



MYSTEROUS PLACES™

the
World of
Darkness



MYSTERIOUS PLACES

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UNFOLD

Someone's breath tickled Russ' cheek. Warm air and a faint odor of sweat and perfume nudged him from sleep, his eyes flickering. He slid an arm across the tangled sheets, felt a pillow and searched in the darkness for a warm body.

He was alone. Russ forced his eyes open. The room was dim, lit only by slashes of sunlight that outlined the dark shade covering the window. He glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Nearly three o'clock in the afternoon. Just enough time to shower and get going.



Russ scanned the neighborhoods of Skyview Acres as he drove to work. At least a third of the houses he passed were little more than skeletons — wood frames with plastic sheeting that flapped in the wind like loose skin. Most of the finished models still had For Sale and Open House signs in front of them. The wife would have hated this place, he thought. He pictured Simona tossing buckets of neon-colored paint at the beige, tan- or gray-sided homes. He came to a stop sign and found himself staring at a swing set on somebody's front lawn. People with kids must have lived there, unless it was a prop to make the house more enticing to home buyers. He pulled away slowly, watching the vacant swings sway in the rearview mirror.

Ex-wife, he corrected himself. *Ex-wife*.

Russ checked his watch. He'd made three wrong turns just trying to get out of his tangled new subdivision. He was running late. Each day's drive to the university seemed to take him on a different route. He remembered the realtor describing the winding streets and unpredictable lanes between blocks as a good thing. "You don't get that boxed-in feeling that comes with a grid system," she'd said. Russ had nodded, looked at the clock on the realtor's desk and wondered if Simona would show up or if he'd have to look through the brochures alone again.

Russ passed house after house, each so similar to the last that he wondered if he was simply circling the same block over and over again. A street ahead was closed off by construction barriers, though there was no crew evident. He turned left, half-sure he was back where he started in his own neighborhood. Then he saw the sign for Route 11 and checked his watch again.



Russ wheeled a bucket and mop into the first classroom on his route, whistling softly. The fall semester would begin in three weeks. Then he'd have a crew of two or three working under him. He'd have people to talk to, even if they were minimum-wage clock-watchers. Assuming, of course, he hadn't been fired for his own repeated tardiness.

As he moved to the front of the room, an intricate design drawn on the blackboard caught his eye. He flicked the switch for more light, and saw that a third of the board was covered by a tangle of different-colored curves and lines, some radiating from a central point, others emerging where two or more chalk lines crossed. At first it seemed that the image was just a random drawing, but as Russ stared, he could tell the strokes had been marked carefully, deliberately, with a steady hand. It was as if someone had tried to illustrate an explosion or a bursting firecracker.

Russ turned away from the blackboard just in time to see someone enter. For a second they stared at each other, and Russ thought how odd it was that neither of them was startled.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were cleaning in here," the woman said. She was dressed in a gray sweatshirt bearing the university logo and a pair of faded khakis. Her hair was the color of black tea, cut straight and short. Looking at her face made Russ feel as if he'd been kissed. He wondered what kissing her would feel like. She dropped a pile of papers onto a desk and negotiated them into a tight stack. "I thought I could use the space. My office is kind of cramped."

"It's okay," Russ said. "I can come back later." At the edge of his vision, he could see the swoops and streaks on the blackboard. "I was just looking at that," he said, gesturing toward the image. "It's beautiful." Russ hadn't realized that was true until he actually said it.

"It is, isn't it?" she responded.

Russ could smell floral perfume as she walked toward the blackboard. She traced a finger in the air, following a red curve that doubled back on itself.

"What... what is it exactly?" He adjusted the collar of his shirt.

"Oh..." She seemed to have forgotten he was there. "It's a diagram. A collision of subatomic particles."

"Yeah?" he said, stepping closer. "They're protons, electrons, that kind of thing? So what makes them collide?"

She frowned. "Quarks, positrons, ions... They collide because we use a huge, expensive machine to make them collide."

Russ made a face that suggested he didn't quite believe her. "Why do that? Just to see what happens?"

"Actually, it's to see what *happened*. To see what happened at the beginning of everything."

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That night, Russ walked the streets of his new neighborhood, drunk, imagining that the stars overhead were positrons, quarks, neutrinos, all the miniscule bits of matter and energy that Professor McKay — Diane — had described. Slamming them together, she had said, was a way to recreate the conditions of the Big Bang, the universal birthday. Like looking backward in time.

After walking down a particularly dark street — the streetlights there had not yet been wired — Russ recognized the melodic chatter of voices. He walked toward the sound, turning down a lane between houses. He heard feet scraping on driveway gravel. The clink of ice cubes in glasses. An occasional burst of laughter. The lane emptied onto a block of houses that all seemed finished. Across the street he saw silhouettes, people moving across a lawn. An arm, a head, a back, each shape visible for a few moments as someone passed across the light-colored siding of a house.

Russ thought about what he would say, that he'd been living there for a couple of weeks and had yet to meet anyone. He'd make a joke of it, and they'd laugh and invite him onto the patio for a drink. *We're neighbors, after all, they'd say. And here's Joe, and there's Bob and Betty, and that's Dave. He lives down the street...* Russ was practically in the yard when the noise ceased. He stepped between a few lawn chairs, turned in a circle and almost tripped over a rake that had been left in the grass. The yard was empty. The house was dark and quiet. There was a picnic table, a single empty glass laying on its side, dry. He stumbled and kicked a pile of empty beer bottles. He put a hand on the charcoal grill that stood near the table. It was cold.



Russ put down his hammer. The last touches on the deck he was building would have to wait. He stood, stretched, leaned on the railing and looked out over the yard. Diane would arrive soon. He'd found her in the classroom every night last week and chatted her up with all the charm he could muster. He'd elicited details of her solitary, lonely struggle with formulas and geometry that he couldn't understand. The collision diagram hung over them as they talked, like a guiding star. And then she had accepted, much to his surprise, a casual invitation to grab a beer at the pub. There had been a short, intense kiss in the parking lot, and then an awkward goodbye.

Now they were going out for a proper dinner. Out on a Saturday night... — the first night out since he'd moved to the neighborhood. Russ turned his back on the yard, walked toward the back door and stopped himself. He couldn't leave his tools outside. They'd been his father's.

His hammer was gone.



Russ could tell by the chalk dust on the forearm of Diane's fitted sweater that she'd come directly from the university. To his relief, she'd had no trouble finding the house. "Your directions were excellent," she said as she passed over the threshold. She dropped onto his couch as if she was in her own living room.

"I'm kind of surprised," he said. "I can't seem to get in or out of this place without getting lost. I think I've driven up and down every street."

"Oh, it feels good to sit in a comfortable room," she sighed. "I need a better chair in my office. My driver's seat lost its spring a hundred miles ago."

He sat on the edge of the couch to face her. "I see you brought our favorite flower."

"What? Oh, God." She fluttered the pieces of paper in her hand. Russ could see the collision diagram on top, its multi-colored swirls and traces annotated with Diane's crabbed handwriting. "I meant to leave them in the car. I didn't even realize I was still holding them."

"You know," Russ said, "I was thinking about that the other day. Can't you just, you know, re-do whatever experiment it came from?"

"Hal" She covered her mouth for moment. "Sorry. No, I can't. I'd need a particle accelerator. It's... a huge machine, miles of underground tunnels, equipment that fills a whole building. The university doesn't have one. They started to

build one years ago, but it was never finished."

"How come?"

She leaned toward him conspiratorially. "That's where things get interesting. These things are so expensive to build, and, with all that money changing hands, some people tried to skim some of it. Dr. Wyveski, the guy who came up with this data, was involved. He ran off. The whole project was a fiasco and funding was withdrawn. They sold off the land to some developer, I think."

"Wow. I had no idea there was so much scandal in the academic world."

"I know! But here's my theory." She picked up the diagram. "The tunnels were there, a lot of the equipment was there. I think Wyveski managed to get things up and running before everything went sour. Which is where he came up with this screwed-up diagram. If I could just figure out which line represents what... I'm sorry, Russ. You're not interested in all this nonsense."

"No, no. The drawing caught my eye.... I guess I kind of like it. Maybe I've been staring at it too long on the blackboard."

"I know I have." Diane laid the piece of paper with the image face down on the coffee table. "Can you believe it? I heard Wyveski joined some cult in India. Maybe the diagram drove him nuts."

Russ opened his eyes. Diane had turned over in her sleep. The moonlight coming through the window gave her skin a glassy sheen. He let his eyes linger on the slope of her collarbone, the rise and fall of her throat as she breathed, her nipples half-covered by the sheet. She'd told him, once, about some book she'd read, about a man who came "unstuck" in time. Russ felt that way now. It seemed the only explanation, the only way that the electric thrill of their conversation at dinner, the exquisite tension of the ride home, the awkward choreography of their lovemaking, could be followed by this moment of stillness.

He slipped out of bed. Diane murmured in her sleep. "They're all around us," she said, and rolled onto her stomach. Probably dreaming about atoms, Russ decided.

Downstairs, he took a pitcher of water from the refrigerator and poured some into a paper cup. As he raised it to his lips, he heard Diane scream.

He found her sitting on the side of the bed, wrapped in the blanket, her hands shaking as they clutched at a pillow. She looked up as he shot into the room. "I'm okay," she said. "Sorry I scared you."

"Scared me?" he asked. "Sounded like something scared you."

"I guess I was dreaming," she said, rubbing her eyes. "I was lying in bed and I looked out the window and saw... I thought I saw someone there. People."

"People?"

"It was their eyes. Staring. I mean... I was half awake, it seemed so real."

Russ strode to the window and looked into the moonlit yard. "Sometimes I think neighborhood kids or somebody is screwing with me," he said. "Making noise. Taking things. They'd need a ladder to get to this window, though."

"I'm sure it was just my imagination." She shifted, relaxing a bit, adjusting the blanket so it wasn't wrapped quite so tight. "Listen, Russ, since we're both awake... I she patted the mattress next to her. "Come here. I think we need to talk about a few things."

"Oh," he answered. "Uh-oh."

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AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Time really is moving faster now. Russ thought, as he watched Diane pace the living room, gathering her purse, her bottle of water, her keys and her stack of papers. Moments slipped from his grasp as if they were greased. He couldn't decide if he wanted to hold onto them or let this experience fly past as quickly as possible.

"I'm really sorry, Russ. I don't want to hurt your feelings or anything...." She paused in mid-stride, adjusted a sock and smoothed her pant leg over it. "It's just, I'm busy with work. It's better we keep this as a one-time thing. For now. I mean, let's face it, we're so different...."

"Because you're a scientist and I'm just a janitor? I do have a college education, you know. 'Facilities maintenance' wasn't my goal in life. Things just happened."

She looked hurt. "I don't mean anything like that. I guess I just wasn't expecting so much to happen so quickly. I like you, but..."

"You need some space. Sure, I get it. Well, maybe you're right. Maybe it's better." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Uh, do you need directions to get out?"

"No," she said, her keys jingling as she shouldered her purse. "It's easy. Those streets you said were blocked off seem to be open now."

Russ didn't go to work that afternoon. Instead, he downed the last of the beers in his fridge, and went walking. He passed yard after yard, some lacking grass, others strewn with soccer balls, tricycles and garden hoses. All still and silent. "Where is everybody?" he shouted, feeling a tang of stomach acid back up in his throat. He stomped up to someone's backyard gate and pushed until it opened. He lurched toward the house in a drunken, bowlegged stagger and saw an open window with blue-gray curtains fluttering in the breeze. He heard voices inside. "Who's home?" he muttered, dropping an empty bottle in the grass. "Somebody's home. Somebody be home. Your neighbor's here." He came to the backdoor of the house and steadied himself against the frame. He raised a hand to knock, but then let it fall. He turned the doorknob, pulled the screen door open and stepped inside.

It was his own house.

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When the phone rang, Russ felt like he was falling. He flailed his arms, felt for the side of the couch and turned to plant his feet on the floor. His hand knocked the telephone off the coffee table just as he managed to force his eyes open.

"Russ..." The static behind the woman's voice sounded almost musical.

"Simona... Diane? Is that you? Your voice is..." He shifted the phone to his other ear. "I can hardly hear you. What's the matter?"

"I put... I put the pieces together. I just..."

"The what?" His throat was dry. "You just what?"

"They're doing something to... everything is wrong... time, space..."

"Diane, where are you?"

"The sky is..." There was absolute silence for a few seconds, and then a dial tone.

Russ stood. He started to dial Diane's cell number, misdialled, reset the phone and punched the numbers again. Halfway through, the rest of the number evaporated from his memory. "Three," he whispered. "No, two. Three, two... Shit!"

A loud, synthesized ring startled him. It was his doorbell. He hadn't heard it ring since he tested it on the day he moved in.

It rang again.

Russ walked toward the door,


not sure why he was trying to be as silent as possible. He was two strides away when he saw the mail slot open and something slip through it and flutter to the carpet. He blinked and glanced to the front window, but the blinds were closed.

"What the hell?" he swore. He yanked the front door open and pushed past the screen. Diane's car wasn't out there like he half-expected. He went across the porch and down the steps. No one was there. No one was around at all.

Russ turned back toward the house and saw her. Diane was slumped against the vinyl siding to the side of the porch. He ran to her, hands shaking. When he knelt by her he saw his hammer lodged in the side of her head, a dark, syrupy mass dripping down her ear and cheek.

He backed away, turning around before he had to double over. Beer-scented vomit stung his lips.

He slipped and bashed his knee on one of the decorative rocks that lined the path to the porch, but he didn't feel it. His leg buckling, he staggered away, desperate for help. A thunderous din greeted him. The noise was everywhere. Applause, the stamping of feet, whistling, shouts of joy and whoops of excitement. But there was no one to be seen. He spun around and



rubbed tears from his eyes. He felt someone slap his back, felt someone pinch his cheek. He was pushed forward, turned, shoved, but he could see no one.

Russ ran. He could hear individual voices among the crowd, distant yet strangely intimate. He pushed against whatever forces acted on him. The sounds seemed to follow. "Almost there," a thick male voice called out. "Very close now," a child whispered. "A little further."

He felt like he was running downhill no matter where he turned. The space around him blurred. Window panes, screen doors, vinyl siding, chain-link fences all flew past him. His lungs burned, his legs ached; and in his head a pattern formed. A map of streets, avenues, intersections, of Skyview Acres. An image of lines and curves the he now realized was an exact match of the drawing he'd seen on the blackboard weeks before. He felt the pattern of lines and curves burning, branding themselves onto him.

Russ stopped. By car or foot, he'd traversed every street, lane and avenue in Skyview Acres. There seemed no point to going any further. The sky seemed to be gone, turned stark white.

"It's not a map," he suddenly realized.

"It's a key." As he spoke, he saw forms moving toward him, gliding down the crooked streets. The forms came closer, and Russ

thought they were like clouds. Thick, dark swarms of humming, spinning particles. Drifting in and out of each cloud were the residents of Skyview Acres. Russ saw a basketball-sized globe of shadows that covered part of a dress and a disfigured woman's face. Another contained child-sized hands that opened and closed like flowers. A large one veiled a man's torso. It extended a dark pseudo-pod toward Russ. At its tip were inhumanly long fingers.

He knelt, shivering, too weak to scream.

"At last. You. Have the. Pattern. Inside you. Can see us. Now." The voice came from all around him. He didn't turn to look.

"Yes."

"We. Have been. All around. You."

Russ closed his eyes.

"Never be. Alone. Again. Welcome."

The shapes converged and stretched Russ through space and time. He could feel each part of his body grasped and manipulated. Something was passed over his head. Before he became blind he glimpsed a huge, bright room where rows of faces hung in the air, shivering. Mouths twitched and eyes blinked, as if an unseen puppeteer practiced manipulating their delicate mechanisms. The images whispered to each other. "Fallen." "Risen." "Fallen."

His feet stood somewhere in the future, his legs straining against something heavy. He felt his right arm pulled backward into the past. Parts of other bodies brushed past him, sent here and there, before and after, like drone bees.

Thoughts from somewhere else sprung into his mind. *No one must know.* The particle collision, the pattern it produced, it had unlocked a door that had kept Russ' tiny and forgotten alcove in the universe safe. But now the door was open. The residents of a larger house had noticed, and they were coming to renovate. Russ and his neighbors were the tools, the swarms were the workers. When the job was done, things more terrible and beautiful would arrive. It was hard for Russ to think of words to describe them. Clockwork angels, black suns, ancient children, a god machine.

And then he felt his fingers, some days or weeks in the past, being forced around something hard and smooth and familiar. The handle of a hammer.

**"LIFE IMPROVES
SLOWLY AND GOES
WRONG FAST,
AND ONLY
CATASTROPHE IS
CLEARLY VISIBLE."**

**— PHYSICIST
EDWARD TELLER**

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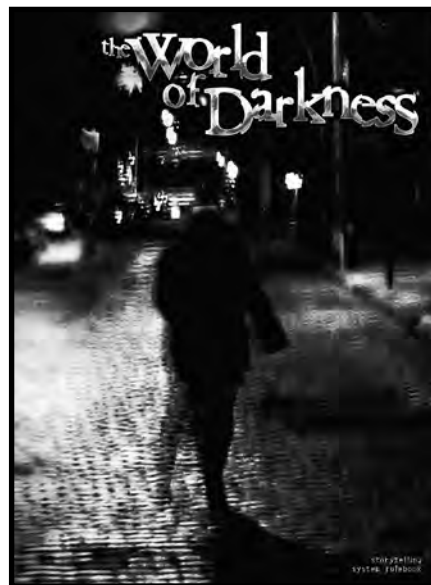
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MYSTEROUS PLACES

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Introduction

Sometimes the man who looks happiest in town, with the biggest smile, is the one carrying the biggest load of sin. There are smiles and smiles; learn to tell the dark variety from the light. The seal-barker, the laugh-shouter, half the time he's covering up. He's had his fun and he's guilty. And men do love sin...

— Ray Bradbury,
Something Wicked This Way Comes

Enter
**World of Darkness:
Mysterious Places.**

*Do you dare
set foot on
unhallowed
ground?*

The abandoned tenement on the block. The swamp where kids disappeared years ago. The old house on the hill. “The World of Darkness” is a phrase that’s bandied about loosely in Storytelling books, but there’s a lot of implicit, ominous meaning to the title that’s taken for granted. The World of Darkness is more than just a global realm of subtle, subversive machination and creeping, cryptic horror. It’s much smaller, much more personal than that. The World of Darkness as a setting includes the city in which your chronicle takes place, the neighborhood in which your character lives, the street he shares with others, and the house he calls home. A shadow is cast over them all, and under it suffering, oppression and depravity pervade. While the supernatural and the unknown span the planet, we can’t forget that they also lurk around the corner, down the street and disturbingly close to home.

World of Darkness: Mysterious Places is dedicated to bizarre, eldritch and tainted settings for your Storytelling games. These locales confront characters with the reality that the otherworldly and just plain strange lurk wherever they go, whether it’s on another continent, at the corner market or in one’s own cellar. The majority of these settings are designed with ordinary, mortal characters in mind. They help expose common people to the truths of the world, offering a peek behind the curtain into supernatural realms. Characters could be allowed bare glimmers into the unknown or be thrust into realities that are home to monstrous creatures, which newcomers may then become.

The settings offered here are just as frightening to seasoned denizens of the world, though. Be they people who confront monsters, or vampires, werewolves, mages, ghosts or other *things*, characters do not find the expected. The locales presented defy conventions and realms of experience for all beings. These places can just as easily terrify and confound ordinary people as the creatures that have long haunted the night.

Nine disturbing settings are offered to introduce new twists and turns to your chronicle.

The Swimming Hole: Something isn’t right down at the old quarry. Sure, folks call it the swimming hole, but no one goes into the water anymore. Instead, they go to drown their sorrows — and wish for new lives.

The University: The cloistered halls of academia promise more than education, understanding and a prosperous future. They can ensure a life of entrapment and captivity, all under the scrutiny of powers that no professor or student could name.

Swamp Indian Hollow: What things lurk out in the swamp, coming to life when nature would put them to an end? What power can be cultivated there and put to humanity’s misguided, selfish ends, allowing us to play God?

The Village Secret: The World of Darkness may be tainted and decayed, but deep down it’s still alive and vital. The essence of that energy boils to the surface in isolated, hidden spots and can be tapped by those lucky or foolish enough to tamper with the world’s spirit. But at what cost is that essence harvested, and who is prepared to protect it to the bitter end?

The Statue of Weeping Alice: Civilization’s reach extends across the world, and hardly any place is free from humanity’s touch. But what price must be paid for mankind to be tolerated by a reality that is far from benevolent? Indeed, that could be hungry? What sacrifices are required to placate the land, and what gifts does it offer in return?

Hillcrest Center for Elder Living: The supernatural need not invade a place to make it disturbing or strange. Humanity itself is twisted and bizarre. What secrets do people near the end of their lives accumulate and hide? What insights do they gather over the years and keep to themselves or dole out only to the deserving? Easily overlooked and intentionally forgotten, a home for the aged can be an alarming, disturbing place.

The Whispering Wood: What happens to people who get lost, never to be seen again? Are they murdered? Do they escape from a world that doesn’t want them? Or are they taken from the world, forced to exist in a realm for the lost of body and spirit? Forgo that trail of breadcrumbs and see where the forest takes you.

The Junkyard: In a society of urbanized, conspicuous consumers, what becomes of the castoffs and detritus of our selfishness? It winds up in the landfills and junkyards to which we turn a blind eye. Graveyards of dead dreams, junkyards are infested by more than just rats. They’re a breeding ground for danger, and things that ought not to exist.

The Empty Room: Commit a crime and go to prison, or so society decrees. But what spiritual or divine justice presides when the seemingly innocent are plucked from the world they know to be imprisoned in a room beyond reality and comprehension?



TALON · 05

The Swimming Hole

*When the gods
wish to punish us,
they answer our
prayers.*

*— Oscar Wilde,
An Ideal Husband*

Nobody swims at the swimming hole anymore. They haven't for years. Part of it is that the damn place just isn't safe. Its waters rest at the bottom of an old, gutted quarry some six or eight stories down. Just getting there means walking down a narrow path along the cliff face. That is, unless you feel like cliff diving, which some have done because the water runs deep. The water itself is placid and dark, practically unfathomable. Parents tell their kids stories about teenagers who drowned there. Adults say that if kids aren't careful, they'll slip into those cold waters and never come back up, maybe pulled down by the lost and sad spirits of all the kids who've drowned there.

But those are just ghost stories to conceal the real reasons why people don't swim at the hole anymore. It's because the water is too special — too *powerful* — to be wasted on swimming. It's quietly understood that the deep water has a kind of magic to it. Certainly, many refuse to believe the whispered tales. But year after year, a handful of townsfolk visit the stark shores of the old swimming hole and offer up a little blood and a lot of desperation to see what salvation the depths offer. In truth, the place isn't really a swimming hole. It's a wishing well that makes dreams come true.

Now, however, one company has bought another, and the land surrounding the swimming hole has changed hands. The new owner, possibly oblivious to the truth of the place, intends to drain the quarry and start mining again. Of course, the place doesn't *want* to be tampered with, and the townsfolk want to keep things the way they are. What happens when the curse of those dark depths is awakened, and reality breaks down?

Characters

The swimming hole is threatened. Do players assume the role of local townsfolk, hoping to protect the place from the influence of avaricious outsiders? Or do they try to exploit its waters before they're drained completely? Players may alternatively assume the roles of the outsiders themselves — company workers just trying to get the job done, unaware of the horrors that their actions unleash. It's even possible that the players create children as characters — kids who haven't been told the truth of the swimming hole, and who wonder why nobody goes to the cool, old spot anymore.

Whatever the case, this is a place of dreams that is now dying, a dark, watery hole that offers hope and damnation. The swimming hole is a literal manifestation of the old adage, "Be careful what you wish for." Are characters' wishes granted? Or do the depths invoke only a fiendish curse?

Where?

The swimming hole sits just outside of town. What town? For the purposes of tailoring this setting to your game, the town remains purposefully nameless. Such ambiguity allows you to customize this setting in a way that appeals to the players' characters. The town may exist just about anywhere in the world. For the most part, it's a rural or suburban setting, somewhere that has geographical room for a quarry, but that isn't an absolute requirement. The locale could be revised and used in an urban environment. Cities don't offer the physical space for a quarry, but the concept functions anywhere a small body of water can be found. Perhaps it's a defunct city pool in an old abandoned YMCA. Or possibly the "hole" is underground, in an abandoned subway tunnel. The waters represent the

double-edged sword of hope, showing that dreams can become nightmares just as easily as they can offer insight and reward. It doesn't matter *where* you place this setting, provided you preserve this core concept.

History

"The Swimmin' Hole" (a title painted in white on a piece of corrugated scrap metal posted down by the wa-

ter) was formed unintentionally in the late 1940s. Initially, the area was a limestone quarry mined by the Glaser Stone Company (limestone being a principal component of cement, steel and some chemicals). The company extracted rock block by block from the land, forming an emergent depression in the earth. After five or so years of operation, what started as a hole became a pit over 70 feet deep, with nearly a quarter-mile circumference.



Unfortunately, at that point Glaser encountered a big problem. The digging uncovered what appeared to be some kind of underground lake — a pre-existing body of water at the very nadir of the pit. The company knew that such a subterranean body wasn't completely uncommon, and was likely fed by some hidden spring connected to the local water table. In reality, no such spring existed, and this "underground lake" wasn't so much a lake as a hole filled with water. It was, in essence, a water-filled cavern

at the bottom of an already huge hole (the quarry), an obstacle the company could not overcome. Contemporary technology and budget restrictions stopped the digging. Attempts to get equipment down there were risky, because it might fall into the water. Plus, any stone harvested might also slide down and disappear. Filling the hole wasn't an option; the water proved far too deep. So, the company abandoned the project, collected insurance on the loss of the site and sat on the land.

The quarry, set aside for potential "future use," languished, all but forgotten by its owners. But the nearby town certainly found very unique uses for the quarry and its waters.

