

Living Embers

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Living Embers

A dysfunctional family and a choice: keep the family together at all costs, or choose yourself and your freedom? Exploring how toxic systems become normalised and the normal can become toxic, Living Embers uses temporal distortions and surreal occurrences to emphasise each character's choice as they are drawn towards the inevitable conclusion. The house will burn. Who will burn with it?

Living Embers blurs the lines between real and the surreal, and emphasises how difficult it is to reconcile the different ways the characters perceive the family dynamics.

As the different worlds collide more of the house's present, past and future is revealed.

Props required

Electric candle

Stuffed toy

A basket or other item to represent a crib

Ball of yarn

Parenting book

A white dress

E-cig / cigarette prop

A scarf

Workshop

There are some suggested workshops below, or the GM can use the workshops they consider appropriate.

Practise a decision scene including the GMs using bird in the ear techniques.

Practice an in character interaction.

Practice ways to express disappointment and uphold family rules.

Play House of the Rising Sun by Joan Baez

Overview of game structure

The structure of a single act

Each act starts with three predefined scenes, framed by the GMs. The play is naturalistic, and the GMs occasionally use voice-in-ear. The final, focal scene of each act has 3 parts, which are played continuously:

1. A predefined group scene.
2. A family member leaves the dinner table quietly, returns as an Explorer and starts interacting with family members. The surreal element of the act starts here.
3. The decision scene for the focus character. It should be relatively slow and long. The character can talk or interact with the other family members and with the Explorer if they feel like it, pulling them into the scene for a while, but otherwise the other players just observe the focus character. The GMs shadow the main character. The act ends just after the focus character makes the decision and burns one of the symbolic objects. If possible, the stage is flooded in bright red light.

The act sequence

Although the acts take place in this order, the game is atemporal. Decisions in earlier acts will not affect later ones.

1. The Intruder - Jacqui, Simon's fiancée, needs to decide whether to follow the family rules in bringing up her child. Surreal theme: confining space.
2. The Hope - Ruth/Reuben thinks about running away from home to escape the constant pressure to excel in their art. Surreal theme: external observer.
3. The Traveller - Simon's dream is to have a Vegas wedding and an adventurous honeymoon, an idea that doesn't go down well with the rest of the family. Surreal theme: socially-enforced ritual.
4. The Mirror - Leah/Luke always envied their sibling and now have a chance to take over their role in the family. Surreal theme: switching identities.
5. The Writer - Esther/Elijah neglects their family for the sake of writing and wants to reveal darker aspects of the family's past in their novel. Surreal theme: internal narration.
6. The Hearth - preparing the perfect Christmas dinner reminds Kelsie/Kelsey of the punishment they received as a child; they need to decide whether the family rules are worth upholding. Surreal theme: reliving the past.

Setting and Background

All characters are members of the Matherson family -- some by birth, some by adoption/marriage. The Matherson family are incredibly close-knit, and as a member of the Matherson family, you are special. You can achieve great things, because you have the Matherson blood. The world is against you sometimes, *but the Mathersons stick together at all costs*.

The family's patriarch, Noah Matherson, was a famous artist who made a fortune by selling his acclaimed portraits and writing on art history. He purchased the family house over 50 years ago, and this was where the older generation of characters spent their childhood. Secluded from the world, they became permanently entwined in each others' lives. Noah was a strict parent, demanding excellence from his children, often punishing them when they failed to meet his expectations. This became normal for them: they came to believe that their family life was the ideal, and that the outside world was alien and threatening.

Rarely, when he felt it was necessary, Noah administered an especially harsh physical punishment. The offending child was grabbed by the arm, and then their hand was forced into the flame of a candle. This has become known as The Secret. This occurred a handful of times, and now they are adults, not all of his children accept that it really happened. Perhaps they deserved it. Perhaps they have exaggerated it in their mind. Or did it really happen? Is it something that has to be addressed?

Recently Noah Matherson passed away, leaving the family home and fortune to his oldest child: E. E has brought their family back to the home, including their older child's fiancée, J; and E's brother, L. As they move in and settle in the house, tensions between family members increase, and they begin to wonder: at what cost will the Mathersons stick together?

