

Threading the 'While

by Lyle Skains

FærLife is about 68,423,659 miles long and just as wide, with more diversions than you can shake a forest's worth of sticks at, but this is the only place on the Thread with a queue. They line up outside it, each waiting for their time alone on the grass in the centre of thirteen hulking monoliths. One by one they walk/fly/crawl/roll in, and one by one they lie there and stare at the sky. Some of them mutter some mumbo-jumbo. A few of the less imaginative wave magic wands or burn some incense. And every one of them, regardless of their results or lack thereof, thanks Amelia on their way out.

She's never there to receive their thanks, of course. They thank her like she's the Buddy Christ, beaming down at them from on high.

She didn't build it for them. She doesn't care if they come or not. She didn't really mean to build it. She just sat down on an empty lot one day, trying to think up the things she wanted to do in the world I created for her. She sat there for a good, oh, ten days or so, until something sparked, or released, or just plain woke up. When she opened her eyes and stood up, those thirteen archaic stones were circled round, bowing their heads toward her.

Thing is, she didn't code them.

FærLife is different from my First World. I got bored with that one, what with all the natural laws making everything so predictable. Here, things are more like they

used to be. When they get tired of the conversation, the trees wander off same as anybody else. Buildings can be made of sea-sponges and teacups. People don't have to be people-shaped. Makes the stories more interesting, like that orchid-armadillo who kept mistaking his tail for his penis.

In the end though, they're all code. The aquarium is built from 1s and 0s in interleaving bricks. The market is jim-jammed with snippets encoding stalls and booths and hawkers, where anyone with credits can tap a button and buy the code for a pair of wings or a motor-copter.

Amelia's Circle isn't code. It's made out of dream. She dreamed it, and within it, what she dreams becomes. Every once in a blue moon, somebody wanders into her circle, squeezes their eyes and their blowhole tight, and their dreams become, too. So they come. And respectfully, they clear out when she tells them to.

Except for him.

I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been. I'm not a multi-tasker. I got to telling Amelia's story, and that boring bastard slipped right in.

It wasn't a scheduled stop. I forgot to wipe the train station is all, after Amelia's train came through. So when he requested the stop, the train obliged.

When he stepped into the FærLife, he had almost no reaction to the digital transformation of his body; he only checked the pockets of his now pixelated overcoat to ensure all his possessions were still in place. When he found them intact, he shuffled on.

He's not supposed to be in her story.

There are no rules in this game. For it is not a game. You know that.

I DON'T MUCH CARE. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO LEAVE MY STORIES ALONE.

The way you have always left my stories alone? The way rabbit was never dunked into a septic pool, the way my princesses are never tricked into poisoned apples?

THAT'S DIFFERENT. THAT'S MAKING THEM STORIES.

So you say.

DO WE HAVE A DEAL? YOU STAY OUT OF MINE, I STAY OUT OF YOURS?

Hmm. I think not.

She's lying on her back in the middle of the stone circle, legs relaxed, arms palm-up by her side. She looks spent, with her eyes closed and her mouth quirked just that Mona Lisa bit. It's almost my favorite picture of her. The other one is that time she turned to the entirety of her grandfather's pub and flipped them the bird and her ass at the same time.

She looks a lot like she did the first day she got off the FærTrain. Inside the train, she looked how she's used to looking, like she walked off the set of *Beetlejuice*. But outside the train, she became how I tell her. Her skin flushes in a programmed approximation of skin, flesh-coloured and round. Her hair is dreadlocked, purple and green, which good old grandpa would never permit. Her clothes are merely differently coloured skin, forming her body in blacks and stripes. It's not her only avatar. Just the most comfortable.

I can hear him coming. The whole 'Life can hear the ignorant tool coming. He's stolen a motor-coptor from somewhere down the Thread, though he's only figured out the motor- part. The rotors stay folded, the engine screaming at being grounded. The usual crowd around Ami's Circle mumbles and grumbles and even shouts in typical crowd dismay as he rumble-screams past them, straight into the middle of the stones. Straight at Ami.

"Seriously?" she asks, one eye opening. She sighs and leaves the Circle, straight up.

Few 'Lifers ever let go of the memory of their flesh well enough to fly. It's not programmed into their digital bodies; nothing, really, is programmed into their digital bodies. Tell you the truth, even the code available in the markets is only a suggestion; it's the mind that turns it into reality. And Ami's mind is blown wide open.