Local Legends

For years, a number of urban legends have circulated about the swimming hole.

- The hole and its waters are bottomless.
- Children have gone missing beneath the water, never to return.
- A high-school student caught his girlfriend with another boy. In anger, he drove her out to the hole (depending on the storyteller, he might have driven a '57 Chevy, a '67 Mustang or an '81 Bronco), and then drove the car off the edge of the quarry, killing them both. Their ghosts still supposedly haunt the hole.
- Gigantic catfish live in the hole. They're over 10 feet long and anywhere from 500 to 1,000 pounds. Depending on the storyteller, the fish are either mutants from some chemical in the ground or are indicative of some kind of "curse" on the place. Nobody knows where the fish came from, but suggest that they swam up from some underground river and look like freakish deep-sea creatures.
- The Glaser Stone Company didn't close up shop because of the water, but because they *found something*. This "something" is rarely the same thing twice. The story varies from person to person. Some say that the company discovered a hidden cache of treasure, others that the company uncovered a buried cave filled with Indian corpses. The more inventive the storyteller, the stranger the supposed discovery. Some religious types suggest that workers found the exact spot where Lucifer himself fell from Heaven. Others speak of aliens and UFOs.

Reality

The hole does look pretty spooky. The rock walls surrounding it are craggy and pale, and deep within the belly of the quarry is the pit itself. Its waters are eerily still and clear, but their unmeasured depths lend that clarity a nearly impenetrable darkness. All in all, it's a barren pond without a shoreline, as the land simply changes to water, which drops into shadow. It's hard *not* to believe all the crazy legends about the place, simply because it looks the part.

Those seeking to investigate local legends may find that they are, for the most part, total bunk. And yet, in the face of persistent, scary bedtime stories about the swimming hole, researchers may find that truth is stranger than fiction.





First, while the hole isn't technically bottomless, it seems to be. This isn't a standard pond with a declining shore and sandy bottom. From the edge of the waters, characters see an immediate drop-off with no visible bottom. The shore itself is inclined only a few inches. After that, it's just a hole. Characters doing local research at the library (see "Research," p. 55 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**) or speaking to locals (likely requiring a successful Manipulation + Persuasion roll to get people to talk about the pit at all) may uncover that in the '50s or '60s, the town did send some men with scuba equipment down to measure the depth. The investigation yielded little information, other than the fact that at about 50 to 55 feet, every diver began feeling sick. They complained of headaches, nausea and disorientation. Nobody ever went deeper.

Second, nobody's actually ever seen monster catfish in the swimming hole. Oh, sure, some have *claimed* such claptrap, but nobody has proof to back it up. Point of fact, the hole contains *no* fish. No life has ever been found in the waters. No minnows, turtles or water bugs. Algae does not spread along the surface. Reeds and willows grow *near* the water, but never *in* it. And yet, curiously, the water is fresh, not stagnant, despite no known running-water source feeding it. Characters may be able to uncover this information with a number of Intelligence + Science rolls, with bonuses given for appropriate equipment. (For example, if characters work for the company and test the water, they may have aquaculture equipment, bio-filters, freshwater plankton nets, field measuring and flagging tape, and pH kits, all of which may add cumulative +1 bonuses to Science rolls.) Some of this information may also be learned by a library trip or by encouraging the locals.

Third, nobody has ever gone missing down there (yet). Children have not drowned or disappeared, and no angry teenagers have ever committed suicide or murder in or near the hole. A trip to the library or to the local or county newspaper archives yields such information, as might conversations with locals. (Note, however, that if appropriate Persuasion rolls fail when speaking to townsfolk, locals are most likely to mislead children or outsiders and openly lie about folks going missing. Wits + Subterfuge rolls may be made on players' behalf to detect any such deception.)

Finally, did the Glaser Stone Company really find anything, or did it stop production because the hole stood in the way of progress? The reality is that the company halted operations because the hole was large enough and deep enough to curtail any advancement. Some employees *did* find something strange down there, though.

The Message in the Cave

At the far side of the hole, workers discovered a small cave just above the water line. It wasn't big enough to stand in, but it was high enough to allow entry by someone crawling on hands and knees. A few Glaser employ-

ees decided to swim across the cold waters and see if there was anything inside — mostly on a dare, for the little grotto itself was profoundly dark and inspired unnerving fear. Three men went in, single file, each armed with a flashlight.

The cave dead-ended about 15 feet in. The worker at the head of the line was a townie named Eddie Lansdale, a teenager just out of high school. There, at the end of the tunnel, he found a message in the beam of his light. The message — a short poem, actually — was literally carved into the rock. The words were engraved in an almost fanciful script, each serif coming off every letter with a curl-cue or hook.

Come to my waters and bleed for a wish

I shall dish out your dreams like a fat wriggling fish

But if my waters are ever drained down

I won't dawdle nor dally when killing your town

The other men asked what was going on. Eddie told them it was nothing, that the tunnel ended and it was just a natural formation. The men reversed out, Lansdale following shortly after.

Eddie and His Wishes

Let it be said, Eddie was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. He made it through high school only at the threatening promise of a belt. His father (a local businessman) would tolerate neither idleness nor folly from his son. Eddie wasn't a popular boy, either. He dressed poorly, slouched and had a face pitted with the ghostly craters of old acne.

The poem on the cave wall terrified him. He wasn't a genius, but he was smart enough to realize that nobody should have — *could have* — been down there to carve it. Something about it cut him to the core, and for a long time Eddie avoided the quarry like it was a leper colony. Yet in his dreams, he saw the poem on the wall and *heard* it whispered to him.

Over the next two years, life ground Eddie down. He lived with his father and barely had two nickels to rub together. Nobody really liked him or talked to him. Girls wouldn't even look his way, acting as if he never existed. With a greasy complexion and the soles of his shoes peeling away, Eddie knew he had to conquer his fear and go back to the quarry.

And so, he decided to follow the poem's instructions. He was a desperate boy with a laundry list of unspoken desires, and was prepared to bleed mightily for them. Eddie went down to the shore, the mining company long gone. He cut his palm with a penknife, let blood dribble into the water and made a wish. It was a simple one, without much fanfare or detail. Eddie Lansdale wished for some money.

Nothing happened. No money fell from the heavens. It didn't float up from the depths. Disappointed (and with a cut-up hand), Eddie went home.

Two days later, Eddie's father woke him up at the crack of noon and informed the young man that his Aunt Flo-

rence had passed away. In her will, Eddie's father said, she left him something special. It was a coffee can filled with money. It was no great fortune, just a few hundred dollars, but it certainly qualified as "some money." Eddie's wish had come true.

He went back to the quarry the next day, reopened his cut and wished for more money. As before, nothing happened right away. Except this time, nothing happened at all. Not that day, not that week, not that month.

Dismayed but not defeated, Eddie went back at least once every month. He wished for money, for luck, for his father to stop hitting him with that goddamn belt, for a girlfriend. None of his wishes came true. He was about to give up, convinced that his first wish was just a fluke, when a year of wishes had passed. Eddie went out to the waters, cut open his hand once more (it was hardly healed) and bled into the water. He wished for something very specific, convinced that it was all a waste, yearning aloud for a 1948 Packard Super Eight Convertible — silver blue with a blue interior.

Two weeks later, Eddie's father went to the city and came home driving that exact car. But the car wasn't for Eddie — his father bought it for himself. In fact, Eddie wasn't supposed to drive it at all. Confused and angry, Eddie didn't understand until another week passed. His father was up on the roof replacing shingles, slipped and toppled to the ground. The man didn't die, but suffered spinal damage. The doctors said he was lucky to survive and put him in a wheelchair. As a result, Eddie got the car, his father suffered and the kid was happy.

A few years later, things had changed mightily for Eddie. He was in charge of his father's business, kept the old man upstairs at the house and got — and then subsequently lost — a girlfriend. Her name was Edith Brown. She was the daughter of the high-school principal. Eddie's and her relationship lasted for about six months, but she broke up with him because he was a "little dumb and didn't have no future." She moved to the big city, leaving Eddie alone with his business and luxury car.

Not long after that, Eddie went back to the place the kids then called the swimming hole, cut himself and wished for Edith to come back and be with him forever.

Ten days later, Edith came back. She was waiting for Eddie in the morning, her pupils dilated and unfocused. She beat him with a skillet, leaving him bruised and bleeding. Then she sent him to work for the day with a kiss on the cheek and a promise of dinner when he returned. He tried to tell people what happened, but nobody believed him. Eddie returned home and was greeted with dinner, a kiss on the cheek; and another beating for trying to tell others that she had returned. Later that night, he found his father upstairs, strangled to death with a lamp cord.

Eddie and Edith

Eddie is still alive, an old man. He doesn't speak of Edith, and sold off his business in the 1960s. He lives off the remainder of that money and social-security checks.

His father's corpse still sits in the attic, slumped over in the wheelchair, his flesh desiccated and brittle.

Edith, on the other hand, is only *sort of* alive. She exists. She walks and talks, and her skin, like porcelain, is unmarred by age. She doesn't breathe, though she occasionally eats raw meat that Eddie brings home from the market. (If he doesn't bring such meat, she tries to eat him.) She's also preternaturally strong and dominating. Eddie keeps her hidden as best he can. All of his windows have heavy curtains, and he keeps a number of locks on the doors. He's lived this way for a very long time, but sometimes people think they see someone standing with him when he goes out to get the mail. Some even say they've seen Edith's "ghost" haunting his property late at night.

Eddie is the primary source for characters to learn about those first wishes and the poem carved in the cave. Others (many others) have seen the poem and made wishes since, but Eddie's story remains the first and perhaps most exemplary. Townsfolk over the years have put two and two together, remembering the persistent cuts on Eddie's hands and his "good fortune." No one knows about Edith as he keeps her hidden, but the stories around town could lead characters to Eddie Lansdale's front door. Characters new to town looking for stories about the quarry might be given Eddie's address on the sly. Characters already living in town might be able to come up with Eddie as a possible hook with a successful Intelligence + Composure roll and remember witnessing or being told of the weird circumstances surrounding him. (Consider, too, that if the swimming hole causes things to go haywire in town, Eddie might try to escape his cruel wife — who turns even more aggressive — to warn the characters.)

Loose Lips

How exactly others found out the secret of the swimming hole remains unknown. Did teenagers swim the pond, find the little cave and the weird poem? Did someone wonder what Eddie was doing down there, cutting open his hand and muttering all kinds of nonsense? Or perhaps townies received visions and insistent dreams about secret promises that could be fulfilled at the swimming hole.

However it happened, it happened. Whispers spread about the magical "wishing well" outside of town. Pinned to every tale were hopes, dreams and prayers for lost items. It wasn't long before townies started going down to the quarry to see for themselves, creeping along the cliff ledge and heading down to the rim of the "bottomless" hole. Most stared into its depths and found themselves scared — too scared to do anything about it, like grade-schoolers unwilling to utter "Bloody Mary" five times in a mirror. But some tried. Those who merely wished got nothing. Those who gave a draught of their blood to the waters were granted their wishes — one way or another.



If Wishes Were Horses...

Below are a handful of wishes that have come true over the last few decades. Characters have a difficult time uncovering any of these stories right away — they have to dig deep to find them. The important thing to remember about each wish is that it is not completely forgotten. Not everyone knows each story, but *someone* does. Whether it's a relative or descendent, a local cop or the nosy town busy-body, somebody knows, and that somebody might yield information to characters who ask the right questions, offer the right rewards or level the right threats.

Of course, you're welcome to come up with your own "wish-tales." If the characters are townsfolk, more stories are useful, because you can connect characters to them. What if they remember a story because it happened to a friend or relative? Or perhaps a character was directly involved. When crafting your own wishing-well stories, always remember the cardinal rule about wishing: *Be careful what you wish for.* (For more guidance, see "Anatomy of a Wish," below.)

The Ugly Duckling. Cathy Cahill didn't need constant reminders of just how ugly she was, but she got them anyway. Local kids called her "Bucky Tooth" or "Fatty Catty." Adults weren't much better. Other women whispered and giggled behind her broad back. Men discussed the finer points of Cathy's elephant ears, pasty skin and neck moles. Cathy decided that she needed to be beautiful, went to the swimming hole, spilled her blood and wished to be the prettiest girl in town. Five days later, she was in Besser's Pharmacy, buying diet pills, when a car crashed into the front of the store, showering her with glass and crushing her between two shelves. She required extensive reconstructive surgery. A year later, after she was released from the hospital and all the scarring and bruising went away, Cathy had her wish. She was the prettiest girl in town. Men fawned over her, and young boys found her at the center of their bawdiest dreams. Cathy still suffers a great deal of pain from the accident (facial stinging, migraine headaches, arthritis from the metal in her bones), but she considers it all worth it.

Have You Seen My Dog? Harold and Kaylie Jones couldn't have children. Whether it was a problem with his biology or hers, they never found out. Instead, they expended all their energy on raising prize-winning rat terriers, rearing several generations of the purebred canines. Harold and Kaylie loved their dogs as if they were family, and especially loved their prized male, a real competitor they called Rascal. They were terrified when Rascal went missing one day. Kaylie had long ago considered using the powers of the wishing well for a baby, but she had worried about committing a blasphemy before God. And yet, she'd heard that one of their neighbors had located a beloved, lost cat by wishing for it. Surely that wasn't against God's plan.

So, she asked Harold to go down to the quarry and wish for Rascal's return. Harold did, and it was nearly two

weeks later when Rascal came back. He ran to them, limping and whining, being chased by the son of their neighbors across the street. Rascal was alive, but had one eye cut out, and the hamstring of his back left leg clipped and crudely stitched. He was covered in solder burns. The son — a learning-disabled teen named Stevie — had taken the dog and tortured him. Harold realized what had happened, turned into the garage for a shovel and beat Stevie to death. Harold went to jail and awaits trial. Rumor has it that he threatens to "expose" the town's secret unless someone helps him.

If I Had a Million Dollars. It seems a common wish, wanting a million dollars. But after Dan Pendercheck tried it, nobody else has been too eager to dare the same. Dan and his family (a wife and three beautiful daughters) had fallen upon hard times. Their hardware store was deep in debt, with all the big competitors popping up five or 10 miles away. The kids' college savings were drained, they sold off their nice cars and bought junkers, and a trip out to a restaurant was no longer affordable. So, Dan decided to try his hand at what had previously seemed foolish. He cut his hand, asked for a million dollars and got it. It came in the form of a big insurance check (paid in one big installment!) after his house burned down with his wife and daughters still inside. They died, he lived. Dan lives as a hermit now, angry and bitter and a little bit crazy. He spends his money strangely (odd folk art, broken-down cars, elaborate dollhouses), and doesn't talk to people much. He mutters to himself more often than not.

Closet Skeletons and Dirty Laundry

Ever lift up a half-rotten log in the forest? Underneath, you find an unholy metropolis of beetles, maggots, worms and spiders. The town and the swimming hole provide characters with a similar experience. Exposing the truth about the town exposes the truth about the townsfolk. Characters trying to find out what happened in the past are likely to follow a trail of breadcrumbs through a forest of moral decrepitude. People's hopes and dreams — no matter how desperate or twisted — are dragged out into the light. A man's wish for money seems harmless, until it's revealed that he's going to use it to buy a dead woman's house during an estate sale so her kids won't get it, all because he thinks the woman kept a cache of war bonds hidden in her walls. When he finally gets the place and looks for the treasure, he finds the leg-bones of children — murder victims of someone whom the town thought was a nice old lady. The trail of breadcrumbs leads right into the darkest places of the human heart. Characters might even fol-

low such a trail far enough to find poor Eddie Lansdale, enslaved by Edith Brown, the unliving love-of-his-life.

Red Herrings

The townsfolk don't always get it right. After all, the very act of wishing is of mythical proportions, and such supernatural tales are often far from true. Below are some quick "red-herring" wishes that might throw characters off, should they investigate. These stories don't really adhere to the "rules" of wishing, and may convince characters that the power of wishing can be more beneficial than it really is.

- Mary Stevens was estranged from her mother all her life. Finally, her mother died of a stroke one night in her sleep. Mary moved back to town after the funeral and used the wishing well to get "just one more night" with her mother alive, healthy and happy so they could reconcile.

- In 1974, Mayor Jack Hanlon saw that the town was headed toward dire financial straits. He went down to the waters and wished for his town to be better, to have a *future*. He didn't spill blood, but the swimming hole granted him his wish anyway, seeing that it was selfless and pure of heart. The next morning, Main Street was renovated, the statue in the town square was flawless again and the sleepy little hamlet got an offer from Hollywood to shoot a picture in town!

- Old Frankie Gurwich ("You know, the one who owns the Railroad Museum just off of I-80?") met his wife by wishing at the old swimming hole. He wished for a beautiful woman to love him. It wasn't even 24 hours later that he met Giselle at Ralph's Diner! Frankie now goes back to the waters once a year and wishes for something small as a present for his wife.

- Louise Kilczewski is a mean, old bitch. She *loves* wishing for things that hurt the town. She wishes for pets to go missing, for bad weather, for potholes to pock up the road and for the flu bug to come around. If something bad happens, Louise probably wished for it.

- Edith Brown was a real go-getter who dumped that fool Eddie Lansdale on his ass. She wished to be free of town and got what she wanted. Rumor has it that she made it to the big city and ended up as a girl Friday to the important CEO of a big steel company.

Veridian

Glaser Stone, owners of the quarry, sold off the business years ago. Its holdings went to another corporation called US Mining, which in turn was bought out by a conglomerate called Veridian. Having taken stock of all the assets that came part and parcel with the purchase of US Mining and, in turn, of Glaser, the new company has come across the quarry. Veridian has a plan and the means to open the quarry once again for operation. It can continue

to cut limestone, this time extracting huge chunks using diamond-cutter technology. Once Veridian has removed all the stone that it can, the company plans to use the entire quarry as a landfill, burying refuse layer upon layer before filling it up.

To accomplish all this, Veridian has to drain the quarry. The company has obtained the proper license from the county. Veridian has demonstrated elsewhere that it can mine below the water table without harming any watershed areas surrounding the operation. The plan is to pump water from the hole into tanker trucks, which will take the water to a man-made aquifer some 15 miles north of town.

Veridian now has a trailer-office at the top of the quarry where it will conduct the draining. The townsfolk don't want any of this, of course. On the surface, they protest the company's involvement. "A working quarry is bad," they say. "There'll be trucks coming and going at all hours of the night." A landfill is worse, and nobody in town wants a garbage pit nearby. Of course, the *real* reason the town is up in arms is that the swimming hole is threatened, and they won't stand for it.

Systems

Any stories featuring the swimming hole may need to reference a few specific systems. These rules are in no way hard and fast, and can be changed to suit the needs of your game.

Anatomy of a Wish

Wishing is a tricky convention in games. On the surface, it's simple. Wish for something, get it. That's it. Ah, but this is meant to be a horror story, not a problem-free Christmas story, and that means wish-fulfillment comes at a hidden price.

Blood in the Water

The poem said it, and the waters comply. For desires to be made manifest, blood is necessary. Any character, whether she's a supporting cast member or one controlled by a player, needs to spill a little *claret* into the swimming hole to get what she wants. She must stand by the waters, spill blood and ask her wish aloud. The blood *must* belong to the character, and must be fresh. Pig's blood from the butcher's shop doesn't do it. Neither does dragging an enemy down to the water and cutting *his* hand. Having a pint of one's own blood from the hospital and dumping that in the water doesn't work, either. It has to be a new cut, with warm blood. Others have tried such variations with no success.

Spilling blood requires that a character suffers one self-inflicted point of lethal damage. While the wound is unlikely to be fatal (unless infection sets in), it counts as lethal because it requires the piercing of flesh.

You may require a player to first roll Resolve + Composure for his character to work up the courage to make a cut. Failure on this roll means the character cannot pro-



ceed with the self-inflicted wound, whereas any dramatic failure likely imposes a temporary, mild derangement for 24 hours. Success on the rolls means the character can make the cut, and exceptional success allows the character to regain a spent Willpower point in addition to being allowed to proceed with the self-mutilation.

You may also ask for a Wits + Medicine roll for a character to treat a wound to ensure that it doesn't become infected.

Hidden Costs

The moral of the story says it all: Be careful what you wish for. The subtext behind this saying is that wishes aren't an easy deal. They don't come free, and, more often than not, the result isn't much of a reward after the true costs are figured in.

The swimming hole isn't any different. Every wish comes with hidden costs beyond the blood cast into the waters. The reason is balance. In some manner, the quarry conspires with the universe to grant wishes, but the rewards aren't simply conjured out of thin air. (This is similar to the physics rule that states "Matter cannot be created or destroyed," except on a metaphysical level.) If someone asks for \$100, the money comes from somewhere. It doesn't just appear, it's pulled from someone else's wallet or cash drawer. A million dollars works the same way, except more extremely. It has to come from somewhere — an insurance policy, bank vault or some rich person. The universe struggles to stay balanced. The good granted by a wish must be equaled by a negative deficit elsewhere.

Translation: Wishes cost more than one thinks. Most of the balancing costs are levied directly from the person making the wish, or are paid out in relative proximity. A guy asking for the aforementioned \$100 gets the money, but only after it drops out of his wife's wallet or is sent to him mistakenly by a charitable organization that incorrectly believes him in need of financial assistance (when his neighbors' address was really the one on the envelope). Or maybe a thief steals an antique that was priceless to the wisher, but the insurance company is willing to pay only the requisite hundred bucks in recompense. Everything balances. The man gets his money, but at what cost?

Note that when the waters begin to recede as per Veridian's plan, the karmic costs of wishes hit closer to home. The unforeseen price affects family and friends, and any conscious or unconscious wish-fulfillment is all the more painful.

It's up to you to decide just how high a cost is paid. You essentially have two schools of thought here: "Monkey's Paw" or "Pyrrhic Victory." In the short story "The Monkey's Paw," each wish leads to only more trouble. No good comes from wishing in this tale. In it, a family wishes for £200 (the characters live in England), and that money is given in compensation for their boy's death at the factory. They use a subsequent wish to bring him back. He comes back all right, but the resurrected son is now an "it" rather than a "him." They use the third wish to undo

the second, and, as such, use up all of their wishes. In this story, only horror and suffering comes from wishes.

The other option is the Pyrrhic Victory route. The wisher gets what he desires, but at a cost high enough to make him question the original wish's validity. *Some* good can come from the wish, and it's up to the individual character to determine whether the end result is worth the inevitable (and irreversible) cost. A character who wishes for Olympian-level athletic ability, but who gets it at the cost of a much shorter life, might be willing to accept such a price because he achieves his dream. (In a Monkey's Paw version of the same, he would get his athletic ability at the cost of his thinking ability, and the resultant mental disability would nullify any newfound athletic talent.)

Limitations

If wishes were limitless and without rule, the world would be in dire trouble. Anyone could ask for anything, even going so far as to wish that the moon would come crashing down into the Earth, destroying all life. As Storyteller, you decide whether to fulfill excessive wishes, but it's recommended that you impose a few limitations to hamper what is already egregiously powerful magic.

First, no character is allowed an endless supply of granted wishes. A character can ask for wish after wish, but she doesn't get anything beyond the first one. Characters are granted subsequent wishes *only* after a full year has passed. (After suffering the hidden costs, not many come back for a second or third helping.)

Second, it's important to understand that the swimming hole is guided by some kind of abstract intelligence. It theoretically has the ability to reject wishes out of hand. Some requests are simply too demanding to grant, both for practical purposes and for the good of the story. As a rule of thumb, do not grant any wishes that cannot be balanced.

For example, wishing for infinite wishes cannot be balanced. Nothing is taken away from anywhere to be given, so it cannot be achieved. A character wishing for the air to turn to molten lava or for all townsfolk to suddenly speak gibberish involves abstractions that cannot be equaled. There is no easy deficit, no hidden cost that can be applied.

Also, the swimming hole has a vested interest in keeping itself around — if it can be said to have any sentience, it has a sense of self-preservation. It therefore won't honor wishes that harm it or change its properties. Destroying the well, destroying the town, killing all the townsfolk — all add up to the wishing well harming itself, and it silently refuses to grant such desires.

Careful Wording

Another reason why wishes are tricky is that whatever mystical force grants them doesn't brook ambiguity. Wishes are accepted letter-for-letter, word-for-word. The rewards are only as good as the wishes themselves, and that's something that should be considered whenever any character tries to make her desires known to the hole. A



character who stands at the edge and says “I wish for money” (and nothing more) is asking for trouble. Such ambiguity might get him a couple of \$2 bills, or might get him a fat sack of Mexican pesos or Monopoly money. A character who says “I want Janine to love me” is in for similar troubles. First, the word “love” is pretty vague, and could mean that she loves the character from afar, loves him “like a friend,” or loves him like a sociopathic stalker. For added cruelty, there’s no guarantee that the swimming hole picks the right Janine. The Janine that shows up on the character’s doorstep with flowers and chocolates might be his 13-year-old neighbor, not the ex-girlfriend who dumped him for the star quarterback. In this twist lies the potential for humor, and that’s fine — provided the humor is used to contrast the inevitable horror that looms.

Swimming/Diving

Swimming at the hole does nothing to intensify wish-fulfillment. It offers no miracle effect or cure. Nor does it cause pain nor create any bizarre conditions. The water might be cold even in warm weather (yet it never freezes in winter), but, all in all, nothing strange happens.

Diving below the surface, however, is another matter. For one thing, as clear as the waters appear, the depths are abnormally dark. Every 10 feet down, a character suffers a cumulative –1 penalty to all Perception-based rolls.

Worse, once a character gets to around 50 feet (if she dares go that deep in the first place), she experiences nausea and a headache. Every five feet after that imposes a cumulative –1 penalty to *all* rolls. If at any point a character suffers a dramatic failure on a swimming roll (Strength + Athletics + equipment bonuses), she begins to drown. (See “Holding Breath” in the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 49.) Characters who wear scuba gear don’t necessarily drown, but their bodies and minds are encumbered. A dramatic failure of any kind while scuba diving causes a character to black out. If fellow divers don’t bring him to the surface, drowning rules do apply.

