

Ryan Veeder - "A Rope of Chalk"

In the first "act" of A Rope of Chalk, the player-character is sophomore Lane Mulville, a reluctant judge in a college sidewalk chalk tournament. When one artist lodges a complaint about a competitor's choice of subject matter, Lane is sent in to resolve the conflict.

Jessica's Space

Here, finally, there's a bench, where the sidewalk turns from west to south. The picturesqueness of the spot contrasts dramatically with torn-up Second Street just a little ways to the east.

Jessica is working on a curved block of pavement, drawing a diverse and vibrant array of flowers.

Nathalie follows along.

>look at art

Jessica has drawn a huge bouquet of lilies, roses, and orchids, all rendered with a level of realism that overwhelms you with the force of a strong perfume—But you're not really smelling anything. That was confusing.

>smell

You inhale deeply. You can smell it again: A field of bright flowers, dappled with dew. No, you can't. That doesn't make sense.

>talk to Jessica

Jessica looks up and wipes some sweat from her forehead. "Yes?"

[1] "How are you?"

[2] "What's the problem here?"

[3] "Well, see you later."

>1

"How are you?"

Jessica sighs deeply. "Actually, I'm in kind of a rotten mood. Sorry."

"Oh. That's too bad." Well, you're supposed to be doing something about it.

[1] "How are you?"

[2] "What's the problem here?"

[3] "Well, see you later."

>2

"What's the problem here?"

"I'm really sorry," she says, "but I don't think Xavier's piece is appropriate. And since it's associated with the Honors program, I just think..."

"What exactly is inappropriate about it?" asks Nathalie.

"Well, you should probably see it for yourself," she says, gesturing further down the sidewalk.

Oh no. More walking.

[1] "How are you?"

[2] "What's the problem here?"

[3] "Well, see you later."

>3

"Well, see you later."

"Okay. But please, make Xavier change his design."

>talk to Nathalie

Nathalie perks up when you turn her way.

[1] "How's it going?"

[2] "Could I get another bottle of water?"

[3] "What do you think of the flowers?"

[4] "Thanks."

>1

"How's it going?"

Nathalie shrugs. "Oh, I'm fine." She really is. It's like the heat isn't getting to her at all.

[1] "How's it going?"

[2] "How are you so chipper?"

[3] "Could I get another bottle of water?"

[4] "What do you think of the flowers?"

[5] "Thanks."

>2

"How are you so..." You lick your lips. "Chipper" isn't really the word you want to use.

Nathalie catches your meaning. "Two things: A positive attitude, and staying hydrated. And a willingness to fully embrace my situation. But that's part of the first one."

[1] "How's it going?"

[2] "How are you so chipper?"

[3] "Could I get another bottle of water?"

[4] "What do you think of the flowers?"

[5] "Thanks."

>4

You and Nathalie step off of the trail for a conference: "What do you think of the flowers?" you ask.

Nathalie looks over her shoulder at Jessica. "Not my kind of thing," she says. "Too simple."

"It's a lot of different flowers, though."

"But the *thinking* is simple."

You don't have the energy to pursue the subject.

[1] "How's it going?"

[2] "How are you so chipper?"

[3] "Could I get another bottle of water?"

[4] "What do you think of the flowers?"

[5] "Thanks."

>5

"Thanks, Nathalie."

"Hey, no problem."

>go south

Xavier's Space

This is where there would be a crosswalk for Second Street, if there were a Second Street. There's a button for the crosswalk, but there is no crosswalk.

You feel a little hemmed in by the torn-up street to the east and all the trees to the west and south. The sidewalk only goes north from here.

Xavier is kneeling over his drawing, hard at work.

Nathalie follows you.

>look at art

On the sidewalk is a curvaceous woman with red skin, goatish horns, and very little clothing. Her lips are parted sultrily, as if she's about to whisper something to you. Your throat feels tight.

"More interesting than a bunch of flowers, that's for sure," says Nathalie.

>talk to Xavier

While you're trying to think of a way to engage, Nathalie steps in. "Hey Xavier. Nice succubus."

"Thanks!" He's in the middle of adding white highlights to make it look like her skin (there's a lot of skin) is reflecting the sun.

"Did you know Jessica complained about it?"

"I know she didn't seem to like it when she was over here earlier. But, what I've learned is, people are always going to have opinions."

"Well, I brought a judge over, to make a judgment call." Finally Nathalie steps aside and presents you. Xavier spreads his arms and presents his mostly-naked demoness.

"What do you think?"

Your head hurts.

>talk to Nathalie

Nathalie perks up when you turn her way.

[1] "How's it going?"

[2] "What do you think of Xavier's drawing?"

[3] "What do you think I should do?"

[4] "Thanks."

>2

"What do you think of Xavier's drawing?" you ask, not concerning yourself with whether he can hear.

"Well, it's got my attention," Nathalie says. "I think people are really going to respond to her."

Xavier presses a hand to his chest. "Oh my gosh, Nathalie, that is the nicest fake compliment I've ever received in my life."

She grins. "Shut up, kid. You know I love you. Keep up the good work."

>4

"Thanks, Nathalie."

"Hey, no problem."

>talk to Xavier

"So, what do you say, judge?"

"Well, she's... scary."

"I'll take it," says Xavier.

"But you're not gonna disqualify him or anything, right?" Nathalie asks.

"I'll... I think I should confer with the other judges."

Nathalie scoffs; Xavier shrugs.