

Fleabag Breaks the Fourth Wall and Then Breaks Our Hearts

Vulture (<https://www.vulture.com/2019/05/fleabag-season-2-fourth-wall-ending.html>) · by Kathryn VanArendonk · May 23, 2019

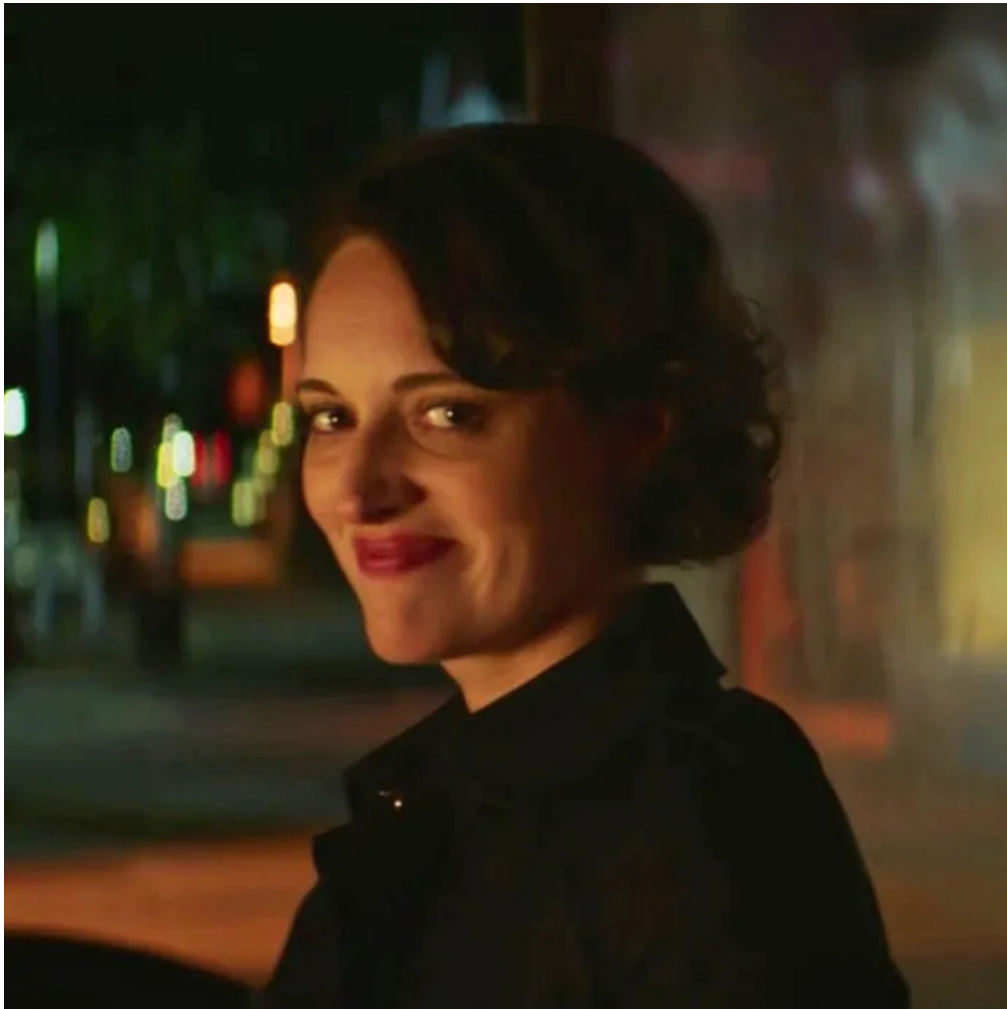


Photo: Amazon Studios

The sexiest scene I have ever watched on TV happens in a confessional booth. It's in the middle of *Fleabag*'s second season, when Fleabag (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) finally acts on her attraction to The Priest (Andrew Scott), the Catholic clergyman who will be performing her father's marriage ceremony. After dancing around the issue for days, Fleabag and The Priest's shared electricity suddenly sparks into a storm of desire, and the spine-aching sensation of hearing The Priest tell Fleabag to "kneel" before his blessing is potent enough to bring down empires.

