

SECOND CHANCE

An ADRIFT text adventure by David Whyld

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Many thanks to my beta-testers: Laurence Moore and Robert Rafgon. Any errors still in the game are definitely down to me and not them.

Written with ADRIFT V.4 R.45

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The latest version of this game can always be found at
<http://www.shadowvault.net/secondchance.htm>

People playing the game for the first time should type either INFO or ABOUT

NOTE: while not an adult game in nature, Second Chance contains bad language and violence.

Street

So here I am, standing on the street corner, minding my own business. The rain is pissing down on me (okay, it's pissing down on everyone but it often seems as if it's something personal, like even the weather has it in for me). I'm cold, wet, miserable - the usual in other words. About me scurry raincoat-clad businessmen, their faces turned to avoid the downpour; their expressions unreadable. The sound of the rain hitting the sidewalk drowns out all possibility of conversation.

I'm standing by the opening of a darkened cinema, one that looks likely to have been closed for several months, if not years. The street extends east and west, both directions looking equally bleak, while south, over the road, there looks to have been some kind of incident.

> s

I head across the road. As I do, someone at the scene of the incident gives a high-pitched scream that cuts straight through me: like fingers down a blackboard. I wince, check my watch for the time (forgetting that it isn't working) and so my attention is completely distracted away from what it should be focused on. So is the driver of the lorry bearing down on me. I notice him at the last moment. He doesn't notice me at all.

... more ...

The pain is extreme but passes quickly. I may have flown through the air in a rather feeble impersonation of Superman after the lorry hit me but I don't remember. I don't remember hitting the side of the road. What I do remember are the hands turning me over and myself trying, although failing due to the fact that I can't control my vocal chords anymore, to tell them not to move me.

I'm injured! I want to shout. Don't move me! I'm injured!

But none of them hear me. They turn me over. Still no pain. Just a detached feeling. Someone starts crying; someone else asks me questions that perhaps make perfect sense to them but none to me.

Then someone turns the lights out and I slowly drift away into the darkness...

... more ...

And
then
abruptly
I'm
awake.

My surroundings have changed.

... more ...

Destiny
I'm in... I don't know. It's strange.

The room is ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. The walls are covered with windows which show a desolate landscape shooting past at unbelievable speeds. The floor, too, is windowed, although the two views differ: the walls view shows that the room is level with the ground, the floor view shows that the ground is several hundred feet away. The ceiling shows an underwater scene.

Gradually I get to my feet, feeling weaker than I've ever felt in my life before. I notice in a distracted kind of way, that there is nothing beyond the walls of the room I am in, nothing that would seem to support it hundreds of feet above the ground.

> z
Time passes...

> z
Time passes...

> z
Time passes...

> z
Time passes...

> z

Time passes...

The sound of rushing wind fills the room and there is a flash of blinding light. When I can see again, I am not alone.

"Greetings, friend!" cries the man with the briefcase. "And do I have a deal for YOU!"

I start to say something but the man slams his briefcase down on a table (which wasn't there a moment before) and flips it open. Inside are two envelopes.

"Allow me to introduce myself!" the man booms. He has the over-the-top voice of the quiz show host and the superficial looks and personality that go hand in hand. "My name is Everett Rhodes! Yes, my friend, you heard me right! Everett Rhodes indeed! Mr ER himself is at YOUR service! And he has the deal of a lifetime for YOU!"

I try to speak again but Mr ER himself presses on, his thundering voice drowning out my own.

... more ...

"We have two envelopes here, my friend! TWO envelopes that contain aspects of your life as it COULD have turned out but DIDN'T! Yes indeed! We at the Hashington/Barkwood Corporation have studied YOUR life and discovered the fundamental places where it went WRONG! We are giving YOU the opportunity to correct those mistakes and make YOUR life go the way it was INTENDED to go and not the way it DID go!"

Mr ER himself stands there, almost as if he expects me to reach out and take one of the envelopes.

> envelope one

I reach out my hand and take the first envelope.

A shock ripples through my body as I touch the envelope and Mr ER cries out, "YES! And a good decision it was indeed! You see HOW you came to die!"

... more ...

And
once
more
I
find
myself

...elsewhere...

... more ...