Characters

Generally, the characters in this setting are the domain of the Storyteller and players. That said, the core mystery of the swimming hole lies with the man who made the first wish, Eddie Lansdale, and his unliving lover, Edith.

Eddie Lansdale

Quote: “You wanna know about the quarry, I’ll tell you about the.... What was that? *Oh god, is Edith here?*”

Background: Eddie was born a dumb kid into a stupid family. He was luckless and loveless up until the age of 20, when he became the first inhabitant of town to make a wish at the newly discovered swimming hole. He had a string of twisted luck for years after that (at least until he wished for the return of his ex-girlfriend, Edith), which allowed him to squirrel away quite a bit of money. Now he leaves the house only occasionally, having most things

delivered to him. When he does go out, he mumbles crazy things about his so-called spouse inflicting horrible abuses upon him. Nobody believes him, of course, because Edith went missing nearly 40 years ago — Didn't she?

Description: Eddie's an old man who looks like a shriveled toad. His beady eyes are set back in hollows above his pock-marked cheeks, and his mouth is turned down in a permanent scowl.

Storytelling Hints: On one hand, Eddie's an old curmudgeon. On the other, he's a victim of horrific abuse and senile dementia. He's clear one minute and babbling on about something the next. He's terrified of his inhuman wife, yet years of confinement with her have made him completely dependent upon her.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 1, Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 1, Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

Skills: Athletics 1, Brawl 1, Crafts 2, Drive 1, Empathy 1, Investigation 2, Larceny 2, Subterfuge 2, Weaponry 1

Merits: Resources 2

Willpower: 3

Morality: 6

Virtue: Fortitude

Vice: Envy

Initiative: 4

Defense: 2

Speed: 8

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Steak Knife (kept in sleeve)	1	(L)	1	3

Health: 6

Derangements: Irrationality (mild)

Edith Brown

Quote: "Eddie, you *will* eat the eggs I cooked for you, my love."

Background: Edith came from a good family in town. Her father worked at the school, her mother was a dutiful housewife. Edith figured she had a promising future, marrying a good man and raising a passel of children. She dated Eddie Lansdale for a while, thinking he might be the one, but she found him too petty and dumb. And so, she decided to try the city, where any number of upwardly mobile young men might be willing to get her that white-picket fence she always wanted. Of course, a lovelorn Eddie Lansdale made a wish for her to come back to him and be in love with him forever. At that point, things got a little blurry for Edith.

Description: Edith looks to be a woman in her early 20s. She's very pretty, her blonde hair cropped in a shoulder-length bob. But she looks wrong somehow. Her skin is overly pale, the veins showing beneath. She doesn't blink. And that might not be red *paint* on her fingernails.

Storytelling Hints: For all intents and purposes, Edith is a partly crazy, undead automaton whose only focus in

this world is Eddie Lansdale. She loves him enough to have sex with him (whether he wants it or not), and she loves him enough to make him three square meals a day (even if getting him to *eat* those meals means holding his shriveled face against the plate until he licks it clean). She pursues her love of Eddie quite aggressively, and sees any persistent visitors as ne'er-do-wells who need to be purged from this mortal coil. Any perceived threats are met with Edith's rather unusual physical prowess.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 2, Strength 5, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4, Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

Skills: Brawl 2, Crafts 2, Intimidation 3, Stealth 3, Weaponry 2

Merits: Fast Reflexes 2, Fresh Start 1, Quick Healer 4

Willpower: 4

Morality: 3

Virtue: Prudence

Vice: Wrath

Initiative: 5 (7 with Fast Reflexes)

Defense: 3

Speed: 13

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Iron Skillet	2 (B)	2	Knockout (p. 168)	9

Health: 9

Motives

What follows are a number of possible reasons for characters to become involved (or they may already *be* involved) with the strange swimming hole. These hooks are not meant to be exhaustive; character motivations are limited only by the combined imaginations of Storytellers and players.

• **Veridian Employees:** Veridian has a vested interest in the quarry. The quarry represents a lost asset that can be reclaimed. It's not so easy, however, for the company to just up and begin mining limestone the day after tomorrow. Preliminary work, such as draining the hole, must be done to prepare the area. Characters can be involved in this process in just about any conceivable way. They could be simple grunt-work employees (such as the guys who drive the tanker trucks or who monitor the big, black plastic pipe that carries the water to the top of the quarry). They then find the little cave and the strange poem. Players could also assume the roles of middle management, those men and women who monitor and shepherd the operation without getting their hands dirty. Depending on the needs of the story, it's even possible that players control executives who know damn well what they're doing, and know full well that they're tapping into and potentially destroying a mystical site. (Such conspiratorial characters cannot know the horrific *consequences* of such actions, though.)

Veridian characters are likely to meet opposition from townsfolk, as well as suffer the unfortunate side effects that result from draining the water (see “Preliminary Events,” below).

- **Protectors:** Not all the townsfolk know or believe in the mystical powers of the old swimming hole. Truth is, only a minority of them have ever truly *experienced* the magic of the wishing well personally. Those who have protect the sanctity of the place at any cost. Most of them defend the waters tooth and nail, or from behind a gun barrel. In this case, players may assume the roles of townsfolk looking to keep intruders out. What happens when Veridian employees, county workers or cops poke around the quarry and town? How far are characters willing to go to protect their secrets? Do they have their own skeletons that need to be kept in closets? Are they able to see the error of their ways and understand that maybe the swimming hole has done more harm than good over the years?

- **Destroyers:** Not everybody in town wants to keep the wishing well around. Some have had their eyes opened to the true consequences of invoking its powers, and know that it causes more suffering than salvation. These characters are the minority of “clued-in” locals who want the swimming hole exposed or destroyed. Are the characters religious and see the magical fount as some kind of abomination? Perhaps they’re friends or family of those who have used the well to no good. Or have they themselves wished and been made worse for their expressed desires? Alternatively, such characters might hold grudges against the town. Maybe locals ostracized the characters because they were different, or maybe the characters belong to a company that couldn’t get a land development deal. Either way, the characters now seek to actively harm the townsfolk by destroying their foolish, mystical crutch. Destroyers are almost certain to experience quite a bit of opposition from the townies, who are likely to label the destroyers traitors or enemies. (Indeed, once the characters begin to achieve their goal of ruining or draining the well, frightening consequences arise.)

- **Kids:** An unwritten rule of the town is that children and teenagers aren’t told about the powers at work. Kids are simply told to stay away from the hole, kept at bay with awful legends and tales of drowned children. Of course, kids are kids, and some live to break the rules. Players could portray such children (likely teenagers) who go down to the swimming hole on a dare or to find out what all the hullabaloo is really about. Alternatively, the swimming hole might be where some kids go to hide from their parents (where they smoke, do drugs, have sex or tell stupid campfire stories). Characters of this type don’t know anything about the wishing well. But what happens when they find the cave and the strange rhymes? Or do they hide and see one of the townsfolk come down to the water to spill some blood and make a wish? What do the kids do after that? Maybe they try their own wishes. Or maybe they’re caught and either let in on the secret or punished. (Are locals zealous enough to bring harm to kids in hopes of keeping the swimming hole a secret?)

Preliminary Events

Before Veridian arrives, characters may not yet know the reality of the swimming hole. What follows are a few events and encounters that get them immersed or intrigued in uncovering the nature of the setting.

- **Urban Legend:** Whether they live inside or outside of town, characters might hear a passing tale about the swimming hole. Maybe a drunk at a bar mumbles something about it, or maybe the characters encounter someone who actually *used* the wishing well for good or ill.

- **Wish-Fulfillment:** All characters want something. It’s part of their nature (and Storytellers are wise to make players write down a list of things their characters might want out of desire or desperation). The swimming hole is an enticing lure for a character who wants something so badly that he’s willing to spill a little blood to get it. Just as a character’s need comes to the forefront (the bank forecloses on his house, someone steals his car, his wife leaves him, he sees a bit of property he could buy “if only” he had the money), one of the townsfolk plants a suggestion about maybe using the swimming hole to help “grease the wheels.”

- **Targeted:** Characters are known to cause a little trouble from time to time. Maybe a character starts a fight with another patron at a bar. Or maybe a character cuts down a branch from a neighbor’s tree or accidentally runs over that neighbor’s cat. The offended party might use the swimming hole to get revenge. What happens when a character finds his own pet (or daughter) crushed, as if run over? Or he suffers a broken leg or his house catches fire? At first, it might seem like a case of mundane revenge — until the character looks deeper.

- **Tangled Web:** Characters just passing through town (or characters in town who are otherwise ignorant of the swimming hole) start seeing the tangled web of wishes in action. One townie hopes for money, and it comes out of another local’s bank account. That local wants revenge on the one bank in town, and the bank burns down, setting the townsfolk in a frenzy. People left and right start wishing for things — money to pay bills, luxury items, an endless supply of necessities — but every wish creates a deficit somewhere else. Soon, people aren’t wishing for material goods, but for revenge against one another or for others to love them and comfort them in these troubling times. Characters witness the town just before boiling point, just before Veridian comes in and makes everything a thousand times worse.

Secondary Events

A number of mundane events are the basis for the supernatural ones that follow. Veridian acquires Glaser secondhand and begins the process of re-opening the quarry. The company sends in a few tanker trucks and



starts the weeks-long or months-long process of draining the hole. Several townsfolk get up in arms and may attempt to stand in the way or sabotage Veridian's efforts. No matter what happens, though, the company starts to drain the water from the swimming hole.

The poem scratched into the wall of the tiny cave across the water doesn't lie. Draining the hole means slowly killing the town. Whatever it was that created this weird place invoked a curse on the site, and it still applies.

The curse is this: once the waters start to drain, the wishing well no longer requires a draught of blood or any wishes to be spoken aloud at its edge. Wishes are fulfilled without either requirement. While that sounds like a good thing, it's most certainly not. *Unconscious desires* are plucked from the minds of the local townsfolk. They needn't actively wish for something to make it happen. The thought merely needs to cross a townie's mind for it to be potentially made manifest. The problem is that people make a number of superfluous or extreme wishes on any given day. People hope for other people to die or for their own children to be made mute or for their spouses to be made into brainless slaves. They don't really *mean* these things. Sometimes the mere thought is a way to relieve stress. Except now, those wishes are not casually discarded. They're born into reality. (Also, it becomes nearly impossible to use the waters for wishing as townsfolk used to, because Veridian puts up barbed-wire fencing and posts a couple of around-the-clock guards.)

With each foot of water drained from the swimming hole, *one* unconscious wish is snatched from a random mind and given form. Veridian can pump one or two feet from the swimming hole a day. The pit itself is said to be over 50 feet deep, possibly as much as 100 feet. Over the course of a few weeks or months, a number of horrid events or phenomena occur across town as people's unspoken desires are granted. Should Veridian find a *faster* way of pumping the water, these involuntary desires come all the more quickly.

What follows are a few potential events that could occur as a result of the waters being drained. These situations are meant to clue characters in that something is wrong, but they may not recognize exactly what it is. That is, until the waters get lower and lower, and more and more horrors are sprung from the wellspring of unspoken wishes.

The Dead Walk

Everybody wishes that dead people weren't really dead. "I wish Aunt Majorie were here with me now," or, "I wish Miranda hadn't died in that car accident." The swimming hole may make such silent wishes a reality. The result is unlikely to be a plague of flesh-eating zombies. Instead, characters might catch glimpses of people who are supposed to be dead, but who seemingly aren't. A local boy who drowned in the community pool is seen lurking around the junkyard, or a suicide victim is spotted in the window of his old house. Some of these undead townsfolk might be docile and intelligent. Others might

be feral and hungry. All of them are pallid and scarred, and bear the unfortunate marks of their demise. Alternatively, depending on the nature of the silent wish, such individuals may not return as the walking dead, but as restless spirits.

Strange Deaths

Just as some might wish for the dead to live, others wish for the living to die. Such death-wishes are casual thoughts, to be sure, much like a child yelling to his friend how he'll "kill him" for taking a toy truck. But once the waters drop, the swimming hole does not discriminate between subconscious fantasies and genuine wishes. Stray thoughts such as "I wish Hal would hang himself" or "I hope Charlie's head *explodes*" might just come to pass. The first strange death isn't necessarily that strange. Sure, it's odd that a local housewife loses her hand in the garbage disposal and dies from the blood loss. One death in town is shocking; but not supernatural. The bodies pile up, however — every day bringing another unusual demise, and then people know something is horribly wrong.

Neighbor versus Neighbor

The manifestation of unconscious desires exposes the way townsfolk feel about one another, which will destroy the town from within. Relationships between neighbors make for a tangled web, but on a normal day it's a web that's kept hidden. People harbor secret feelings toward one another all the time without ever airing such opinions or grievances. The swimming hole gives life and dimension to those frustrations. When Mary wishes that someone would kill her neighbor's cat, and that cat ends up crucified on a cellar door, suspicions spark. When one of two competing cheerleaders wakes up one morning with her hair and eyebrows shaved off, she concludes that the other girl did it (even if the stray wish came from someone else, such as an ex-boyfriend or someone the cheerleader made fun of in class). People eat poisoned breakfasts. They find spiders, rats or snakes in their glove compartments. They're pushed down steps by invisible hands or wake up deaf, dumb or blind. Some of these wishes manifest as mean pranks. Others are dangerous or fatal attacks. What was ambient but harmless passive-aggression becomes pure aggression. The town is like a pot of water on a stove. There are a few bubbles at first. Before long, the whole thing boils over.

Return of Lost Items

People lose items and wish for them back. They do it all the time. People lose keys, wallets, jewelry and cell phones. Others lose more personal items — a trusty compass from the days of being a Boy Scout, an old movie-ticket memento of a first date or a mixed tape from a past girlfriend. Once the waters of the swimming hole lower, lost items re-appear. They just don't show up in likely places. A person might find her lost engagement ring in a closed-up box of cereal. Keys might show up in someone

else's car. An old hunter might have a pain in his side, go to the hospital and find his lucky arrowhead buried under a layer of muscle. It's also possible that lost pets — or people — show up spontaneously, their minds and personalities drastically subdued or altered.

Personal Horror

Characters' own unconscious dreams and desires come true. If one character wishes for or vocalizes violence against another, perhaps that aggression suddenly manifests quickly and cruelly. The opponent's leg breaks as he trips over a curb or the wishing character accidentally shoots the opponent when hunting deer later that day. Or maybe a character for whom a roll fails (or fails dramatically) suddenly enjoys the results of a success — except it comes at an unforeseen cost. Maybe a Presence + Animal Ken roll fails for a character who tries to tame a stray dog, and the dog runs away. An hour later the dog is back, and not only is it tame but it attacks *anyone* who gets within 10 feet of the character.

Inexplicable Events

When the undeclared wishes of locals materialize, a lot of *little things* happen that might not set off any alarms at first. By themselves, these incidents don't mean much. When added up, they clearly show that something unusual is underway. What happens when a local teen miscreant starts getting straight A's and joins the swim team, all because his parents wished it — and, as a result, he's some kind of automaton? Or when an overweight woman wishes she could lose weight, and wakes up at a dangerously low 90 pounds and goes into insulin shock? Or anybody who goes into the local library finds their voices stolen, because the librarian wished that everybody would just *be quiet*? Old people become young again but are still afflicted with things like arthritis, cancer or Alzheimer's. Or a blizzard strikes in June, or it becomes a blistering 100 degrees in December because someone wished for a change of seasons. At first, the events are likely to be small, perhaps nearly unnoticeable. Characters hear rumors or witness the fallout of weird incidents, though. These phenomena gain in intensity and frequency, and, before long, the strangeness is undeniable.

Eddie

What does Eddie Lansdale have to say about recent developments? Does he see the town going to hell in a hand basket and suspect the cause? Does he try to escape the clutches of his dominator, Edith? Does he warn the townsfolk when Veridian sets up shop, or is he content to watch them all suffer and burn (or is he afraid to raise a hand to help)? Eddie might very well try to contact characters — whether by phone, by writing messages in his

attic window where Edith won't see them, or by sneaking out of bed at night and trying to get free of his imprisoning house. Of course, if Edith finds out he's doing anything out of the ordinary, she not only punishes *him*, she finds out to whom he's been talking and pays them an unpleasant visit.

Stories


The swimming hole is a setting with a lot of history and drama. Most of the drama is found on the local level, existing in the relationships between townsfolk. With that in mind, a troupe has a number of potential stories to tell.

Wish in One Hand

This story is a very personal tale for characters, because it deals with the repercussions of their own wishes. Players assume the roles of characters who have all spilled some blood and made wishes in the past. Some likely regret the true cost of their hopes, while others might be happy with the results of their dreams. Whatever happens, wishes come back to haunt them in one form or another. Once Veridian shows up, the characters' own unconscious thoughts are the first to come true. Characters cooperate or conspire to meet either their redemption or damnation at the whims of the wishing well. Can they come to grips with what they've done and help make amends for any suffering they inadvertently cause? Or do they try to undo the harm with more wishes, only sinking deeper into moral quicksand? Do they go on the offensive, trying to undo the power of the swimming hole by helping Veridian? Or do they try to save the well, seeing it as the last true means to salvation?

Damage Control

Suffice it to say, the swimming hole causes a lot of problems between people. Real feelings are exposed through both the conscious act of wishing (before Veridian arrives) and through the manifestation of untold desires (after Veridian starts work). The town has to keep it together to survive, but, without focus or guidance, that cannot happen. Without help, townsfolk kill one another or themselves. That's where the characters come in. They handle "damage control," trying to keep the town together and focused in this particularly trying time. Maybe the characters act as impromptu policemen (or as actual cops) to keep control of residents. Maybe the characters try to turn the townies' focus away from one another and direct a mob toward Veridian. Perhaps the characters help organize a mass exodus away from town (mobilizing 1000 or more people while the world goes crazy is an unenviable task). This story doesn't paint the majority of the townsfolk as zealous lunatics desperately trying to protect their se-



crets, but shows them as fragile, sympathetic victims who once leaned shamefully upon a misunderstood crutch.

Cult of the Pit

Not all townsfolk are zealous lunatics, but some of them are. A small number of locals (probably about 30 or 40) have long-protected the secret of the wishing well. They are something of an amateurish cult. They have secret handshakes, a “code of honor” and certain kinds of protocols in place to keep the swimming hole safe and secret from outsiders or unbelievers. They know the power of the pit and have appointed themselves its guardians.

Players’ characters seek to undo the power of the swimming hole. They might be Veridian employees who are initially unaware of the site’s mystical power, or they might be other locals who see the place as a curse instead of a blessing. The “cult” of protectors is the enemy, though they may remain sympathetic opponents. They’re misguided citizens, not Nazi torturers. And yet, these townsfolk are willing to harm or kill to protect their secret. Characters have no idea who’s a friend or who’s a foe, and have to deal with opponents at every turn. (Alternatively, consider a story where characters are part of this cult instead of against it.)

The Veridian Conspiracy

For this story, the swimming hole remains a constant backdrop as wishes go haywire, and the town falls apart. But the real enemy is Veridian. The company isn’t draining the quarry for the purpose of resuming operations. It has a more malicious purpose. Veridian has been buying up a number of mystical sites all over the place, doing God knows what with them (maybe harnessing their power or destroying them altogether to weaken magic in the world). Characters learn that Veridian is well aware of the consequences of “de-watering” the quarry, and sends some of its employees (in requisite dark suits and sunglasses) to monitor the hastening demise of the town and its people. Characters might play unsuspecting Veridian employees or townsfolk who uncover hints that the company is up to no good. Characters expose the conspiracy from the ground up, perhaps sneaking into company offices and finding secret papers or computer files. They might discover that the conspiracy goes very high indeed, all the way to other conglomerate companies (Time-Warner, Halliburton) or even to the government. Maybe rampant wish-fulfillment *wasn’t* in the company’s plans, and matters spiral out of control for even them. Or maybe the characters discover that Veridian is buying up a number of strange sites, sites found on the other pages of the very book you hold....

The Thing at the Bottom

Eventually, the waters of the quarry are drained. Despite the legends, the hole is not bottomless. If Veridian succeeds and the townsfolk don’t destroy each other, what

happens then? *Something* had to etch that poem on the shadowy stone of the cave. In this story, that “something” awaits at the bottom of the pit, where it has existed since before the town was built. What is the thing? Is it some fey creature, cruel in its whimsy and alien in its desires? Or is it some slumbering serpent, coiled and very, very hungry? The thing could be anything — an immortal man chained and cursed to live a painful eternity, a wretched djinn like those found in the *Arabian Nights*, or even the Devil himself. This story requires characters to survive to this point, allowing for a “fire and brimstone” finale. The creature is revealed and must be defeated, likely with cunning strategy or wicked firepower. Characters are faced with the fact that monsters exist, and such fiends are probably the cause of some of the world’s truly strange evils.

Reality Bites it

In this variant, no monster lives at the bottom of the swimming hole — no face is given to the enemy. Here, however, the draining does more than just bring subconscious wishes to reality. *Weirder* things happen. Reality begins to break down. Hallucinations are given shape and form. Passing thoughts are carved into the walls of the quarry, or painted on local houses or businesses in blood. Roads out of town either disappear into a dense fog or simply break off and disappear into a wretched, gray canyon. Animals speak, inanimate objects gain lunatic sentience; and all water becomes flammable. The membrane between this world and the spirit world thins and tears, and the characters must deal with the results. Do they cross over into the strange otherworld, living in a broken mirror universe à la Stephen King’s *The Dark Tower* or Robert McCammon’s *Something Passed By*? Or are they able to find their way out of the madness before the whole town disappears from the face of the Earth? Characters learn quickly that the material world is only one part of a greater reality. They realize that the hole is actually a projection of human fears and desires, and it now regurgitates these unreal nightmares. Can they placate it by performing virtuous deeds or by making selfless wishes? Can they confound it by using its own wishing powers against it? What happens if they learn they haven’t destroyed this strange reality hole, but have only moved it elsewhere in the world, or that its effects project into another reality?

Ending it

When some characters discover a “bad place,” their first instinct might be to destroy it. That can be a reasonable solution. If the quarry is the source of the trouble, bring an end to it. You might even want that solution to work. After all, destroying an entire quarry or body of deep water isn’t an easy task. It takes massive effort, whether that means procuring vast amounts of explosives or buying one’s own tanker trucks or whatever. Characters pursuing such a solution should face almost insurmountable

difficulty, because *destroying a quarry is hard*. So hard, it might not even be legitimate that they can pull it off. If they come up with good ideas or absolutely persevere, so be it. Maybe you want them to succeed instead of punishing them for the effort.

That said, however, blowing up the swimming hole is really too simple a solution. The well is an almost intelligent setting, mystically aware of itself and the wishes it grants. Such supernatural sentience goes beyond mere rock walls and watery depths. The power is not contained in the physical matter, so destroying it doesn't necessarily do the trick. In fact, it might only intensify matters.

Veridian

Veridian owns the quarry. It has put up fencing and signs warding townsfolk away from even the top of the pit, much less the bottom. The company has no interest in characters mucking around in its operations. Intruders trying to do physical harm have to deal with opposition from Veridian employees. Characters are likely to be arrested — or Veridian might want to “handle” them in its own way, which might mean any number of awful fates (torture, brainwashing or just killing them and dumping their bodies — maybe to feed the thing lurking in the depths).

Townsfolk

The locals oppose Veridian's interference, so why would they want the characters to come along and obliterate their sacred site? Locals may stand in the way of any characters seeking to do physical harm to the quarry. At first, residents are sure to make life difficult. Characters have a hard time getting a motel room and aren't served at restaurants. If they continue their crusade, the police might get involved and lock characters up, even if the cops have to trump up charges. If the characters *still* try to do harm to the area, they might face a cavalcade of angry locals bearing pitchforks and shotguns, who seek to protect their “salvation.”

Draining Down

Let's say the characters actually manage to do some kind of physical harm to the quarry. Maybe they detonate explosives and blow a ton of rock into the water, or maybe they secretly operate a number of tanker trucks at night and drain the site on their own. Perhaps the characters manage to somehow *wish* harm upon the swimming hole using the pit's own powers against itself. The outcome is likely to be the same: they hurt the area and potentially lower the water level. That means the curse only intensifies. More subconscious wishes are made real, and the horror in town worsens. At that point, characters may realize that their actions don't help the problem, but make it worse.

Poisoning the Water

One option characters may choose is poisoning the well. They might assume (correctly or incorrectly, depending on the type of story you've chosen to tell) that something dwells in the darkness, and poison might kill it. Poison might work if they can manage to dump enough toxins. Some poisons used in lakes or ponds (like the fish-killer Rototene) might be enough, but then what happens? Does it really terminate the power of the swimming hole, or does it only accelerate the metaphysical damage that the waters cause? What happens when Veridian drains the quarry and unwittingly trucks *poisoned* water to an aquifer where it will seep into the water table and into people's drinking supply?

Real Solutions

Once characters realize that the destruction of the swimming hole isn't the answer to their prayers, they might consider alternative solutions. How they can achieve some kind of closure regarding the site is up to you.

One possibility is that they simply return to the status quo. The swimming hole was at an original level, so the characters attempt to put the water back to that mark. They might undo Veridian's efforts and use tanker trucks to pump water back into the hole. Or maybe they try to get water from a local river or divert a stream in an effort to fill the pit back up. Any of these approaches might stop the mysterious effects of the well and put it back to “normal.” That is to say, the swimming hole still grants wishes, but only by people spilling blood and speaking such yearnings out loud. Characters may still have to deal with Veridian, though.

Alternately, if the characters can stop the draining, maybe they can protect the area from further harm. Perhaps they even stop locals from going down to the water's edge anymore. They put up fences, signs, barbed wire or even *guard* the well personally. Or maybe they can convince and show Veridian what awful things are happening, and convince the company — as owner — to do all the guarding. After all, the corporation could face massive insurance debt if local problems can be directly attributed to its activity.

