	An accomplishment.
3	An overwhelming feeling.	9	A joyous event, witnessed.
4	A mundane habit, broken.	J	Your spouse.
5	An opportunity, missed or taken.	Q	Your child.
6	A disagreement, unresolved.	K	Your parent.

If the card selected is in the first position clockwise from the deck, then drawing A–3 : the memory is lost. If the card selected is in the second position, drawing A–6 : the memory is lost. If the card selected is in the third position, drawing A–9 : the memory is lost. If you draw a Joker, place it in front of you to keep, and then draw a new card.

After drawing, discard the selected memory and the drawn card. Rotate all remaining face-up cards clockwise to fill in the empty space. Finally, replace the empty first position with a new memory from the top of the deck.

Finally, the game ends when you draw the second Joker. If one person has both, then the main character arrives safely at the family home. If the Jokers are split between the two of you, the main character is lost. Decide on and narrate a few details to explain the main character's confusion if you haven't already. Who is the stranger? Who or what is in the woods? Use all of the details you have discovered so far, but stay in the moment. In other words, do not create an epilogue. Tie up any loose ends — or don't. Unresolved issues can remain, but you should create a satisfying ending. ✍