

A Serpent of Ash

An live-action role-playing scenario by J. Tuomas Harviainen

GENERAL INFORMATION

This larp's emphasis is heavily on discourse. So if you're looking for action, it may not be for you.

A Serpent of Ash was originally created as a part of the Test Project on Larp Theories and Methods, and first run in Finland, at Ropecon 2006. It was designed to test the Process Model of Role-playing (Mäkelä et al., 2005).

The larp will last for a maximum of two hours, but if it would be logical for your character to leave the room before that, feel free to do so and stick around at the edge so you can see and hear what happens.

The game mechanics used is called "FreeComm". Essentially, pain hurts and death kills. If you need to share off-game information, do it with statements that start with the word "Meta". (For example: "Meta: I hit you", after which the punch is performed through acting; or: "Meta: We've had an affair, right?" "Meta: Yeah.")

If some information you consider necessary is missing from the character data, feel free to invent it if it does not directly affect your character's relationship to the others and/or Timothy.

This is version 1.5-English, laid out by Jason Morningstar

THE CHARACTERS

All are about 25 years old now. The jobs and studies given are as you remember them being five years ago.

Pick from among those not crossed out by the organizer, cross it out in turn, and give your character a name that starts with the letter given in the description. Take a name tag and the booklet corresponding to your letter.

A Timothy's "favorite disciple", despite not being a member of the inner circle. Studied chemistry.

E The most talkative member of the Liberated. Even more active than the others in everything. Was unemployed at the time.

H Helpful, like an extra mom/dad who would always give you comfort. Studied mathematics.

I Friendly and helpful. Married one of the other cult members (Jimmy/Joanna) three months before Timothy died. A waiter/waitress.

J The best recruiter. Talkative and friendly. Studied to become a pharmacist.

K Silent and unpredictable. Quick to anger. Sports masseur.

L Happy, sunny and supportive. Hugged a lot. Studied to become a teacher.

M Always asking for more information and guidance, very curious. Was a temp at city libraries. The person who organized this get-together.

N An idealist who wanted to save everyone. More eager as a recruiter than what (s)he actually had talent for. Did occasional short-term jobs; no higher education.

P Usually shy, but social amongst friends. A nurse.

R Determined, might have been Timothy's successor if given a few more years. Spoke sparsely but with precision. Studied political history.

S Over-eager. Laughed a lot. Always in a good mood. Home assistance worker.

No one from Timothy's small inner circle is here today. You do not know why.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR RUNNING THIS GAME (GM ONLY)

This game is intended for 6-12 players. If there are less than twelve, remove characters as follows:

11: remove S

10: remove E and L

9: remove E, L and S

8: remove E, I, L and S

7: remove E, I, L, P and S

6: remove E, I, K, L, P and S; (yes, this indeed leaves the killer out)

Make sure everyone has a nametag. They can be present also in-game, as the characters do not remember much about each other. This is intentional. The Liberated are based on a real-life cult and the material has been designed according to scientific psychological and sociological research conducted on former cult members, and the situation seeks to represent the social reality of such people meeting again. The descriptions that are given about other characters correspond strongly with what people in real life seem to remember. The location has likewise chosen on a similar basis; if you need to change it, make sure you select a prominent university town. Cults of this type are especially active in those, as religious students who lack a sense of community in their new home town are particularly easy prey.

Despite the fact that the available information should be limited, the players have the right to invent any missing information. Anything that directly affects the potential plots (such as deciding "I killed Timothy") is of course prohibited, but there are no other limits. Make sure they understand this.

Two notes on religion:

1. At all European runs, it has been essential to keep the believer and apparent believer characters in a definite majority. This is due to the fact that even in heavily Roman Catholic countries, players have had a much easier time finding arguments against than for the cult's faith. In areas where atheism and criticism of religion aren't as common or as accepted, the situation may be very different.

2. The larp has been designed so that it does not require more than a passing knowledge of dogma or the Bible. The cult is basically a Christian one, but the characters have been successfully played by people of different faiths without any problems. If any of your players feel that the material is offensive to their personal faith or that they cannot objectively participate in the game due to a religious bias or a problem with how the game may create potential non-heterosexual relationships, please ask them not to participate. This game is about the distorting effect cults have on their members' lives and the way they manipulate faith, not a comment on the Christian religion or sexual orientation.