But that confessional booth moment is not the scene from *Fleabag* season two that made me gasp for air. Earlier in the season, at the end of episode three (<https://www.vulture.com/2019/05/fleabag-recap-season-2-episode-3.html>), Fleabag has a conversation with The Priest about his vow of celibacy. Fleabag has

shown up at the The Priest's home late at night, and she can't help but ask him how he can stand to give up sex. Her invitation is clear: She wants them to be together, and he gently reminds her that although it can't happen between them, he hopes they can be friends. Fleabag turns to face the camera, speaking directly to the viewer. "We'll last a week," she tells us. She is both happy and sad about it.

Fleabag speaks to the camera a lot. In interviews, Waller-Bridge refers to the device as "her secret camera friend (<https://www.npr.org/programs/fresh-air/2019/05/13/722812016/fresh-air-for-may-13-2019-phoebe-waller-bridge-of-fleabag-and-killing-eve>)." In the first season, Fleabag's fourth-wall-breaking asides are often explanations or helpful contextual notes, like annotated references in the margins of a story. Sometimes they're more like admissions of guilt, simultaneously begging and daring the viewer to judge her. Sometimes they are outright hostile, or they act as excuses. "We'll last a week" feels like something from the excuse vein. It's a wry assessment that lets Fleabag condone herself for what she will do, and by including the viewer in that excuse, she makes us complicit in her behavior. Just like Fleabag, we the viewers know she's going to sleep with this priest. Just like Fleabag, we cannot stop it.

As Fleabag turns to the camera to do this dance with the viewer, she's also briefly exiting her interaction with The Priest. She pulls us into her fantastically charming, self-destructive orbit while also stepping out of her own life for a moment. She's charming us, her secret camera friends, at least in part because it's a way to take a break from the intensity of this experience with the person sitting next to her.

But then the scene changes. The Priest's eyebrows furrow in surprise. "What was that?" he asks, looking at Fleabag. "You just went somewhere," he tells her accusingly, glancing in the same direction she turns when she looks at the camera. Fleabag claims to not understand, and, panicked, she looks at the viewer once again, this time with alarm on her face. "There!" he says. "Where did you just go?" Fleabag tries to shake it off. "Nowhere," she tells him. He only sort of accepts this, shrugging. Fleabag turns to the camera once again, this time in shock. He's *seen* her. He's seen *us*.

Reader, I gasped.

Fleabag's sly, secretive, sometimes resentful tendency to break the fourth-wall of her own story is an escape hatch. She dissociates from her own life whenever things get to be too much, turning away from what's right in front of her so she can have a moment to breathe. The Priest sees her distancing strategy for what it

is: Whenever she's too overwhelmed to be looked at, she takes a step back from her own life. The Priest feels her leave him, even though he can't quite see that she's leaving him so she can speak to us.

It's tempting to think of Fleabag's compulsive habit of looking to the viewer as a form of intimacy. It's the only way I can adequately describe how emotional the device makes me, how overwhelmed I feel every time Fleabag flicks her eyebrows toward me, a rapt member of her audience. Fleabag spends each interaction with other characters as opportunities to seduce *us*, fully aware that every scene is a performance she's manipulating for our shared amusement. The pain, shock, and disgust she feels during an excruciating family meal in the season's first episode (<https://www.vulture.com/2019/05/fleabag-season-2-recap-episode-1.html>) are legitimate emotions, but by instantly turning to us so she can explain how she feels, Fleabag packages the experience for our consumption. She presents it to us, swiftly twisting those awkward, bruising conversations with her family into stories she's telling for our pleasure. Packaging them, turning them into a story, is also a way to control her feelings. Fleabag gives us *Fleabag* as a gift, so she doesn't have to deal with it herself.