I'm Dolores Hayes. I'm seventy-four. I'm on my way to see my grandchildren, Sam and Barbara (more Sam, I've never cared much for Barbara - too much like her mother in my opinion). It's a long walk across town but I don't drive and I'm not paying the extortionate prices they charge on buses these days. And so many taxis are driven by foreigners that I'm not even considerin' that idea.

Right now I'm at the corner of Monk Terrace and Mormon Avenue, southwest to one, southeast to the other. I don't know diddly squat about either and don't care to know.

> i

I've got with me my clothes (naturally - I'm not stupid and go out with nothin' on but what I was born in like some people I could mention) and my purse and my umbrella and my newspaper and some darned mobile me son got me.

> x mobile

I ain't got a clue 'ow it works. More trouble 'n' it's worth anyway. Me eldest, Josh, says he's got it on "speed-dial" (whatever the hell that is) for the cops an' I oughta push the button if I'm in trouble. Huh! Waste o' bleedin' time if yer asks me. A button is on the mobile phone.

> se

I head along to Mormon Avenue, my ankles givin' me the usual probs. Sometimes I hate bein' old. I'd have ran down here when I was a lass.

Mormon Avenue

Okay, I'm at Mormon Avenue. Not been this way before. It looks bleak an' miserable. The houses are all pokey and close together and look like the sort of houses lowlifes and immigrants would live in. Not nice houses at all. Little windy streets lead off south into

the heart o' the city an' northwest back the way I came. Several fellers stand about twenty feet away, swearing at each other an' messin' around with knives. Shouldn't be allowed.

> push button

I push it. Immediately there's some ringin' sound comin' from the mobile then an official sounding voice on.

"Ere, bitch!" one of the thugs yells at me. "You callin' the fuckin' cops on us?"

"You oughta be locked up," I tell him.

"We ain't done nothin' wrong, you whore!" another one shouts.

I wave the mobile at him. "I'm callin' the cops anyway so you'd better get runnin', you foul-mouthed little thug."

For a second I think it might have been a mistake to have said that to them. One of them pulls out a flickblade.

... more ...

But then another grabs his arms and they have a heated little argument before the first puts the knife away.

"Ain't worth it, dude," the second says.

Castin' hateful glances at me - if I was thirty years younger I'd have tanned their arses an' no mistake! - they clear off.

The official voice has been goin' on all this time but I can't say I even noticed. Anyways, I tap a few buttons on the mobile till it shuts up.

Time I was getting' along to see little Sam.

... more ...

abruptly

I

find

myself...

...elsewhere...

... more ...

Destiny

I'm in... I don't know. It's strange.

The room is ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. The walls are covered with windows which show a desolate landscape shooting past at unbelievable speeds. The floor, too, is windowed, although the two views differ: the walls view shows that the room is level with the ground, the floor view shows that the ground is several hundred feet away. The ceiling shows an underwater scene. A table with Mr ER's briefcase on rests in the centre of the strange room.

Mr ER is here, his personality so loud and overpowering there seems precious little room for anything else.

"And welcome BACK to YOU!" cries Mr ER, pumping my hand as if he's determined to pull it off my arm. "You did..." He laughs. "Well, that would telling now wouldn't it? Let's move on, shall we?"

1: "Move on? I don't follow..."

2: "What the hell just happened back there?"

> 1

"Move on INDEED!" Mr ER claps his hands and I notice he is now holding a key where before his hands were empty. "Where to now, I wonder? Where to indeed..."

His voice is fading away even as he finishes speaking. Or is it that I am fading away?

... more ...

I'm 17. Spotty face, beady eyes, nose too big, greasy hair. Despite this I have the firm belief that I look like Al Pacino's more handsome brother. I've been known to fly into rages at anyone insensitive to point out that I don't. I walk around with the kind of swagger normally reserved for big movie stars and chart-topping singers and give the impression that others believe in my coolness factor implicitly. Deep down, I know how desperately uncool I am but that's deep down. On the surface I'm the coolest of the cool. I'm hip; I'm happenin'; I'm crucial in a seriously kickin' kinda way; I speak all the cool dude lingo and dress the cool dude dress code and I am THE cool dude.

... more ...