BEFORE THE GAME BEGINS: PREPARATION AND INITIAL PLAY

Ascertain that people understand the rather simple rules system. Everyone should have at least a mug or cup of some kind and access to both drinking water and a toilet. The game does not include or need any props besides the drinking vessels, and absolutely no character should have a weapon of any kind with them.

The player of the meeting organizer (M) should choose how the game area is prepared. It is supposed to be a meeting room that M has rented for this purpose, and the seating order (s)he chooses will have a definite impact on the larp. Have a few chairs more than there are players, in order to make it possible for the characters to change seating. After the room is ready, select one off-game spot where the players of characters who have walked out from the meeting can see how the game ends. The game begins with the people arriving to the meeting, with M already being there to welcome them. This helps establish the sense of broken community and creates a tension the players can then build upon.

Experience has shown that this is optimally a 1.5 hour game. If there is a suitable moment after that mark, feel free to end the game. The discourse will very likely start to go on circles with nothing apparently happening well before that, but let the situation run its course. Do not interfere with the game in any way while it is being played, but if players want discrete clarifications on some points, do give them.

There is absolutely no intended plot in the larp, only seeds of potential plotlines and intrigues that the players may dig up. In some runs, the killer has been revealed, in others not. During the earlier runs, (s)he was revealed thrice and murdered on two of those occasions, and M has twice committed suicide at the end of the game. In Helsinki, everyone except N ignored the idea of a murder completely, and shouted her down whenever she tried to bring it up. So anything can happen. This lack of a clear plot, combined with the fact that there is no real truth as to what Timothy did or who he was, just “truths” the characters can come up with, does not sit well with all players. At nearly every run, there has been (on average) one highly unsatisfied player. Make sure that during the debriefing everyone has a say about how things felt and what the game was like, so that no one dominates the discussion..

**“Come with me, and see what life
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—Timothy Barke

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A

Welcome

All of you here today were once members of a religious sect called “The Liberated”, located in Boston. It was a Christianity-based movement led by a man called Timothy Barke. (Always “Timothy”, never “Tim”.) He was about 35 years old and single. Tall, dark, handsome and incredibly charismatic. The Lord Christ spoke directly to him, and he in turn passed the message forward to those who deserved it, the only ones who would be saved. You.

There were about 30 people in the cult at a time, the numbers fluctuating slightly during the two years that the movement was active. It was normal to move in to the Liberated’s communal house in Boston after one joined the sect, and to donate one’s income to the upkeep.

The code of conduct was very strict: One should never say anything negative about the other people in the sect. All worldly possessions were given to the movement, with their distribution and sale directed by Timothy. The same with what money you earned. All contact to secular people (i.e. all non-members, including relatives and family) was forbidden, unless done solely for the purpose of recruiting them too. No alcohol, no tobacco, no television, no drugs. Sex was permitted only in marriage, and even then solely for the purpose of procreation, and only when permission for it had been asked beforehand from Timothy. Discussions about religion were held every night. Any deviation from these commandments was automatically a sign of the peril of eternal damnation, leading to personal counseling from Timothy, or, possibly, even expulsion from the cult and that very damnation.

The movement died in winter, 2002, when Timothy slipped on a hillside while jogging and broke his neck. No one from his closest (“inner”) circle was able to take control of the sect, and all members eventually went their own way. With no more money coming from cult members, and no one knowing what exactly happened to what had been donated to the movement, the house’s lease soon expired as well.

Now, five years later, M_____ has summoned all of you together again, to talk about what actually happened. About what made you stay in the sect in the first place, and about what Timothy really may have wanted out of all of you.

A

You grew up in a family of farmers, near a small town in an agricultural, conservative region. You have two older and three younger siblings. After your big brother took the mantle of the family tradition keeper, you were able to move to Boston, to study. Despite being a very social person, you felt lonely and in need of a safe community. You were never much into religion, but a visit to a meeting of the Liberated convinced you. You finally felt able to belong somewhere. You were in the sect for a bit over a year, to the day Timothy died.