Explaining the Surreal

The explorers

The explorers enter the house in the final scene of each act and highlight the choice that the spotlight character makes. Each explorer is played by a different member of the family. Although the family member chosen is symbolic the explorer should be treated as an independent person. When playing the explorer it is important to highlight the choice of the spotlight character and you can also reference the fact that the house will burn down in the future. In the explorer role you aren't constrained by the norms of the house - feel free to interact in any way you consider interesting. You also aren't constrained by realism - feel free to introduce surreal elements (a good example of the suggested tone:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SF9yFCSICE8>)

The decisions

Decisions are taken right at the end of each act. They always symbolise the character's choice between their individual or family identity. The decision is made by burning (putting an electric candle to) a symbolic item. Decision scenes should be shadowed by the GM(s).

Meta-techniques and GMing

To run this game as a GM you need to be able to guide the players through the scenes and keep up the pressure on the players and their decisions throughout the game, but particularly in their spotlight act. We use the following meta-techniques:

Shadowing and bird in the ear: We use shadowing and bird in the ear techniques during the decision scenes at the end of the act when each character is making a decision between the family and their personal freedom. During these scenes the GM(s) should highlight the consequences of each choice and the feeling of being trapped versus the fear of the unknown and being estranged from the family.

Burning: Each character will have a choice between embracing their own identity or the identity of the family throughout the game. This will be symbolised by burning a different aspect of either the character's life or struggle for freedom or which symbolises the character's role within the family.

Acceptance of the surreal: The game involves surreal aspects to symbolise normalisation of dysfunction within the family. These elements should be accepted by the characters and

responded to as if they were an everyday occurrence. Characters should interact with surreal visitors, but not be surprised by them.

Act 1. The Intruder

Scene 1.

Simon gives Jacqui a tour of the house and (re-)introduces her to the other family members.

- Present: Jacqui and Simon in focus, everyone else in the background.
- Possible topics: Jacqui asks the family how to use the oven, but the only person doing the cooking in the house is K. Perhaps E is uncomfortable letting people see their office while they're writing. Perhaps R resents people wandering through their room while they're trying to draw -- but how can they express that in this oppressive atmosphere?

Scene 2.

R is supposed to practice drawing. K instructs Jacqui to pose for them and after a while leaves the two alone.

- Present: Jacqui and R; K initially.
- Possible topics: R's schooling and art. Perhaps Jacqui looks foreign or unusual in some way. Does R get lonely without friends of their own age here? How strict is K with R?

Scene 3.

[Flash-forward] When Jacqui is close to term, she and K disagree on where the crib should be. K wants it to be in the older couple's bedroom, because they are the ones having parenting experience and will take better care of the baby. They can both involve other family members in moving the crib between the bedrooms.

- Present: J and K in focus; possibly the other family members.
- Possible topic: Attitudes to parenting. What does K think of the modern parenting book that J has been reading? What does J think of K dictating everything in the house?

Group scene.

The young couple shows the family how they rearranged the furniture in their room. They announce that Jacqui is pregnant. J can mention that she has been reading a modern parenting book - there will be a prop book provided.

- Possible topics: decor of the house, pregnancy before marriage, plans of the young couple, parenting styles, talent running in the family, baby names (the family's theme of using Biblical names)

Surreal scene.

K leaves the scene - they could announce that they will hire an interior designer to help childproof the house. K's player returns as the interior designer, who has been childproofing the house for generations. They are carrying a ball of (very flammable) yarn and "childproof" the space with it, extending it between the chairs etc., and as the scene progresses also entangling

people in it. By the end of the scene, the house should look like a barbed wire entanglement with the family trapped in it.

Suggestions for the explorer:

- Creating an oppressive atmosphere: “You should cover up all the windows, young children are not ready to be exposed to the outside”, “The yarn will ensure that the child won’t be able to escape the room unsupervised”
- Asking questions about parenting styles, family lives etc., through the lens of home decor: “How was your family home decorated? What did that mean to you?”
- Foreshadowing: “It’s a pity such fine woodwork will burn down completely...”

Decision scene.

The interior designer sets up some candles around the cradle (“Babies sleep better in candlelight”). They say that before the child is born, J needs to get rid of all flammable objects in the nursery, e.g. by burning them - otherwise the yarn might catch fire. They point out that the parenting book is very flammable and should be destroyed. J needs to decide whether to:

- Tear down and burn the yarn (which symbolises choosing her individuality).
- Burn the book (which symbolises choosing to conform to the family rules).

Shadowing suggestions:

- GM1:
- GM2:

Act 2. The Hope

Scene 1.

K and L make R copy Grandfather's famous painting (of the family).

- Present: R, K, L.
- Possible topics: how wonderful grandfather was. How R must live up to grandfather's achievements. R hasn't been practising enough lately. R has been drawing in an *unusual* new style.

Scene 2.