Tonight is going to be the night I score with Jenny. She's a year younger than me and pretty with long blonde hair. Nice tits, too. Bit on the dim side but then who gives a fuck about that considering the kind of rack she's got? She's always been pretty cold to me before and I've never made much progress with her but tonight I'm not taking no for an answer. Tonight we're going to do IT whether she wants to or not.

> 1

Room

I'm in my room at uni. I share it with a bozo called Doug who's into heavy metal and rock and think he's going to be a world class drummer one day (yeah, right) but he's not here right now. The room is a mess, as usual, with clothes on the floor, empty beer cans piled around the bin, several pornos scattered about. There's an unwashed body odour smell in the air and also a smell of vomit. A mirror in which I often pose hangs on the back of the door to the north. Other than that there's a desk, two chairs, two beds, a small table and a lamp. We sure don't live in style, me and the Dougster.

> open door

Flash forward half an hour

Party

The party's in full swing and so loud I think my eardrums are about to explode. God knows what song they've got on but it's all one hideous dirge, the words and music all jumbled into one by the sheer volume. About me people are dancing like they're out of their minds. Not me, though. When you're cool, you don't dance like a prick. You move through the party, you give subtle nods, you clap people on the back, you check out the lay-deez...

No sign of Jenny yet. Unless she's in one of the other rooms: northwest to the kitchen, east to the lounge, up to the bedrooms.

> u

I catch a glimpse out of the corner of my eye and see Jenny there. I head over to her. She looks hot.

- 1: Tell her she looks hot.
- 2: Ask her about sex.
- 3: Ask her how she's been.

> 3

"Oh, not so bad," she says. "Damn, this party's loud. I can hardly hear myself think."

- 1: Ask her about going upstairs?
- 2: Ask if she wants to get out of this dump.

> 2

"Sure, why not. Anything's gotta be better than this dead end party."

... more ...

The beach is beautiful that night; the way the moonlight strikes the sea sends shivers through me. Not that I'd admit this in a million years. Doug would knock my teeth out if he thought he was sharing a room with someone who thought about things like that.

Jenny, at my side, is exquisite.

- 1: Tell her she looks beautiful.
- 2: Ask her to marry me.
- 3: Kiss her.

> 1

"Flattery'll get you nowhere, Walt. Don't you know that by now?"

"True all the same."

She shakes her head though I can tell she's pleased I said that.

"Have you thought about what happens when you finish uni?"

- 1: Tell her I'm going to join Doug's rock group.
- 2: Tell her I'm going to become a teacher.
- 3: Tell her I've not thought about it yet.

> 3

"Oh, I know what you mean," Jenny says. "I thought about being a model but I dunno. Standing there with some guy with a camera taking shots of me in a bikini. Ugh!" She grimaces. "I'm too paranoid about how I look besides."

"You look fine," I say automatically.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Truth is, I'm not confident enough for that shit. Never have been, never will be. I want a better job as well. I don't want to start modelling then have to quit it all when I get wrinkles."

- 1: Tell her do to what she wants to do.
- 2: Ask if she's got any shots of herself.

> 1

"I will. I will. Y'know, I never even knew you had a sensitive side."

"I hide it well," I say. "When you're sharing a room with the Dougster you need to keep your sensitive side well hidden."

Jenny grins. "I can imagine." She sticks her hand out. "Walk me home, Walt. My parents are out and the house is all empty."

I walk her home. I'm not sure what I expect but it turns out to be even better than anything I've fantasised about. I lose my virginity that night (my actual virginity, this is, and not the one I tell people I lost when I was 14 to my maths teacher). Jenny is

incredible. I feel a connection to her I've never felt to anyone before. Is this love? I don't know. I've never been in love before. Hell, I've never even looked at a girl before with anything other than lust or indifference. But I feel me and Jenny have got a bright future ahead of us. A bright future indeed.

... more ...

And, once more, I find myself back in the strange room.

... more ...

Destiny

I'm in... I don't know. It's strange.

The room is ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. The walls are covered with windows which show a desolate landscape shooting past at unbelievable speeds. The floor, too, is windowed, although the two views differ: the walls view shows that the room is level with the ground, the floor view shows that the ground is several hundred feet away. The ceiling shows an underwater scene. A table with Mr ER's briefcase on rests in the centre of the strange room.

