

Under the Drawbridge

by Oliver Hunt

Grace lurked a few days first, then registered: One message board was for Doctor Who fans, a show she never watched; one was for miniature enthusiasts, which she wasn't, but thought the idea sounded neat; one was for cycling activists, though she hadn't been on a bike since the day, as a child, her father had removed her training wheels and she broke her collarbone. She'd registered as Grace for one, Twinkly_Butterfly3 for another, and GoFuckYrself for the third.

She was human and lived in the world. Other people received recognition, and she'd felt barely considered except as the woman behind a desk- working for ambulance chasers - politely answering phones and connecting callers to their recipients.

As GoFuckYrself, she saw repair and maintenance questions, googled or researched the answers, then responded with You've been cycling how long? And you don't know that? Sheesh. She'd also posted about long bike treks she'd never really taken and hidden urban routes she'd found in cities she'd never visited.

As Twinkly_Butterfly3 she posted I'll bet you pathetic weirdos have more well-furnished dollhouses than you do living quarters. Why? Don't you think your time and money would be more well-spent on, you know, furnishing an actual residence?

As Grace she posted Why don't you fucking nerds get a life? It's just a stupid TV show. Time travel's never gonna happen, so get over it dork!

She browsed other message boards she might join: Groups for Chess and Backgammon enthusiasts, games she'd never played since suffering humiliating defeats in fifth grade; Forums on Roxy Music and David Bowie fansites, musicians she didn't listen to; there were forums for baristas, she'd never liked coffee, and there were groups and forums for rickshaw drivers, circus performers, super 8 filmmakers, the BDSM community, and travelling street musicians.

She'd made a list of forum handles she might use: FlwrPwr12, SykoBitch13, Lil'Grrrlost, J;>8-<=, and DreamPuff.

She logged off and went to bed. She knew the language she used was a tad harsh, but from what she'd seen real talk wasn't anything polite or pleasant. She figured she could take as good as she was willing to give, she simply needed somebody to throw it back at her.

She'd tried to join conversations before, in real life and in real time. She'd be either greeted with eye-rolls or simply talked over. Sometimes peers would pause, look at each other, wink, smirk, let her get one tiny peep in edgewise, then start talking over her again. At work she'd try to join any water cooler conversation and talking would cease. Someone might grin and nod sadly, then everybody'd disperse back to their respective tasks. She'd go to bars, and anytime she'd try to strike up a dialogue she'd be greeted with glassy eyes and slurred mumbles.

Maybe it'd help if she had anything really to talk about. She laid awake trying to remember: When was the last time anything- movie, book, TV show, game or any activity, physical or mental- engaged or inspired her? Had she ever taken an active interest in anything? She tried to remember what it was to be genuinely excited about anything, but nothing came up. She wondered why that was. Was it something in childhood? Anything she might've been interested in held out of reach? Was she told she had no natural talents or abilities, so she should just forget about everything? Could she blame her parents? Siblings? Childhood peers? Should she? She couldn't remember.

She fell asleep with questions. She dreamed the office she worked in was a miniature, and a giant hand lifted her slightly overweight and frumpily attired body from her desk and replaced her with an inanimate figure in a feather boa and heels. Her co-workers were all scarab beetles, cast in amber, carrying files in their pincers. She'd try to speak but blank quotation bubbles came from her mouth.

When she woke up, she revisited the forums she'd posted on. She saw, to her excitement, that her posts generated some response. She felt like she'd gained a second life, a set of new identities. She had more than a hobby and a social life. She was either a brave, outspoken heroine or a wicked villainess. The best thing about it: She could receive any and all attention while remaining anonymous. How wonderful technology was, she mused, that you could have some things both ways. How grand it was that it'd invented a cake you could not only have but eat as well.