R and Simon commiserating that they don't see E anymore. Possibly while out in the garden, pulling up weeds.

- Present: R, Simon.
- Possible topics: they used to play basketball in the yard with E -- it's been so long since they last played, weeds have taken over the yard. When was the last time E cooked dinner like they used to? Why is E so fixated on writing their book?

Scene 3.

R writes to their friends (one or several letters/emails - monologue).

- Present: R.
- Possible topics: what do they *really* think of the move from public school to being home schooled? How are their parents treating them? Whom do they miss? Did they leave behind friends? A crush?

Group Scene.

The teenager presents their drawings to the family.

- Possible topics: perhaps R has to be persuaded to show their drawings. Isn't being homeschooled much more time-efficient than going to school? R is so talented; isn't it a shame L (and S) never had talent like E and R? Has R been practicing enough? Is R's art as good as their grandfather's?

Surreal scene.

S leaves the scene quietly. S's player returns as a museum guide, giving a tour of the family house, treating everything and everyone inside as exhibits. They start by talking about R's drawings, and then move on to discussing the family members.

Suggestions for the explorer:

- Asking R and other family members about R's drawings: "Do you think the artist put their heart in this one?", "Do you find this style too old-fashioned/too modern?", "What feeling did the artist want to express here?"
- Commenting on the family members and asking them about each other: "And now, the patriarch... What a stern expression!", "Such sadness in her face, exquisite

chiaroscuro...”, “What do you think about this exhibit? Do you think it is good enough to be displayed in the museum?”

Decision scene.

The guide says that the exhibits in the museum need to change frequently, and that the museum always burns the previous exhibitions. They offer R tickets to the big city, saying that this would give them the opportunity to see the “exhibits they were friends with”, but that they will not have a museum venue anymore and might need to display their art on the street. If they want to go, they need to burn the current exhibition.

R needs to decide whether to:

- Burn their drawings (which symbolises choosing their individuality).
- Burn the tickets (which symbolises choosing to conform to the family rules).

Shadowing suggestions:

- GM1:
- GM2:

Act 3. The Traveller

Scene 1.

Jacqui and Simon plan the dream honeymoon.

- Present: Jacqui and Simon.
- Possible topics: how J is settling in. How does J like the family? J and S are going to travel to so many exotic places.

Scene 2.

K and E reminisce about their wedding, discussing it with J and S

- Present: K, E, J, S.
- Possible topics: how K and E weren't allowed to spend time together in private before they got married. Differences between K&E's wedding and J&S's wedding plans.

Scene 3.

L and S talk about starting a family, love, and future.

- Present: L, S
- Possible topics: Looking for jobs. Failing to fit in with the world outside. Being in love, starting a family.

Group scene.

A barbecue. Discussion of the wedding plans, e.g. which invitations to use, where to hold it, what dress to wear, etc.

- Possible topics: J *is* going to wear grandmother's wedding dress, isn't she? It's been in the family for so long. And of course, they'll have to invite all the distant relatives. Hopefully J's pregnancy won't be showing too much by the time of the wedding.

Surreal Scene.

As the family discusses the wedding, L leaves the scene, ostensibly to get some more charcoal for the barbecue. L's player returns as a wedding planner, carrying a wedding dress (which was worn by Simon's mother, grandmother etc.) and plane tickets for their dream honeymoon. Loud and opinionated, the planner forces the young couple to choose between different invitation designs etc. on the spot. The planner gradually starts to ask about different choices: "So will you be living here forever? Or moving away?", "Do you want to be related to your family, or not?", etc.

Suggestions for the explorer:

- Emphasise that every decision must be made here and now, cannot later be changed.
- Whenever family members disagree about what choices to make, say that you'll choose the "traditional" option for now.
- Foreshadow by asking about what kind of fire they would like at the wedding.

Decision Scene.

The wedding planner says the barbecue is running low on fuel. Something needs to be burned.

S needs to decide whether to:

- Burn the traditional wedding dress (which symbolises choosing his individuality)
- Burn the plane tickets for the honeymoon (which symbolises choosing to conform to the family rules)

Act 4. The Mirror

Scene 1.

K confides in L that E has stopped caring for the family.

- Present: K and L.
- Possible topics: how E has stopped helping with housework, stopped interacting with their children, etc. How lonely K is without somebody they can rely on. How things *used* to be.

Scene 2.

L and E, reminiscing how they switched places when they were children (and how they were punished for it).