Mr ER is here, his personality so loud and overpowering there seems precious little room for anything else.

"You look like a CONFUSED person, my friend!" booms Mr ER, slapping me about the slapping. "No doubt right now you are wondering just WHAT is going on and HOW you can get everything SORTED out. Am I right or am I RIGHT?"

I try to retreat away from him but there is, of course, nowhere to go.

"What the hell is this?" I ask. "Just what's going on, Rhodes?"

"A second chance," says Mr ER. For once he is not shouting. "For you. You made some mistakes, friend. Bad mistakes that have crippled your life. Today you can fix them. TODAY..." And he's back to his more normal self again. "You have the opportunity to SET MATTERS STRAIGHT. Just shake my hand and everything will be YOURS to decide."

"Shake your-"

Mr ER extends his hand. "Shake it."

> shake hand

Mr ER encloses my hand in his own and pumps it vigorously. "A GOOD choice, Mr Kramer. Let's go back a few years, shall we? To when your life changed..."

I try to pull my hand away from Mr ER's but find myself falling...

... more ...

I feel... different. I look down at my hands and notice they're smooth, unlined. Not my own hands. What has happened to me?

... more ...

Bedroom

This is mine and Walt's bedroom. Blue wallpaper with swans on; matching bedside cabinets. We thought about having a mirror put on the ceiling once ("for when we're in a kinky mood," Walt said) but I didn't like the idea of looking up and seeing myself. Just freaked me out for some reason. A doorway in the south wall leads to the upstairs hallway. Downstairs, I can hear Walt getting things ready for the party.

> s

I leave the bedroom. Time for the party...

... more ...

The party was pretty much a disaster. Laurie and Keith hardly said a word to each other all evening and I couldn't help but notice how much makeup Laurie had on - was she trying to hide the bruises around her left eye? Walt tried a few times to get Keith talking about sports - the one subject they seem to have in common - but Keith seemed distracted. For some reason, he seemed reluctant to leave Laurie to speak for herself.

But after the meal was done, I managed to grab hold of Laurie and spirit her away to the lounge for a little chat.

... more ...

Lounge

Myself and Laurie are stood in a corner of the lounge. Near to me is our TV set (some hideously large thing Walt bought last year so he can watch sports "the way they're meant to be watched" (whatever that means)) and the sofa. A door in one wall leads through to the kitchen.

1: "So tell me, Laurie, how have you been doing?"

> 1

"We're fine," Laurie answers quickly. A little too quickly. "Keith got a promotion a few weeks ago so more money, more..." She shrugs. "More lots of things. He has to work more hours but I can live with that."

1: "How are things between you and Keith?"

2: "Tell me about Keith's promotion."

> 1

"Fine. Just fine." Laurie casts an anxious glance out of the window to where Walt and Keith are star spotting. "You think we should head out there? Keith doesn't like it when I'm..." Laurie trails off.

1: "He doesn't like it when what?"

2: "I know you and Keith have been having problems, Laurie."

> 1

"Nothing, Jen. Look..." She looks out the window again. Keith is thirty feet away. "It's not been easy these last few years," she says quietly. "Keith... well, I think he's been seeing someone."

I nod, urging her to go on.

"Some girl at work. His secretary. I met her once. She seemed like a nice girl."

1: "You think he's seeing her?"

> 1

"Oh, I don't know." Laurie shakes her head. "I mean, it might be nothing more than he says it is: overtime. And she's got to work the overtime because she's his secretary. But..." Laurie shakes her head again. "I phone up sometimes to speak to him and she answers. I know there's something about the way she talks to me - oh so polite and well mannered - and I could swear she's rubbing my face in it."

1: "Maybe there's genuinely nothing going on."

2: "Have you confronted him about it?"

3: "Have you asked the girl outright if anything is going on?"

> 1

Laurie looks at me. "Do you think so, Jen? Oh God, I hope there isn't."

Deep down, I wonder what is going on - Keith has always seemed like the sort to cheat if I'm being perfectly honest - but does Laurie really need to hear this?

1: "I'm convinced nothing is going on."