You might even want to consider strange solutions. Can the characters contact local mystics (Indians, Wiccans, paranormal investigators) who can help combat and undo the curse? Or do the characters attempt such occult legwork themselves, fumbling through spell books and old parchments in the hopes of finding some kind of arcane solution? This setting might even be a good jumping-off point for characters whose eyes are opened to the horrors of the World of Darkness. The swimming hole might be the beginning for characters who feel compelled to explore other mysteries and the occult.





The University

"With a complete turnover of the student population every four or five years, the tale can be passed from one class to another, and in dorm rooms, fraternity, and sorority houses, with the original source long since removed."

— Richard Roeper,
Urban Legends

Universities are strange and dichotomous places. Some people see college professors as valued purveyors of knowledge, while others see them as stuffed shirts and elitists of the highest order. Similarly, a college student might be a child of privilege frittering away his parents' money, a hardworking youth trying desperately to graduate before his student loans mount too high or an athlete coasting through on his way to the big leagues. All of these stereotypes exist to one degree or another at any given university. Even the institutions themselves change over time, and a school's reputation might outlive the truth by decades. Whatever a college's present state, all institutions of higher learning have secrets. Sometimes these hidden realities are nothing more than a professor's affair with a student or an unsolved murder committed in a dorm room. The older a university is, however, the more likely that it houses secrets of a more esoteric nature.

In the World of Darkness, universities may conceal supernatural beings. Some could feed on the student body while others might lurk with their own bizarre motives in darkened hallways. Our school is more than a home to the unknown. It's a mystery in itself, possessed of a bit of sentience and a bare glimmer of an agenda, as evidenced by the strange events that dog those who work, live and study there.

Summary

Academia is a funny thing. It's just as vicious as politics, but has a more respectable veneer. Most people expect politicians to lie, but unless people are actively involved in academia, they usually expect professors and other collegiates to be honest. These folks aren't any more honest than anyone else, and it's not at all uncommon for a professor to plagiarize a student's or a colleague's work, to backstab or otherwise play politics for funding and privilege or to sacrifice integrity in the name of tenure.

Professors who do achieve tenure think of themselves as above the rules. They can do or say almost whatever they want in their classrooms. Some professors abuse their power by extorting money or sex for grades. Some are content just to be pedants. There are, of course, excellent and honest professors at any given university, but academia is dog-eat-dog, and if someone is gunning for a good position or grant, odds are someone else (probably someone less scrupulous) is as well.

But that's a normal university. Our mysterious school shelters something that's more than simple scholastic pettiness. Here, hazing pranks result in brutal fatalities. The library is mammoth and labyrinthine, and students swear someone lives between the stacks. The busts of the school's founders talk to each other. Or at least, it always sounds like there's someone talking in the room in University Hall where they're housed, but the room falls silent as soon as someone opens a door. Every university has its share of ghost stories and weird rumors, but this one has a story for every building. Stranger still, rather than dismissing these rumors, some professors actually take interest in them and track down students who have tales to tell. Some faculty belong to a secret society, a group responsible for calling up the force that haunts the campus.

Where Is This Place?

We don't name the university or set it in any particular city. No matter where your World of Darkness chronicle is set, odds are that a college or graduate school isn't far away. Most large cities have at least one, and almost all universities have web sites with easily printable maps, lists of faculty (which you can use to round out the secret society, if you wish) and local areas of interest.

Of course, the city makes a great deal of difference with regard to how you portray the school grounds, the staff and any stories set there. St. Lawrence University in upstate New York has a very different mood than, say, Ohio State in Columbus. Do a little bit of research into the history and current events of your chosen institution, and consider how that information might change when you add the events and information presented here. A small, urban campus makes some stories (such as "The Cost of Success," p. 40) more probable, while a story like "Snow-bound" (p. 41) might not work as well because of the logistics of each scenario.

Characters

Universities play host to a wide variety of people. That means a large number of character concepts can take an interest in this mysterious place. The most obvious concept is "student," but even that begs more specificity. Is the character an undergraduate from a small town, marveling at the number of people with whom she suddenly shares space? A star jock on an athletic scholarship? An iconoclast trying to complete a four-year degree in two years? A graduate student with a wife and kids?

Faculty and staff make for good concepts, as well, but the same level of variance exists. A professor might already have tenure (and might then be approached to join the secret society) or might be a part-time or adjunct professor trying desperately to obtain full-time employment. An engineering professor has a very different approach to a problem than an English professor.

"Staff" includes everyone from janitors to campus security to librarians. While the work might seem unglamorous in some cases, the benefits of having a set of master keys to the school shouldn't be taken lightly.

Beyond students and employees, many other character concepts are appropriate. Anyone with an interest in the paranormal might have heard of the goings-on, and universities are much easier to investigate than, say, federal buildings or private homes since small groups of people — even ones behaving oddly — are hardly out of the ordinary on a college campus. A city employee checking on building codes or a health inspector looking into a cafeteria might become involved in a story here. See "Motives" (p. 37) for suggestions on bringing disparate groups of characters together.

Theme and Mood

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. That notion is central to stories involving the university. The secret

society knew enough to endanger everyone and everything around it, but proceeded with its plans because members didn't stop to consider that they *shouldn't*. Even now, they undertake the actions they do not necessarily out of morality, but because they arrogantly feel that they are the only ones who can. Dividing education into departments and colleges encourages learning in only one field, and degree and career paths follow suit. The result is that the Renaissance man is a thing of the past. Even the foremost expert in a particular field is likely to be fairly ignorant outside her expertise. To truly understand what happens at the university — to even have a *hope* of understanding — the characters must be willing to learn and to keep learning. Or conversely, they must be willing to shy away from knowledge, because knowing too much of the wrong thing (as the faculty secret society has discovered) is dangerous.

The university lends itself best to an oppressive, overwhelming mood. Buildings are large and impressive. Halls are wider than necessary, and thus always feel empty. Staircases echo loudly, and lights never quite seem bright enough to illuminate rooms. Walking across campus is tiring for anyone, no matter their physical condition. Being in the middle of campus, seemingly miles from "the outside world" is to be completely cut off from anything except the grounds. Once the characters enter, they should feel trapped.

History

The age of the university and the specifics of where, by whom and why it was founded are left to you, the better to facilitate using a local institution. What follows is the history of how the supernatural came to the place and what it wants, insofar as it can be understood to "want" anything.

Dr. Cathcart's Discovery

Michael Cathcart, PhD, is an anthropology professor. He specializes in local history, culture and folklore, and is widely regarded as a superb, though demanding, teacher. On the night he was awarded tenure, he celebrated with some colleagues and then returned to his office to put some papers in order before going home.

Cathcart claims that he heard sounds coming from the basement, perhaps carried up through the vents. He investigated, but slipped and fell down the stairs. He twisted his ankle and lay there for several minutes before he could muster the strength to stand. During that time, he claims to have felt a profound sense of menace, as though he was not alone. Something was down there with him, watching from just beyond the pale light.

After a few minutes, Cathcart pulled himself up the stairs and limped out to his car. He didn't return to his office for nearly a week, but when he did he brought along a flashlight and a camera, and ventured into the basement again. Searching for several hours, he found lines of

chalk on the walls, floor and even ceiling, apparently drawn there. He guessed the chalk marks to be several years old, and they were far too faint to make out or read clearly. He photographed the lines as best he could, guessing them to be diagrams for piping or something else left over from construction, but was still curious after his previous experience.

Many months later, he met a recently tenured professor of linguistics named Robin Frost and wound up discussing his find. He showed her the photos. She said there was definitely a linguistic pattern to them. They researched together, but had only Cathcart's images to go on (the originals had since faded or vanished). They initially intended to limit the effort to the two of them, but exploring new possibilities called for skills they didn't possess. Within five years of Cathcart's mishap, several other professors were involved.

New Tactics

As months and years passed without any revelations, Cathcart became convinced that the symbols bore some religious meaning. He had no hard evidence to support his theory, but often pointed back to his experience on the stairs that first night, investing emotional significance to the episode and, therefore, the marks.

Jerry Detwiler, a young psychology professor brought into the group, decided to pursue Cathcart's theory. He explored the realm of religious ceremony and practice not strictly to find an answer, but because he was a die-hard rationalist who prided himself on being an empirical scientist. Detwiler quietly scoffed at Cathcart's increasing intuitive approach to the curiosity, and wanted to embarrass the old man. Detwiler therefore studied various religious trappings in hopes of finding some clue that explained the chalk marks. Less personally motivated, the other professors gave up and concluded that the marks had no meaning, that they were just graffiti or an unusual but natural phenomenon — maybe due to mold or condensation in the building's old stone foundation.

Eventually, Detwiler was rewarded when he discovered a volume in the university's rare book room. The book was embossed with similar signs.

Trial and Error

Detwiler called the other professors together and showed them his find. The book didn't appear in the university's list of rare collections. One of the group, a history professor, guessed its age at around 300 years, but Dr. Frost disputed that, observing that the book was written in English, and the dialect didn't seem any older than about 1860. Physical testing of the paper and ink provided no conclusive results. Detwiler, however, wasn't as interested in the book's age and origin as in what it said.

Apparently, the markings were designed to "unlock potential." Written or spoken the right way, over the right subject (which the professors believed was meant to be a





place rather than a person), the incantations would awaken that subject's latent power. The problem was that no context was provided for the claim. The group developed some pet theories, of course, but a frustrated Detwiler scoffed at them all. He hoped for proof to rationalize away the whole puzzle, not grounds for further speculation into mysticism. He was now sure that the whole thing had a completely sensible explanation, but the group just couldn't find it.

Someone suggested inscribing the symbols somewhere to see if they had any effect. The group was sorely divided on the issue, though. Cathcart and Frost believed that further study was necessary before any "experiments" were conducted. For his part, Detwiler dismissed the book just as he did Santa Claus. He wasn't alone in this assessment. Dissension resulted in inaction among the teachers for weeks until Frost, urging a reluctant Cathcart and some of the others to make something of their find, organized the performances as described. It was spring break, and the university was largely deserted when the group met in the chemistry lab to run their "experiment." Appalled, Detwiler insisted on attending to be proven correct.

At first, nothing happened. Then, as the professors watched, the lights in the hallway turned on and off repeatedly. The bells in the clock tower chimed. The heat of the furnace came on full blast. And as the teachers rushed out of the building, they heard every telephone on campus ring, first discordantly, then in eerie unison.

They had indeed accomplished something.

Initiation

The professors separated that night, but none of them slept. Every one of them felt the same sense of malice that Cathcart had in that dark basement years before. Even Detwiler, still proclaiming logical explanations right up until the phones rang, knew that the group had made a mistake and that he was largely responsible.

Uncertain how to proceed, they decided the safest thing to do was to wait and see. Besides, who could they tell and what could they say? The professors returned to their lives and watched. For several months, all went on as normal, and it seemed as if it had all been a nightmare, a fear conjured up by mutual agitation. Then, after the end of the fall semester, a student named David Milford plunged to his death from the clock tower. He narrowly missed Robin Frost on the sidewalk. She pried a note from his dead hand before anyone else arrived on the scene. It was a rambling account of the student's experiences over the past few months. He had heard voices echoing from hallways, empty rooms and stairwells. He described feeling hunted, as though something lurked around every corner waiting to pounce. Most disturbing of all, the student, a freshman living in one of the dorms, hadn't left campus all semester. He had written that the university wouldn't let him leave.

But what Frost recognized and feared most, even when the student still held the note, was that the paper's mar-

gins were adorned with markings like the ones she and the others had studied — had drawn on the blackboards of the chemistry lab.

Frost kept the note, but the student had emailed copies to a few friends as well. Those emails did not include the drawings, which the professors counted as a small blessing. Within hours, the school and surrounding community was abuzz with stories about a paranoid-schizophrenic student who had committed suicide. On campus, the old urban legend about getting a 4.0 GPA if one's roommate killed himself surfaced. Worried, Cathcart inquired after the student's roommate and discovered that he had, in fact, earned straight A's that semester, but had never struck professors as a particularly good student. He was frequently tardy or absent, unimaginative in class discussion and rarely took notes. His final exams, however, had been flawless.

Cathcart expressed concern to his peers. They had let something loose that night, he believed. They didn't know enough about it to undo what they had done, but Cathcart felt, and the others agreed, that they had a responsibility to do something. Even Detwiler's determined cynicism faltered. Each went back to researching the problem, while Cathcart admonished them to watch the students and the university's populace. They had to undo what they had done, but had to protect potential victims, too.

Today, the professors have agreed that none of them can retire or leave the university's employment until they have solved the problem that they caused. As time passes, however, there's concern that they won't find a solution, and they wonder how much more of their lives they'll have to sacrifice.



New Society Members

Although other professors have earned tenure since the formation of the university's secret society, the group has not admitted any new members. It has discussed the possibility, but encountered significant obstacles. One is a question of eligibility and qualification — the group is rather elitist, even in the face of fear for what they seem to have done. Members consider themselves superior as well as senior to most university staff, so are paranoid about asking any newcomers to join.

Another problem is approaching a professor and convincing her of the truth behind the university, especially when the group isn't entirely sure what "the truth" is. At some point, however, they'll be forced to replenish their numbers. Members may pass away or break their word and move on, or just give up the investigation. A player's character or perhaps a supporting cast member connected to a character (maybe an Ally or

Mentor) might be invited to join the society on a provisional basis as a jumping-off point for events. Maybe the character stumbles onto the truth herself and is witnessed in the act by a group member. Or she stumbles across the professors themselves in the midst of their own strange or conventionally inexplicable behavior.

Investigation

The sorts of supernatural occurrences that dog the university are listed below, under "Preliminary Events." Characters investigating the university's eldritch nature for whatever reason might pursue the following avenues.

Asking Around (Students)

Asking questions at the Student Union, the library, a dorm or any other hangout probably yields good results. Students aren't at all opposed to talking about their weird experiences, and *everyone* seems to have had one (or knows someone who has). Of course, a large number of these experiences are complete fabrications, urban legends or the result of too much cheap beer and not enough sleep, but the characters have to decide what's what.

Systems: Which dice pools players use depends on the characters' tactics.

Tactic	Roll
Buying drinks at a bar	Presence + Socialize
Careful questions at a study group or library	Manipulation + Academics
Interviewing random students on campus	Manipulation + Investigation
Telling a weird story in an attempt to coax others to do the same	Manipulation + Expression

Results: Success with any of these tactics indicates that a character hears a weird story from a student. What exactly she hears depends on your needs. Bear in mind that not all stories floating around actually happened. Every campus plays host to urban legends, some of which are decades old (books and web sites archiving such stories can be available, should you want characters to have access to them). Failure on a roll means students immediately distrust the character, and further attempts to obtain information in the same manner suffer a -1 penalty. Exceptional success means that not only is the story genuine (that is, a real story about the strangeness of the university and not just an urban legend), but a student has also been interviewed by a member of the secret society and mentions the interview experience. Dramatic failure gets a character run out of a bar, library or study hall.

Rumors and Events

The following are rumors and brief stories that characters might hear from anyone as they investigate. The validity of these events is up to you.

- "I heard about a guy who died rushing one of the frats. It wasn't hazing. He walked through the front door of the house, took one look at the president, screamed bloody murder and fell over dead. Heart attack, man. Scared to death."

- "A friend of mine works at the campus restaurant. She said they found all the flour dumped on the floor one morning and these weird letters drawn in it. She went out to have a smoke, but when she came back, like, two minutes later, all the flour was gone and there were, like, people having breakfast."

- "Something's living in the walls of the honors dorm. I heard somebody's pet ferret got loose, but I don't know. It sounds bigger than that."

- "You know about the Housing Pattern of Death? I thought it was a joke, but every single person who lives in Peterson Hall, then the honors dorm and then lives off campus dies before she graduates."

- "If you throw a coin in the fountain at the center of campus, you dream about your future wife or husband. Thing is, you might dream about killing them, so it's not really worth it. That's what I hear."

Asking Around (Faculty and Staff)

Most faculty members are glad to make appointments to speak with people about the university. Such meetings probably need to have a work-related context to begin with, even if bogus, and then the conversation might be turned to more esoteric matters. Staff members have various opinions on strange occurrences. Some suspect the university is haunted, while others simply believe an inordinate number of urban legends make the rounds on campus. Characters who are students have an easy time talking to professors, but teachers aren't usually willing to discuss their own strange experiences with pupils. If characters are faculty or related staff, players receive a +1 bonus.

Staff members don't necessarily have any reason to lie, but are aware that recounting a truly strange event sounds like a tall tale or a drug-induced hallucination, so they tend to choose their words carefully. Promising anonymity and not writing down a staffer's name helps, as do claims that the information is for research for a book or

paper. Presenting the question in any kind of official capacity, whether for the university or for law enforcement, puts people on their guard and discourages them from being forthcoming (–3 to influence rolls).

Systems: Dice rolled depend on the methods the characters use, but Manipulation + Persuasion is probably appropriate in most cases.

Results: Simple success and failure are the same as listed above for students. An exceptional success means an interview subject knows about a professor who takes a keen interest in the subject (a member of the secret society, of course). Employees who work nights might also remember one or more professors walking the grounds after dark, as though searching for something.

The Internet

One can find anything, whether it's true or not, on the Internet. Researching strange events at the university this way leads to results almost immediately, but the ratio of usable information to utter garbage is such that characters might be better served talking to real people. Even so, a computer-savvy character might be able to find something useful online.

Systems: An extended Intelligence + Computer roll is required, with each roll representing two hours of work.

Results: The character finds a truckload of information about the university and strange events that have supposedly happened there, but the information is largely anonymous or, where names are listed, leads to dead ends. If the character perseveres (and the player accumulates 20+ successes), she finds archived discussions from old message boards about professors researching “modern occultism, cult worship and the impact on the psychiatric health of college students.” One of the names that surfaces is “Detwiler.”

Historical Research

Digging into the history of the university turns up whatever information you have decided about how it was founded, and any other significant events in the years leading up to Cathcart's discovery. In order to learn anything about the secret society, its research or its grand mistake, characters need access to campus security files, alumni or employees from over a decade ago, or to employees who have worked for the university at least that long.

Systems: Dice pools depend on the characters' methods. Obtaining campus security files requires gaining access to the records room (whether by stealth or guile), and searching archives for anything useful. The records are too old to have been converted to computer format. Actually reading through those records to find useful information requires an extended Intelligence + Academics or Investigation roll, with each roll taking one hour.

Results: Once a player accumulates 10 successes, his character discovers security reports from the night years ago when the professors performed their ill-conceived ritual. The reports don't mention names, but state that “a

group of people was spotted on campus, probably a frat or some local kids, possibly vandalizing University Hall.” The report does not mention the phenomenon of the phones or lights, but if the characters seek out the now-retired security guard who made the report (this can be as difficult or as simple as you want, depending on the intended pace of the story), he can tell them about that night. Students who attended the university that year might also remember the electronics disturbance.

Summary: Learning Through Dice

The research methods discussed, while they involve some roleplaying, are largely resolved with dice. That allows characters to unearth only enough truth to know that a mystery exists, however. Below is a summary of what the characters *can* and *cannot* learn about the mystery by mechanic-driven methods. Anything else depends on what you want to do with the university.

Characters *can* learn that:

- The university plays host to a greater-than-average number of ghost stories, paranormal occurrences and urban legends.
- Some professors take a keen interest in such phenomena and track down students who speak of their strange experiences.
- A professor named Detwiler at one time conducted research into modern occult practices at the university (exceptional success or extended roll required).
- Something odd happened on campus years ago, thought to be vandalism.

Characters *cannot* learn the following through dice. These facts have to be learned by direct experience and perhaps hard knocks.

- A secret society of faculty exists on campus.
- The university itself is aware of what happens on campus.
- Supernatural events are directly related to the “odd occurrence” on campus years ago. (The characters might well infer this, but there isn't an easy way to confirm it until they do hands-on exploration.)

Systems

The truth of what the professors unlocked is for you to decide (though possibilities are provided below; see “Stories”). Whatever the true nature of the presence on campus, it has certain effects on those within its reach.

Getting the University's Attention

The university knows what happens within the boundaries of its campus. It doesn't pay attention to everything at once, though. A college campus is a hotbed of activity at most times of the year. The everyday hustle and bustle doesn't arouse the entity's interest for the most part. If something out of the ordinary occurs, however, roll three dice subject to the following modifiers.

Condition	Modifier
Event involves 1-2 secret society members	+1
Event takes place in the campus library	+1
Campus is mostly empty (fall or winter break)	+2
Event involves half of the secret society	+2
Event involves the book Detwiler discovered	+2
Event involves any occult or mystical ritual	+2
A human being dies during the course of the event	+2
Event involves a supernatural being (vampire, werewolf, mage, ghost or something else)	+3
Event involves most of the secret society	+3
Event involves all of the secret society	+5
Event involves destroying or damaging university property or buildings	+5
Event takes place during the day	-1
Event takes place during the first week of a semester	-1
Event takes place during finals or midterm week	-2

If a success is rolled, one or more characters is noticed by the entity that is the school.

For purposes of this system, an "event" can be a single action or scene that is out of the ordinary, or it can be an ongoing trend. Fights don't break out often on campus, so the university is likely to notice one. Murders also have a strong chance of drawing attention. A group of people systematically tracking down and interviewing students who have taken classes taught by one of the secret society professors has a chance of attracting attention, too.

Note that the force behind the university sometimes notices people almost at random. Understanding its choice of targets requires understanding the nature of the presence itself, and the tenured faculty have been working on that for years.

The University's Scrutiny

Once the university has noticed a person or group, it pays attention to them for at least one semester. If during that time the subject continues to pique interest, the force continues paying attention. If not, the target falls from notice. Yet, any future rolls for the university to recognize that particular subject gain a +1 modifier.

Living under the university's scrutiny is not pleasant. A target has frequent dreams of suffocation and falling, and is paranoid and edgy (though not to the point of suffering a derangement or any actual impairment). In addition, the university can inflict the following effects upon anyone who gains its notice.

- **Dreams:** The university can impose a dream upon anyone under its scrutiny. Most people have no way to resist this effect, though a character with the Meditative Mind Merit or one who is practiced in the art of lucid dreaming for whatever reason might be able to do so. (The player rolls Resolve + Composure. If the roll is successful, the character receives the dream that the university imposes, but understands that the dream does not spring from her own mind.) Forced dreams don't have any intrinsic prophetic aspect, though the university sometimes arranges events to coincide with the dreams it sends. In other cases, it forces two people who have never met to dream of each other in highly charged situations (sex or violence) and then waits for them to recognize each other on campus.

- **Anguish:** The university is capable of causing anyone under its scrutiny physical or psychological pain. It never does so carelessly, reserving the power for self-defense or to prevent someone important from leaving campus. Roll 10 dice minus the subject's Morality dots (for a psychological attack) or minus the subject's Resolve + Stamina (for a physical one). The number of successes rolled (if any) is imposed as a dice-pool penalty to rolls made for the subject for the remainder of the scene, either due to incapacitating fear or crippling pain. In the former case, the victim hyperventilates and panics as he reaches the "border" between the university and the outside world, the symptoms mimicking an attack of agoraphobia. In the latter case, the victim feels a crushing weight on her chest, searing pain through her muscles or a headache so severe that she cannot even walk. This effect may be imposed no more than once a scene and only on one subject at a time.

The university cannot perceive people while they are not on campus, so cannot send dreams or use Anguish on them. Such people might still feel nervous or edgy, though.

The University's Influence

The university has a limited degree of control over the campus' physical environment. It can alter and manipulate anything that's part of or is controlled or maintained by college employees. For example, the university has no control over the weather on campus, but any of the buildings and anything they contain does fall under its influence. Likewise, the hedges surrounding a building sometimes lean outward to snag students' clothing. School employees trim those hedges, so the entity can manipulate them.

You're limited only by your imagination and the needs of your story when determining what the university can and cannot do. The force can arrange accidental deaths, cause bizarre ghost-like occurrences, alter the content of email sent or received through campus servers, lock doors and break windows. It can rearrange shadows and light to create ghostly images, but is incapable of creating realistic illusions. It can create sound, and can therefore mimic footsteps, snarls, heavy breathing or even gunshots. It *cannot*, however, manipulate people directly, except as noted above.

Supporting Cast

Obviously, the most important cast member here is the university itself. Discussing its motives would require defining what the presence truly is, and that's best left to you and the supernatural identity of your game (whether low-key, lurking horror or high-drama and power-laden). Instead, here's what the university does and what it seems to want.

The force wants as many people on campus as possible, so it doesn't do anything to lower enrollment drastically. It seems to need people to be aware, interested and emotional, and isn't particular about which emotions people experience. Anger and fear are easy to inspire, so barely a year goes by without some kind of strange event designed to frighten people and get them talking.

Under "Preliminary Events" and "Stories," below, are examples of what the university is capable of doing. Feel free to assign whatever motives you like to its behavior. Or simply present the facts and let the characters play detective and draw their own conclusions. The less you lead them, the more thinking they'll do for themselves.

The other major supporting characters are the professors of the secret society. At present, the group has 10 members, all faculty in various fields who have gained tenure. Michael Cathcart is the "leader" of the group, though Jerry Detwiler remains the most aggressive and ambitious about finding out what happened during the ritual and reversing it (or debunking it somehow). All other members follow the lead of one of these two. The group isn't big enough to truly have "factions," but any given argument usually boils down to "Cathcart's side" or "Detwiler's side."

All society members are considered to be under the university's scrutiny. It never lets them escape notice and seeks to keep them on campus by using its powers.

Michael Cathcart

Quote: "Do your research. Trust me, it's not wise to skimp."

Background: Michael Cathcart was, before the accident that set the tragic events in motion, a dedicated teacher and researcher. He took time to tutor struggling students, to aid in scholarship and assistantship allocation and wrote for various journals and periodicals. Indeed, he had considered leaving the university and going on the lecture circuit for a year, or spending some time working on a book. Since the ritual, however, he has been mired, stuck on campus with no hope of escape. He is now a contender for the university presidency, but campaigns half-heartedly. Even if he doesn't get the job, he'll stay on as a professor. He has to. He's sure the university won't let him go.

