

The Decline and Fall of the Family Birthday

A freeform LARP about a tight-knit extended family which is slowly falling apart.

Players: 5+, including one facilitator

Length: 2 – 3 hours

Many members of your large extended family have birthdays in the same month. Because of this, it has become a family tradition to throw one big consolidated birthday celebration and family reunion every year. In this LARP you will play out several instances of that big family birthday party. As you do, you will follow the fragmentation of a once tight-knit family and watch your shared tradition wane and disappear.

This LARP is designed to be played by five or more players, with more being better. It is also designed to allow additional players to join late or allow some players to leave early. The LARP is split into multiple rounds, each lasting 15 – 30 minutes. Each round corresponds to one party. Several in-game years may pass between each round. Therefore, the characters have many in-game reasons to enter or exit the LARP.

This LARP involves keeping track of how often each character grants or denies the petitions of the other characters. A character who gives support and assistance to the other characters, but does not receive sufficient support and assistance in return, will eventually stop attending the family birthday party. When this happens, the character leaves the LARP, but the player is encouraged to create a new character and continue playing.

Necessary Materials

- Character nametags, with spaces for character names and character gender presentations or pronouns.
- “Granted” and “Denied” cards, four of each type per player, plus a few extra “Denied” cards. Cards can be cut out from the sheet provided at the end of this document (one sheet per two players). Alternatively, two distinguishable kinds of poker-chips or other small objects can be used in place of cards.
- Paper, to record **Lines** and **Veils**.

Running the LARP

Choose one player to act as the **facilitator**. (The facilitator may also choose to play.) The facilitator is responsible for reading through this document, making sure that the other players understand the rules, explaining the safety and consent mechanics, leading the workshop, keeping track of time, and leading the debrief. The facilitator may also need to orient newly arriving players during the game.

Facilitator Directions

- Begin by explaining the concept behind the game.
- Explain the **Safety** and **Consent** mechanics:
 - Determine what level of physical contact is appropriate for the playgroup. Default to “no touching”, but allow each player to opt into more physical contact if they choose to do so.
 - Tell the players that they are allowed to leave the LARP whenever they like, for any reason.
 - Ask the players if they have any **Lines** or **Veils** they want to declare before the game begins. Lines are topics that they do not want present in the game under any circumstances. Veils are topics that they are willing to encounter or address thematically, but do not want to dwell on. Make sure to write down these Lines and Veils so that late arrivals can reference them. Players may choose to add new Lines or Veils as the game progresses.
 - An in-game safety/calibration mechanic such as “OK check-in” is also recommended. Instructions for “OK check-in” are available online.
- Explain the **Petition Mechanic** (page 3)
- Lead the **Workshop** (page 4)

Facilitator Directions (continued)

- Follow the steps below to **begin the first round**. Once each character has petitioned at least one other character, give a 2-minute warning. After those two minutes, end the round. Aim for 20 – 30 minutes, total. Once the round ends, follow the steps for **ending a round**. After that, follow the steps for **beginning subsequent rounds**. Subsequent rounds should last about 10 – 20 minutes, with a few minutes of discussion between each round and the next.
- Depending on time constraints, warn players before the last round begins.
- Finish by leading the **Debrief**.
 - Gather the players in a circle. Have everyone take three deep breaths. Then ask the players the following questions: What were your feelings towards the family at the beginning of the LARP? How did those feelings change as the LARP progressed? What was something you, as a player, enjoyed about this LARP? Is there a particular moment or player you want to give a shout out to?

Beginning the First Round

- Ask each player to think about the answers to the following questions for a few moments: What am I worried about, today? What are my short-term goals? How can my family members help me with these goals? Why might those family members be reluctant to help me?

Ending a Round

- Any character holding **zero “Granted” cards or eight “Denied” cards** is removed. If a character is removed, ask the player to describe why their character is no longer attending the party in the future. (Examples of reasons to stop attending the party include moving away, becoming estranged, or dying.) The player may create a new character, as described below.
- Each remaining player gives the facilitator a “Granted” card. Those cards are set aside.
- The player(s) holding the **fewest cards** choose how many years pass between this round and the next. (By default, 1 – 5 years pass between rounds. Everyone still attends the party every year.)
- The player(s) holding the **most “Denied” cards** choose how the family’s situation changes during that span. Focus on how the change affects the family emotionally. Resist the urge to make major changes to the world outside of the family.

Beginning a Subsequent Round

- Create new characters, if needed.
 - Use the same method described in the workshop section. Examples of new characters include teenage children of other characters and family members who have been there all along.
 - If new players want to join, make sure they are aware of any previously stated Lines or Veils. Give them the opportunity to add new Lines and Veils. To ease joining, new players are encouraged to create characters that are attending the party for the first time. Examples include new significant others and family members who have just moved to the area.
 - Give each new character four “Granted” cards and four “Denied” cards, minus one card of each type for each round that has occurred beyond the first. At minimum, give one card of each type.
- Describe how many family members are at the party. By default, the party should shrink every round by half as many attendees as there are players.
- Go around the room and have each player say a sentence or two about how their character has changed since the last round. Concentrate on details that everyone else should know.
- Ask each player to think about the answers to the following questions for a few moments: What has changed for me in the past year that that entire family might not know. What am I worried about, today? What are my short-term goals? How can my family help me? Why might they be reluctant to help me?