2: "I think you should confront Keith over it."

3: "I think you should check up on things beforehand - speak to his work colleagues, that sort of thing."

> 3

Laurie nods her head. "That's the best thing to do. Thanks, Jen. I wished I'd thought of it before."

"He might have asked his workmates to lie for him," I say.

"There's a filing clerk I know. She'll tell me the truth if no one else will."

... more ...

A week later I get a call from Laurie. She tells me that Keith has fired his secretary and hired a male secretary in her place. Apparently the filing clerk had gone straight to Keith and given him hell for sleeping with his secretary. A red-faced Keith had then called the secretary into his office and the two had been heard yelling at each other, following which the secretary emerged in tears, packed her bags and left. She hadn't been seen since.

"So I don't know what happened between him and that bitch," Laurie tells me, "but he got rid of her."

"Are you giving him a second chance then?"

"One second chance. No more. If I so much as suspect he's cheating on me again, I'm getting a divorce."

... more ...

I mention this to Walt and he breathes a sigh of relief. Seems like things worked out okay in the end.

... more ...

... elsewhere ...

... more ...

Destiny

I'm in... I don't know. It's strange.

The room is ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. The walls are covered with windows which show a desolate landscape shooting past at unbelievable speeds. The floor, too, is windowed, although the two views differ: the walls view shows that the room is level with the ground, the floor view shows that the ground is several hundred feet away. The ceiling shows an underwater scene. A table with Mr ER's briefcase on rests in the centre of the strange room.

Mr ER is here, his personality so loud and overpowering there seems precious little room for anything else.

"Now, was that STRANGE or was that STRANGE?" booms Mr ER, laughing delightedly to himself. "Ready for another one, Mr Kramer?"

"No, I fucking well am not!" I snap. I stare about myself, at the room, at Mr ER...

"What is this? Some kind of drugs trip?"

"Do you FEEL like you're on drugs, Mr Kramer?"

"No... I don't-"

"Then drugs it CANNOT be! Now, a question if you will, Mr Kramer, one requiring an ANSWER of either 'yes' or 'no'. Are you ready?"

I say nothing, convinced Mr ER will continue whether I respond or not.

"Yes or no, Mr Kramer?"

"You haven't even told me what the question is, Rhodes."

"Ah, but I have, Mr Kramer. I HAVE indeed! The QUESTION, my good friend, is simply: yes or no?"

"Yes or no what?"

Infuriatingly, he just stands there and repeats: "yes or no?"

> yes

"And YES it is!" cries Mr ER and before I can ask him just what he means, my surroundings abruptly change once more...

... more ...

The music is loud, painfully so. It's also decidedly tuneless, the sort of dirge that if it came on the radio you'd quickly reach for the off button. I sit there and listen to it as best I can, knowing full well that Doug values my opinion (false as it is - if I told him the truth he'd freak out and that might well be the end of our friendship). Right now, I'm desperately trying to find something positive to say about the music that won't sound like I'm just saying it because he's a friend and I don't want to hurt his feelings but instead that I genuinely love it. It's hard.

> wait

I wait. The rehearsals go on. At a time when I'm sure people born without the ability to hear are lucky, the rehearsals finally end. I muster up a few congratulatory words for Doug and we head into the dressing room.

... more ...

Dressing Room

We're in the dressing room, me and Doug, only it's not really a dressing room so much as an abandoned office off to one side of the hall. A flickering light hanging from the ceiling illuminates the room - partially anyway. Most of it is gloomy and looks like you'd imagine it would after dark. By way of decoration the dressing room has a scratched mirror on one wall and a stool on which Doug is currently sitting. The showbiz life, eh?

A door to the east leads out of here.

> e

"And off to the party we go," says Doug. "Let's go get that pussy, man."

... elsewhere ...

... more ...

Party

I don't know whose house this is but they sure don't know a lot about taste. The walls are red, the carpet is pink, the decorations are... well, 'shit' is the first word that comes to mind when describing them. The room I'm in is crammed: men and women stand around in groups chatting, kissing and, in one occasion, even fucking in full view of everyone else. I don't know where Doug is. He wandered off when we got here and I haven't seen him since.

I spy doorways to the northwest, west and east leading to different parts of the house.