To you he was most of all a personal mentor, someone who was always interested in your needs and your questions. There was never any erotic tension between the two of you, but you think that others may have believed that there was. All that you wanted were more answers, clarifications to what had been talked about. You were constantly in need of them, and Timothy was happy to provide.

After Timothy died you concentrated on your studies. You became obsessed with completing things and reaching goals, in order to bury all your sorrow and loneliness under that obsession. Your family never accepted your joining the Liberated, and you are still only barely on speaking terms. You are currently a doctoral student at the university, living on study grants. You have utterly ceased to believe that God exists.

You have never had a relationship with anyone, and are totally inexperienced in all things sexual. The thought of letting another person close to you seems impossible. You hide your anxiety behind a happy, talkative mask, but that mask breaks easily. You also find touching other people to be a disgusting thing.

You are here today for the purpose of seeing in what shape the others are. And, possibly, to tell them how much better you are feeling now that you understand that everything Timothy told all of you was a lie, or a delusion of his.

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E

You are the only child of a middle-class family from a well-to-do community near Boston. You moved to the city to start in a promising job, but could not concentrate on your work and got soon fired. After that your life was a series of sporadic short jobs, heavy use of alcohol and some random experiments with drugs. Your parents did, nevertheless, take care of you, and you did not need to worry.

An extremely attractive recruiter (invent a name that starts with an “O”; not present in the game) got you to accompany him/her to a meeting of the Liberated, and you started to hang along in the action. Sooner than you noticed, it had become your daily life, and, soon after, all of your life. You wanted to get married and have children. You asked your parents for more and more money, all of which you then donated to the Liberated. Eventually your parents had enough, and severed all their connections with you.

To you Timothy was just a leader, not the larger than life person everyone else saw him as. Despite this, his death shocked you very much. In time, you have become more and more of a fanatic believer of Liberated dogma (which you can’t remember very well, though). You “officially” feel that they were right in all things. In reality, however, you understand that you just sacrificed everything for the movement, and that if you would admit that fact to yourself, your mind could not take that shock. You therefore hold on to that “official truth”.

You are currently working as a sales assistant in a major general store. You are in a relationship, but that too is dying, because you are utterly able to compromise on your world-view. Your financial situation is very poor, and you have anxiety attacks at nights. You speak all the time, whatever comes to mind. Especially about things like faith, religion and moral values – but of even those you speak on the basis of images and feelings, not in an analytical manner.

You are here today mostly because you hope at least one of the old members will still share your view of the world. And it would be love if that person would be attractive and single, as well.

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H

You are the second oldest child of a rural family with 11 children. All of you belonged to a religious movement that says no one outside its membership will get to heaven. At home you got used to being surrounded by constant activity and noise, and also to taking responsibility for others at a very young age. You had a lot of talent for mathematics, and after school you moved to Boston, to study at the university. Surprisingly, you did not adjust at all as well as you’d expected. For some reason you were unable to forge good connections to local brothers and sisters in faith, and ended up left outside their circles.

As by request, the Liberated appeared just in time to fill that social and spiritual hole in your life. Their teachings were so similar that it was easy to join in, and to once again feel a sense of community and the presence of God. Your relatives did not agree with this view, but you knew you were right. You therefore still have no connection to your family. You always too care of the other members. If someone was suffering a spiritual crisis and Timothy wasn’t available at the time, you helped that person. You had always a nice word to say, a couple of good hints to give and a comforting hug to share. Your relationship with I_____ was problematic, though, because the two of you competed for the attentions of the same help-needing members.

Actually, you never really were enchanted by the Liberated dogma, or even Timothy. Instead, you very quickly developed an addiction to being invaluablely necessary to other people, an addiction that continues to this very day. You left your original studies, and transferred to studying social work theory. You currently participate in the projects of several volunteer organizations, in addition to your daily work at the social services office. You are utterly unable to tolerate situations where your help is refused, and thus you subconsciously gravitate towards the company of people not able to refuse you. You have lost all faith in God. Even though you do not admit it. God does not help – you do.