Description: Cathcart is a morose man in his early 60s. In his youth, he dressed comfortably, often wearing jeans and loose-fitting shirts to class. In recent years, he's taken to wearing a coat and tie, but never quite looks com-

fortable in them. He looks pained at all times, usually speaks in hushed tones (except when teaching) and glances around corners before turning them.

Storytelling Hints: All secret society members have their own theories about the university, except perhaps their leader. He once feared the worst, that some kind of spiritual force had been released or attracted, but now when he tries to put the data together, his chest seizes up and he hyperventilates. He doesn't know if this is simply his own anxiety stopping him from thinking about it any further or if the university interferes somehow. Regardless of the reason, in these moments of panic all he can think about is the sensation of unmistakable cruelty and menace that he felt, helpless at the bottom of those stairs, so many years ago.

Cathcart wants to see the presence driven from the university, but has no idea how that might be accomplished. Still, he knows more about the history of the institution and the local area than anyone else, so is a valuable resource for anyone investigating the place. He doesn't make himself available for questioning, though, and tends to discourage others from investigating the university. After all, if he and other well-educated professors have failed thus far, what chance do newcomers have?

Cathcart has never married and has no local family. He lives alone in a house on the edge of campus. He hasn't left the city in over 10 years and is afraid of what might happen if he tries.

Jerry Detwiler

Quote: "We've almost got this thing figured out. I'm sure of it."

Background: Jerry Detwiler is, and always has been, arrogant and self-assured. A professor of psychology, his research into schizophrenia and its treatment promised to herald a new era of psychiatric medicine. Or so he believed, until further research demonstrated that his methods were flawed and required much more testing, all of which Detwiler brushed off bitterly (and still does). He remains a dogged pragmatist and atheist, despite everything that has happened on campus. His theories revolve around natural phenomena or human-based causes for the so-called presence. He has even begun teaching an annual-course in paranormal studies with the unstated purpose of disproving and discrediting such bunk. He hopes that his efforts in the class will have a residual effect of diminishing any psychological phenomenon that actually pervades campus.

Description: Detwiler is in his late 40s. He is tall and lean, keeps his hair neatly groomed and wears crisp suits to class. He insists on decorum from students and has been known to kick pupils out for wearing hats or chewing gum. Although he handles the stress of being in the university's thrall better than some secret society members (especially Cathcart), Detwiler fidgets constantly.

Storytelling Hints: Detwiler is the most aggressive of the professors, and most of their initiatives originate with him. He would love to direct their activities entirely,

but Cathcart still vetoes him sometimes, and the others are too cowed by the university to try anything daring. It has not occurred to Detwiler that the university might be able to empower him directly. If it ever does, he would at least consider the offer.

Motives

An advantage of a university setting for a Storytelling game is that the university lends itself to a wide variety of character concepts. A disadvantage is that characters from disparate backgrounds within the university might never have reason to interact. Below are six reasons for characters to come together.

- **What happened to Claire?** The characters attend a funeral for a student named Claire Wightman. Before beginning the story, ask each player for one fact about Claire that his character knows. The only rule is that players' facts can't contradict each other. This way, the characters have a direct and personal connection to the deceased. How and why she died makes up the meat of the story, and might involve the secret society or simply hint at the nature of the university.

- **In Dreams:** As the characters see each other on campus (or around town), they recognize one other from dreams and nightmares. These dreams can have any context, though the university strives for situations that produce emotional responses (sex and violence are the most basic and often the most effective). The characters might ignore each other at first, but as the dreams grow more intense, they probably wonder why they constantly focus on these strangers.

- **Dormies:** If several of the characters are students, living in the same dorm (or even stipulating that they are roommates) is a simple way to bring them into close proximity. Then it's just a matter of having them witness or experience the supernatural effects of the university as a common bond.

- **Battle of the Bands:** Universities usually boast a number of rock bands. A campus "Battle of the Bands" event provides the university with a superb method of terrifying a number of people at one time. Characters in this situation might be members of one or more bands, policemen volunteering to work the event (or called to the scene after an incident), campus security, maintenance workers or bartenders or other staff.

- **Detwiler's Class:** Jerry Detwiler teaches an annual class called Paranormal Phenomena and Studies. The class covers Fortean events, cryptozoology, ESP, alien abductions and various other paranormal topics. This class is extremely popular and always fills up quickly. Characters might be students who discover that they were all placed in the class — even though not all of them actually registered for it. Who or what selected them? Not all characters must be students. A character could be a paranormal expert whom Detwiler brings in as a guest lecturer or an alumnus auditing the course. The university could notice all characters (indeed, all students) in Detwiler's class.

- **Sighting:** A "monster" is sighted on campus. Depending on your needs, this creature could be humanoid (sparking talk of Bigfoot, aliens or the Mothman), animal or spectral (rumors of a haunted dorm or building spread). Word attracts the press, amateur investigators (or possibly professional investigators, depending on what happened and to whom), curious locals and university personnel trying to calm things down. Characters could be among these folks or could be students trying to cope with living on campus with the "creature" (which may or may not actually exist).

Preliminary Events

The following are examples of events that might get the characters' attention once they're on campus. When introducing these incidents, don't forget the basic mood of the setting. The entity is always watching, and physical space on campus feels huge and empty, the weight of the grounds and their history bearing down on the characters. An event doesn't need to be overtly supernatural to inspire characters to investigate. A mundane occurrence described in the right way can betray enough of the truth to "hook" players.

- **Meeting of the Minds:** The characters are in the Psychology building when they hear ghoulish laughter, unearthly howls and shrieks of fright from one of the classrooms. The door turns black as if burning, but no heat or fire is evident. Green light flickers from underneath. In a few moments, these effects stop, the door opens and Detwiler, Cathcart and the rest of the secret society members exit. They claim to have no knowledge of the lights or sounds, and say that they were meeting on "inter-departmental matters."

- **Symbols:** The characters find strange markings in odd places — in the mud outside one of the dorms, etched into a frozen puddle in a parking lot or in the dust on their computer screens. Investigating these signs eventually leads them to a few of the society professors. Perhaps one is found making such symbols across campus, or the symbols are drawn in what's considered an effort to ward off the entity from affecting parts of the campus.

- **714:** Introduce this event after it's apparent that something strange is happening on campus. Occasionally, when characters talk to someone at the university, the person's eyes lose focus for a moment and he murmurs "seven-fourteen." The person has no recollection of saying it and has no idea to what the number refers. It might be a date, time or passcode or have some numerological importance. Alternatively, the number *increases* every time a character hears it, implying that something is working toward a total — or countdown. What is the university counting toward, and why does it feel the need to inform the characters. (Or are characters' encounters with the numbers some psychic effort to resist the entity's efforts?)

- **The Shooter:** A young student climbs to a high vantage point with a rifle (a clock tower if you want to be traditional, though any high structure works) and starts shooting. Depending on how high you want the death toll to be, the student might have never held a gun before or she might be the star of the university's ROTC sharpshooting class. As she fires, she cries out that the people she's shooting are lucky, because they're now free. What makes this scenario truly chilling is that fate seems to approve. When people try to flee, they find doors are locked, the ground becomes uneven or puddles freeze momentarily, causing targets to slip.

- **Haywire:** Every phone on campus rings. Computer monitors and televisions flicker or momentarily show strange images. Lights flash on and off, tiny dorm-room refrigerators freeze everything in them solid and every stereo on campus plays the same song at the same time. This might well be the event that pushes Cathcart into a nervous breakdown. If the characters are around to see the mayhem, they might get a clue on how to proceed with an investigation. But what precipitated this electronic mayhem? Did the secret society finally get too close to "wounding" the university, or did it experience a sudden surge in power? If so, from what?

- **Eliminating the Competition:** For several weeks, students report being harassed by local gang members (obviously this event works best if the school is urban). These young toughs mug students walking to class, vandalize the grounds and generally make trouble. It all comes to a head when they hold two female students at gunpoint and assault them sexually. The local community cries out for action, as does the entire student body, but before the gang members can be brought to justice they're found dead on campus. Their wounds are brutal. Their throats have been torn out, and they've been disemboweled. The police cover up the worst of the details as best they can, but privately conclude that no human could have done this. The terror doesn't end there. Anyone on campus who takes violent action against students or objects finds his tires slashed or hears snarling noises from the shadows. Something seems to be "protecting" the students, and terrifying them in the process.

Bulldozers and Flamethrowers

The first response of some players when faced with a location-based mystery is to "burn it down." Once the characters realize that strange phenomena are intrinsic to the school rather than to any people at it, this solution makes sense — if you ignore the difficulty and danger of burning down a university. In this case, individual buildings are difficult to destroy, because they're largely made of stone. A fire might make a building useless until it can be refurbished, but that takes only a few

months. Explosives might work better.

Overlooking any considerations of obtaining and using them without being arrested for homeland-security violations or blowing one's self up, a larger concern exists. The university doesn't *want* to be injured. Since the entity behind the place can notice when someone plots to harm it, and it has control over inanimate objects on campus, someone sneaking onto the grounds with an explosive device might find the device inert when the critical moment comes — or it might detonate prematurely.

There might be a way of cleansing the presence from the university, but simply destroying the buildings probably is not the answer. Even if it were achieved, it might do nothing more than free the presence, enabling it to spread to the entire city.

Stories

Here are six possible stories involving the university. Set up a situation and conflict between the characters and the university (and/or the secret society), and run the following stories with that premise in various directions.

A New Society

The university decides that the secret society of professors is detrimental to the entity's goals and wants to destroy them. The force does, however, want to keep people in the cabal's role. Despite its best efforts to remain secret, the society has inspired dozens of rumors and legends about the strange and mysterious goings-on on campus. The entity therefore intends to inspire a new group to assume the role, and chooses the characters.

In order to become the new shadowy group, the characters must dispose of the old one. The university could kill the professors quite easily, but prefers to manipulate the characters to do it. The presence undertakes this process slowly. First, it makes sure all chosen characters have reason to live or work on campus. It arranges jobs for them (creating openings through "accidents" and then arranging resumes so that the characters are the applicants who shine), admits students to whichever programs they wish and arranges housing concerns. It makes things as comfortable as possible for the chosen characters, so that they come to identify the university as a safe place.

Then it gradually frightens them. It doesn't bother with dreams or other phenomena that could be explained away as originating in the characters' own minds. It arranges near accidents and other mishaps designed to scare characters into believing that someone is out to get them. It adds supernatural elements, such as claw-like gouges on

doors or inexplicable power outages during crises. Then the dreams begin.

The characters dream of the existing secret society performing human sacrifices and drawing strange symbols with blood. Whenever characters see the society's members on campus, the university darkens the area a bit, removes a professor's shadow or reflection or makes him seem menacing in some way. Anecdotal evidence from the characters' near accidents seems to point to the professors, and if the characters investigate deep enough they find seemingly damning facts. The university hopes that the chosen characters will kill or drive off the standing group, after which these characters have a shared experience (possibly of murder) that binds them together. The university then reveals some of the professors' "rituals," encouraging characters to pick up where the older group left off, only now the secret society unwittingly works for the entity's benefit.

Embezzlement and the Walking Dead

This story requires a university with a pre-med program.

The janitorial staff goes on strike, and the head of Building Services fires them all. Barely a week goes by before the buildings are being cleaned regularly again. Because it doesn't cause a very big ripple in the day-to-day operations of the school, the strike and firings don't get much media attention. No one asks where the new employees came from, or why they don't seem to say much.

Meanwhile, the university's medical school has its own troubles. The school was supposed to receive a large shipment of cadavers for anatomy classes, but the corpses never arrived. A security guard remembers the truck coming on campus, but no one else seems to have seen it. The medical supplier swears that the bodies were delivered on time. This story makes headlines. It's not every day that 100 corpses vanish.

Actually, the bodies haven't left the university. They're now wearing uniforms and cleaning classrooms, emptying trashcans and doing whatever other work is required of the janitorial staff. The university animates and controls them, and prevents them from rotting or smelling bad. The head of Building Services, a greedy and amoral woman named Judy Lyden, made a deal with the university entity. She doesn't know that the being she dealt with is actually a presence spread across the entire campus. She thinks the force was a demon of some kind. (Lyden is not an occultist, but doesn't have enough frame of reference to think of the thing in any other way.) She agreed to fire the striking workers and allow the dead to do their work, and she fixed the paperwork so that the university has records of a new janitorial staff, all of whom are drawing paychecks (which, of course, go directly into Lyden's account). She never asked why the "demon" wanted zombies working at the university, which is just as well, since the presence wouldn't have been able to explain in terms she'd have understood.

The zombies are under the university's control, and it's content to let them go about their jobs for the time being. It has completely loyal and very strong hands all across campus. When the time comes, the university has a small army of the walking dead at its disposal.

The New Campus

The university opens a new campus on the other side of the city. (This story works best for schools situated in a metropolitan area.) Once construction commences, the main campus experiences an odd series of events. First, sporadic brownouts occur over the space of a week. Then, air conditioning and heating units malfunction. Electronics, including televisions and computers, follow suit. Any speaker system produces a high-pitched shriek, almost too high for human ears to perceive. All over campus, students complain of insomnia and bad dreams. And then, just as the first building of the new campus is completed, all of this activity ceases and the university returns to normal.

On the new campus, however, construction workers and foremen report odd events. Machines turn themselves on and off, seemingly at will. Construction proceeds at a remarkably fast pace for a few days, and then slows to a crawl. The secret society investigates and finds markings etched into the stone of the new buildings' walls, markings that they know all too well. The professors fight amongst themselves, accusing each other of drawing the signs, but none of them confesses. Investigating further, they find that the markings also appear daily on the ground, but are lost during the course of construction. The marks seem to appear spontaneously.

What's more, the professors feel the same sort of oppressive presence on the new campus as on the main one. Whatever they unleashed, it seems to be capable of spreading or spawning. The new campus isn't as subtle as the first, though. It doesn't seem to understand how fragile human bodies or minds are. As serious injuries become common at the new site, and construction workers go home more unbalanced every day, it becomes clear that something must be done to stabilize — or exorcise — this "infant" presence.

Detwiler's Deal

Dr. Detwiler, tired of trying to rid the university of the presence (and more than a little unhinged by the effort) decides to bargain with it. Taking all of his society's notes, he inscribes the markings again, this time slowly and methodically, making every detail perfect. Is it because he draws the letters correctly this time, or simply because he has the university's attention that the entity makes him an offer? Detwiler doesn't know. Regardless, he cuts a deal and receives a share of its power. He can now direct events on campus as he sees fit. Detwiler promptly sets about making the changes he most desires.

Michael Cathcart hangs himself in his office. A few weeks later, Detwiler is elected president of the university. He immediately sets about redistributing funds to the



departments that he feels are most worthy. Specifically, the Department of Psychology receives as much funding as he can get it, while athletics and arts programs are cut drastically. A few days later, the campus Interfaith Center burns to the ground. Detwiler refuses to allocate funds to rebuild it, stating that there are plenty of churches in town and that the university is not a seminary. This, of course, doesn't please the trustees — but after a three-hour closed meeting, the trustees emerge looking terrorized and cowed.

The extent of Detwiler's power is up to you, but probably includes a degree of the university's control over the physical environment of the campus. The result makes Detwiler nearly impossible to surprise. He deals with threats quickly and brutally, and thinks nothing of using the institution and its resources to better his own lot.

And yet, this turn of events might be a blessing in disguise. With so much of its power bound up in a mortal body, the university may make itself vulnerable. Killing Detwiler might destroy or cripple the force. Of course, doing so on campus is easier said than done, but he has to leave campus sometime.

The Cost of Success

A cult arises on campus, formed by one of the secret society members (unbeknownst to her fellows). Driven mad by nightmares and general paranoia, she comes to the conclusion that the university can be placated by a sacrifice. The entity doesn't really *want* a sacrifice, but approves of the professor's actions and feeds her fervor. Within a few months, the rogue professor assembles a cult of students willing to trade blood for grades.

The group meets once a month in a tree-shrouded valley behind one of the dorms, nicely shielded from prying eyes. Members take turns bleeding into a small stream. They are rewarded with good grades, refunds on their tuition and other favors that the university is capable of granting. (All records of grades and payments are housed on computers, so the presence can change them easily.) Characters might notice that some students look peaked or anemic, which might well lead them to the logical (but erroneous) conclusion that a vampire stalks the dorms.

Recently, cult members have realized that blood needn't come from a supplicant. That is, no matter whose blood one spills, wishes are still granted. Most cultists don't have the stomach to harm or kill for what they want, but a few do, and are strong-willed enough to bully the professor into changing the group's policy. Of course, harming others raises other issues — where to get victims, what to do with any bodies and how to dodge police investigations. The students believe that the same force that grants their wishes (and they have different theories on what it really is) protects them from retribution. They're right — at least for the moment. If the university ever feels that it can accomplish its ineffable goals by selling out the cult, it will.

For a truly horrific twist, combine this story with "Embezzlement and the Walking Dead," above. The undead

“staff” is then composed not only of medical cadavers, but of victims of the cult.

Snowbound

This story requires that the university be set in an area prone to blizzards, or at least where a blizzard wouldn't be entirely implausible.

The worst winter weather in decades strikes, right before mid-terms when most students are on campus. The snow makes roads impassable, but no one is very concerned since the plows usually have them clear within a day or two.

The university decides that this is an opportunity not to be missed. The presence can't control the weather, but it can certainly make the most of it. Plows cease working as soon as they enter campus grounds. Salt thrown on sidewalks doesn't melt snow and ice. It simply sits there, in-

ert. Snow shovels snap when used, or the snow seems punishingly heavy. Snow drifts pile up in front of dorm doors, trapping students inside. Electricity to refrigerators fails. The heat dies. Students — and anyone else trapped on campus — must find innovative ways to stay warm and fed.

The university can cut communication lines and, if necessary, prevent anyone from the outside world from reaching and saving the students (since it can shut down or destroy any vehicle that enters campus). But it prefers to engender paranoia and xenophobia to the point where students are afraid to reach out for help. It inspires dreams of cannibalism and human sacrifice, and encourages these behaviors in subtle ways. Those who talk of sacrifice always seem to look warm and comfortable, while those espousing rational courses of action feel the cold more keenly.





Swamp Indian Hollow

*Oh blessed
puppets, receive My
prayer, and teach Me
to make Myself in thy
image.*
— Thomas Ligotti,
“Mad Night of
Atonement”

Summary

There is a place in the farm country of Hampton County where being deceased doesn't work the way it does in the rest of the world. Life-like dolls made out of carefully prepared dead materials — bones, dried flesh and plant matter — have a limited sort of magical life in that place.

A crematory now stands on the spot, and the man who operates it has gone mad. Rather than burning bodies, he hoards them for use in making dolls. He lives there, with his aging mother, in a ghastly kingdom of shallow-bone puppets.

The Puppets

The puppets, also called “dolls,” are central to this setting. While they're ambulatory beings made from corpses, they are not animated dead. Puppets are more like vessels or conduits for a vague form of artificial life. Around the fen called Swamp Indian Hollow (named by the madman in his youth), this form of life can take up residence in armatures of bone held together with long strands of fibrous plant material.

What is also important to know is that the puppets are capable of hiding quite easily from human sight. They are very shy around people unless they outnumber the living considerably. Their forms can also be fit around the human body in some not-quite-comprehensible fashion to serve as veritable costumes.

History

The land that Clinton Weiss calls Swamp Indian Hollow has been there since the dawn of time, exuding an aura that makes the concept of life malleable within its confines. There, to have been made in the shape of life, from materials of living things, is enough to provoke animation and existence of a sort.

The taint of Swamp Indian Hollow is subtle. Its influence has passed through history without being marked. When natives came, perhaps they noticed the land's strange aura and used it for worship from time to time before the arrival of the white man, but probably not. There was no real reason for anyone to notice the tiny patch of land where things that were dead didn't always act that way. Swamp Indian Hollow certainly didn't advertise itself — its effects were innocuous, and it communicated its nature only after long contact.

And so, the small, dark place came down through history either unknown or known and then as quickly forgotten, just a stitch of malevolence in the fabric of the world. But when Clinton Weiss came along and discovered the power that lurked there, he batted onto it like a leech.

Weiss' family heritage at Swamp Indian Hollow began shortly after the white man arrived and drove out the Indians. Weiss' progenitors, subsisting first as farmers, were among the first settlers of what would become Hampton County. Then, as generations rolled by and dreams inspired by the swamp descended upon them, changes occurred. Weiss' grandparents mortgaged the farm in the early 20th century and bought one of the first (at that time) gas



crematories in the state. The family became operators of one of the county's two licensed facilities for cremating the dead.

The couple's children followed in the two family trades, farming a little less each year and burning bodies a little more. Year followed year, and consolidation and modernization brought the cremation business of several counties to the Weiss-family door.

They were nice enough, but they were touched by the land's peculiar nature. Great-grandfather was a compulsive whittler, decorating the house with scrimshaws. Great-grandmother was an Irish turnip farmer's daughter; she spent her life in constant devotion, putting iron on the windowsills in hopes that dreams sent by America's Fair People would abate. They couple had two children, Ash and Emma.

Emma moved to Chicago and never looked back. Ash stayed on the farm, married a woman named Ethyl whom he had met at church and kept a little bit of the ashes of everyone he burned. Ethyl (Clinton Weiss' grandmother) bore one daughter, Gladys (called Mother for most of this material). Ethyl also made elaborate macramé hangings of various martyrdoms, a devotion of which Great-grandmother approved.

Gladys was vivacious, but not beautiful. She collected lithograph prints of shrikes and other impaling birds. She married an honest and hard-working man named Herbert, with her father's implicit promise of an inheritance as a dowry as long as the Weiss name continued. Gladys and Herbert had three children, only one of whom lived.

Clinton had two younger sisters, but they both died during his childhood, one of cancer when he was 5 and one in a fall from a tree when he was 7. After the death of her second daughter, Mother became withdrawn. Herbert, who had never been the most communicative individual, was unable to reach her in her depression, and he soon forgot the habit of talking almost completely.

After his sisters died, Clinton Weiss was a very lonely boy. Far from any other children, with parents grown silent from pain, he was left to his own devices for amusement. Weiss found he enjoyed handicrafts, including carpentry and fabricating various sorts of decorative swags and arrangements. Like his predecessors, he was clearly affected by a lifetime of exposure to a funerary motif. And like the rest of his family, he was haunted by dreams of gnarled twine, vine, bone and wood. His crafts featured remains from animals he found lying on the property.

Clinton's mind turned wild without companionship, and, motivated by his dreams, he played feral games with bones, sticks and dead things. It was at this time that he made a terrifying discovery that changed his life. There, on the banks of Swamp Indian Hollow, he found that the threaded-together bones of a raccoon would, if left unattended, seem to go about their business.

The remains wouldn't move when he was there, but when he left, they would be gone upon his return. He would find footprints, gnawed things, all the signs that

the animal was living there, just out of sight. It was like it had came back from the dead in a subtle sort of way.

The discovery was incredible, amazing, beyond comprehension. Clinton wanted to study it. Swamp Indian Hollow's dreams had finally found their servant. What he needed was uninterrupted time with the phenomenon. He watched the calendar, dreamed of the games he would play, and waited.

In time, his parents grew old. Eventually it was time for young Clinton to take up the mantle of crematory operator. He had trained. He had taken the certifications. He was ready.

And that was the beginning of the best time of Clinton Weiss' life. Once he had access to a stream of bodies, he could do his secret work. He started small, using the remains of the indigent in case questions were raised about the mixture he substituted for human ash.

He repeated the experiments he had conducted as a youth, but now with human bones. His parents' increasing age and the furtive nature of his early endeavors allowed him to conceal his first creations. As with the dead raccoon of his childhood, vines intertwined with bones created a semblance of life. Weiss' creations would not come out of hiding while watched — they could not generally be seen at all — but when his attention was diverted, it seemed from all evidence as if the puppets of vine and bone went about a normal, sheltered existence.

Yet, it didn't seem very useful to create something that was invisible and animate only when there was nobody there to see it. Weiss had a hunch. He sensed it when he first experimented with reanimation. Puppets were naturally timid. If there were more of them, they'd be more active. Weiss had these and other ideas about the bone puppets he'd made in the woods. The notions had come to him in dreams, or had been written down for him by his own hand late at night or had been learned after breathing the thick summer air in Swamp Indian Hollow.

Taking a few of these dark revelations into account, Weiss refined his thinking and created the Professor, a pseudo-puppet designed to study the secret life of his creations. The Professor was the first fully mature doll Weiss created in that it was the first that could be *worn*. In it, he could watch his children.

Using the Professor was like wearing a diving suit in a strange world of unlife, allowing Weiss to learn about the secret existence of bone-and-vine beings. During his explorations and refinements of the Professor, Weiss discovered it was possible to wear any properly fitted puppet as a sort of second skin.

After Weiss saw the graceful stumblings of the almost-living, after he witnessed the inelegant drift of his progeny through the unobserving eyes of his suit, few bodies sent to the crematorium were actually burned. Weiss had found his avocation — he was to be a sculptor. No corpse could be thrown away, sent up the chimney to soil the air. There were too many beautiful almost-lives to create.

With the glowing pride of a child who has created a new painting, Weiss tentatively showed his bone-and-

bramble creations to his parents. He had to gather several of the dolls together to display them, but, eventually, numbers lent the timid entities enough confidence that they could bear the withering glare of the living, with the Professor there to help them.

Weiss feared the worst, that his parents would call him mad or a blasphemer. He didn't know how long they had seen the puppets in their own dreams, or how natural it seemed to them to watch the stumbling mannequins' gait.

Mother asked if they were good company. Father eventually remembered the words to inquire if they could be made to shovel snow. It seemed to Clinton's parents that their son's bony automatons were just too clever, too useful to accept.

Soon, with the help of the dolls, the house was immaculate and in perfect repair. Mother had her young daughters back, and if she knew they were not real, it didn't make them any less enjoyable as pets or companions. Father always had someone there to obsequiously hand him tools in the shop.