- Present: L and E.
- Possible topics: was it for one twin to help the other with an exam? To sneak into a play after paying for only one ticket? Another reason? (Several of these can have happened.) How have their lives changed since? How are they different now?

Scene 3.

L behaving like a parent to R, while Jacqui watches.

- Present: L, R, J.
- Possible topics: practising painting? Talking about how R misses their friends. R asks L what it's like to return to the house.

Group Scene.

The family are gathered around the TV on Valentine's day, discussing L's future. They are making L write a letter to Andy/Anna, a family friend (distant cousin?), inviting Andy/Anna on a date.

Possible topics:

- L should write to Anna! S has J, K has E, but L has nobody.
- Subtly remind L of their failings: no partner, no job, no children.
- Why is L reluctant to write to Anna? L is interested in someone else... but they can't say who. (K).
- S will be taking J out, K will be taking E out -- all the couples will be busy.

Surreal Scene.

During the conversation, E leaves to continue working on their novel. The lights go out and E returns as an electrician with a torchlight, also carrying an item of E's clothing. The theme of the interaction should be replacement.

Suggestions for the explorer:

- Start by talking of replacing defective parts of the house (“I’ve come to replace the lightbulbs.”, “While I’m on it, I could replace this old chandelier with a more modern lamp”).
- Build towards replacing family members: “I could also replace your Mom/Dad (E) with a different model, would you like that?”, “Would you want your husband/wife replaced?”, “Do you need a replacement of self-confidence etc.?”.
- Foreshadow by asking whether the family wants to replace the fire alarm and saying “I’m not sure if I’ll manage to get it done it time...”
- At the end of the act they should give an item of E’s clothing to L (“ Would you like a replacement life?”). L must put on this item of clothing.

Decision Scene.

Every other character treats L as if they are E. L should experiment with taking on parts of E’s life. L can flirt with K, be a parent to R and S, etc. After a bit of this, the shadow will tell K to step up the flirting with E. It’s Valentine’s Day, and the two of them should go to the bedroom. L must be torn about this -- the GMs will help shadow. And now L must make the decision:

- L can burn their job applications, taking on the writer’s life and joining K. (Individual)
- L can continue to hide their feelings for the sake of family harmony. To do this, they burn the item of E’s clothing. (Family)

Note: while the decision is being made, K should put pressure on L to join them. “Come on... what’s the hold-up... it’s Valentine’s Day... you’ve been so busy lately...”

Act 5. The Writer

Scene 1.

E argues with K about not helping with household chores, not seeing the rest of the family.

- Present: E, K.
- Possible topics: E isn't pulling their weight around the house. The children miss E; this isn't how things used to be. E is becoming obsessive about their book -- to the point of e.g. not bothering to go to the bedroom to sleep, not bothering to wash.

Scene 2.

L and K reminisce about their childhood. E feels that they have idealised their memories, and tells them how it *really* was. They argue about which description will make it into E's book.

- Present: E, L, K.
- Possible topics: fun things the family used to do together. Old games they used to play. Punishments that were unfair (or were they?) Responsibilities and chores.

Scene 3.

J asks E about how their book is progressing, and the family's history in general. S is present, and perhaps feels uncomfortable about this, because E has been so secretive about their book.

- Present: E, J, S.
- Possible topics: how famous and acclaimed was Grandfather? How long has the family owned the house? Is the book going to focus on E's childhood, or it will it be more historical? What does E remember most vividly about their childhood?

Group Scene.

The family are gathered in the living room for the first reading from E's novel. E is delaying the start of this -- maybe it's not time yet, it's not ready, a cigarette first, etc.

Possible topics:

- What's going to be in the novel? Who's excited? Who's worried?
- No smoking inside the house.
- Why is E so nervous about the novel?

Surreal Scene.

R quietly leaves the scene, returning as E's doppelganger. The explorer wears an item of E's clothing. They are E's internal monologue, grown overactive from E's obsessive writing. Any time a character says something, the explorer can append "(s)he said", and then explain what they really meant. For example, if K says, "No smoking in the house, honey.", the explorer will say "she said, staring disapproval at me. She hated my smoking. She always knew it meant I was anxious... though *this time*, she didn't know what I was anxious about..."

Explorer Suggestions:

- Don't feel you have to explain every utterance by every character, but do try to be talking a good fraction of the time.
- It's fine to just say, "He said. What did he mean, *really?*", and similar phrases.
- Make your descriptions sinister and insecure where possible; explain how the characters are poised to abandon E, how they don't believe in E's writing or work, etc.
- As time goes by, mention The Secret more often. How much do the family members know? Who remembers, who suspects, what are they thinking?
- Foreshadow occasionally: "of course, the fire was on its way... none of them had long."