You are completely unable to form equal-level relationships with others. Your partners and even friends must be dependant on you in all things. You are seeing no one at the moment. You have come to this meeting today for the purpose of helping the other former members, because they will certainly need *your* help.

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Your purpose in life was to take care of other people. You grew up in a small community in western Delaware, the only child of an alcoholic father. Your mother died of cancer when you were 16. You took care of her, because your father could not do it. As soon as you could you moved away, to Boston. There you found work as a waiter/waitress in a small luncheon.

You visited a Liberated meeting, just out of curiosity, and felt a sense finally enjoying yourself. It was easy to exist in a life where others (read: Timothy) made all the decisions for you. Nevertheless, you often ended up helping and assisting the others. You could not stand and watch when someone else had a hard time, you had to help. You felt a lot of sympathy towards H_____, who was likewise committed to helping others.

Three months before Timothy died you and another Liberated member, Jimmy/Joanna, got married. Your life was very easy – until the sect died along with Timothy. Your relationship could not handle the pressures of the mundane life, and in truth the two of you had nothing in common. Nevertheless, you got three kids [Simon (4), Seanna (3), Zachary (1,5)). Then, without any warning, your spouse committed suicide. That was one month ago. You are alone with three very small kids. You are desperately looking for a person who could fix your world again.

You are currently on sick leave from work (you’re still waiting tables, still in a no-smoking, no-alcohol restaurant – due to both Timothy’s teachings and your childhood trauma). Your children are showing serious signs of not feeling mentally well. You are here today in order to get someone to set your life aright again.

You do not want to admit how broken down you are, so you pretend that you are happier than you are. You rarely succeed in doing so. You used to be talkative and happy, but the years have made you much more cynical and quiet.

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You always had a natural talent for manipulating people into things. You did it as a child, making your parents and you four siblings do whatever you wanted. As soon as school ended, you moved to Boston, to study to become a pharmacist. You considered your interest in medical drugs to be a natural extension of your habit of molding other people’s behavior.

You went to a Liberated meeting on a lark, expecting to get a kick out of turning a few of them monetarily against their beliefs. Yet you too were completely captured by Timothy’s charisma. He could not be manipulated, and yet appeared to be utterly sincere. You were soon fully active in the movement and a firm believer in its doctrines. You were their best recruiter, which earned you a lot of respect.

Timothy’s death and the breaking of the movement basically wrecked your life. You had quitted your studies and abandoned all your old friends. You had nothing to return to. Just an emptiness that you started to fill with intoxicants. First it was alcohol, then much stronger stuff. You are currently an active user of hard drugs, and you pay your fare by working as a chemist for the suppliers. You never finished your university studies, but hard work has taught you all you need to know about chemicals.

You are here today in order to find out what actually happened. Was Timothy a fraud, or for real, or crazy? And, most importantly, did he manage to manipulate you?

You have no family and no social contacts outside the narcotics circles. All of your “relationships” have been just random fucks, nothing else. You do not know whether you still believe in God or not.

You are still highly talkative, but a sarcastic, slightly mean tone has taken presence in your way of speaking.

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K

You have always wanted to believe in something greater. First it was the things you were taught in Sunday School as a child, then it was authorities in your youth, and, finally, both. The Liberated seemed almost tailor-made for your needs. Timothy was everything you could have asked for: a person you could admire and a person with the Truth, both at the same time. You threw yourself headlong into the works of the Liberated, forgetting what family or friends you had left.

You require a leader both because of your nature and because you need someone to keep you in check. You have a hair-trigger temper. You are a person who under a reserved, quiet exterior hides a constant state of rage, a rage that gets channeled out in whatever ways it finds. It may be triggered by any random thing. The only protection against it is a strong authority, in the form of either a strong leader, a tight code of conduct denying violence, or both.

Unfortunately you were disappointed in Timothy, at least for one very crucial moment. During a failed recruiting attempt, a person you were talking to preached to you about mass suicide cults. Sooner than you knew, you had developed an obsessive paranoid delusion about Timothy planning that very thing. So, to protect everyone in the group from him, you pushed him to his death on the jogging path.