The greasy little grunge boy spins out on his bike, tearing an inner circle in the grass as he stares up at her diminishing form.

"Great," he says to the bike, flipping toggles at random. As though an interfering little birdie is whispering in his ear, he manages to unfold his rotors and chug into the sky after her before the crowd of worshipers can manage to tear them – and him – from the bike.

I pull myself into a physical form, cloud after cloud, surrounding him, blinding him. I beat him with rain. I zap him a couple of times with a lightning bolt before I realise he hasn't bothered to download the code that lets him feel any of it. He's just a numb, storyless form.

Ami is stretched out on a cloud when he finally reaches her. I trail behind, shaping myself into a skulking dog.

"Hello," she says.

"Hello," he replies.

MAKE HIM GO AWAY, AMI.

I send the message to her so he can't see it. She just waves it away.

"What would you do if I kicked that noisy thing right out from under you?" Ami asks him, wagging her combat boot in illustration.

"I'd fall."

Ami laughs. She spreads her arms and rises, hovering several feet above her misty dais.

"I don't fall," she tells him. "But you're right. You'd fall, and you might even die. Why are you here?"

"I'm Ben. I'm looking for my sister. I keep hearing your name, like you're some kind of Wizard of Oz here. I thought you might know something."

With one sweep of her arm, she wipes away the clouds, including mine. Below, the FærLife landscape rolls out before us. It looks like the inside of a sphere, never ending, only terminating when the eyes can no longer process the distance.

"No," she says, "why are you *here*?"

He stares down. He should have a problem with the perspective. It should turn his bowels to water. At the very least, the stupid shit should lose his balance, topple off his perch, and fall screaming to the ground, impaling himself on some form of sharp architecture.

But he does not throw up, or crap himself, or fall to a fiery wet doom. He gazes again at Ami, and then has the nerve to shrug. "I don't even know where the hell here is. I rolled a weird old bum, got on a train that I thought would lead me to my sister, and got off here. Now I can't get back on the train, or get out of this world—"

Story, I thought at him. I never should have helped Her lead him to the 'while. He is not supposed to be in this story. He is supposed to stick to his own tragic pathetic tale of transformation, the ones that She tells, the ones that make me want to vomit my pancreas from boredom.

"—and I just want to find my sister and go home."

"Go home?" Amelia blinks at him, incredulous. "Why would you want to go home? This...this is like heaven. Like heaven should be, anyway."

At this, Ben actually grins. "Heaven's a load of bullshit. This place is a load of bullshit too. It's like being in a cartoon."

Amelia loses all pretence of friendliness. "What the hell would you know about it? You're still tied to this idea of physicality, of life and death, of limits and rules and boundaries."

"Maybe," he admits. "I generally like to know what the rules and boundaries are. Helps if you're going to be crossing some of them."

"You're just going to have to figure it out yourself. I don't want to get out."

"But you know how to."

"I've never wanted to try."

"And you know how to shapeshift. And you built the Circle."

"You know all that, and you still can't get your sorry self out of here."

She's right. He's not entirely stupid. He should have figured out an exit by now, especially since I haven't been doing anything to keep him here. This has to be Her doing. Damn busybody.

"Nope, I can't." Now he grins. Smug bastard. "And it seems to me, you can't either."

Uh-oh.

"Why would I want to?" Amelia rolls a very slow backflip. "This is the best place I've ever been in my life."

"Uh-huh. Home sweet home, huh?"

She falls out of the flip. "I don't have a home."

"So this is it? Float around on clouds, build magic circles that actually are magic, and what? Program some kids, maybe a dog?"

"Yes, because kids and a husband and a dog are the ultimate goals of life."

He shrugs again. "Not for me. Not for you then, either. I know what I'm looking for, though. Do you?"

Ami rolls her eyes. "This is stupid. I came up here for peace and quiet, not a goddamned sermon."

"So show me how to get out of your perfect world, and I'll go."

"I have a better idea."

He barely has time to raise his eyebrows before she zooms away, firing toward the landside of FærLife.

I installed a virus in his ride. It crashed; he found another. I installed a virus in his avatar. He walked around looking like a six-foot tall naked female toddler, and didn't blink an eye. Every time he got within a block of Amelia, I made sure he fell in a hole. I like holes. I fill them with all manner of gooey and crunchy things. Scorpions. Snakes. Eyeballs. Dog crap. *Sick* dog crap. He shrugged it off and kept going.

He could have picked on a million other 'whilers here – but he didn't. He picked her.