After his father died, Clinton waited for a time, and then asked the delicate question. Would his mother like a puppet to replace her lost husband? Assured of its capability in marital endeavors, she consented, and the replacement (named Clark) was soon delivered.

For the last three years, Clinton Weiss and his mother have been living in the family farmhouse. He dwells in an extension with several of his bony companions, always creating new ones from the dead.

His mother putters through the main rooms of the house, dressed in the puppet of a beautiful young woman, enraptured in the hazy, distant embrace of the stylized love she feels for her ersatz spouse. Her puppet "nieces," are ever at her heels, tending to the every faint desire of their matron's faltering will.

Geography of the Land

The following general areas comprise "the Land," a term used by Clinton, Mother and this chapter for the area where the power of Swamp Indian Hollow is sufficiently thick that puppets can be animated. Outside of the Land, dolls are merely lifeless congeries of bone and vine.

The Weiss farm itself is more like scrubland at this point. Clinton has the puppets turn over and tend a fair-sized garden every year, but no serious commercial farming takes place. Mother sells corn and melons at the local farmer's market in the summer, but it's strictly a spending-money business. Most of the fields have lain fallow long enough that small trees have sprung up here and there. The woodlots are likewise untended, and have grown into dark and impassible thickets since the Weisses, with their increasing affluence, moved over to heating oil in the 1970s.

The farm is quite extensive, second only to the old Magnus mansion in the county in terms of size (see **World**

of Darkness: Ghost Stories). The house cannot be seen directly from any side of the property. The nearest property line is along an access road, which is several hundred yards away, across the back field.

The Outland

Until recently, the power of Swamp Indian Hollow, the animated dead and the Weiss land have been synonymous. Now, however, areas that are not part of the farmstead have become inhabited by puppets. Weiss doesn't fully understand, but the influence of the swamp spreads. Weiss calls all the area that's not family territory, but where puppets now roam, the "Outland," and he forbids his creations to go there. They largely submit to his demands, though some cross over in mock bravery, lurking unseen in thickets and along roads in the countryside.

Weiss can use the Professor to see other puppets, but he can't drive around wearing the costume. The police might see him, and then there's the difficulty of getting the Professor's elaborate plumes into his truck. Weiss must patrol the woods at night on foot. He, therefore, can't hunt for rogue puppets very well, and a number of fugitives go unpunished.

The Outland consists of the outskirts of other large farms. The most interesting things in it are miles of fence line, a few collapsing barns and some drain culverts. There are no habitations other than the Weiss' on the Land and the Outland. Copses, barns and culverts each have at least one blank puppet with a fragmentary personality hiding within. Visitors to such areas may have the distinct sense that they share their space with someone just out of sight — because they do.

The Weiss House

The Weisses have a sprawling farmhouse at the center of their parcel of land. Mother inhabits most of the farmhouse as her personal dwelling, while Clinton lives in a three-room addition that was added in the late 1970s, and he works on his sculptures in the basement. The house is watered from a well upslope of Swamp Indian Hollow, and is heated by an oil furnace. There is an incinerator in the basement that's powered by the same natural-gas tank that powers the house's air conditioner and (ostensibly) the crematory.

Offices: This area has an office, a toilet and a back office where Clinton keeps urns and does paperwork. There's a desk in the front room where he presents urns to representatives of funeral homes or churches, and signs papers. Clinton is very meticulous, documenting everything just as if he were burning the bodies. Puppets are never, ever allowed to go into the office.

Clinton's Rooms: Clinton's personal area is surprisingly clear of debris. Both Mother and son have the puppets clean regularly. The result in this case appears to be a spotlessly maintained child's room with a television, cable hookup and a Sony Playstation. Clinton's rooms include his own shower, a living room and a bedroom. He eats out or eats food Mother prepares for him. The "front door" to



the basement is just a few feet from the door to Clinton's rooms. Any sounds of a struggle or fight in Clinton's rooms brings the sharp-eared Police Men running (see below), and Clinton need not expose himself to the weather unduly when going downstairs to work.

Clinton often shares his personal space with enough Beautiful Babies (see p. 50) that he doesn't have to wear the Professor to interact. He has a relatively chaste relationship with the female puppets, who are his silent companions. He dons the Mayor (see below) several evenings a week, however, and explores a rather more adventurous life with the Beautiful Babies and the Police Men. He separates such diversions neatly away from his regular life. The Professor can always be found in Clinton's bedroom, and the Mayor can usually be found sitting in his living room.

Mother's Rooms: Clinton used puppets to ease his parents' lives for years before his father died. Two bone-and-vine daughters kept his mother company and did her chores, as did several blank puppets delegated to such tasks. A year after his father died, Clinton offered to make his mother a puppet-husband to alleviate her loneliness. She agreed, and has since had a very fine relationship with it, at least as far as doll relationships go. They mostly watch television, make love, cuddle and otherwise bond mindlessly.

Unlike Clinton, Gladys is protective of her privacy. She keeps the door to her part of the house locked. Her rooms include a large kitchen, dining room, living room, an unused guestroom, a sewing room and a room for "Clark's hobbies." These hobbies are nonspecific, the room unfurnished. The puppet-husband simply goes there and stands silent and inactive, having "hobby time" whenever Mother feels like getting him out of the way.

Basement: The front room of the basement is the "Police Barracks." Normally, four Police Men lurk in the front room around a plain pine table, playing cards for no stakes. They stop anyone from entering the workshop.

The back room is Clinton's workshop and chamber of horrors. Mangled, desiccated corpses in every stage of mutilation and re-assembly hang from hooks, lie on carefully appointed worktables and stand on large metal armatures. Equipment includes liquid acrylic varnish, large sewing needles, spools of silk floss, metal piano wire and rawhide lace, a wide variety of hand and power wood-working tools and large bunches of dried creepers, vines and stripped saplings.

There is also a coffee maker, microwave, radio/CD player with a variety of light rock/smooth jazz titles (Clinton's favorite genre), as well as an incinerator. The air down here is cleaned ruthlessly through HEPA filters. All waste material is incinerated in a fully functional mini-crematory and then scattered along roadsides in various remote locations.

Crematorium

The full crematorium is a large building — about 10 by 50 yards — with a large, free-standing oven at the center. The oven is (or was) powered by liquid natural gas.

The same LNG powers the smaller crematory in the basement of the house and the house's air conditioner. Weiss changes suppliers frequently and pays for his gas in cash to conceal the fact that he's not using enough fuel.

The crematory is simple. Coffins go in, the furnace runs for several hours; and the remains are swept out. Or rather, that's how things would go if the crematorium was actually operational.

Weiss deliberately broke the device two years ago to give himself a modicum of legal cover (see below for more information). He also trusts in his friendly demeanor and the evasiveness of his creations to protect his secret.

The oven isn't visibly disused, but a pilot nipple appears to have cracked and the crematorium will in fact generate an explosion if used. If the machine is rigged crudely and runs for 30 minutes or more, it has a blast radius of 50 and a damage of 8, with characters inside the building taking 12 damage.

Storage Buildings

There are three barns around the main house. The smallest is a garden-implements shed. The next is a four-car garage. The largest is a storage barn presumably used for hay. It's kept securely locked. It, in fact, holds corpses. One of Weiss' major problems is an "inventory" backup. About 200 corpses "await incineration." In truth, they await Weiss breaking them up into parts from which to assemble dolls. They're wrapped in burlap, packed with salt and mothballs and laid out on open prefabricated shelving in this huge steel structure.

Wits + Investigation should be rolled for those who go near the biggest barn. On a success, a character smells the faint aroma of camphor and rot. This is a major worry of Clinton's, and he watches visitors for any sign of suspicion. If characters inquire, he tells them the building is exactly what it looks and smells like — a barn for storing the deceased if there's a backup or disaster. Under no circumstances does he permit people to enter. He berates them for their morbid curiosity — unless they are police serving warrants. At that point, Weiss' bone-and-vine "Neverland" probably vanishes in the rapid crack of automatic pistol fire.

Swamp Indian Hollow

A wooded valley forms a natural amphitheater and drainage problem known as Swamp Indian Hollow. The fen is provided courtesy of a local spring that flows into heavy topsoil over a layer of clay, draining out very slowly.

Weiss correctly identifies the place as the center of the power that animates the puppets. Of course, there were never any "Swamp Indians;" the bog is only a few hundred square yards around. It's just a name that he came up with as a child, of which he no longer remembers the origins. There are well-worn paths and game trails all through the swamp, a small amount of litter and a few discarded tools, tires and machines, which now lurk in the underbrush waiting to scare the bejesus out of jumpy intruders. There's standing water and mosquitoes in the summer, ice

in the winter. The woods around the Hollow are always thick with puppets, as they are drawn there like the rest of the farm's inhabitants.

Regular Operations

When a job is accepted by the Weiss crematorium, the memorial service is held at a church and the body is brought to the farm by hearse. In the normal course of business, the casket and its contents are left on the loading dock. After the job is supposedly completed, an urn full of "remains" is picked up from Weiss' office. Burns are done at night, Weiss claims, to discourage people from gawking at the smoke or reporting strange smells. If anyone asks, Weiss is quick to produce a newspaper story about how a woman attempted to sue his father in 1983, because she said that effluvium from the smokestacks sickened her as she drove down a nearby highway. The Weisses won the suit in a preliminary judgment (which is true and can be checked at the county courthouse). He says that bodies have been burned at night since then.

Weiss is strictly a disposal contractor, taking bodies and reducing them to ash in a certified furnace on a work-for-hire basis. He produces the ash within three to five days, which a funeral director or pastor returns to the family of the deceased during a billing or counseling session. For the last seven years, Weiss has used dry cement, wood ash and char instead of fine white ash from his furnace. He takes great care to keep the area around the crematorium clear of puppets, he always has urns filled promptly; and he's always happy and agreeable. So far, nobody has raised any questions about what they've really gotten back.

Weiss' day-to-day existence is a charade for his puppet-play. He has very little contact with his mother outside of occasional, empty formalities. He manages to keep himself outside of a puppet and smiling long enough to transact business — which usually ends before noon — and then he lives something resembling a mock childhood or possibly a very simplistic delusion, which goes long into the night. Various details of his behavior are provided throughout this chapter, but they consist mostly of conflict roleplaying — fighting soldiers, monsters or villains. That, and rather painful episodes of mock-socialization in which Weiss' own lack of social skills levels the playing field to the drab whisperings of his creations. Characters who somehow witness such a display may be subject to a mild derangement from the horror of the spectacle.

Weiss' paranoia and dementia are manageable only because he has become disconnected from the real world. He considers it a hostile place where he must often run dangerous or frightening errands, before retreating back to the felicity of his bone-doll home life.

Systems

This section concentrates primarily on puppets, but also includes traits for the Weisses. Keep in mind that dolls,

while formidable to mortals, are not especially powerful supernatural beings. If you want them to be dangerous to supernatural characters, they need to be upgraded to a more effective set of traits, and their vulnerability to mind control should be eliminated.

Puppets

The dolls that spring from Swamp Indian Hollow are tall, baroque creatures made of carved bone, wire, twisted nightshade and Queen Anne's lace, brambles and grape vine. They walk with stumbling yet smooth gaits, always lurching awkwardly forward on the edge of disaster, but never falling. In some ways, they resemble human remains mummified to the point of being skeletal, but heavily altered with twisted sinew and plant fiber articulating or decorating joints, horns and other protrusions, careful drapings of winding fabric, and latex or leather masks and body-coverings to prevent flaking or tissue loss.

Most puppets are "blank," merely created and animated using the magic of the swamp. They drift without purpose, blown by the wind and the sun and the tides of the earth's forces. Others are imprinted with roles, which assign purpose, drive and a certain amount of skill in matters relating to the role.

Weiss assigns dolls their chores. Each can have one role, which consists largely of some simple costuming. Police Men have a badge, billy club and police hat, for example. The process that makes the roles work is uncertain, involving meditation, minor alterations to a puppet and the addition of costuming. Some roles such as Police Man and Monster "take" very easily. Others, like the Mayor, have never been duplicated successfully.

Regardless of whether dolls are blank or have roles, they are all subject to the following rules:

Puppets Are Timid. Unless they outnumber the living by a factor of at least two to one, puppets do not move when the living are in line of sight. The dolls act only when they're alone or when there are significantly more dolls than living beings in the area. Even then, the dolls often hide, though they can be aggressive in large numbers if they are bound by their roles to confrontation or if an intruder is already terrified.

Timidity isn't a predilection but a reality of their condition. When puppets outnumber the living by two to one or more, but fewer than three to one, the puppets allow themselves to be seen, but can take no direct action. They can interact with things around the living, but cannot not actually attempt to affect the living themselves. The dolls' artificial reality cannot compare to the blunt truth of those who live.

When the puppets outnumber the living by three to one or more, puppets are emboldened and can act in ways that affect the living directly. Weiss knows this and tries to keep his creations spread out.

Puppets Are Invisible: If the number of puppets in a character's immediate environment does not at least exceed the number of living people present, and none of the

characters has access to supernatural perceptions, the beings are invisible. Or rather, they are so unobtrusive that people ignore them completely, even when they should be in plain sight.

When there are more puppets present in a location than there are living individuals, but fewer than three times as many, the puppets may be seen with a successful Wits + Investigation roll, but only if an observer actively attempts to search for things out of the ordinary.

If there are more than three times as many puppets as living beings, the puppets are visible normally.

Characters who have access to magical perceptions (such as a vampire's Auspex or perhaps the Unseen Sense Merit attuned to magic) might spot puppets in any number. An appropriate roll for the power or Wits + Investigation is rolled to spot the creatures instinctively or when the power is active.

Puppets are not ghosts or the walking dead; characters who are mediums do not react to them in any special way.

When a puppet is seen, it may not necessarily appear inhuman at first. At a distance, it seems like an old, disabled or injured person. Only upon closer viewing is the truth apparent.

Invisibility Example

A curious local newspaper reporter is alone in a room with a puppet. He cannot see or notice it, and it cannot act at all while he is there. If the reporter has Unseen Sense attuned to magic, a Wits + Investigation roll could be made for him to notice its subtle stirring.

If there were two puppets, they could act if they wished, but not directly against the reporter. Another Wits + Investigation roll could be made for him to spot them if he searched the room for clues or paid close attention for disturbances.

If there were three or more puppets, they would outnumber the reporter three to one. He could see them automatically, and they could act directly against him if they had reason to do so.

Puppets are Clannish. On some level, puppets are aware that they have problems asserting themselves individually, so they tend to gather together if they sense the need for bold action. Indeed, they can be downright pushy when they have strength in numbers. If confronted with already terrified intruders, or if characters are detected by Monsters or Police Men, puppets call for their fellows. This is a rattling tone, like shaking beads in a wooden cup, with occasional piercing whistles.

This distress call can be heard by anyone on the Land. Following the call, puppets surreptitiously arrive on the scene over the course of long minutes. They furtively build their numbers until they can interact directly.

Puppets Are What They're Dressed Up to Be. Puppets are naturally listless. They have no real life functions, so no real drive. A doll without a costume mopes from place to place, accomplishing nothing. With appropriate garb, a puppet gains a role and a purpose. Beings that are dressed for a role act as that function dictates. This includes certain low-level supernatural effects. Weiss has discovered a number of roles for his children (see below).

Puppets Can Be Worn. Puppets' materiel can be worn as a sort of uniform. Doing so effectively makes the wearer into a puppet of that role. This is a supernatural capability inherent to all of the entities, but the physical capacity of being worn must be integrated either into a doll's construction or through refitting. All of Weiss' creations can be worn, and he adopts all of their seemings at some point or another.

Individuals dressed in a puppet have its invisibility, but also suffer the same lack of volition when outnumbered by the living. They go where they're told and stay where they're put. Efforts to influence a wearer's mind or will gain a +4 bonus. When a character in a costume can be seen, attempts to notice she is a person wearing some kind of morbid suit require a successful Wits + Investigation roll. If it fails, the character looks strange, but the reason is unclear. Characters who dress in puppets may see and interact with other puppets, no matter how few of them there are.

Puppets cannot resist being seized and worn unless they outnumber the living by three or more to one. In that case, a successful grappling hold is required, and a puppet must be immobilized successfully for two turns thereafter. Weiss uses the Professor to see his creations, while players' characters probably need to use supernatural senses or Unseen Sense, or may be able to spot the creatures with the naked eye if they're quick-witted and can lure enough of the things together in one place.

Puppets can also give their consent to be worn, and customarily allow Weiss to don them. He doesn't know that there's a point at which they can deny his advances, though.

Puppets go on and come off quickly — it takes only a turn to put one on or remove one. No more than one can be worn at a time. When Weiss uses the Professor to hunt his children, they are sometimes able to slip away while he removes that puppet to put them on. Such escapes are now rare, however, since the Professor has been reduced to just a mask. The puppets pine for the day when the Professor was more cumbersome.

Puppets Can't Leave the Land. The range of the Land is limited, primarily by dramatic necessity. Until recently, the Land comprised the Weiss farm and swamp. Now, the range to which puppets can roam has been extended, and Clinton doesn't know why. Ultimately, there's a point at



which puppets can range no farther, and if they step or are carried beyond that point, they collapse into a tangle of bones, vines and wood. They may be re-animated when returned to the Land, or they need to be born again. You can decide based on the dramatic circumstances of your story. Maybe you don't want characters to be able to prove the vitality of a captured, dormant puppet to others simply by approaching Weiss' house. If for some reason you want Weiss to be a sinister menace, he can send his puppets abroad to catch the characters where they are or reside.

Puppets Are Obedient. Puppets generally obey the commands of the living, because puppets' will is just as ephemeral as their life. Even when they reject orders, their rebellion is timid, shallow and easily squashed. They obey Weiss, because he's a paternal figure to them. If someone else living came along and ordered them to do otherwise, the puppets would also obey her.

While puppets can't be controlled merely by the shouts of visitors, if newcomers spend some time in the presence of the creatures — long enough to interact socially in a meaningful fashion — some puppets cleave to the newcomers. Weiss knows this can happen, but doesn't know it can happen so quickly.

For every day that characters strive to control the will of the Land's bony populace, make contested Presence + Socialize rolls between Weiss and anyone else involved with the puppets. The winner rules the Land for the day. If multiple characters are involved in the effort, make a roll for each.

If a character has a supernatural power that facilitates social or mental dominance, his dots in that trait or power are added to the daily roll as automatic successes, without even paying any costs normally required to activate the effect. Puppets are *extremely* susceptible to such powers. So, if a vampire character has Dominate 3, an automatic three successes are added to each Presence + Socialize roll made for him.

And yet, mind-reading puppets is impossible; they think of nothing substantial. This immunity passes to anyone wearing a doll as a suit.

Puppet Statistics

Puppets are not especially dangerous foes. While they can overwhelm mundane folk while in large numbers, individually they are no more fierce than a mortal human. Indeed, they're less so since one puppet alone could not

bear to act against the living. Puppets rarely attack the living unless it's part of their role.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 1, Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Stealth 5

Merits: None

Willpower: n/a

Morality: n/a

Virtue: n/a

Vice: n/a

Initiative: 5

Defense: 2

Speed: 6 (half normal)

Health: 7

Puppets suffer no wound penalties. They are destroyed when their Health is reduced to zero, regardless of the kind of damage inflicted.

Roles for Puppets

The following are the various duties Weiss has devised for his creations, each of which confers a special benefit to a being. For mechanical purposes, these bonuses derive from the equivalent of a two-dot Physical Merit. Characters who wear one of these puppets also gain these bonuses.

Blank Puppet: Blank dolls have not yet had (or never will have) personalities applied to them. More than a hundred blank puppets lurk around the Land. Blanks have no personality, no drive and no particular desires. They wish only to rest where they are, but reluctantly go where they are told and sometimes wander from place to place. Clinton could make costumes for blank puppets, but doesn't want to manage so many relationships, and his internal fantasy landscape doesn't reach particularly far. Still, he loves making puppets. They listlessly haunt the woods, secretly lurk among the corpses in the storage barn; and hang from the trees in Swamp Indian Hollow.

Since the power of the bog has surged of late, some blanks have developed a rudimentary personality or role due to pose, experience or shape. These refugees seek to avoid a sanding and re-wiring of their joints, which would restore them to a complete blank again. To evade notice and "repair," these dolls drift out past the area that Weiss normally travels in his day-to-day business. **Bonus:** None.

The Professor: Weiss' most refined design, the Professor exists only to observe and capture other puppets. Weiss imagines that the Professor has come from a far-off land or other world. With work, Clinton has reduced the size of the Professor from a large body suit with a wig and rattling bone wings to a mere bone facemask adorned with ratty peacock plumes and a pair of Groucho Marx glasses. The mask also requires a large briar-wood pipe.

This costume has no volition at all when not worn, and is essentially a ritual trapping rather than a semi-animate being. Unlike the other dolls, the Professor is visible to mortals. It is unknown if other puppets could be simi-

larly refined, but Weiss has done little to experiment with the possibility. **Bonus:** +2 dice to all attempts to study or capture puppets. Can be seen even when alone.

The Mayor: The Mayor is the Land's authority figure. Weiss sometimes pretends to work for the Mayor. Other times, he's the Mayor's friend or partner-in-arms. He regularly dresses as the Mayor and narrates both sides of complicated interactions, say, when the Mayor assigns Clinton or the Professor to a mission. Weiss occasionally schemes against the Mayor, but usually only in terms of pointed words to other puppets. They're harsh statements, but nothing to truly spoil their endless friendship. **Bonus:** +1 die to all rolls involving Social traits.

Beautiful Baby: These dolls are bony beauties constructed with sufficient capability to at least suggest that they're meant to be attractive. There are a number of Beautiful Babies. Weiss refers to them all impartially as "Baby" and treats them all as if they were his spouses. Mother also has a custom Beautiful Baby that she wears at all times, which is now virtually indistinguishable from her. **Bonus:** Treat as the Striking Looks Merit (••). This is a supernatural effect, though the bone-and-vine puppets are clearly meant to be female and suggestive in a grotesque, tribal sort of way.

Clark: Clark, also called "Dad," is roughly the male equivalent of a Beautiful Baby, but with a rather more sturdy, fatherly demeanor (inasmuch as a puppet can have one). Clinton created the being for his mother after the death of his natural father, Herbert. **Bonus:** +1 to all rolls involving Strength.

The Nieces: Two child-sized puppets, these beings orbit Mother as her helpmates and confidants. They are indistinguishable from one another and accept such confusion without resentment. They are normally addressed as "darling" or "child." **Bonus:** +2 to all rolls involving Crafts.

Police Man: There are four policemen on the Land. They're Weiss' allies in battle, his faithful protectors, and are occasionally used to play out rather disturbing scenes in which the police come knocking while Clinton hides in his bedroom. Mother's whispers as she persuades the Police Men to depart is the sweetest sound in her son's small world. **Bonus:** +1 die to all rolls involving Stamina.

Monster: Monsters are "bad" puppets who have been disfigured with filed teeth, sharp sticks and bones for claws and coal or toy gems for eyes. Weiss, the Mayor and/or the Police Men often do battle with the Monsters, often to save one or several Beautiful Babies. Other times, Weiss runs naked through the woodlots at night with the Monsters, or walks with them on patrol around the borders of the Land.

The Monsters are as loyal to Weiss as are the Police Men. These freaks among freaks are the constant subjects of their creator's attention, always being repaired and exhorted to defend the Land. It's on such missions that Monsters are most likely to run into the living. Two patrolling Monsters might be careless in apprehending a rogue puppet and present quite a scene for hikers or highway travelers.

There are six Monsters in total. **Bonus:** Blows with hands inflict lethal damage, and Strength rolls gain a +1 bonus.

The Dreams of Making

Anyone who sleeps on or near the Land for more than a year dreams of how to construct puppets. Individuals who have the Unseen Sense Merit suffer these dreams immediately. It takes a year for the dreams to instruct a character fully, and she must have Crafts 3 or more to be able to execute them properly.

Any character who has the dreams and begins the work cannot carry it out beyond the Land. The results are inert. It might be possible, however, to create a puppet elsewhere and animate it once it is brought to the Land.

Clinton Weiss

Quote: "Mayor, I'm sure you understand the importance of this situation. It demands drastic action."

Background: You could say Clinton Weiss prepared from birth for the role he has fulfilled. His family legacy. His endless dreams of wand-like limbs of bone and white wood. The ease of getting the necessary materials to hand. Who knows? Sometimes he wonders if he's the culmination of generations of Swamp Indian Hollow's yearning for expression. Other times, he knows it.

Description: Weiss is a fit, middle-aged man. He's balding, with long gray hair in a fringe around the back of his head. He wears jeans, button-down shirts with flannels over top. He looks like any of a thousand other older-than-middle-aged men in the county who are too stubborn to leave, too unlucky to break cleanly.

He carries a wallet and wears an analog watch. He uses ATMs and computers, but not cell phones. Like many adults in his district, Weiss carries a gun. He has a Para-Ordnance P-14 in his rear waistband and a spare magazine on the side of his belt. These are normally concealed by his flannel overshirt.

Storytelling Hints: Weiss is a slave to the power he's discovered, and doesn't stray beyond the boundaries of the Land without need. He's well adjusted for a madman, so "need" includes regular trips to Wal-Mart and the post office and even occasional visits to distant relatives. He will never move or abandon his life on the Land, though, because it makes him special and he in turn gives it purpose.

Weiss is an average man of above-average intelligence who is enchanted with the allure of lordship over his home. He's been growing more paranoid recently, and with good

reason. He's perpetrated his fraud and created his puppets at a prodigious rate for years without attracting undue attention. He's not sure how long the Land can go without detection or destruction, and he lives in denial about it in the form of elaborate role-playing games staged with the puppets.

Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 2, Resolve 2, Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

Skills: Academics 2, Brawl 1, Computer 1, Crafts 3, Drive 1, Expression 3, Firearms 2, Investigation 1, Medicine 1, Stealth 1, Survival 1, Weaponry 1

Merits: Resources •••

Willpower: 5

Morality: 2

Virtue: Hope

Vice: Gluttony

Initiative: 5

Defense: 2

Speed: 9

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Range	Shots	Special	Dice Pool
Para-	3	30/60/120	13+1	-	7

Ordnance P-14

Armor: None

Health: 7

Derangements: Paranoia, Vocalization

Gladys Weiss, "Mother"

Quote: "Is that you, honey?"