Your last five years have been spent half working as a massage therapist, half at home on sick leave due to mental problems. You have started to doubt your decision regarding Timothy. Were you right, or not? Some days it feels like you were an instrument of God (for otherwise you would certainly have failed, or at least gotten caught), on other you think you are just a bad person guilty of murdering an innocent, good leader.

You have come here today in order to find out the real truth about Timothy. You rarely speak, but when you do, you do it with strength and conviction. You firmly believe that way your message gets heard and understood best.

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L

You were a good person. As a child you helped your parents whenever you could. At school you protected smaller children from bullies and encouraged those who were less good than you at sports. You guided and instructed wherever needed. You moved from Georgetown to Boston, to study to become a school teacher. You wanted to dedicate your life to helping and teaching others.

You met Timothy at a lecture, and he lured you to join the Liberated. At first you saw the movement as a way to get people to leave their bad habits, but eventually you too were a true believer. From that point on you helped people especially by saving them. You did not quite understand why many people refused such help, but you did not mind. The important thing was that you tried. You still kept the habit of aiding the less talented in everything, channeling it all to helping the other Liberated members to improve their skills.

After Timothy died, you developed a completely new perspective. You had been betrayed, lured away from giving people real help. You had been chasing a mirage for nearly two years. Timothy had, in truth, just loved being adored and worshiped, and not believed in what he told you. You are certain that Timothy had an affair with at least A_____, probably many others as well. All the money went into Timothy’s secret life of luxury, a life none of you were allowed to see. You have no proof to back these suspicions up, but it does not matter. You see conspiracies everywhere.

Being betrayed has utterly hardened you and turned you into an atheist. You now work as a teacher at an elementary school, but you are about to get fired because you have completely lost the ability to feel compassion and the desire to help others. The only thing that matters to you these days is how many other people besides Timothy were in on the plot to screw you over. You have come here today in order to find out, and then – if possible – to pay back in kind. If you can’t get your revenge on Timothy, you will at least make sure that everyone else who was involved will be left feeling at least as miserable as you are.

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M

You have always wanted answers. You were the youngest of three children, always asking more details about everything. You are not happy until you have the whole truth. During your youth you spent a lot of time in church activities, and you missed those circles when you had moved to Boston. The Liberated answered that need, and you quite quickly became a devoted, active member.

To you Timothy was just a normal man, able to make mistakes just like anyone else, but one who understood a lot more about the world than others did. Maybe God really did talk to him. At least these are the things you tell yourself – in truth, you were fully committed and fully believed everything Timothy told you. You kept asking questions mostly out of habit, or, actually, in order to be visible and to get to spend more time with Timothy. You were probably deeply in love with him, even though you deny that now. You were probably also jealous of A_____, who got more attention from him, and of the whole inner circle (which is why you did not invite them here today, despite claiming that you did).

You are living on social security, in a tiny apartment at the edge of Boston. You have tried to form relationships after Timothy’s death, but never succeeded.. Not a day goes by without you thinking about suicide. But before you kill yourself you want to hear the truth about what the hell really happened to all of you. That is why you have reserved a conference room for today and called as many of the (non-inner circle) former members to come and talk with each other.

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N

You found the Liberated before they found you. You read about Timothy’s little congregation in a newspaper, and knew at once that you belonged in it. You had spent your childhood in foster homes, with no idea about who your real parent were. You got decent marks in school, but left your studies at that, and did whatever odd short-term jobs happened to be available when you needed more money.

In truth, you did not really read the newspaper article. Just seeing Timothy’s picture was enough. On some deep level you felt that he was related to you, perhaps he might even have been your big brother. All of this meant there was a purpose behind you seeing his picture. So you joined the movement, as just a common member, and never told anyone about your ideas. You wanted Timothy to see that you were invaluable to the sect, and thus spent all of your time recruiting more people and asking for corporate donations.

You were, in reality, far too eager and failed almost every time. Nevertheless, you blame the other active members’ jealousy and plotting for it, not yourself. Timothy’s death came as a huge shock to you, due both to your commitment and the relationship thing. You have come to the firm conclusion that someone murdered him purely in order to hurt you. If you can find the person responsible – or even someone you just think is responsible – you will finish that person off (either mentally or physically).

