

The Replacement

A magical realist larp for 4 players and an optional GM
by Karolina Soltys

My name is John and I am a 43 year old male, with a loving wife I have been married to for 20 years, and an amazing teenage son. I work as a middle manager in a medium-sized manufacturing business. My hobbies are gardening and watching cricket. Occasionally I go hiking with a few old school friends. I am looking for a man of a similar age to become my Replacement.

You have to be a responsible person in good health, with no criminal record and no substance abuse problems, who values family very highly. Degree-educated candidates preferred, but that is not strictly necessary. You should like animals: we have a 10 year old border collie called Lucy.

My company has all the standard procedures in place for handling employees getting Replaced: you can expect a fully-paid training period and a guaranteed positive performance review in the first quarter. My line manager is a Replacement herself. My friends and extended family are all wonderful and very understanding people; you will definitely not have to deal with any anti-Replacement bigots – I imagine they will all be polite enough to not even bring up the subject when you meet.

I have not yet discussed getting Replaced with my immediate family – I wanted to wait until a suitable Replacement is found. Once that happens, I will do my utmost best to prepare my wife and son for the upcoming change. I have done a lot of reading on how best to support your bonding with my old and your new family and I am very committed to making it work. I am sure that soon enough they will treat you as if you were there from the start and I had never existed. Thank you for considering my ad. To express interest, email me at j.smith@email.com.

Setting

The Replacement is set in the real world with one magical realist element: people can decide to find someone to take over their life, similar to how one would seek a replacement tenant to take over a flat rental contract. It is not very common, but most people know (or at least know of) someone who got Replaced. The Replacement is supposed to take over all the social and professional roles the Replaced was performing, and the Replaced is meant to forever stay away from their previous life. People choose to seek Replacement for a variety of reasons: midlife crisis spurring them towards a radical life change, terminal illness, wanting to commit suicide, or start a new family with the person they had an affair with, etc. Similarly, there is no unique reason why people choose to become Replacements, though in most cases their previous lives were disappointing in some way, to the extent that taking over a life advertised in the classifieds section of the local paper becomes an appealing prospect. Similarly to the Replaced, the Replacement also needs to cut off all ties from their previous life – but usually they anyway have very few meaningful relationships.

It is considered impolite to make a big deal of an acquaintance, a colleague or a neighbour getting Replaced – you're supposed to just accept it and be understanding; you might need to discreetly remind

the Replacement of some detail of your shared past every now and then, but otherwise it shouldn't change anything in your relationship. In principle, the same applies to the immediate family of the Replaced – the Replacement is usually doing their best to perform their new role as a parent, a spouse, a lover, a child etc. just as well – if not better – as the Replaced had before, but obviously such close relationships are more affected by the change and at least initially there can be a lot of heightened emotions and drama. The larp will explore this situation.

The characters are a family where one of the members chooses to get Replaced, and their Replacement. By default, the family is a married couple with a teenage child, and the Replacement is a stranger who answered the classified ad, but the players can change this if they want – perhaps it is the child who wants to get Replaced, or maybe the Replacement isn't a stranger but a sibling to the Replaced, or a lover of the spouse. Note: the default assumption is that the Replacement has honest intentions, i.e. they are not a con artist planning to run away with the family's money – this should not be changed.

Structure

The larp starts with a 30 minute workshop where the players choose and flesh out their characters and discuss the relationships between them. The prompts to flesh out the characters are given in the final section of this document. The player of the Child should decide their age (anything between 10 and 17 is suitable) early on during the workshop and announce it to the rest of the players since it might slightly affect their character ideas. After you think about these questions for the character you've chosen, introduce them to the rest of the group. Then, the 3 family members should discuss the relationships between them, as a family and in pairs, with the Replacement listening. If you decided to change the default setup and the Replacement is not a complete stranger, they should of course discuss their relationships with the family members as well. Even if the Replacement is a stranger, the player should also briefly introduce their character idea to the other players, even though the characters won't know them. Finally, the family should briefly flesh out a few background details that can come up in conversations: where do they live, were there any major events in their shared past, do they have pets, is there an overbearing grandma, a quirky neighbour, a school play coming up etc.