Decision Scene

After conversation, and with guidance from shadows, the explorer will move the game to the decision scene. This is done by the explorer loudly narrating: "And all of a sudden, it was some time later, and I was alone. I was at my typewriter, with a glass of whisky by my hand, craving a cigarette, desperately trying to write."

At their typewriter, tormented by shadows, E must make their decision:

- To grab their manuscript from the desk and cast it into the fireplace. This will hide the family's shameful secret. (Family)
- To gather their resolve and light a cigarette, smoking it inside the house, before they continue writing. They will tell the world about The Secret. (Individual)

Act 6. The Hearth

Scene 1.

J tells K about her childhood. It can be good and/or bad details, but what's most important is how *different* it was to life in the family.

- Present: K, J.
- Possible topics: J's mother was always busy working. J had much more interaction with the outside world -- was that good or bad? Does it come up that K was adopted by the family? How old was she then, if so?

Scene 2.

S confides in K, telling K how he feels like he doesn't belong in the outside world. Perhaps he also shares his fears for his child.

- Present: K, S.
- Possible topics: what jobs did S try? How did they meet J? What forced S back home? How will the child be brought up? K probably has strong feelings about this.

Scene 3.

K, L and E reminisce about their first kiss. Even though K and E went on to marry, it's not defined which of these characters kissed first -- this is for the players to choose. Contradictory memories are fine; this was long ago, and emotionally charged.

- Present: K, L, E.
- Possible topics: how old do they each remember being at the time? How did they find a place they could be alone? Were all three characters together at the time, or did two of them abandon the third? What does this memory make them feel now? Would they go back if they could?

Group Scene.

K is preparing a traditional christmas dinner.

- Possible topics: The other characters should hint at the way K is an outsider, as they aren't genetically "a Matherson", e.g. by talking about the talent or a birthmark running in the family; E and L could discuss the christmases before K was adopted etc. J could ask about K's birth family, which would be met with awkwardness or anger.

Surreal scene.

The scene gradually becomes more atemporal, many christmases are taking place at the same time. E and L should regress to various stages in their childhood, becoming children opening presents or disinterested teenagers. J and S act as if they're already parents, enjoying Christmas with a young child. R can alternate between childhood and acting as an older character. Only K stays in the present. At some point R should leave or be sent away to go and get some cutlery. R returns and steps into the room as K's younger self, symbolised by carrying a stuffed animal, the one thing they have left of their biological parents. A scene plays out

between K and their younger self. It's a reenactment of a time in the past when they were punished for keeping their stuffed animal after they had been told that they were too old for it. R plays K's younger self, while K's player reenacts the behaviour of Noah, the grandfather, while simultaneously staying immersed in K - it is K feeling compelled to reenact that behaviour. E and L can watch this scene play out and interject comments that they may have made at the time ("Don't hurt them" or "punish them"). However, they can't interfere with the action taking place and K can choose whether to acknowledge them.

Decision scene.

The conversation between K/Noah and R/K's younger self should take some time. K/Noah can ask, perhaps mockingly, perhaps in earnest, whether R/K's younger self likes their new family and their new house, or would they rather prefer the house e.g. burnt down. The scene ends when K makes the decision about whether to burn the hand of their younger self or set fire to the house and end the cycle of abuse.

K needs to decide whether to:

- Burn down the house, by knocking over a candle and pulling R (their younger self) out of the house (which symbolises choosing their individuality).
- Pull R's hand into the flame (which symbolises choosing to conform to the family rules).

Shadowing suggestions:

- GM1:
- GM2:

The Hearth - Kelsie / Kelsey

You are the core of the family but deep down you still feel like an intruder. You are married to Esther/Elijah (E). Yours was an unusual romance: you were adopted by the family at a young age, and raised alongside E and L. In some ways, E was your sibling. But in other ways, you never felt like part of the family -- you were always the newcomer, the interloper, the poor child whom the perfect family decided to take in.

Your birth family was worthless, and you can't forget it. Now, you can make up for that by ensuring your own family is perfect. Perhaps then you'll feel like you belong. When people break family rules, you're the first to chide them. You've always had to be the stern parent. Not because you want to, but because E is incapable of it. You are ill in some way, e.g. prone to migraine, and use this to manipulate other family members.