She's at the Circle when he finally circumvents the last of my barriers. He's quick, even if he refuses to imagine any powers beyond that of an analog human.

Ben – somehow back in his trench-coat and black mussed hair – just trots right on in. He leans over her head as he says this, blocking out her sun. Just for fun I make his shadow look like a mouse.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" she says without opening her eyes. She doesn't move, but her face is now tense.

"I'm a dick like that."

"You said it."

He sighs. "I'm just looking for my sister. I'd like to get out of your hair, if you'll just show me how to get out of this place."

"Bugger off."

"Nope. Can't."

Ami rolls away from him, sitting back on her knees.

"What makes you think I'm so goddamned special?"

He shrugs. "I don't. Every other idiot here does, lining up like you're the Goth Buddha. What makes *you* think you're so goddamned special?"

"Fuck off."

He almost does. So close. He actually makes it to the edge of the stone circle before stopping, his fists clenched.

A snowball forms in Amelia's palm, a tiny planet of frozen prisms bursting in the sunlight. She pegs him in the back with it. "Why do you keep bothering me? Why me?"

Ben turns around, stares at his hands. "Because you're the only one here who can create a way out."

"Create?" She says the word faintly, as though she's unfamiliar with it. And she is. She's not really a creator, not like me, not even like the Other. She dreams, and she's fortunate enough to be in a part of the 'while where that's enough.

Silence covers the circle. Ami twirls a finger idly through her hair; the strand swirls through all the colours of the rainbow, then all the snakes of the Southwest. Ben watches her, waiting.

Finally, he says, "Her name is Lilly. She was eight the last time I saw her; she'd be eleven now. She was easier to place in foster homes, see – younger, a girl. She could pretend better than I could, pretend like she was happy. That

was her favorite thing, actually, pretending. She liked me to read to her. She'd get up and act the stories out, lost somewhere that wasn't all about sleeping on hard concrete or timing visits to soup kitchens so we could get enough feed."

Amelia crosses her legs, her posture inviting him over for a pow-wow.

HE WAS ABOUT TO LEAVE! JUST LET HIM GO.

"I'm bored," Amelia says softly to me. Louder, she asks Ben, "What happened to your parents?"

"Killed." That's all he says, and his face hardens, its teenage softness dropping away, what little of it there is.

Amelia nods. She doesn't say "Mine too," doesn't tell him she's an orphan too. She knows better, I guess. Getting to live with your grandparents in a nice warm house in a friendly little village doesn't quite carry the same hardship as scratching out a notion of survival on Los Angeles streets.

Ben sits across from her, his coat puddling on the ground. I let a little ground water rise to the surface underneath him.

"How do you know your sister is here?"

"I saw her, just for a second." He tells her about the book – even takes it out of his pocket and shows it to her – and the underground metro station. He tells her about me, how I gave him the map, how he saw his sister on the passing train.

Amelia frowns down at me. "So this is a habit for you, is it, Tal?" she whispers.

MORE LIKE A TALENT.

"Sorry?" Ben asks, but she only shakes her head.

Ben says, "Just get me on a train. If she were here, I would have found her. She's not. I just want to find her, but I have to get out of here first."

Amelia sighs. "It might not be that easy."

"It's generally not."

She looks up at one of the stones, her expression tight. "All right. But if I'm helping you, you have to make some effort to not be such a tool."

Ben bristles. "If you make some effort not to be such a bitch."

"Hey, who's helping who here?" Amelia begins drifting above the circle. "First," she calls to Ben, "you have to think some happy thoughts. Fairy dust not included."

HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GET OUT WITHOUT HER HELP. NOW LOOK WHAT HE'S GOTTEN HER INTO.

Are you accusing me of...what do you call it? Hacking?

I'M ACCUSING YOU OF MEDDLING.

I think maybe you're incapable of controlling your own characters in your own story.

AND I THINK YOU'RE A SPOILED ROTTEN BRAT WHO'S BEEN LEFT TO TELL THE TALES ON HER OWN FOR FAR TOO LONG.

Vinegar or honey, honey. Have you learned nothing from my stories?

I CAN'T STAY AWAKE LONG ENOUGH TO HEAR THE END OF ANY OF YOUR STORIES. YAWN.

That's a tragedy. Oh, look. They're fighting. May I suggest telling your story instead of ranting at me? Things do have a way of spiralling when you're not paying attention to them.

SHIT.