At the end of the workshop, the players of the Replaced, the Spouse and the Child should play a short scene representing a regular family dinner, with the player of the Replacement watching. They should establish some family habits: Who sets the table? Who serves the potatoes? What do they usually talk about? Do they have pet names for each other? Are there any family in-jokes?

The in-game part of a larp is a chronological sequence of short scenes spanning a few months surrounding the process of the Replacement. Most scenes include only a subset of the characters; the other players are supposed to watch the scene as their characters – in a magical realist way, the characters perceive these events some time after they happened, perhaps in a dream, on an old camcorder found in the attic, or in an empty cinema. The players should briefly skim through the list of scenes before they start playing to know what is going to happen in the larp.

1. The Replacement and the Replaced sit back-to-back. The Replaced narrates the classified ad they are writing, describing their current life situation, what they are looking for in a Replacement, and possibly but not necessarily the reasons they are choosing to get Replaced. Then the Replacement narrates the motivational letter-style response. Both of these can be narrated in a stream-of-consciousness way, e.g. "I am tired of the constant arguments with my

husband. No, I can't possibly write that, let's delete the last sentence. Recently, there are some minor problems in my marriage that I am hoping will be easily solved by a suitable Replacement".

2. A family dinner. The Spouse (and perhaps the Child) senses that something is wrong, but the parents don't want to discuss it in front of the Child and try to act as if everything was normal. This scene should be a bit longer and fluidly transition through several sub-scenes with different pairs of characters having a one-on-one conversation.
3. The Replaced and the Spouse are getting ready for bed. The Spouse wants to know why the Replaced has been behaving strangely; the Replaced tries to avoid having this conversation, but ultimately reveals that they want to get Replaced. They can refuse to reveal their reasons.
4. The Replacement has answered the ad and is meeting the Replaced for the first time in a cafe. They get to know each other and agree to begin the Replacement process.
5. Another family dinner. After a while, the Replaced says they have invited a friend who will stay over at the family house for a few weeks, but without mentioning anything about the fact that they are planning to get Replaced. The Replacement knocks on the door and the Replaced introduces them to the family. The dinner continues with all 4 characters. Again, this scene should be a bit longer and fluidly transition through several sub-scenes with different pairs of characters having a one-on-one conversation.
6. The adults discuss how to arrange the Replacement process: what elements of the life of the Replaced does the Replacement need to be introduced to? How best to explain to the Child what is going to happen? The Child may or may not be eavesdropping.
7. A group scene where the adults tell the child that their parent is getting Replaced.
8. The Replacement and the Child are supposed to engage in some regular parent-child bonding activity, something the Replaced and the Child used to do together, e.g. walking the dog, gardening or playing basketball in the yard. Initially, the Replaced is supervising and occasionally intervening, giving instructions on how the Replacement should be behaving. Eventually, they walk away and just observe from a distance.
9. Tonight the Replacement and the Spouse are supposed to try sleeping in the marital bed together. The Replaced initially observes, then leaves.
10. A family dinner, where the Replacement is supposed to fully take over the role of the Replaced, with the Replaced present as a guest invited to dinner. Again, this scene should be a bit longer and fluidly transition through several sub-scenes with different pairs of characters having a one-on-one conversation.
11. 4 short inner monologues, where the characters confide their thoughts to a friend in a phone call, a therapist, or write in a diary, in the following order: the Child, the Spouse, the Replacement, the Replaced.
12. It is the night before the Replacement contract is supposed to get signed. Everyone in the house shares the same surreal dream. The content of the dream depends on what interests the players. Some examples: an idealised version of the Child's birthday party or another happy memory that the family shared in the past – played as a flashback scene, that the Replacement may choose to enter at some point as some kind of surreal presence. Or the other way round – a flash-forward to a future where the Replacement is already a part of the family, e.g. the Child's 18th birthday, where the Replaced is trying to barge in as a surreal presence. If the players like, they can fluidly transition between these two scene ideas.
13. The family is in the City Hall, Department of Replacement, where the Replaced and the Replacement are supposed to sign the contract for one to officially take over the other's life. If there is a GM, they can act as a clerk, if not, the Spouse will act as a witness. The contract reads:

I, [name of the Replaced], hereby agree to cede my identity, my social and professional roles and obligations, and all my material assets and liabilities, to [name of the Replacement]. I understand that I will henceforth not be allowed to use my previous name, contact my previous family, friends or acquaintances, or attempt to return to my previous life in any way. Signed, [date, name of the Replaced].

I, [name of the Replacement], hereby agree to take over the identity, social and professional roles and obligations, and all material assets and liabilities, of [name of the Replaced]. I do it in good faith and commit to dutifully perform all my new responsibilities to the best of my ability. Signed, [date, name of the Replacement].

Either party may refuse to sign the contract. The Replacement and the Replaced will now be referred to as The One Who Stayed and The One Who Left, depending on whether they signed the contract or not.

14. A family dinner, same day as the previous scene. The One Who Left is supposed to move out of the family home right after dinner and this is the time to say their goodbyes. Yet again, this scene should be a bit longer and fluidly transition through several sub-scenes with different pairs of characters having a one-on-one conversation. After they leave, the family continues their evening routine as normal: play for a while longer. [Note: for the sake of time, or if it makes more sense dramatically, this scene can be omitted and its contents merged into scene 10.]
15. (Optional) Some years later. The family (or perhaps just some of its members) meets The One Who Left by chance on the street. (Alternatively, a family member chooses to seek out The One Who Left, or The One Who Left attempts to return to the family).

Characters

The Replaced

- What is your current life like? Flesh out details like: name, age, job, hobbies, friends, social groups, hopes, regrets, issues, major life events etc.
- What are your reasons for getting Replaced? Escaping to a different, better life? Terminal illness? Desire to commit suicide? The belief that your family would be better off without you? Boredom, seeking change? Note: you can choose to leave this undefined and perhaps discover this as a player during the larp, or keep changing it. You may but don't have to reveal your reasons to the other players during the workshop – and similarly, during the larp, you may but don't have to reveal them to the other characters.
- Which of the elements of the life that you leave behind will you miss the most? Which one are you happy to leave?
- What would you like your Replacement to be like? In what ways do you want them to be better than you? Are there any ways in which you wish they were worse than you?

The Replacement

- What is your current life like? Flesh out details like: name, age, job, hobbies, friends, social groups, hopes, regrets, issues, major life events etc.
- What are your reasons for choosing to become a Replacement? Why did you choose to take over this particular life?
- Which elements of the life that you are taking over are you the most keen on? Which ones less so?
- Which elements of the life you're leaving behind will you miss? Which ones are you running away from?
- How confident are you that you will perform well in your new life?

The Spouse

- What is your current life like? Flesh out details like: name, age, job, hobbies, friends, social groups, hopes, regrets, issues, major life events etc.
- Do you love the Replaced? What aspects of them as a person do you love? What aspects do you hate, if any? Did you ever wish they got Replaced? What would you like their Replacement to be like?
- Do you suspect the reasons for the decision of the Replaced? Do you blame them? Do you blame yourself, or perhaps the Child?
- Do you ever think about seeking Replacement for yourself?

The Child

- What is your current life like? Flesh out details like: name, age, school performance, hobbies, friends, social groups, hopes, regrets, issues, major life events etc.
- Do you love the Replaced? What aspects of them as a person do you love? What aspects do you hate, if any? Did you ever wish they got Replaced? What would you like their Replacement to be like?
- Do you suspect the reasons for the decision of the Replaced? Do you blame them? Do you blame yourself, or perhaps the Spouse?
- Do you ever think about seeking Replacement for yourself?