Diegetic activity:

- messing with other people's diegetic activities: "Don't smoke in the house!", "Shouldn't you be looking for a job instead of scribbling in that notebook?" - or - "Why are you wearing my husband/wife's clothes?!", "I think you could have done better in this sketch", "Here, look at the family recipe for a wedding cake", "How could you put *that* on the mantelpiece?!" etc

The decision:

- Burn (your memory of) yourself as a child. Take their hand and force it into a flame. (Family)
- Burn down the house. You don't want to stay here, and you can free your younger self. (Individuality)

Relationship with:

- **E:** E and you are growing apart due to E's writing. You are feeling rejected, E feels that you don't understand them. You are very different people, but you love E nonetheless and you're so happy you got married and started your own family. You and E have drastically different views of parenting. You don't approve of E writing about the darker part of the family history (harsh punishments etc.)
- **L:** You and L remember the harsh punishments inflicted on you when you were children, but don't want to talk about it. You both claim nothing happened. Internally, you rationalise it in various ways (I completely deserved that, Daddy/Mommy had a hot temper and was so easy to provoke etc.). L is very supportive and helps you with the children and household chores.
- **R:** You have to be stern with R. You weren't as stern with S, and it led to trouble. Make sure they're doing everything just right: practising their painting, following the rules, being respectful, etc. Sometimes you make L be the one who enforces discipline -- this gives

you a rest from being the strict parent. You need to drive R hard so they can achieve everything you didn't - they should become as accomplished as their grandfather.

- **S:** You're a bit disappointed with S, but you almost entirely forgive him for leaving home. It's so good to have him back. You're thrilled about having a grandchild. You need to make sure that S feels at home; he doesn't have to be reminded how badly it went when he struck out on his own.
- **J:** You want to include her in the family but sometimes she doesn't understand how things are done. Both of you are outsiders, technically, and you hate to be reminded of that. J is overconfident about parenting -- she doesn't have the experience you have, so you'll have to help her out when the baby comes. You'll have to explain all the family rules to her. Maybe you can become a parent figure for J. But you can't help but notice every mistake J makes, each mistake separating her more from the family.

The Writer - Esther / Elijah

You are writing a memoir which will reveal the trauma from your past. You are married to K. You've known K practically all of your life: they were adopted by the family at a young age, and are almost your sibling as well as your spouse. Yet now you're growing apart. Your writing is vital to you, but you still have doubts about publishing the dark family secret: the harsh physical punishments. The horror of your childhood remains an open wound for you, but the family is all you know. What would life be like outside it?

The decision:

- write the book while smoking in the house (individuality)
- burn the book (family)

Their diegetic activity:

- writing the novel and chain smoking, which helps you focus

Your relationship with:

- **K:** Your writing is driving you apart. K doesn't understand you; doesn't understand why you're so driven. You have very different temperaments, and perhaps you want different things from life.
- **L:** You were always superior, L always envious. You know that your twin is fascinated by you, and sometimes feels the need to copy you. Your memories of The Secret are different and your twin seems to be in denial. Nonetheless, you share a deep twin bond, perhaps more powerful than your bonds with any other member of the family.
- **R:** You love R, but you don't have enough time to see them. Sometimes you use R as a weapon against K, and you feel guilty about this. R craves recognition, and admires you, but is beginning to resent you. Sometimes you feel like R takes more of your time than it is worth.
- **S:** S is sympathetic towards your writing, and you're so glad they've returned. You remember S's childhood as a happier time. You missed S when they were gone. S seems contemptuous towards you sometimes, and this worries you.
- **J:** You're desperate for validation and friendship, so you're very happy to have someone from the outside join the family. You're worried that Jacqui doesn't seem to trust you.

The Traveller - Simon

You are the older child of E and K, and are engaged to J. Your childhood was dominated by the house and the family, and you never knew anything else. You remember all the rules and taboos -- you thought that was just the way it was supposed to be. After you left and saw the family from another perspective, you started to rethink your parents' relationship -- especially how odd it was that they grew up together in the house before marrying. The problem was that life outside the family was harder than you thought; you couldn't make a living, and after you met Jacqui you returned to the house. You returned as a prodigal son, but were welcomed. Now you are pressured by the family to pull Jacqui in and make them abide by the family rules.

The decision:

- burn grandmother's wedding dress (individuality)
- burn the tickets to Vegas for the honeymoon you have planned (family)

The diegetic activity:

- browsing wedding magazines, on their own or inviting Jacqui to do it together as a couple - in principle you would want to make your own choices, the food, the venue etc. yourself, but "it's obvious" that you have to marry in the house, Jacqui needs to wear the grandmother's wedding dress, you need to serve the traditional family pudding etc. Your dream would be to use all that money to go on an adventurous honeymoon.

