

## LOVE, NIKKIMOUSE

*(View 1 of 2)*

From the sky, the lavenders fall in. To their places, row by row, they render. The sky like the succulent flesh of a tangerine. I could drink it. Like tequila sunrise. I can almost smell, the sweetness so sweet it's bitter like medicine at the back of my throat. Wafting from the thousands of blooms, millions of purple pixels before me, swaying in a looped motion, waving a greeting beneath my nose. I stand in this lavender field alone. I feel free when I see no one. Where the sky doesn't change.

No, not alone. I'm streaming. The chat messages whiz past. I can't believe how many viewers I have. How many viewers? I can see the number in the upper right corner, but I can't read it.

*So pretty!*

*Cute <3.*

“Cindy!”

Someone asks how I made it. I try to remember. When do the iterations begin? Which flower is an exact copy of one that existed before it? Moving exactly as its prime in the gentle breeze. The blooms recede into the sky, melting complimentary colours on an ugly greyish-brown line at the horizon. Maybe I should change the colour of the sky. But it's an illusion. The field is really quite small to save memory. The graphics shrink according to a formula, giving the illusion of distance. The player boxed in by an invisible wall.

*No, like how did you make it as a streamer?*

You can feel Mum calling your name from downstairs.

*Where does the story go?*

I guess I'll take you guys through to the next part. Your heartrate quickens. Did you code a next part? Did you just see your sister's name in the chat? What is she here for? She doesn't even game. Only Cece could be that lame, using her full government name on this site.

“Cindy!”

The next scene freezes as it loads. Sorry, guys, I'm still optimizing. Blank mind. Blank screen. When it loads, you stand in a dark lecture hall. You're stranded amongst the endless

rows of purple seats. They all hated what you made. They're gone. This is futile. This is failure.

“Cindy! Wake up!”

Dazed, blinking. In a space in between. You're still streaming. No, lying in bed, with dried drool on your cheek.

“Cindy! Dinner's ready!”

Familiarity dwells next to comfort. Knowable outcomes. This you know. But there's suffocation, too. Stagnation. Paralysation. Joey's animated 'How you doin'?' and the laugh track coming from Cece's bedroom, again. Half-empty glass of water on your bedside. From last Thursday. What have you done since graduation? Two years on from that stormy day on campus. You've been lying, petrified, blank, staring for ten minutes, now.

Where did the time go?

Cece's too busy studying to eat with them tonight. She probably has an eating disorder.

Dad's home now, too. Mum asks did you clean the bathrooms today.

“I cleaned me and Cece's.” That's a lie.

“Did you vacuum?”

“Yeah.” You really did.

“And dust beforehand?”

Sharp screeching from Dad's phone. YouTube videos from its speaker.

“Did you close the windows before it rained?”

They're still open now and you think you're caught. But maybe you reopened them after the rain stopped.

She says that the dust is still going to be stuck to the furniture now, from the humidity, so I shouldn't have reopened them.

You pick at a piece of pork. Mum retracts your bowl. She says you could really eat less and spoons some rice into Dad's bowl. The space between your hands is empty, is the absence of a plate or bowl where one should be, like a graphics glitch.

“Any job offers yet?”

Mum slides your bowl back to you. Its base whistles against the countertop. You refuse to be the one to speak first. But then, who do you think taught you that communication means surrender?

It’s been three weeks since your last online personality assessment. This is true. Six since you were like last offered a video interview. You have ninety seconds to record your response to the question that appears on your screen. Why would you like to work for us? Surely, they know what your silence means.

Near fifty rejections in two years, and you’ve never met a human along your quest. You’re in a sci-fi dystopian RPG when you’re not logged in. You’re an NPC. You’re streaming. An eleventh minute passes of you staring at yourself in the monitor. Wide eyes. Leg jittering. ‘So, no one told ya life was gunna be this way...’. Clap-clap-clap-clap. Through the wall. Like Cece’s head if the mic picks that song up, because it’s copyrighted for sure.

Four more minutes. Then, two enter the chat, then a third.

*Hey Nikki! <3*

*NIKKIMOUSE*

*NIKKIMOUSE*

*Hiii Nikkiiii! Hows yr day*

*NIKKIMOUSE*

“Hi guys, my day’s been nice. How was yours?”

*Hi Nicki. From Barcelona*

*Stressful. Fist exam tmr*

A trumpet sounds. TheQuietUnderwater donates fifty dollars. He’s a regular, too.

**TheQuietUnderwater - A\$50.00: “Rly bad but gud now yr live”**

“Aw, sorry to hear that,” you smile. “Hope this can cheer you guys up. Thank you for the donation!”

The tangerine sky that seemed so intoxicating in your dream now falls flat upon the lavender field like drapes.

“I’ve been thinking about changing the colour of the sky. What do you guys think?”

*What happens next?*

“Uh,” you pause. Cece’s brushing her teeth. “I was thinking about adding a hut.”

*whose the player character*

*That’s too boring*

*she should be a witch*

*i like it she could find a map inside or smth*

*Maybe she could find a picture of her lost family*

“Like Genshin?”

**TheQuietUnderwater - A\$50.00:** “do u play CS2”

You sigh. “Thanks for another donation, TheQuietUnderwater! No, I’m not that into first-person shooters.”

**5po0n1e – KRW\$2,000.00:** “The vibes are so cute ^.^”

“Thanks, Spoonle. That’s really sweet. I wanna add stars or clouds to the sky, too.”

*their should be a portal to another dimension*

*A hut would look nice with the lavender*

*or a clocktower*

Why would there be a clocktower in an empty field with nothing around it?

*The portal should be blue*

**TheQuietUnderwater - A\$31.28:** “do you play skyrim”

The night stretches, like a loose thread. Caught on something. This tangerine sky. Lavender blooms. These beautiful graphics in these other games you play instead. This gambit. This trap. This silent, dizzying urgency from the external. God knows I tried. The morning is saffron and yellow as the stream empties again, like tequila sunrise.