The Petition Mechanic

In this LARP, the characters are encouraged to ask each other for specific rewards. The character asking for the reward is the **petitioner**. The other character is the **giver**, and must choose to either **grant** or **deny** the petition. Petitions can be big or small, concrete or abstract, and fair or unfair. Here are some examples of petitions that might be made during this LARP:

- “I want you to help me find a good nursing home for mom, and help me convince her to move there.”
- “Could you get my kid an intern position at your office? He’s promised to be more punctual this time.”
- “Please don’t tell grandma about my boyfriend. I don’t know how she’ll take it.”
- “Can I borrow \$20? I promise it’s not for alcohol.”

Notice that each of these example petitions include an explicit or implicit reason to deny them. This is not required, but doing so can be helpful for the other players.

Players should do their best to craft petitions that are explicit, consequential, realistic, and emotional.

- **Explicit** means that it should be clear to everyone that a reward is being requested and who is requesting it. Rounds are short, so there’s no time to be subtle. Consider declaring your intention out of character prior to a scene. This can make it easier to request abstract things like attention, approval, or acceptance.
- **Consequential** means that the reward should matter to both characters. The petitioner should want or need the reward, and being denied should negatively impact them in some way. The giver should be conceding something that matters to them by granting the petition, beyond just time or money.
- **Realistic** means that the reward should be something that the giver can actually grant or reasonably refuse to grant. Asking for the unattainable does not count as a petition. Nor does asking for something that no reasonable person would ever refuse to grant.
- **Emotional** means that there should be emotional stakes to the petition, even if the literal request is purely practical. For example, if a character asks for help moving in to their new spouse’s place, the emotional stakes could involve the giver having to accept a disliked addition into the family.

Once a petition is made, the characters should play out the scene. Once the scene concludes, the giver should decide whether the petition was granted or denied. This choice is made out-of-character, and cannot be disputed. Importantly, the **player** may have their character agree to grant the petition, but may also decide that their **character** will fail to follow through on their promise. In such a case, the petition is denied. Avoid justifying denials in purely practical terms. The giver should refuse for emotional reasons, if possible.

Every player begins the LARP with four “**Granted**” cards and four “**Denied**” cards.

- Whenever a petition is granted, the giver must give the petitioner one of their “Granted” cards.
- Whenever a petition is denied, the giver must give the petitioner one of their “Denied” cards.
- If the giver does not have any “Granted” cards, they cannot grant the reward. The giver player is encouraged to create an in-game reason for this outcome. Perhaps they are emotionally drained, feeling put-upon by the petitioner or the rest of the family, or are feeling too unhappy to say yes.
- If the giver does not have any “Denied” cards, they may still choose to deny the petition. If they do, they should obtain another “Denied” card from the facilitator and give it to the petitioner.

At the end of each round, any character with **zero “Granted” cards or eight “Denied” cards** is removed. (The player may create a new character.) Then, every player discards a “Granted” card.

Workshop

Family Workshop

This is where you create your extended family. Assume that at least four times as many family-members as there are players attend your family birthday party every year. Give everyone the opportunity to contribute to the description of your setting and your family. If you choose to define the racial or ethnic background of your family, take care to be respectful. Here are some questions to help begin the discussion.

- Where is our family concentrated? A particular city? A small town? Something more unusual?
- In which month are the birthdays clustered? (By default, use the current month.)
- What brings our family together? What commonalities do we all share? As examples, our family could operate a business together, or we could all have recently arrived in the area.
- What is the major source of conflict within the family?
- What is our family's last name? (This may or may not be appropriate based on the other choices.)

Character Creation

Every player should now begin defining their own character. It is important for each character to have a strong identity so that they can improvise petitions during the game. Connections between the characters will be defined following this step. It is recommended that each character be in their teens or older. Here are some questions to help begin the character-creation process.

- How do I define myself? Who am I when I'm apart from my extended family?
- How old am I? When is my birthday? Is it celebrated at this event? How do I feel about this event?
- What are some sources of adversity in my life? How does my family help me deal with them?
- What secrets do I try to keep from my family? What do I think would happen if my secrets were known?

Once this is done, go around the room and have each player say a few sentences about their character. Concentrate on details that everyone else should know.

Character Connections

Now that the characters are partially defined, discuss as a group how each character relates to the whole extended family. When workshopping connections between your character and another character, take care to be respectful of the other player's choices and desires. Here are some questions to help begin the discussion.

- How am I related and/or otherwise connected to the other members of the family?
- Aside from my immediate family, with whom am I closest among the other player-characters? With whom do I spend the most time among the other player-characters?
- Whom do I want to avoid among the other player-characters? Why will I end up having to deal with them anyway?
- How do I fit into this family from a social point of view? What social role or niche do I fill? Am I a caretaker? A busybody? A mooch? A respected elder? A bad example?
- Is there a particular family member that is not being played by another player that I need to describe to complete my character? How am I connected to them? (This character may be played by another player later.)

Written by Dan O'Hanlon as part of the 2019 Golden Cobra Challenge

Petition Mechanic inspired by Robin D. Laws

Denied	Denied	Granted	Granted
Denied	Denied	Granted	Granted
Denied	Denied	Granted	Granted
Denied	Denied	Granted	Granted