> w

I move west.

Hallway

Ah, a bit of peace and quiet. Still noisy, of course (hell, they can probably hear this party on the Moon) but not so painfully loud that my head is throbbing. Stairs lead up to the bedrooms and a door leads east.

> u

There's nothing much happening at the top of the stairs. Several doorways - west, northwest, north and east - lead into bedrooms while the stairs themselves lead down to the hallway.

As I reach the top of the stairs, I hear what sounds like a scream, quickly muffled.

> n

I step into a bedroom where-

"Doug!"

Doug looks up and the girl he's holding down opens her mouth to yell. Doug quickly clamps his hand down on her, forcing her head into the pillows on the bed.

"For fuck's sake, Doug, what are you doing?" I ask, but it's clear from a glance what he's doing.

"None yer fuckin' bizness," Doug mutters. He's either drunk or high. Probably both. "Gerroutere, Walt. Me 'n' Liz jus' 'avin' bita fun."

"Doug-"

"GERROUT! Now! Or so 'elp me God I'll kill yer, Walt."

> talk to doug

"Fuck off!" he hisses, spraying the poor girl with saliva. "You 'eard me, pal. Ain't nuffin' bu' a bita fun..."

"Let her go, Doug," I say. "You don't want to end up in prison."

Doug shakes his head. "Ain't gonna 'appen. Me - gonna me famous I am. Big ro' star. Nobody touch me then."

> talk to doug

"You'll never be a big rock star if you carry on like this, Doug," I say. "They'll lock you up and throw away the key. Now let her go."

The girl struggles and Doug raises his hand as if to hit her but then seems to think better of it.

"No' fair," he mutters. "Jus' a bita fun."

> talk to doug

"Let her go, Doug. She won't say a thing about this if you let her go now," I say. In all honesty, she'll probably run straight to the cops but I'd sooner take the risk of that happening than have Doug rape her. "Let her go."

Doug shakes his head but lets the girl go. She struggles away from him and pushes past me out of the door.

"Fuck," Doug mutters. He hasn't moved from the bed. "What wuz I gonna do there, Walt?"

I help him up. "Let's get out of here, pal. C'mon."

... more ...

Doug phones me. "The other night - with that girl. I just wanted to say thanks, man. And I'm giving up the drugs."

I breathe a deep, and long, sigh of relief.

... more ...

Everything flickers... solidifies... flickers once more... I see Mr ER and the strange room... but then it is gone once more and I find myself...

... more ...

Antonia's Bedroom

Antonia's bedroom is the usual chaotic mess: jeans on the floor, books strewn across her desk, videos piled in an untidy heap by the door. Her bed is unmade (no big surprise there). How she manages to keep track of anything I don't know. The walls are decorated (if that's the word) with posters of her latest craze, some skinhead punk band who apparently vomit on the audience during concerts. Her door, also with a poster, lies to the east.

> turn on computer

I press the power button and wait for the computer to power on. Then a message flashes on screen asking me to type my password.

It was the letter from the school headmaster that got myself and Jenny worried. Antonia, along with several other girls her age, had been caught smoking pot between classes. It came as something of a shock I don't mind admitting. We sat up late last night discussing it, keeping our voices low so there was no chance of Antonia overhearing. We also knew she wasn't the ideal 13 year old (we're realistic enough to know she's not the little angel she pretends to be) but we never really thought she was into drugs.

> type ainotna

I type Antonia backwards and the computer continues to load all its programs. After a minute, the opening screen (the desktop is it called?) is before me.

The letter made us wonder just what else Antonia had been up to that we didn't know about. Jenny in particular was shocked as she had always been closer to Antonia than I was and thought that Antonia told her everything. I remember the time she came home with a bloodied nose and said she'd fell over. Had she? Or was the truth something more sinister? I remember the CDs and videos she buys and often wonder just where she gets the money for them from.

> x desktop

Several icons are displayed here.

So we decided, after Antonia left for school this morning, that I'd conduct a little search of her room. Jenny has gone to speak to the parents of one of Antonia's friends to see if their daughter can shed any light onto what's going on.