But that sense of intimacy, however effective it may be for the viewer, is only ever one-sided. She can speak to us, she can acknowledge that we see her, but we see her through a one-directional mirror. Her intimacy with us is also a way of distancing herself from anyone who could actually speak back to her. The scene where Fleabag sees a therapist played by Fiona Shaw underlines that idea very directly: The therapist asks Fleabag who she confides in, who her friends are, and Fleabag turns to us once again with a knowing, happy smile. *We* are her friends, because we are the recipients of her private disclosures. That scene is thrilling and crushing at the same time. It's so flattering to be her confidant, and so sad. Her closest relationship is with a presence she can neither see nor hear.

The Priest can't see or hear us either. But when he notices Fleabag talking to us, he's barging into our secret relationship with her, pointing at exactly the place she assumed no one could see — pointing at us, her distancing strategy, her audience who can't ever speak back to her. That false intimacy she shared with us? Suddenly it's real, and it's not between Fleabag and her silent viewers. It's between Fleabag and the one person who can still see her whenever she tries to take a step away.

In a later scene in Fleabag's café, The Priest catches her dissociating once again. He can feel her leaving, and he calls her back. To Fleabag, and to us the viewers, it feels like an intrusion. We have been a couple for so long, a dysfunctional pairing of speaker and observer. But now The Priest has entered into our relationship, barged in where no one asked him to be. Our relationship with

Fleabag has a third person in it now; we're a throuple, a lopsided, poorly communicating, painfully raw triangle of shared knowledge and humor and need, and the fact that some of us are fictional and some of us aren't doesn't do anything to diminish how intense it all feels.

The confessional booth scene — the moment their attraction finally gallops out of control — comes later in that same episode. Prompted by The Priest's questions, Fleabag does what he and the setting asks of her, and she confesses. It's an overwhelming scene, a masterpiece of writing and cinematography and the combined magic of Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Andrew Scott's performances. But its narrative power is predicated on what came before, when The Priest saw Fleabag slip away and asked her where she went. Its intensity comes from our knowledge that when Fleabag sits in that booth and confesses to The Priest, she is actually confessing, in a way that she's never been able to do as directly or as honestly when she's speaking to her secret camera friends.

When Fleabag and The Priest do finally have sex, though, she is ready to shut us out. They gasp together in bed, and unlike a previous sequence where Fleabag interrupts a sex scene with some idiot to tell us how it's going, she does not want witnesses when she has sex with The Priest. She shoves the camera away.

We viewers aren't the only unseen, all-seeing observers of *Fleabag*; the season's other looming, omnipotent figure is God. God would be an appropriate alternative for Fleabag, a way to give up her secret camera friends and turn toward Him instead. She *wants* to. When telling The Priest about her deepest desires in the confessional scene, Fleabag basically begs for a God-like figure who can relieve her of the burden of her own agency, and her fourth-wall-breaking habit isn't all that different from prayer. She turns to us as a way to gain perspective and distance from her own life, and if she could feel that way about a higher power, if she could turn her conversations with us into conversations with God, maybe it would be healthier for her. But she can't.

At the end of the series, The Priest admits that he's chosen God over her, and his decision forces Fleabag to make a similar choice. She has mostly given up on the false intimacy she built with her viewers in favor of a real intimacy with The Priest; as they grow closer, she turns to us less and is able to be honest with him. What should she do without him? She could easily slip back into her old habits, something we the viewers might actually hope for. After all, unhappy dissociative Fleabag is also *our* Fleabag, the person who gives us her life wrapped up in a self-deprecating, wildly charming bow. When The Priest breaks up with Fleabag, there's a chance that we can get *our* relationship with her back. Once again she'll be intimate with *us*.

Fleabag makes the other choice. Rather than turning to the camera once again and cracking a joke about her devastation, she walks away. She shakes her head, telling us that we cannot follow her, and gives us a sad, resigned, hopeful little wave as she walks away. She ends the story she's been telling us while also turning toward her own life, her own family, her own relationships with people who can speak back to her. It's why the ending is such a perfect conclusion to the series, and why it also feels so crushing. In the end, Fleabag breaks up with us.

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