"I never told you I could do it, you pathetic, whining, useless *jolido!*" Amelia is screaming right into Ben's face. Ben stares right back at her, nonplussed. "Find your own goddamned way out, and don't ever come near me again."

She walks away. In her anger, she has developed orange and white stripes over her body, rippling over her muscles as

she moves. A long, sensuous tail follows behind her.

Ben, a black rat at best, stands still, folding his arms. "It's pissing you off, isn't it? That even the great Prophet Amelia can't find a way out of her own magical fairyland."

She whirls on him, sharp feline teeth flashing. "I'm not a fucking prophet, and this isn't my fairyland. I'm not the queen, or the president, or the moderator, or whatever. I just live here."

"You call this living, do you?"

"YES!!! Go away!" Her tail lashes. "God."

Ben reaches out and grabs her tail. I laugh, even if he is annoying my plaything. Tail-grabbing always leads to something fun, like somebody's head getting eaten.

Ami growls and swats his hand.

Ben lets go. His hand is bleeding, bright red #F12600. Maybe he'll bleed out.

"I tried," Ami says, her voice low and tight. "I got you into the train station where no trains come. I imagined a train, but you're too dull to dream it into moving. I imagined a door for you, but you're too stupid to dream it into opening. I imagined a Stargate, a wormhole, a looking-glass, a portal, a vortex, a spaceship, even a goddamned wardrobe, but you can't play the fucking game! I did what you wanted. Now fuck off."

"You can do something about it. You just don't want to. You're kinda lazy. Come on, you know you can get out of here anytime you want."

"I don't want to!" She's in his face now, her mouth wide and dripping with carnivorous saliva. If he had any senses, her breath would smell rotten, dead, but he doesn't, so he just sighs and reaches out to thump one of her long, sharp canine teeth.

"Chill out, Tiger Lily. What was it you said to me? Think happy thoughts. Your happy thought for today: the sooner you get me out of here, the sooner you get back to your regularly scheduled meditation on how awesome you are."

Ami screeches, but she steps back. Her features come back to resembling the human, reluctantly. She looks down at her feet, and a pair of old saddle shoes appear over the tiger paws.

"Just like a chick," Ben comments. "Say the phrase 'happy thoughts' and they go buy new shoes."

Ami's leg stripes resolve, the orange and white camouflage straightening out to ordinary striped tights. Above those, a denim mini-skirt, and a brown and orange paisley top. She's like a teenage girl's Halloween costume of her mom in the 60s. But it's no longer murderous in its very appearance.

She glares at Ben, then stares up at the sky. "I came here from somewhere else. You came here from somewhere else. This world is not infinite, even though it looks like it is. And if it's not infinite, there is an edge. You just have to find it."

"Okay, but where?"

"Not here."

She jets up into the air, morphing into a falcon, whose orange and white stripes would be found nowhere in nature. Ben runs one hand tiredly through his hair and jumps up, very very hard. He's not able to morph at the same time, not able to morph at all, but he can hold himself aloft and keep up with her – just. I appear high in the sky, a tiny swallow, too small and too high for him to really see, and poop repeatedly on his head.

We fly and fly and fly. Ami has to come back to drag Ben

along several times, but she never stops flying. She flies farther than she ever has before, out into sections that have long been abandoned. Some sit in 8-bit glory, occasionally firing tiny white squares at us, but mostly just rotting into nostalgia. We pass out of colour, and into monochrome flatspace. And farther, into text, which has mostly degenerated into random wads of command prompts.

Still, there is no boundary to be found.

Ben calls out, "We're not getting anywhere!"

"Sure we are," Ami replies. "At the very least, we've gotten a history lesson. What came before code?"

"Like I'm going to know."

Amelia slows, flying at Ben's pace. Her wings glide gently on a breeze underneath a plain white sky. "Look, there — punch cards. I read about those once. If we get past those, we get to the world before computers created it."

"What world before? You mean the world? Computers don't create anything."

"Idiot. This is why you're flapping around up here in a trench coat. Computers create this entire world. But what created worlds before computers?"

Ben rubs his face. His tiny brain is clearly struggling to keep up with her. It's all I can do not to shout "I did!"

The white, the scattering of chits from computer punch cards, the strange one-dimensionality, it fades out gradually. They both drift down, down, down, no longer managing to fly in a space where their thoughts do not become instant code, processed and running like a stream of infinite data. Amelia is even struggling to hold her form together. Ben's form is perfectly intact; it would never cross his mind that he is only what he imagines himself to be, and thus, he is simply himself, no more no less, just as he has always been and will

always be. Boring.