Background: Gladys Weiss has lived on the farm all her life. Her husband, third son that he was, came to live with her and assumed the trade of her father. It was, in a sense, part of an unspoken dowry.

Gladys watched her father, mother and two of her children die, and always just beyond perception lurked dreams of smooth, white bones. When she first saw the bone puppets that her son created, she understood them implicitly.

With her new companions, she knew there would be no more pain, no more emptiness, just aimless mannequin dreams. She and her husband enthusiastically embraced their son's inhumane creations. When her husband died, she willingly accepted a skeletal replacement.

Description: Mother is a horsy-looking, older woman, generally dressed in a custom-made, very attractive Beautiful Baby over a pink housedress. Gladys looks like an aging woman, even in her supernatural wardrobe, but has a certain allure. She is trailed by two small female puppets ("the Nieces") and her puppet-husband, "Clark."

Storytelling Hints: Gladys is a hopeless addict of doll existence. Her will is frail, her Virtue and Vice is muted, and her day-to-day existence is a mere matter of habit. This bothers Clinton somewhat, but Mother tends to herself and seems to enjoy her malaise, so he leaves her alone.



Both she and Clinton suspect that if she is wearing a doll when she dies, she will continue living through that frame and will be unable to remove it. Whether this suspicion is true depends on your desires for any stories in this setting. Nobody has died while wearing a puppet, especially not someone who has been long-conditioned to its influence. Swamp Indian Hollow certainly seems to hold the promise of an existence without end, but is that true or just a seductive hope?

Gladys, despite the potential for perpetual existence and the companionship of her puppet spouse, is sanguine about leaving the Land. Her addiction to the Beautiful Baby has left her morose when outside the doll. She doesn't attempt to go back to the Land if removed, but simply lapses into a withdrawn, almost catatonic depression similar to her existence as a puppet.

Abilities:

Modified Puppet Powers: Outsiders would not normally be able to see Gladys, but the two Nieces with her allow her to meet people face to face.

By dint of long practice and familiarity with her home, Gladys can also act indirectly, even if she is outnumbered. She does so by calling to guests from other rooms. Conversations with her flit from room to room, with her presence always a tantalizing hint, her shoes clicking just ahead of characters.

Gladys is totally vulnerable to mind control while she is in her Beautiful Baby.

Attractive: Striking Looks Merit (••). Mother is a stolid, old female with a magically enhanced, yet disturbing appearance.

Motives

There are a number of ways in which characters can become involved in the life of Clinton Weiss and his malefic brood of bony servants.

Characters interacting with Weiss do so in the context that he conceals a terrible secret. He has hundreds of corpses in the shed behind his house, and a hundred mostly invisible, animated bone dolls lurking around his back 40. How characters stumble onto his goings-on is the question.

Individuals most likely to challenge Weiss hail from the area. Insular though he is, Clinton still gets out, and there are plenty of reasons for characters in the district to interact with him. Those from outside Hampton County have to be drawn to the place for some reason, but any locals can wonder what the queer old bird does out at his lonely farmhouse.

• **Curiosity:** Humans are naturally curious. Children and adults alike find the allure of prying into other people's doings irresistible. This is multiplied by transgression; if it's rewarding to sneak into someone's barn, it is twice as good to sneak into a crematory where the tri-county area's dead go up the chimney. Characters can easily stumble onto the truth while trying to get a glimpse of the furnace

or barn, or when peeking in windows to see if Weiss diddles his mom.

• **Power Lust:** Supernatural characters who happen upon the Land are likely to have a completely different reaction to it than mortals. The Land offers attractive prospects for a supernatural being seeking a source of power to adopt. Characters may learn about Swamp Indian Hollow through geomancy, divination or simply by happening upon it.

• **Personal Vendetta:** A character may have just found out that Weiss didn't give her grandmother a proper cremation. The character was given a box of soot and cement instead. Characters might be police checking into complaints about fraudulent funeral services. They might be private individuals determined to get to the bottom of things and confront Weiss. Or they might be private investigators hired to collect information for a civil suit.

• **Self-Defense:** The power of Swamp Indian Hollow is expanding. Characters who live nearby may be consumed by bizarre dreams, or may discover puppets lurking near their houses. Weiss may develop a fixation for one of the characters and attempt to engage her in some sort of demented "relationship," or collect her especially appealing bones for use in his work. Finally, he may run amok and order his puppets to attack someone, or the dolls may prove dangerous without Weiss' direction.

• **Invited in:** Finally, there's the great, borderless information network of the Internet. While this chapter doesn't detail it specifically, there's no reason why Weiss can't have an active online presence, constantly visiting with email friends or living as a forum personality or guild leader on a MMO of some sort. Characters might be online friends who decide to "drop in" while in the district, email correspondents or fellow "artists" drawn to Weiss' "How To Make Human Bone Sculpture" website.

Preliminary Events

Once the reason for characters arriving at the Land is established, the scene needs to be set for horror. The evil of the place conceals itself well, but Weiss' life is a pretty deviant affair. It's not too hard for characters to glimpse his wrongdoing.

• **Physical Evidence:** Characters who go to the premises for evidence don't have to snoop very long before they discover something creepy. Unless a character goes alone, a group probably escapes meeting any puppets. The three primary sources of evidence are the basement workshop, the giant shed full of bodies and the long-broken oven.

• **Observation:** Characters may examine evidence they have (maybe a dead relative's "ashes") and arrive at the scene already convinced of Weiss' guilt, though they know nothing of the depth of his culpability.

Characters may see large numbers of puppets together at some point. Even if they can't identify their nature,

they may be curious about who exactly is on the premises other than Weiss and his mother.

Characters who are supernatural beings or supernaturally aware may use occult means to detect the Land and arrive to reconnoiter it for later use. Likewise, characters with Unseen Sense may explore the source of magical power detected.

- **Unsettling Conversations:** A character may set out to interview Weiss or his mother. Perhaps the character is an officer, a reporter, a new neighbor stopping by to say hello or someone who comes in contact with the family as part of the mortuary business. Weiss proves unsettling, but his mother's room-to-room flight and the constant attendance of her silent "Nieces" (about which local word says nothing) may be enough to excite further interest.

- **Others Discover it:** Characters may find themselves involved in the Land after someone else gets close to the situation. They may be police officers called in after a deputy has been murdered or agents of an occult force following up on investigations of missing masters. Whatever the case, the characters come to the Land pre-equipped with evidence and (possibly quite mistaken) presuppositions about the nature of the power that lurks there.

Destroying the Land

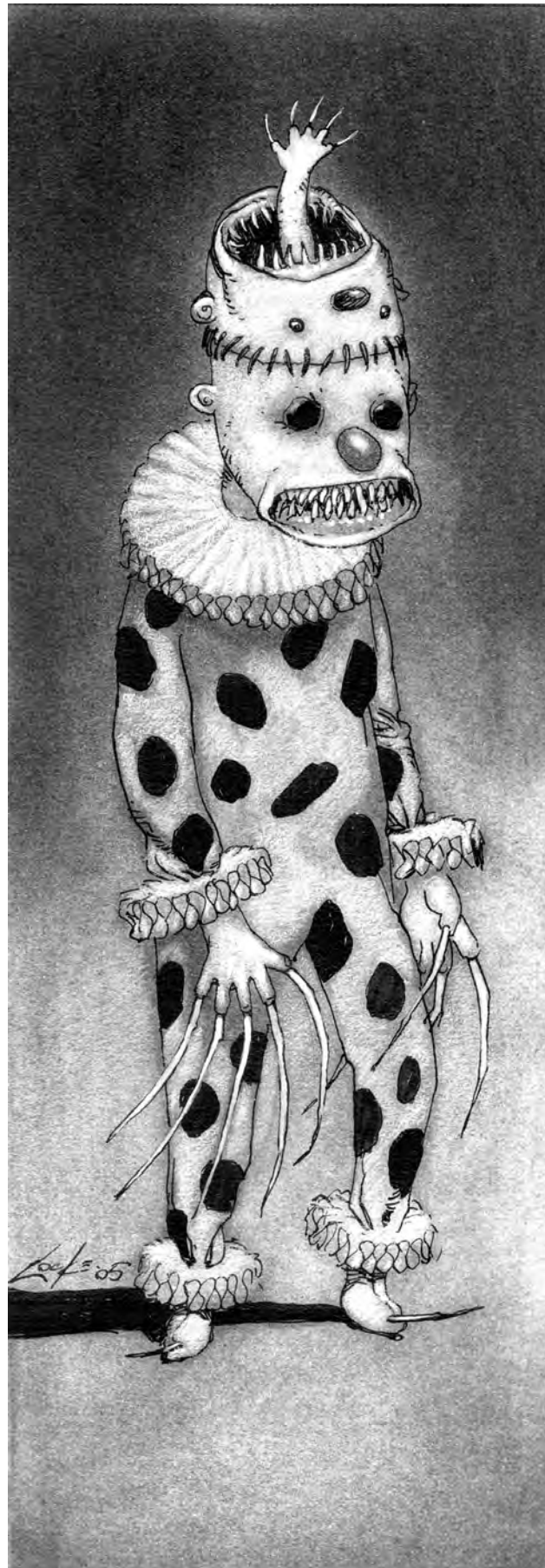
The dark power of this setting runs deeper than the spring and clay of Swamp Indian Hollow or the twisted mind of Clinton Weiss. It's the Land itself that has driven the family to its funerary madness. The Land taught Clinton how to make puppets. Bulldozers and gas cans don't stop the forces at work. The power seeks a way to manifest and birth false life under any circumstances, though it may take generations if the bog is excavated or the crematorium is destroyed. If characters deliberately cultivate some interest in or expression of the setting, it's likely to take root in them.

Stories

Discovery

This type of story pulls back the cloak of secrecy that hides Clinton Weiss' strange life. Characters are drawn to his property and find his creations, or perhaps encounter his creations in the Outland and are drawn to his property.

Weiss' reaction isn't pleasant. He's an unstable but intelligent man. There's no way that he'll go free if his





world is made public, and he knows it. If he's discovered and has an ounce of suspicion whatsoever in his highly paranoid mind that he's going to be turned over to the authorities, he'll kill whomever threatens him. Should matters ever get out of control, he even seeks to kill Mother and himself before being exposed or condemned.

Weiss is also enraged if influence over his puppets is ever usurped. He is exceptionally jealous of whomever they turn to, and plots murder to become "king" again.

Stories based on discovery tend to be short and tightly focussed. The characters develop suspicions, collect evidence and then there's a sharp confrontation with Weiss and/or the Police Men and Monsters. This approach lends itself to shock horror.

The Growing Might

The power of the Land has grown recently, probably due to Weiss' assiduous worship of Swamp Indian Hollow. As a result, the influence of the bog has extended (you get to decide just how far), and a few blank puppets have spontaneously developed their own personalities.

Perhaps the power of the Land expands rapidly, racing outward as the occult might of Swamp Indian Hollow truly awakens. Puppets become more willful, and though they do not rebel against Clinton's control, they range farther from the farm. Rebels become organized, evolving into self-assigned Monsters in the Outland. Clinton is too preoccupied by his puppet-play to notice it all, or cannot control the problem despite his best efforts.

With growing range comes growing will. The puppets are able to act more openly, and can interact with the living more easily. Conflict develops between dolls and the local living, but the constructs' newfound range allows them to operate without obviously being related to the Weiss land. If a puppet is examined forensically, its teeth or mummified fingerprints could be linked back to a corpse "burned" at the crematorium.

Servants of Their Own Power

The characters are members of a supernatural faction set to claim the power of Swamp Indian Hollow as their own. Specifics will vary from group to group and character type to character type. Cabals might be self-motivated, having discovered the Land and chosen to exploit it, or characters may be sent by their superiors to preserve the place.

The challenges here are rather different than those in a game about unraveling the sinister secret of the setting. The characters may well come equipped with an understanding of the phenomena that occur. They need to deal with two things. One is gaining clear legal and business control of the

crematory without attracting undue attention. Hampton County is small. Characters who suddenly appear as "relatives" of the recently and mysteriously deceased Weiss family (or with some other unprecedented connection) can expect attention. Characters probably need to ingratiate themselves with the Weisses or with the community if they hope to integrate themselves.

Some beings can probably make themselves Weiss' masters, but beings with less influence over the human mind may have to pose as the greatest fear that he can imagine, or replace him somehow.

The other problem is the body stockpile. There are perhaps 200 corpses at the crematorium. In addition, the puppets' growing independence and overpopulation may force characters to diminish their numbers, which means even more remains. Bodies demand a lot of natural gas to burn, the purchase of which takes effort to conceal. Until the backlog of corpses is taken care of, characters operate under constant threat of exposure.

Beyond those immediate challenges, characters face the long-term challenge of unraveling the mystery of the Land and its denizens. What is their true source, and to what new heights can automatons be raised?

Variations

- **Inheritance:** Clinton and Gladys Weiss die in a terrible car accident while on their way to a putt-putt golf outing. One or more characters are mortal relatives who realize the magnitude of their inheritance. If they don't cover up the hundreds of unburned corpses, their inheritance will be lost and they'll undoubtedly be dragged down or slandered in the investigation that will follow. And what do characters do when the puppets begin to look to them for identity and guidance?

- **Brave Little Puppets:** The characters themselves are puppets who have somehow been swept away or hauled off the Land. The mummified, wooden heroes must make their way back to their macabre and demented home from their new location in a New York art gallery or a Christmas tree lot in a San Diego barrio. Obviously, the fact that puppets who go off the Land fall inanimate has to be suspended for this story.

- **Rise of the Puppets:** The puppets gain a collective will of their own. A charismatic puppet, possibly the Mayor or a new personality whom Clinton creates, rises to leadership among the marionettes. Weiss, as creator, is intimidated into a slavish existence of fixing and maintaining the beings. Characters get involved when Weiss finally snaps and encounters them on a psychotic bender, or when the self-motivated puppets kick down the characters' door and try to carry them off to serve as more slaves.



Puppets Are What
They're Dressed
Up to Be.





The Village Secret

Summary

Somewhere near the edge of the world there is a network of caverns that still resounds with the primordial frequency of the world's birth screams. From a small cave mouth in the depths of a jagged stone pit, rich, warm winds blow from the *omphalos*, the world core where the pulse of vitality first throbbed, and where it pulses still. Hot springs boil and steam, and mud pools wallop in the cavern's deep, crystalline galleries. The pure essence of life itself wafts along these breezes, and those who seek healing need only make their way to the caverns and drink from the springs or dab their wounds with the sacred mud. Those lucky or enlightened enough to find their way to the caverns — and past the village that stands guard — discover that their wounds, cancer and old age fade amidst overwhelming vitality.

Rumors of these caverns occasionally make the rounds among treasure hunters, lore masters and mystics. They're in Peru, claim hushed voices. They're in Wyoming, Sri Lanka, Mozambique, northwest Australia, Afghanistan, Tibet, Iceland, Antarctica.... Rumors, of course, are notoriously unreliable.

The number of rare, privileged individuals who have even heard tell of the caverns is small. The number who think they might actually know the sacred site's whereabouts is smaller still. Those who really do know the location are a fraction of that. And of that group, all but a handful reside in the village adjacent to the caverns, keeping vigil over the natural wonder that destiny has made theirs.

The village comprises those who have grown up locally, thinking nothing of the near immortality the caverns provide, and those whom fate has led here. To these people, death comes to animals and the people who choose it at the end of a long string of healthy years.

The villagers aren't stupid. They know they've been blessed with a natural gift, and they've been raised on tales of vicious, lying thieves who come from time to time in hopes of taking the secret. These cunning interlopers, legends say, want nothing more than to lead the filthy world to the sacred caverns and pristine springs, despoiling them. The locals therefore stand vigilant, waiting to mislead or even kill those who come snooping where they don't belong. Forewarned is forearmed, and there's very little the villagers won't do to protect their charge.

Theme and Mood

The theme of this setting could be thought of as "lost hope." When the characters hear about the miraculous powers of the caverns, they may be wildly optimistic about their chances of finding a place where such healing is possible. But that hope is dashed when characters reach the village. The paranoid village. The village of narrowed eyes, hidden meanings and deadly games.

The caverns themselves, should the characters ever get to them, are almost an afterthought, a denouement to the real meat of the setting: the village itself. In a place as grim as the World of Darkness, every last bit of joy must be guarded fiercely, lest it be overrun by swarms of the miserable and joyless who would claim it as their own. The caverns are no different. Their protectors may not be creatures of legend, but they're no less fearsome or dangerous for it.

"There was the brilliant world of hunting, tactics, fierce exhilaration, skill, and there was the world of longing and baffled common-sense."

— William Golding,
Lord of the Flies



The villagers don't want visitors, they don't like visitors and they get rid of the few who stumble in by playing stupid and sending travelers on down the road. The mood of the place is pure paranoia. Locals feign total ignorance and have done so effectively for centuries. If this setting is located in a non-English speaking country, locals pretend to not understand English (or any other languages the characters may speak). They may give characters false directions that take them through hostile territory or dangerous terrain. And if characters get too close to the truth, the villagers may go to extremes, attempting to kill through subtle means. It wouldn't be the first time.

A Note on Language

In the village's default, remote setting, the language spoken is not that of the surrounding country. It's a hybrid of all languages spoken by seekers who have come looking for the caverns and wound up staying. It borrows from English, Spanish, Japanese and Dutch, with hints of several other tongues, but it isn't a pure form of any of them. Those who have spent a few years in the village understand each other perfectly, and can make themselves completely unintelligible to visitors, even in their very presence. Between language and physical gestures, visitors can get the gist of what villagers say, but nuances or specific terminology are probably lost in translation.

An English speaker, for example, understands every other word or so, and probably more once she studies the villagers' thick accent. It's not an overly complex language. A character could pick it up after a couple of months (provided her player spends the requisite experience points for one dot of the Language Merit).

Residents happily make the most of their language barrier if it helps them get rid of intruders. And yet, if locals *really* need to be understood, it's amazing how their vocabulary grows in proportion to necessity. Languages from the "old world" are remembered. Old phrases seem to come to mind. And there's a nigh-infinite number of ways to say "Go away."

Inspiration

The community wants characters to leave, one way or another, without finding the caverns *and* without getting suspicious. The easiest means of accomplishing that is through plain old hostility. If characters don't take the hint and find some way of staying, locals seem like part of a greater intelligence at work to drive the intruders off, whether through accidents, close calls, threats or direct harm. When portraying the village, bear in mind classic tales of paranoia from literature and cinema, particularly those in which outsiders are watched, manipulated, lied to and possibly killed by a hostile and determined society. One of the best examples is H.P. Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." Cinematic examples include *The Wicker Man*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Dagon*, *Deliverance*, *Race with the Devil* and the 1981 film *Southern Comfort*.

Other good examples of the "paranoia tale," though not as directly applicable as the those mentioned above, include Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Thing* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*.

And remember that just because the villagers are hostile doesn't mean they act that way all the time. They may believe the old adage about holding one's friends close and enemies closer. That conveniently makes for a truly disturbing game experience.

Should the characters make it abundantly clear that they're not going away, the villagers might grudgingly offer some basic hospitality, like providing them with a place to stay. As it turns out, that means lodging with a large family that asks for help in exchange. This requirement is intended to keep characters too busy to go snooping around, and the family happily puts guests to work mucking out stalls, digging wells and hoeing vegetable patches.

At night, characters are locked in and watched over. Snares and traps might be set throughout the village. Any free time that intruders have is chaperoned. The locals insist on providing a guide to show characters around. It might be a pretty girl whom characters don't mind having along, or a wily old man who clings to them and just can't be shaken.

Location. Location. Location

This chapter is written on the assumption that the village and caverns are set *far* from civilization, but you're free to set them anywhere you like. The default location is incredibly remote and most likely found in rugged terrain. It's miles from the nearest town and hundreds of miles from the nearest significant population center. It may be on a remote island. Cell phones don't get a signal, and even radios fail due to "magnetic interference" or similar phenomena. This remoteness inspires a sense of anxiety or helplessness that cultivates horror. It also makes sense given the subject matter. Were the caverns' existence common knowledge, were a rut to form on a road that led to the vital place, were a modern city to arise around the caverns, they would lose their essence and become mundane or a nuisance more than a blessing.

At least that's the fear of those who consider themselves the caverns' guardians.

Perhaps the hardest part of finding the caverns is learning that they exist at all. Given how long they've been around and how few people have ever learned of them, the caves are one of the world's best-kept secrets. The few people who have found them and returned to civilization have been very discreet. Some have been forced to swear a binding oath of discretion, while others don't want to reveal the location for fear of losing a good thing. And yet, there are occasional legendary accounts of the caverns or phenomena like them in old books or even among the prophecies of lost civilizations. Or characters who are healers (or in need of healing) or who are psychically "gifted" could learn of the site through vague dreams or visions.

All that said, the village can still be slipped into the civilized world in several ways.

- It could be a small town in rural America — say, in Wyoming, Alabama or Alaska — where the people have lost touch with modern culture. Television is still considered a newfangled invention, and computers haven't made it there yet. It's a dry, lonely region, and one that doesn't take kindly to strangers. Locals have truly been blessed with the nearby caverns, and they won't ruin that for anything. It's likely that the caves were ripped from the possession of a Native American tribe, and any number of ugly repercussions could hang on that fact.

- The "village" could be a ghetto in the middle of a city. In this case, the caverns could be (or open into) a disused sub-basement. But characters are likely to get shot execution-style long before they ever get into the building through which the caverns are accessed. The caverns' main use might be to revive those injured in gang violence, making what appears to be deadly urban life no more dangerous than kids playing cops and robbers. Characters may get nervous when the guy they saw take six bullets the night before is up, healthy the next day — and taking aim at them.

- Foster, Slade and Beauchamp, LLC, is a small corporation that brings in a lot of money. Its immaculately landscaped corporate headquarters is located just outside of Tremont, the fictional suburb of your city. The caverns are located beneath the buildings of the "secure sector," where only authorized employees may go. The "village" is a small corporation that has already taken possession of the caverns and aims to make sure that no one else gets them. The plan may be to replicate the caverns' effects, or to figure out how to "neutralize the threat to the nation's pharmaceutical manufacturers."

The Isolated Village

The guardians' remote home is very small. It's situated within a mile of the caverns and has fewer than a thousand inhabitants. If travelers arrive asking for the caverns or anything resembling them, the villagers shrug, feign ignorance and "helpfully" gesture down the road. If travelers arrive and linger, sniffing around for something, the locals are hostile and make every effort to send the strangers away. The longer characters stay, the more residents escalate their efforts.

The place has little to offer beyond convenient access to the caverns. Its buildings are simple, hand-built structures drawing on the building principles of many cultures. It has no electricity and no running water. Food is whatever the villagers can catch or grow in the inhospitable climate. Chickens and goats provide the populace with meat and milk, and folks augment their diet with fields of a grain of some sort and maybe melons, potatoes or roots, depending on where in the world you put the place.

Travelers from civilized regions do not find village life to their liking. That's fine; villagers don't find soft, pampered civilized folk to their liking.

By the time they arrive, travelers usually perceive the terrain as a hostile force to be overcome. Locals, on the other hand, know the terrain intimately and think of it as their ally in their mission to protect the caverns. Out there, without cable, electricity or computers, villagers pass the time by farming and reveling in nature. They know where the fishing holes are, where game animals congregate and where to sit to watch the roads without being seen.

Characters interact with villagers at a disadvantage. The denizens know intruders are coming and have plenty of time to make any necessary preparations. Later on, characters may be surprised (or downright irritated) to find that villagers seem to know where they are at all times or know where characters are headed next.

Residents

The village comprises people from all races and walks of life. No single ethnicity or look dominates. In fact, the only thing locals seem to share is youth and vibrant health. They're hundreds of miles from the nearest hospital, but there's not a single sick or injured one among them. Their vitality is unmistakable. Strangers may wonder if the elderly, sickly or wounded are hidden away or killed.

The following are some cast members painted in broad strokes whom characters are likely to encounter. You can customize them to fit your particular take on the village.

Jonathan, the Young Buck

He's got a chip on his shoulder, a violent temper and a cunning mind. He's a good brawler (six dice in his pool), and he's the one village elders send to do dirty work when they don't want to get their hands bloody. In an urban setting, this is a young gangbanger, while in a more corporate milieu he's a young but exceedingly ambitious project manager eager to make a name for himself.

Molly, the Seductress

She's young and pretty, and her smile is luminous. She doesn't entirely comprehend what the elders ask of her, but she knows the old stories, and does anything to help keep the caverns a secret. Village elders use her if they need to sow dissent in a group of young men. If they need to weaken a group's numbers, she's always good at peeling away one or two of the stronger ones. All she really needs to do to be effective is smile. In an urban setting, she could be a neighborhood whore-with-a-heart-of-gold, while in a corporate setting she could be a winsome young secretary or a new hire.

Jack, the Old Bastard

He doesn't particularly care about protecting the secrecy of the caverns, he just hates outsiders. He's very mindful of the lives of villagers, but strangers are like cattle to him, not fully human or worthy. He looks forward to making intruders suffer, and anyone who possesses an item that he wants — be it a shiny watch, a nice coat or a pair of good shoes — is marked for an accident. In an urban milieu, the Old Bastard is a vicious ex-con, the guy with a

rap sheet 15 pages long who kills for the fun of it. If he's corporate, he's the old vice president whose promotions just seemed to stop some time ago (most likely for ethical problems). There's nothing he wouldn't give to claw his way up the last few rungs of the ladder. If he can do that by keeping the caverns' location a secret, so be it.