After the Liberated dissolved, you have spent almost all of your time in psychiatric care, without any significant results. Despite this you think you are in full mental health.

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P

You were a bit older and a bit more experienced than the other members. That, however, did not make you any less naïve. You went to a Liberated meeting just to check it out, joined in, and left all of your earlier life behind, with the exception of your job. You took a divorce and committed yourself to the Liberated’s work. As a professional nurse you made sure everyone stayed healthy and able to give their utmost to the sect.

Quite soon you realized that everything wasn’t OK. The members slept too little, ate less well than they should have and their lives were regulated in many ways. You knew from experience that those things made people more credulous and easier to manipulate. You did not care, however, because you believed they needed it to get saved. You took your faith very seriously. And you were very fond of Timothy – as a friend, a role model. Maybe the attraction went a bit further than that, even though you do not admit it.

Timothy’s death has a big shock to you, a shock from which you have never recovered. You have drowned your sorrow with work. You are currently working as a nurse for elderly, dying patients and, when given a chance, you tell them key pieces from Timothy’s teachings. Perhaps that way some of them can still be saved. Under other circumstances you are still quite shy and do not participate in discussions with people you do not know. Luckily enough, today you are surrounded by old friends, so you are far less reserved than usual.

You have come here today in order to see whether the Liberated movement can be restored. Your faith in Timothy’s words is still absolute. There is no salvation outside the ranks of the Liberated, not for anyone. The world today is too filled with sin, too evil, for anyone else to make it to Heaven.

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R

You have always wanted power, but unable to get it. You were the second youngest of six children, meaning that you were never the most important. You come from a small community to the north of East Coast, and your parents’ middle-class mediocrity cast its label on you as well. You therefore left to Boston right after school, in order to make a political career for yourself. You began studying political science at the university and joined the Democrats.

You nevertheless had significant problems: You completely lack the kind of personal charisma that one needs to get elected to office. And you did not have the makings of a political aide or decision-preparing bureaucrat either. Just as you were sinking into desperation, you met a couple of morons pushing Jesus at a street corner. You decided to get an ego boost by checking the movement out.

You very soon realized that in such a small community it would be very easy for you to climb into a position of importance, to power over others. You started to imitate Timothy, picking up ideas about leadership, influence and public speaking. Without noticing it, you also developed into more and more of a true believer. The movement itself became important to you and you felt sure that you would be among those God would save. Nevertheless you never became a recruiter and stayed on the organizational side of things.

From your point of view Timothy died too soon. In a couple of years you would have been high enough to succeed him as the leader. Despite your lack of status you did try to turn him into a martyr and gather support for you, but there was too much confusion and you were cast aside.

So for the last few years you have been continuing your studies (your master’s thesis still needs a bit of work) and have re-entered politics, a field you neglected while you were with the Liberated. You are just a hang-around in those circles, however, and long for more. That’s why you have come here today, to re-build the Liberated, rebuild it with you as the sole leader.

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S

You enthusiastically embrace new things, like a small child. You would also like to feel that you’re in the right, that you’re important, that you’re liked. The Liberated gave you all that. You have next to no recollection of your time with them: the shock of Timothy’s death wiped everything else away.

After it happened, you returned to living with your elderly mother in a suburb of Boston. You spend your days by doing nothing. You have serious problems with both memory and the ability to take initiative in things, never having realized that they would need treatment.

You have slowly started building fantasies about what happened, images that seem more and more real every day. You are, for example, completely sure that you saved a lot of people from going to hell, that you and Timothy had a romantic relationship, and that Timothy was going to nominate you as his successor. The fantasies are not complete, though, so you may get mixed up with the “facts” if directly questioned about them.

Your nature is still the same as before: easily excited by things, devoted, always happy. Your laughter, which is extremely common, has nevertheless developed a hollow, dishonest, fake tone.

Despite your fantasies, you have never been romantically or sexually involved with anyone. If asked for details on such things, you get completely confused.

Sometimes you can still hear the voice of God. He always speaks to you in Timothy’s voice.