There is no true ground, no surface to land on. Only the black nothingness, the feeling of absence, just as she had described to Ben.

"What is this?" he says. "This doesn't make any sense. There was a world before computers."

Amelia's voice is a bit staticky. "I think...I think there wasn't. Not in this world."

"So we're stuck here. We can't get out because there's just nothing. No data."

"Can you be quiet? I need to think, and I'm having problems multitasking out here."

Ben cocks his head at her. "What...are you a program?"

A sigh. "You don't get it at all, do you? I'm a program, you're a program, we're all programs once we step into FærLife. I embrace it, which means I can be more here. You don't embrace it, so you're just you. But where the processors no longer work, you're a little more put together than I am because you don't need them to hold you together... because you've never been anything other than you."

"Have you been here so long you don't remember who you are anymore? That's not the brightest idea I've ever—"

"Seriously, what part of STFU don't you understand?"

He rolls his eyes, but falls quiet.

Long moments pass. I, like Amelia, have a hard time keeping a form together out here, so I revert back to a familiar shape. As Raven, I'm still not very visible in the darkness; I can, however, still dive bomb Ben.

"Goddammit!" he yells. "Amelia, call your pet off!"

Pet, my ass. I reach for an eyeball.

"Tal." Amelia's voice is laughing, trying hard to be stern. "You don't need his eyeball. Leave him alone for five

minutes, and we'll be rid of him."

I squawk, and settle. Ben watches me, eyes narrowed.

Suddenly, they widen. "Amelia!"

She's faded away, her visual form sacrificed to the thinking process.

"Amelia! Where'd you go?"

A vague white mist appears, hovering next to Ben. "I'm here, noob. I'm trying to concentrate on one thing, and I don't need an avatar to do that. Now will you please shut your pie hole?"

"I know what came before."

"Now you're full of ideas. What?"

"Computers are information, right?"

"No, they're machines that process information."

"Whatever. It's about information at the core. Before we had computers we had books—"

"You want a book? Out here?"

"What part of STFU don't you understand?" Ben reaches into his coat and pulls out that mouldy old notebook. "I got here through a book, you got here through a computer."

"So?"

"So before there were books there were just stories." He waves the book, its pages spitting dust.

"And?"

"And..." His arm droops. "And I don't know where to go from there. I just thought...computers...books...stories. I used to read her stories, you know, and stories can take you places."

"You want to Reading Rainbow out of here?"

"I don't...I don't know. Nevermind."

Amelia's mist swirls. "Hold on, technophobe. You might have something. I mean, what you imagine here happens."

Ben throws his hands out. "You think I haven't tried to imagine myself outside of here? Once I figured out how this place works, it's all I tried to do."

"Place and time, Benny boy, place and time. I don't know if there's anything spatially beyond this point, or if we've moved an inch once we got into this nothingness. But if there's anywhere in FærLife where the border between this imagination-generated world and all the other worlds is thin, this has to be it. It'll be easier to break through here."

"Okay, so why haven't we?"

"You, why haven't *you*. Remember, I don't want to go anywhere with you, *amigo*."

Another eye roll. I wonder if I can make them stick like that. "Fine, fine, why haven't I?"

"You haven't tried."

"What do I— Look, can you put some kind of face on or something? I feel like I'm talking to Casper, after your friend the raven or the wolf or whatever he feels like being today has gotten to his eyes."

Amelia laughs. "He generally gives them back, eventually. You shouldn't be so worried about him." But she pulls it together a bit, and becomes herself. In monochrome, somewhat transparent, so...a ghost of herself.

Relieved to be looking at another pair of eyes in the nothing, Ben says, "So what is it you think I have to do?"

Amelia exhales. "I'm not a hundred percent sure it'll work—"

"Fuck!"

"—but it's worth a try, right? Just...no guarantees, that's all." Amelia raises her eyebrows, and Ben does that asinine eye roll again (they really do deserve to be pecked out), then nods. "So what I think is, you need to tell a

story. Any story you really get into, maybe that you shared with your sister a lot. Tell it, and believe it when you tell it."

"Believe it? What the hell does that mean?"

"Jesus, you're a thick bastard, aren't you?" Yes.

"Believe it like you said your sister believed them, where she would get up and act them out, and be the people in the stories, believe that she was in those places."