I'm not comfortable with searching Antonia's room in her absence; it makes me feel a bit on the low side, as if I don't trust her or something, but right now I'm beginning to wonder if I can trust her. Hopefully I won't find anything suspicious and that will be the end of it.

> x icons

I see icons for "e-mail", "word processor", "internet explorer", "diary" and "my pictures". Another icon in the corner of the screen is marked "shut down". Apparently I have to click on one of these icons and it will run a program for me.

> click picture

I open the program and...

Several seconds later I'm staring in shock and disgust at the naked pictures of Antonia displayed on the screen. Some are in extreme close up and even show her playing with herself. One photo has her sitting on a boy's lap while he fondles her. Disturbed, I close the program down.

> click diary

I click on the diary program. A page from a diary displays itself before me. Today is blank but tomorrow has a note in about "snazzing" someone called "Claudia". I have a sinking feeling what "snazzing" means but just hope I'm wrong. Disturbed, I close the program down.

> click internet explorer

The screen flickers several times then a website called "Stressed & Depressed" displays itself. It looks to be some kind of forum for teenagers experiencing emotional problems who need someone to talk to. One particular thread called "pissed off with life an considerin suicide" jumps to my attention as the last poster is "AntoniaStressed".

1: Read it.

2: Shut the program down.

> 1

I click on the thread and read a few posts at random. AntoniaStressed seems to be complaining about the unfairness of life in which her "cunt parents" beat and abuse her, her friends torture her with cigarette lighters and even her teachers are out to get her. She seems to be considering suicide as an escape from it. Several other members of the forum appear to be trying to talk sense into her but the last post from AntoniaStressed, at 8.23 this morning no less, says she is planning to knife her "cunt parents" in their sleep over the next few days.

Wishing I had never read this, I close down the program.

> make bed

I pull back the top sheet and find, lying there, a lacy red bra. Feeling a little disgusted, I decide against picking it up. This is one thing I'll definitely want to be asking Antonia about.

> x posters

The groups Antonia seems to be into are all either rap or acid house and have names like Fukker, Corpse and there is even a German thrash metal band called Bitch Smackers. I've

listened to some dire stuff over the years, mainly due to my association with Doug Kincaid, but not even Doug would listen to the likes of Bitch Smackers. A calendar in the middle of the posters seems to take precedence.

> get calendar

As I move the calendar to one side, something that was taped to the wall at the back of it drops to the floor. I stoop and pick it up. It turns out to be a ticket for a night club, one that myself and Jenny banned Antonia from visiting due to its reputation.

> out

... more ...

Later in the lounge downstairs...

"Get it over with then," says Antonia, hands folded across her chest. She's got an arrogant sneering look on her face but I can tell she's worried. "Gimme the shit."

"Language!" says Jenny.

Antonia sneers. "Whatever."

We discussed how we were going to go about this earlier, after I searched Antonia's room but before she arrived home from school. We talked long and hard. Surprisingly it was Jenny, usually the more tolerant parent, who suggested we really read Antonia the riot act.

"It's for her own good in the long run, Walt," she had said. "We either knock some sense into her now or we waste the rest of our lives trying to sort her out."

"Well," says Antonia now. "Get on with it then."

... more ...

Antonia's sneer fades quickly as I relate everything I found in her room this morning. By the time I've finished - and I've omitted a few of the things to spare Jenny having to hear them - Antonia is almost in tears.

"Were you going to kill that poor girl, Toni?" asks Jenny.

"Kill her? 'Course not. Jus' messin'..." says Antonia, squirming in her seat. "'Course I wasn't gonna... kill her..."

"We need to know you're serious about this," says Jenny. "We need to know we can trust you."

"Or we go to the police," I say.

Antonia looks like a cornered mouse. It tears my heart to see her like this but I know how necessary it is. It would hurt me far worse to see her arrested.

"The... police?"

"We can't just turn aside and let a girl get murdered, Toni." Jenny looks our daughter hard in the face and says, "we need to know."

... more ...

Several months later, myself and Jenny attend Antonia's school for a meeting with her headmaster. He welcomes us in, asks if we want tea, then starts to speak.