Relationships:

- **E:** E cares about you, much more than about your sibling R. E remembers your childhood as a happier time. E envies you for leaving the family, you think. You feel some contempt for E's weakness in allowing their life to be dictated, and you struggle with self-hatred as you do much the same. You left after finding a draft of E's book where you found out about the secret.
- **K:** K *forgives* you for leaving, and will not let you forget that you are forgiven. K is genuinely happy that you are back ("back, safe in your parents' arms"). K is hugely excited about having a grandchild. You used to rebel against K, but now you just want to come back to someone making the decisions for you - you failed at being an adult, now you just crave the safety of having rules to follow. You want to feel you belong in the family, as you didn't belong outside.
- **R:** You are quite close in age to your sibling R, but you were always the more rebellious one while your parents found R to be the more talented. The family always doted more on R. You resent your sibling, but now you just want to prevent R from making the same mistakes you did. R has some contempt for you (you left, you failed, you no talent, etc), and chafes at your overprotectiveness. R also resents that you abandoned them (but voices it as "abandoning the family").

- **L:** You distrust L, and have some idea of their feelings for K and K's desire to displace E. L is desperate for your approval and acceptance, but you only see L as an intruder. Like you, they tried their luck outside of the House and failed, but you at least brought back a partner, which L failed to do.
- **J:** You love each other. You still remember when you latched on to Jacqui. She fell in love with your rebellious side (living in a squat in the bad part of town, working in a bar, etc) and is disappointed that it's gone. The pregnancy was accidental, but you both decided to keep the baby. Sometimes you think Jacqui feels trapped in the family. You both want to be good parents, but are a bit clueless about how to do it.

The Intruder - Jackie Lorenzi

You are engaged to Simon, and are deeply in love with him. You are from a much more normal family. Your father left your family when you were very young. Your mother cared for you in principle, but because she was such a workaholic, you never saw much of her. You fell in love with Simon because of his rebellious side and his easy way of living, but he has changed a bit since you moved back to the house. You want to fit in with the family, but on the other hand you have seen and lived in the outside world, so you find the family's dynamics more and more difficult to handle. When you and S decided to move into the house, you brought some of your own things. You are now unpacking and trying to make the house into your home. But the family don't think your things *belong* in the house - photos of your happy family, your controversial books, modern-style decorations etc. You got pregnant by mistake but you decided to keep the child and now you are getting married to Simon. It is nice that everyone is so enthusiastic about and wants to help, but sometimes you want to do things your own way.

The decision:

- burn the family's childproofing yarn (individuality)
- burn the book about modern parenting (family)

Their diegetic activity (for Simon and Jacqui together):

- unpacking, arranging things, dealing with the onslaught of things representing the family, reading the parenting book

Your relationship with:

- **S:** You love each other. Simon latched on to you and you fell in love with his rebellious side (living in a squat in the bad part of town, working in a bar, etc) and you're disappointed that it's gone. You got pregnant accidentally, but decided to keep the baby. Lately you have felt S changed and sometimes you feel trapped in the house and lacking the support of S when you want to do things your own way. You both want to be good parents, but are a bit clueless about how to do it.
- **K:** You are very different from each other and polar opposites in terms of how you influence the family. But both of you are outsiders -- perhaps this could be common ground? K is almost trying to take possession of your unborn child -- dictating where the crib will be, how they'll be raised, etc. K seems to care for you. They explain the family rules very often. But they also take note of every mistake you make, and of what makes you different from the family. Sometimes you want to go your own way and sometimes K makes you feel insecure.
- **E:** E is desperate for validation and friendship, but you think they're selfish. They're destroying the family through their negligence. This reminds you of your father abandoning his family.

- **L:** You feel L would be a better parent to S and R, and a better partner to K than E. You want to become friends with L, and try to make them feel good about themselves. L seems to like you, but they are a lot less willing to show it when E is around.
- **R:** You see R as the younger sibling you never had. But it could be easy to stifle them with this...

The Hope - Ruth / Ruben

You are the child of E and K. You were always the talented one, drilled to excel in drawing/painting and your art. You are destined to follow in the footsteps of your grandfather, Noah, who was a prestigious artist. Yet you are not even sure that you like to draw. E and K put a lot more pressure on you than on your brother S. You went to an ordinary school for a couple of years. You enjoyed this experience, and made friends there. But your parents decided to homeschool you, and have taken you away from your old life when you moved house. Now you are in the house nearly all the time and practise your art every day, always under the critical eyes of your parents. Your brother S left home a while ago, and when that happened you felt betrayed and alone. Now he has returned, and you don't know what to think. Sometimes you dream of leaving, about how a life outside would be, a life where you could take your own decisions and make your own choices. But you also need, want and love your family; and you are the one that your parents trust. You have to make them proud.