Ben is shaking his head. What a punk ass bitch.

"Will you just do it already? There is no fucking exit door. We tried it, it didn't work. You're going to have to make your own."

Ben rubs his palms over his hair again. They leave wet streaks and plastered strands. "I'll try. There was a story Lilly used to love. I think I can remember it. It's hard — she used to change it every time we read it."

"Would it help if I made myself look like her?"

"No!" Ben looks startled. "No, sorry, just no."

Ami shrugs. "Whatever. Go, then."

Ben is uncertain, his eyes flickering from Amelia to nothing and back again. He finally settles on the nothing and fumbles his way into his story.

"Once upon a time — well, that's not really how it started in the book, but I can't really remember..."

"It doesn't matter if you get it perfect. Just tell the story."

He nods, inhales to start again. "Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young Indian maid. God, this sounds dumb."

"Keep going, you fucktard. You can't keep pulling yourself out."

It's not that hard, kid. You just tell a story.

Everybody does it at some point.

He clenches his teeth and goes on. "There was a beautiful young Indian maid. She was the daughter of the chief, but he was forever on the warpath, and never home. Her mother..." Amelia fades to nothing, and Ben's eyes drift away into the other world. "Well, see, they lived on this island where there were no mothers. No one ever knew why, but there just weren't any mothers. Sure, she had to have a mother at some point, but no one could remember her, especially the girl."

He goes on, his voice shaking in the black edge between worlds. Slowly, the nothingness takes on a sense that it is no longer nothing. It is becoming the idea of something, and that's the most important something of everything.

"...She's out at the lake for a reason, see. Somehow, someone had gotten word to her that the mermaids knew something about her mother..."

In the distance, the idea of something shimmers. Moonlight on water. The black behind Ben darkens, forming clumps and shapes. Lightning sparks through me – I remember my first time, making mud out of the black.

But Ben, the idiot, opens his eyes. "...only it was a trick, 'cause the pirates wanted to—holy shit, it's working!" And it all flickers, fades away, like a monitor dropping into sleep.

"Keep going," Amelia urges.

"She—she's tied up." Ben squeezes his eyes shut, and now his voice and his whole body are shaking. "And the mermaids are laughing..."

The moonlit scene returns, bit by bit. The landscape is easy; Ben's subconscious fills in the gaps with trees and rocks and lapping waves and a small island in the middle of

the lake. By the time he gets to the part where the unlikely little boy is about to bust out all over the pirates, a small rowboat is emerging on the lake's surface.

"It's him, the leader of the tribe of shitheads – I mean, wild boys – who roam the island, attacking her people whenever they feel like it..."

His voice is becoming fainter now, his body mimicking Amelia's translucence. The story spills out of him, told from a different perspective than anyone – save himself and his sister, maybe – has ever told before.

His created world, his storyland, becomes vividly clear. The water smells of kelp, and in its gurgles I can hear the mermaids giggling. The metallic clashes of the sword fight echo off the water, the rocks, drifting away over the tops of the trees. The moonlight is silver and clear, washing over everything like a cool bath.

Then it is gone. And with it, Ben.

The nothing returns, as though it had never left. Somehow, in the wake of Ben's story, the nothing is more – or perhaps less – than it was before, and I ache in it. I ache to begin again, to craft a tale that will create oceans and earths and peoples and mud and shit and smiles and laughter.

"Tal?" Amelia's voice is small, and yet so loud.

Amelia. I forgot. I'm already in the middle of a story. I want it to end already. I want a new toy.

I clap, but I don't take a form for her.

WELL DONE, AMI. YOU SENT HIM AWAY. LET'S GO HOME.

Amelia's virtual body pushes through the darkness. She appears not in her comfortable goth FærLife avatar, but rather as a small, pale girl, her black mourning dress a size too large.

"Home?" she repeats, as though the word is no longer

among her vocabulary. She blinks through the wet crusting her eyelashes. "Oh, I know what you mean."

She doesn't fly. She just imagines herself back on the Thread.

I follow, but I'm churning with other stories. Hers has played out, and with far too few exchanges of body parts or offal.

You've been unkind to the girl.

IT'S NOT MY JOB TO BE KIND. I JUST TELL THE STORIES. WHEN THEY STOP BEING INTERESTING, I TELL A NEW ONE.

I don't think you know interesting from a hole in your butt.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT IT, OH TELLER OF TALES?

More than you. I can see the story yet to come.

DO YOU NOW? BRING IT.