"I was worried about young Antonia, I don't mind saying," Principal Hashwood says, flipping through a file on his desk. "Such a clever girl she was. Such vitality and such a bright future ahead of her! But then she seemed to lose her way. I've seen it happen before many, many times and it always worries me when it happens to the clever ones. Such a wasted opportunity I always think. But," he smiles, "I'm relieved to say that my worries are now behind me. Her grades have picked up, her attendance has been first rate and she's even signed on for some after school classes to catch up the lost ground." The headmaster gives us a satisfied nod. "I think your daughter has a bright future indeed waiting for her, Mr and Mrs Kramer."

... more ...

... more ...

My surroundings change...

... more ...

Destiny

I'm in... I don't know. It's strange.

The room is ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. The walls are covered with windows which show a desolate landscape shooting past at unbelievable speeds. The floor, too, is windowed, although the two views differ: the walls view shows that the room is level with the ground, the floor view shows that the ground is several hundred feet away. The ceiling shows an underwater scene. A table with Mr ER's briefcase on rests in the centre of the strange room.

Mr ER is here, his personality so loud and overpowering there seems precious little room for anything else.

"And our journey has come to an END!" cries Mr ER himself. "It was a GOOD journey but, alas, it has now reached its CONCLUSION!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" I rub a hand across my eyes. I feel tired. Unbearably so. "What journey? What conclusion?"

"The CONCLUSION, Mr Kramer, of your LIFE!"

A sudden dread fills me. "You mean I'm going to die?"

Mr ER smiles a radiant smiles. "That all depends, Mr Kramer, on just how you lived your life." He raises a hand in a farewell gesture. "It has been a PLEASURE, Mr Kramer, but I am afraid you must now DEPART."

"No... wait..."

But my surroundings are changing once more.

... more ...

Street

So here I am, standing on the street corner, minding my own business. The rain is pissing down on me (okay, it's pissing down on everyone but it often seems as if it's something personal, like even the weather has it in for me). I'm cold, wet, miserable - the usual in other words. About me scurry raincoat-clad businessmen, their faces turned to avoid the downpour; their expressions unreadable. The sound of the rain hitting the sidewalk drowns out all possibility of conversation.

I'm standing by the opening of a darkened cinema, one that looks likely to have been closed for several months, if not years. The street extends east and west, both directions

looking equally bleak, while south, over the road, there looks to have been some kind of incident.

> s

I set off south, determined this time to avoid the fate which occurred before. I know the damn lorry's going to be coming at me, so this time I can avoid it. I can either wait till it passes before I cross the road or just dodge out of the way or...

Or...

But I can't. I can't do any of that!

It's like my actions are preordained, like I can't change anything and instead have to follow the exact same course I followed before, unable to change a thing, a victim of time and circumstances.

But wait! The old woman, Dolores, she didn't die. I saved her. I steered her away from the thugs-

I can see Jenny and Antonia. And Doug! They're waiting for me on the other side of the road. Jenny's pointing, gesturing at something. The lorry! Doug is shouting something to me. Antonia runs across the road and the lorry... the lorry... it comes to a halt before her. The driver leans out of his window and yells at her to not be so damn stoo-pid she could get run over what the hell is she thinkin?

I step into the road myself, go to Antonia, lift her up and carry her to the far side. As I put her down, I sense something strange has happened. Something... life changing.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Walt," says Jenny.

"Yeah, dude, you're white as a sheet," says Doug.

"Are you okay, dad?" asks Antonia, looking up at me anxiously.

I notice I am holding the letter from the Barkington/Hashwood Corporation and out of the corner of my eye I catch a glimpse of the unmistakable Mr ER himself standing in the crowd. He gives me a wide-as-his-face smile and claps his hands together as if congratulating me on a job well done.

"I'm fine, honey," I say to Antonia. I look at them - my wife, my best friend, my daughter - and realise what a difference my actions have made, not just to myself but to the people around me. "In fact, I'm better than I've ever been."

... more ...

END GAME

The game has ended. Did you reach a good ending or a bad one? If you've just died again, it's a certainty that you reached one of the game's many bad endings. If you feel like another go, simply type "restart".

On the other hand, if you achieved an ending which didn't result in your death then you can feel justifiably proud that you reached a satisfactory ending. Are there better endings that you didn't find? Well, maybe you should type "restart" and see for yourself.