The decision:

- Burn your drawings, and run away from home (individuality)
- Burn the train tickets you bought with money you have been saving for a couple of months (family)

The diegetic activity:

- Drawing, under the critical eyes of your parents. There are tons of constantly changing, arbitrary rules here: "In this house, you need to cover the whole sheet of paper", "You shouldn't be drawing people, that won't help you get into this prestigious school we've chosen for you", "You shouldn't portray any elements of the house as ugly", "I do not understand modern art", "It is good but still a copy of your grandfather's work" etc.

Your relationship with:

- **L:** gives you the attention you crave, and loves you, but is stern whenever K suggests it. You have a troubled relationship. You sometimes feel that L resents you; maybe you remind L that K is not their spouse. L is more of a parent figure for you than E is. L is pulled between K's and the E's approaches to parenting.
- **E:** negligent. E has little interest in you as a person. E gives you more freedom than anyone else. E uses you as a weapon against K. You crave recognition from E, and admire them, but resent how uncaring they are. E is preoccupied with writing, and has no time for you now.
- **K:** You get attention from K. K gives you what you need, and pays attention to your art, but gives you minimal recognition as a person. You crave K's love, but K only gives you practical attention and rules. K makes L discipline/command you -- you don't like that they turn L against you. Sometimes you think K likes to show E how inferior they are as

a parent. K drives you so hard because of their inferiority complex - as an adopted child they were always told they lack the "talent that runs in the family".

- **J:** Jacqui sees you as the younger sibling she never had. Jacqui has all this glamorous experience of the outside world, but at the same time you're stifled by yet another adult telling you what to do. And why has J entered the family, anyway... will she truly be one of you?
- **S:** Simon is more rebellious than you. The family always doted more on you. Simon was never as talented, and resents you for that. You resent that Simon abandoned the family -- especially that he abandoned you.

The Mirror - Leah / Luke

The family was the first thing on your mind while growing up. Of course it was strict sometimes but you think it was for your own good. When bad things happened, it was because you or your sibling behaved badly. And it was nothing extreme, nothing abnormal. Sometimes you feel like a shadow of your sibling, E, and sometimes you even impersonate them. You remember the day K came to the family, when all three of you were children. After E and K got married you left the house and worked for a boring company for 15 years. They took you in, and work was your life -- after losing your job you had nothing left. No house and you never found love. So you had to return to the family house. You feel like a failure but you also see that you are needed in the house. You just want to feel valued, like E.

The decision:

- Burn the love letter they are trying to get you to write (individuality).
- Burn your brother's scarf (family)

Diegetic activity:

- Subtly imitating E's movements/poses/speech, whenever E is around. Subtly trying to get close to K whenever K is around.

Your relationships

- **K:** Your feelings for K are deep, and always have been. You are... are you in love with them? You think it could have so easily been different: they could have fallen in love with you instead of E. You cannot understand why E is not taking better care of K. Sometimes you wish you could take on E's life, including E's marriage to K. You and K remember The Secret, but you don't want to talk about it and claim nothing happened. Perhaps you think that what happened was for your own good.
- **R:** You love little R. Lately, you've been more of a parent figure to them than E has been. It's difficult sometimes; K wants you to be stern, and although this isn't natural for you, you know it's necessary for R to fulfil their potential. When you see E's mannerisms in R, it's a sad reminder that they're not your child.
- **E:** E was always superior, and you were always envious. You are fascinated by your sibling, and sometimes wish you could take on E's life. You have very different memories of The Secret. The deep twin bond you share is perhaps more powerful than your bonds with any other member of the family -- and yet you hardly get to see E now, because they're so busy with their book.

- **J:** J is so supportive. She's younger than you, but she feels like she has more experience. Sometimes you commiserate with J over E abandoning their family. Then you feel guilty: how could you talk about E behind their back -- and with an outsider, of all people?
- **S:** S distrusts you. He seems to feel that you're trying too hard to replace E. Maybe he's right. You are desperate for his approval and acceptance, but he sees you as a failure. Like S, you tried your luck outside of the House and failed, but S at least brought back a partner, which you failed to do.