Estrella, the Matriarch

She's lived in the village since 1588, kept healthy and relatively young by constant exposure to the power of the caverns. She doesn't like the things her people have to do to protect the caverns, but she's seen too much to think that people can be aware of such a blessing and not tell others or try to capitalize on it. In an inner-city setup, she's the old lady who runs the show. She might be a madam, a neighborhood leader, a corrupt cop or a higher-up in the city administration. Even though she may feel for the characters, she can't stop them from digging their own graves if they're intent on learning too much. In the corporate setting, the Matriarch is the CEO. She's torn between the wonder of the resource at her disposal and the horror of what she does to defend it. Just because she's horrified doesn't mean she shows mercy, though.

One Village, One Mind

You can turn up the creepy factor of your setting by deciding that long-term exposure to the strange mists and environment of the caverns grants locals a low-level group telepathy. The result is a disturbing "hive mind" that everyone shares.

What one villager sees, all see. What one villager thinks passes through the minds of all villagers. This makes it very difficult for characters to go anywhere without everyone knowing where they are and what they're doing. It also makes it impossible to play the villagers against one another. Under these circumstances, intruders face a legion, rather than a few unsophisticated yokels.

To make the most of this option, downplay the effects of the shared mind at first, but slowly let characters figure out that something disturbing is at work. They might notice that something they said to one villager is quoted verbatim back to them by another. At first, the downtime is a day. Later, it's hours and before long it's minutes.

If and when the characters get to the caverns, they may find that they too hear others' thoughts — and the others hear theirs.

Atj's Fäir...

Defending the caverns from outside discovery is the village's *raison d'être*. Driving strangers away is the preferred method of dealing with them, but if outsiders *should* find the caverns, locals quickly change tactics and try to keep characters around and adopt them — or kill them off before they can tell anyone what they've discovered.

The following are a few of the tactics villagers use to safeguard their secret:

- Sabotage characters' equipment, especially radios, tents, compasses, maps and boots. Vehicles are another likely target, but villagers try to determine just how much characters will be missed before stranding them. The last thing the villagers need is an army of rescuers showing up.
- Cut all of the characters' climbing ropes, especially if the newcomers are already down in the caverns and need the ropes to climb back up.
- Pretend to guide characters to the caverns, while actually taking them on a dangerous path in hopes that they have accidents — or arranging for them to have accidents.
- Plant poisonous snakes or insects in tents.
- Feed characters poisoned food.
- Take a hostage who will be released only when characters agree to leave.

The Eternal Cycle

The village population increases very slowly, if it grows at all. While young inhabitants marry and have children, the majority of residents are over 50. Thanks to the rejuvenating powers of the springs down in the caverns, there are many grandparents, great-grandparents and even great-great-grandparents still keeping the settlement running. Without a high birth rate, the best way to maintain population is to absorb those who come looking for the caverns. It's not a challenge. Despite the location, people want to be there, and those who find the village often stay — sometimes voluntarily, to take advantage of the place's healing properties. Other times they're forced to stay against their will and come to terms with their fate only slowly. Strangers arrive in the village, usually after a lengthy journey. If they persist long enough to see past the residents' deceptions, they may find their way to the caverns. And they may find themselves forcibly adopted. Individuals find their vehicles sabotaged and their radios and wallets missing. Locals have even imprisoned travelers in homes or the caverns themselves until they acquiesced. In time, they have been absorbed into a household and the community.

At such a point, a traveler is a local. He sweats and laughs alongside his neighbors and takes up the village's burden of guarding the caverns and the gift they promise.

Indeed, some claim that the warm winds blowing from the caverns have a dulling effect on memory, making it hard to hold onto thoughts of a former life in the world of cell phones and concrete. That may well be, but it's just

as likely that the convenience of being cured of any ill with a simple trip down into the depths has an appeal that modern life can't match.

Whether it's base human nature or a subtle supernatural compulsion, travelers who settle down often wind up as the most zealous guardians of the caverns, willing to do anything to preserve the secret. This cycle has turned since the second traveler to ever come to the place stumbled upon the shack erected by the first (who is remembered in lore as a great, wise woman). It is considered the proper way of things. The inversion of the natural order is for villagers to leave for civilization.

Motives

There are various reasons why an individual or a group might seek out the caverns and come upon the village that is guarding them. Depending on your particular chronicle, these seeds could lead to an action-adventure story, one of intrigue and paranoia or a tale of politics and diplomacy. The characters may be lied to and intimidated one moment, and forced into difficult ethical decisions the next (say, whether or not to expose the location of the caverns to the world). They likely develop a love/hate relationship with the villagers.

Survivor

Finding the caverns could easily be a consuming passion for a person diagnosed with a terminal disease. In the absence of any other hope, the character sets off to pursue the one option available to her, regardless of the cost or impracticality. A desperate woman need only hear a rumor, or even the echo of a rumor. If nothing else offers promise, she'll look for hope where she can find it, however quixotic the quest may seem. Friends or family could easily be pulled into the search, especially if the terminally ill character's ability to make such a journey is compromised by sickness or age.

Missing Persons

Characters need not be looking for the caverns themselves. They might search for a friend or relative who went looking for the caverns, and who never returned. This gives you the option of running a bit of a detective game. The characters need some skill in piecing together clues leading to the whereabouts of the missing individual. If they do find their quarry after a lengthy quest, they may find that he has no interest in leaving the security and near-immortality of the village. The loved one may invite the characters to join him, or their arrival might put him in the awkward position of making a choice between his adopted home and his old associates.



In Search of...

A media “myth buster” or legend-hunter might be on the trail of a hot tip, with finding or debunking the caverns a goal. The villagers are particularly hostile to such a public figure for fear of her spreading word. If they fail to keep her out, they might be forced to reason with her to not disclose the place. Or they might just try to kill her and her crew (despite the media frenzy that would unquestionably follow).

Accidents Will Happen

If the characters are already out in some remote corner of the world for some reason, they may stumble across the village, without even being aware of the caverns. After observing the residents’ strange or suspicious behavior, they might grow curious about the apparent local secret.

Religious Revival

Members of a church or religion might hear tales of the caverns and want to claim their healing powers for themselves (in the name of their god, of course), or to condemn such a place as a blasphemy. To that end, they might hire someone to find the site. This possibility is likely among the worst for villagers, who are quick to realize the magnitude of the threat. The result could easily turn into a holy war.

Cold, Hard Cash

Characters answer an ad or are contacted by a wealthy individual in poor health. He has heard of the caverns and may have tracked down some vague information on their whereabouts. He doesn’t want to (or can’t) risk the journey until he knows for sure that he’s not chasing an empty dream. He’s willing to outfit a group and pay a lot of money to anyone who finds the caverns on his behalf. He’s not stupid, though. He insists on sending an assistant along to keep tabs on the characters and to make sure they don’t come back with expensive lies. The characters need not be “professional adventurers.” They might accept the challenge for any number of reasons. They might need the money, or they might really need to make a particularly fast exit from other troubles. The dying millionaire outfits the group and gives his henchman funds to cover all expenses. The real money comes into play when (or if) the characters come back with proof that they have found the site (as verified by the henchman). But then, there’s no telling what kind of agenda the henchman might have, and he has to make it back and vouch for the characters’ trustworthiness.

Alternatively, if the caverns aren’t too far away, the hard part might be finding them among various possible locations. Old accounts may be all the characters have to go on. Meanwhile, “The beautiful new flagship store of Goldbaum’s Department Store” may now be that old roach-infested building in the heart of the ghetto. Or “The

forest preserve west of Kirkville” might have become the corporate campus of that powerful investment firm.

Preliminary Events

Characters notice that things aren’t right in the village relatively quickly. Their first and biggest clue is the immense amount of energy the villagers expend trying to convince intruders to leave, or to go here or there, but not where characters want to go most.

As the sense of paranoia and feeling that newcomers are being *managed* grows, so should characters’ suspicions that something is terribly wrong.

After that, the bizarre clues start adding up one after another, depending on which variation of the main setting you use. If the villagers plant the bodies of those who came before in their fields, characters may find a human jaw bone. If you give the locals a hive mind, any number of unsettling incidents might occur that jar characters into alertness.

The Caverns

Regardless of the caverns’ location, the default setting is deep in hostile terrain. It’s incredibly cold, terribly hot, mountainous and/or remote. The only roads that even come close are thin, gravel and probably wiped out by landslides or avalanches here and there.

Before seekers can find the caverns, they have to lower themselves down a jagged stone crevice or well that leads to the source. It’s a long, treacherous descent, a 35-yard drop through protruding fans of crystal spines.

Deep down, the cavern network is uncomfortably warm, averaging around one 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Small, deep fissures in the stone floor reveal the dull, red glow of hot or molten rock. Pungent gasses hiss from vents or steam issues from bubbling pools. The untamed life force of the world surges to the surface.

Hiding the Way

One of the challenges of keeping the caverns hidden stems from the fact that villagers descend frequently. There are a variety of ways in which they (and characters in turn) can keep the secret.

The entrance to the chasm could be underwater and the caverns themselves could be an enormous grotto. This option is especially appropriate if you place the village on a remote island. Swimming down the chasm might seem much easier than climbing down, except for that razor-sharp coral that cuts skin and diving gear, and the constant threat of drowning.

The village’s chief or elder could have a large home built over the entrance to the chasm. It’s natural that villagers would visit their chief on a regular basis, so his place would also be guarded.

The entrance to the caverns could be up in the stony mountains above the village, requiring characters to have a guide (unlikely) or to spend days doing their own re-

connaissance (difficult and not something the villagers tolerate). If characters go a long time without food or water while exploring, feel free to invoke the deprivation rules (*World of Darkness Rulebook*, p. 175) if the characters don't have sufficient Survival Skills — or after their food and water supplies mysteriously disappear.

History

The caverns have always existed, going back to the world's primordial origins. They are one of the very few places where the planet's life force surges to the surface with a power that can't be denied or rationalized away. As Storyteller, you're free to decide *why* the place is so special. Was it one of the world's original sacred places? Was the world wounded here when something fell, or is it a product of a disruption in the spirit world? Is this the kind of place where life itself developed from the primordial soup?

The history of the village is less grandiose. Indigenous people wandered into the caverns, discovered their amazing power and stayed. What was originally an individual or a single clan eventually became a small community. Its members realized that unless they wanted to be conquered and displaced, they had to keep their good fortune to themselves, and they've spent the subsequent centuries doing exactly that. Perhaps other tribes also found the place and claimed it for themselves, or the descendants of those original settlers still remain, their origins muddled by the genes of intruders who came later.

Systems

The rules of the mundane world do not apply to those in the caverns. The upwelling of vitality and passion overwhelms individuals just as a hurricane, earthquake or other force of nature would. The results can vary according to the identities of those who venture in.

Fading Memories of Home

An outsider who enters the caverns may find the experience so profound that it obliterates memories of his former life from mind. That's how many residents of the village remained once they arrived. The first *three* times a character enters the caverns, roll her Composure + Resolve on her player's behalf. If you get even a single success, the character feels a bit dizzy, but she suffers no other effects. On an exceptional success, no roll need ever be made again to test her memory. If any roll fails, she forgets where she came from, including what she did there, who she knew and any other information that might pull her back. Her memories are not completely absent. They could be revived by someone with a Psychiatry Specialty in a successful Intelligence + Science extended action (a total of 10 successes required, each roll made over a period of a day). If a roll to remember one's past is ever a dramatic failure, her memories are lost forever and cannot be restored. If a character is aware of the memory loss threat-

ened in the caverns, she may exert her will to retain her identity. (A Willpower point can be spent, and three dice are added to the latest roll you make.)

The Fate of Oath-Breakers

If a character willingly swears the villagers' oath to not speak of the caverns to the outside world, a thick, sulfurous mud spews from her mouth and nose any time she is about to convey the location of the place. The effect occurs whether she was going to speak of the spot, write it down or draw a map. These spectacular, prolonged vomiting spells inflict wracking stomach cramps on the would-be snitch and automatically inflict (5 – Stamina) levels of bashing damage. She also suffers a –3 penalty to all actions (save reflexive ones) for the remainder of the day. Supernatural efforts to counteract this ritual suffer a –4 penalty due to the old (and self-induced) magic involved.

Earning the Villagers' Trust

"The Tale of the Lying Traveler," "The Story of the Wandering Viper" and "The 21 Fates of the Unwary" are among the most popular folktales told in the village. They involve what are stock figures in local legends: the crafty villager and the treacherous traveler who wants access to the caverns and who stops at nothing to get it. In the end, the crafty villager dupes the duplicitous intruder, the caverns are protected and life goes merrily on. (Characters never hear these tales — at least not in full — unless they are accepted into society. At that point, much of the paranoia and hostility targeted at them makes a lot more sense.)

This is all by way of saying one thing: gaining the trust of the villagers takes more than a simple kind deed or two and a few convenient promises. Winning trust is the hard but noble way of learning information about the caverns. It takes weeks, if not months, to get the villagers to be anything but aloof, and longer still to get them to share anything about their secret. If players seem to be going in this direction, you may want to incorporate a few sub-plots into your game — developments between characters themselves, between characters and individual villagers or between characters and other outside parties — to keep things moving.

Every time a character (or a group) performs a truly appreciated deed for a local or for the village as a whole — something that really takes effort such as helping to dig a new well or working in the fields for a few days in place of someone who's lost — roll the character's Presence + Socialize (or for a less sincere character, Manipulation + Subterfuge) in an extended action. If a group is involved, roll the highest pool among them. Once 50 successes are accumulated, the villagers might be inclined to take him/them in as their own. After requiring the oath of secrecy, they reveal the location of the caverns. No more than one roll can be made per day, and the deeds performed must change and be new or original. Characters can't get repeated rolls for languidly digging the same well for weeks on end, for example.

If a dramatic failure ever occurs, characters make some horrendous faux pas that negates all the successes that have been accumulated.

Chasm Rules

Getting up or down the chasm that leads to the caverns requires climbing rolls (as per the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, pp. 64 and 179). A dramatic failure indicates that a character has either swung hard into the sharp crystals that line the walls (and suffered a lethal wound) or fallen and landed in the crystals at the chasm's bottom, which always inflicts lethal damage regardless of distance fallen. (The crystals at the bottom aren't part of a natural formation — they've been positioned there by villagers.)

Locals have the advantage of experience in descending to and ascending from the caves. Many of them make the pilgrimage four or five times a year, whether they need the site's healing powers or not. Villagers are subject to the same climbing rolls as characters, but the 8 Again rule applies (p. 134). You're also free to make villagers' ascent and descent safe automatically, if that makes the story (and the characters' frustration) more interesting.

Those entering the caverns discover incredible amounts of energy. They're animated, jittery, almost hyperactive. Those with the Vice of Sloth may consider it suspended so long as they're in the caverns. Everyone has an extra Willpower *dot*, even in excess of normal Resolve + Composure, while in the depths.

The primal, heady energies of the caverns can be overwhelming. All passions — such as love, fear, lust and rage — are intensified. You're welcome to reflect this phenomenon in any way you see fit. One possibility involves Virtues and Vices. While Vices are primal, Virtues are analytical or forced. The effects of both on Willpower recovery are reversed. Characters get back all Willpower for fulfilling Vices and only one point for fulfilling Virtues while in the caverns. Indulging Vices, of course, means committing selfish, harmful acts. People can do horrible things to each other down there, and feel empowered for doing so. A character who is jealous of another might act on his passion. Someone who's been angry at a companion could finally let loose her fury. Morality rolls are not made for deeds performed down below, although they might be once a character returns to the surface and must contend with the gravity of his behavior.

Thus, there is a huge moral price to pay for visiting the caverns. People are restored physically, but may be driven to what are considered amoral acts in a modern context (in the primordial atmosphere of the caverns, such activity is natural). As a result, you could portray the villagers as strict ascetics or "Puritans" who punish crimes and acts of indulgence severely. They know that succumbing to the habit of selfishness above ground can be deadly if fully explored below ground. In preparation for the temptations of the caverns, locals might viciously enforce their own codes of behavior and purity, whether newcomers understand the rules or not.

The Gift of Healing

The real benefits of the caverns are gained only by drinking the water from its hot springs or by daubing its black mud on wounds. Drinking cures the living of all diseases, mental and physical. Placing mud on a wound causes it to heal at an astonishing rate.

After a character drinks, it takes a day of descent to recover completely from a disease or mental affliction, two days if a condition is severe. Diseases and mental ailments do not heal concurrently. Individual diseases fade first, and then individual derangements pass.

Aggravated wounds heal at the rate of one point per day. Lethal wounds heal at the rate of one per hour. Bashing wounds heal at the rate of one point per turn. All healing occurs from right to left on a character's Health chart, as normal, so aggravated injuries are last to be recovered if enough time is spent below.

If a character suffers from wounds *and* a disease or derangement, wounds are healed first. Wounds and diseases/mental conditions must be healed separate of each other. Losing a derangement by staying in the caverns does not restore any Morality that was lost when the ailment first manifested.

Neither the water nor the mud heals if removed from the caverns where it bubbles to the surface. Also note that these healing benefits are for living creatures only; neither ghosts nor vampires benefit from the caverns in any direct way.

Optional Rule: Vital Blood

For a week or so after taking advantage of the caverns' healing powers, a person's blood retains some of the richness gained from the caverns. Bashing and lethal damage both heal in half the normal time (see **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 175, for normal healing rates). And yet, this quality also makes an individual's body more delectable and powerful to creatures that feed on blood. In game terms, a mortal's blood is sufficient to sustain a vampire who normally needs the essence of his own kind to exist (see "Blood Potency" in **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 99). A week after visiting the caverns, a person's blood returns to normal, as does her rate of healing and the appeal of her vital fluid.

Clearly, if vampires learned of this effect on Vitae, they'd do everything in their power to exploit it. But just like their mortal counterparts, they would also do everything in their power to keep others of their ilk from learning their secret. The greed and territoriality of the mortal world is reflected tenfold among the Beast-driven Damned.



Stories

You can use the remote setting of the village and the caverns to tell a number of stories. Some of these deal directly with the caves themselves. Others have more to do with the various relationships characters might develop with residents.

Romeo and Juliet

The villagers are more than just a scheming group that's antagonistic toward characters. They're a community of individuals. That means not all support the majority directive to drive intruders off. Some young villager may take a fancy to one of the characters, especially if the newcomers remain in the area for a while. The attraction may even be mutual, or the characters may simply use the native's naiveté for their own ends.

The villagers do their best to proscribe any romance, but if they fail, they're not entirely averse to having new members marry into their extended family, to prevent inbreeding if nothing else. A pitchfork wedding, if you will. Before any marriage can take place (or is imposed), the intended spouse must swear a solemn oath to never reveal the location of the caverns to outsiders — including to other characters.

Custom dictates that the "happy" couple spends the wedding night in the caverns. Other characters are closely guarded and possibly bound or imprisoned, according to the degree of honesty or integrity they've demonstrated thus far.

Romance may be a splendid thing, but the fact remains that joining the village means never leaving. That could have some serious ramifications on the troupe. Just as a villager's loyalty might be challenged by a romance with one of the characters, so might a character's romance with a villager undermine her commitment to the rest of the characters. And if a betrothed goes along to learn the village's secrets, the locals are sure to enforce his or her residency by threat or harm.

There's also a possibility that a villager might be attracted to a character because he wants to escape and experience the outer world. Any characters who leave with a member of the village are hunted down. The wayward youth might suffer the same fate as the rest or simply be dragged back. Romance is all well and good, but the villagers value loyalty and discretion far more highly.





Rich, Green Fields

In this interpretation, the villagers are predators, relying on a steady stream of cavern-seekers to provide them with important supplies. They appear to be humble farmers responsible for raising all of their own food out in the middle of nowhere, entirely at the mercy of the land and the elements. In fact, they use the dismembered remains of murdered travelers to fertilize their fields. They might be followers of a bizarre nature religion, or harshly pragmatic (if antisocial) opportunists. To that end, they could “graciously” allow a small number of individuals to make it to the caverns and leave again, just to maintain a trickle of newcomers.

In this kind of story, the focus is on characters’ detective work to figure out that something is terribly wrong, and to then find out what it is. They might be kept away from the fields as well as the caverns. If they do go out to the fields they may find the soil to be full of bone fragments or teeth. Yet, they’ve eaten a number of delicious meals....

What the characters could do about it — besides escape with their lives — is another question. The appropriate authorities are unlikely to be all that concerned with events in a remote village, especially if the persons reporting the “crimes” appear vaguely unhinged themselves.

The villagers probably make the most of “gifts” brought to them by outsiders. Characters may notice that something strange is going on when clothing worn by villagers all seems to be of the hand-me-down variety (most clothes belonged to past visitors). Likewise, those looking for the caverns may be the main source of tools, gasoline and scrap metal in the village. Characters sense something awry when they find a whole building full of old engine parts that the villagers haven’t been able to find a use for since no one drives.

Planetary Hemorrhage

While the caverns may be a blessing to humans, they’re much more — and much worse — than that on a global scale. The caverns are a wound where the life force of the planet itself leaks forth. In this story, villagers play a smaller role than spirits that linger in the place. Characters with any degree of sensitivity to the spirit world (say, with the Unseen Sense Merit) discern agitation in the place. Spirits are alarmed, because the wound causes the world to weaken. The characters may therefore try to figure out how to destroy or collapse the caverns. They do not receive the support or assistance of the villagers, and any mention of the heresy they contemplate brings swift reprisal. Alternatively, the characters seek to make the most of the caverns, and the spirit world turns against them. Perhaps the village is beleaguered by spirits as well. Yes, locals live extended, healthy lives, but freak accidents tend to happen that threaten their numbers.

A Bad Case of Parasites

Where there is life force, there is always something willing to feed on it. That’s as true around the caverns as it is anywhere. Creatures that feed on life essence don’t benefit from the caverns directly, but they can — and do — feed on those who *do* benefit directly from the vital essence of the place.

In this scenario, the villagers fight a war on two fronts. Not only do they try to send curious characters on their way while hiding the existence of the caverns, but they suffer the predation of a pack of vampires. Every night, the bloodsuckers surge in and take the blood they want from the villagers. They kill only those who fight, and most have long learned to either hide or submit. In the absence of effective weapons, the locals have few alternatives.

Every morning before dawn, the bloodsuckers disappear back into the countryside, sated. The residents have tried hunting the vampires by day, but they’ve never been able to locate their hiding place.

The vampires feed on the villagers because their blood is particularly sweet and rich, and sustaining to old undead (the “Vital Blood” rule applies). Make no mistake, this fact is nothing less than earth-shattering to the Damned, but those few vampires who know of the place guard it ferociously, even more so than their mortal counterparts.

The villagers would love nothing more than to enlist the aid of capable allies in their fight against the bloodsuckers, but doing so would require them to trust outsiders. And then, do the locals realize that some of their number are blood-slaves to the undead?

Characters may hear screams in the night as the vampires attack, or the vampires may target the characters themselves once the newcomers have gone down into the caverns.

In this remote location, outsiders have access to even fewer weapons in a fight against the undead than they would in the civilized world. Even if they have firearms, their ammunition supply is likely limited.

Once characters learn about the bloodsuckers, the villagers might be willing to let them return to civilization so long as they come back with help (and after taking the oath of secrecy). Meanwhile, the vampires don’t want anyone interfering with their dark miracle. They do everything in their power to ensure that the characters never make it back alive.

Variations

The basic setup of the villagers protecting the caverns is made pretty clear, but there are stranger directions in which you can take the premise.

The Plague Well

Unrestrained vitality seem promising in theory, but it can be a curse in practice. The caverns aren’t just salutary for humans, but for pathogens as well. In fact, anyone

who descends into the caverns is exposed to an array of disease strains, at least one of them incredibly deadly. This disease is something along the lines of Ebola or an especially virulent strain of SARS. Characters entering the caverns are exposed, inoculated and cured at the same time — as all the villagers have been. Those exposed never suffer any adverse effects to their own health, but are Typhoid Marys in the presence of anyone who has not been similarly treated. The moment they reach civilization, characters are “Patient Zero” in what is likely to be the worst pandemic the world has ever seen.

The villagers might be delighted to take characters to the caverns, either as a means of adding to their numbers (if they realize that it prevents the characters from returning to civilization) or as a vicious retributive strike against a world that has left them behind. Or it’s possible — even probable — that the villagers don’t even know that they’re walking biohazards. When the characters get sick (which they do if they’re in the village for more than a week without descending into the caverns), the locals voluntarily take the newcomers to the caverns to cure them, never realizing that the caverns are the source of the illness.

Obviously, this variant could have severe repercussions on your chronicle if played to its logical conclusion. To intensify the mystery of the plague, you may rule that since characters themselves are immune, the disease fades from their blood over the space of a month or so. They seem miraculously immune — they’re no longer even carriers — while people around them drop like flies.

Science of the Ancients

For centuries, possibly millennia, locals have guarded what they believe to be a natural place of healing. In this interpretation, characters are poised to discover that there’s far more to the setting than meets the eye. The site’s healing powers do *not* come from the natural efflux of the planet’s vital force, but from a healing field generated by an ancient construct lodged beneath the surface.

This construct was embedded in the Earth’s crust thousands of years ago. Local volcanic phenomena (the hot springs and mud pools) aren’t caused by natural conditions, but by the incredible output of strange energies from the body. You may determine that the construct was the creation of ancient astronauts, of “the Second Children” (see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, pp. 27-31) or of enlightened scientists from Atlantis.

It’s improbable that characters discover the truth about the caverns in a visit or two, given that villagers have been there all their lives and never had a revelation. It’s also possible, however, that the villagers never thought to look beyond the superficial. Characters’ reasons for

probing further could come from any front. They might see the remains of an old structure in the village that’s covered with strange writing. They might have dreams that lead them to the construct’s access hatch. Or they might find that one of the larger springs is cool enough that they can — with effort and maybe a little technology or expertise to which the villagers don’t have access — swim to the bottom of the pool to find the strange, luminous engines that make the place “sacred.”

Can the characters make their way inside the construct? Does direct exposure to it change characters in some bizarre, horrific way? Does it cause them to evolve? Gain psychic abilities? Do they inadvertently break it with their clumsy attempts to master it? How the story unfolds from that point is up to you, but it could be a springboard for an entire chronicle.

Suburb of the Mysteries

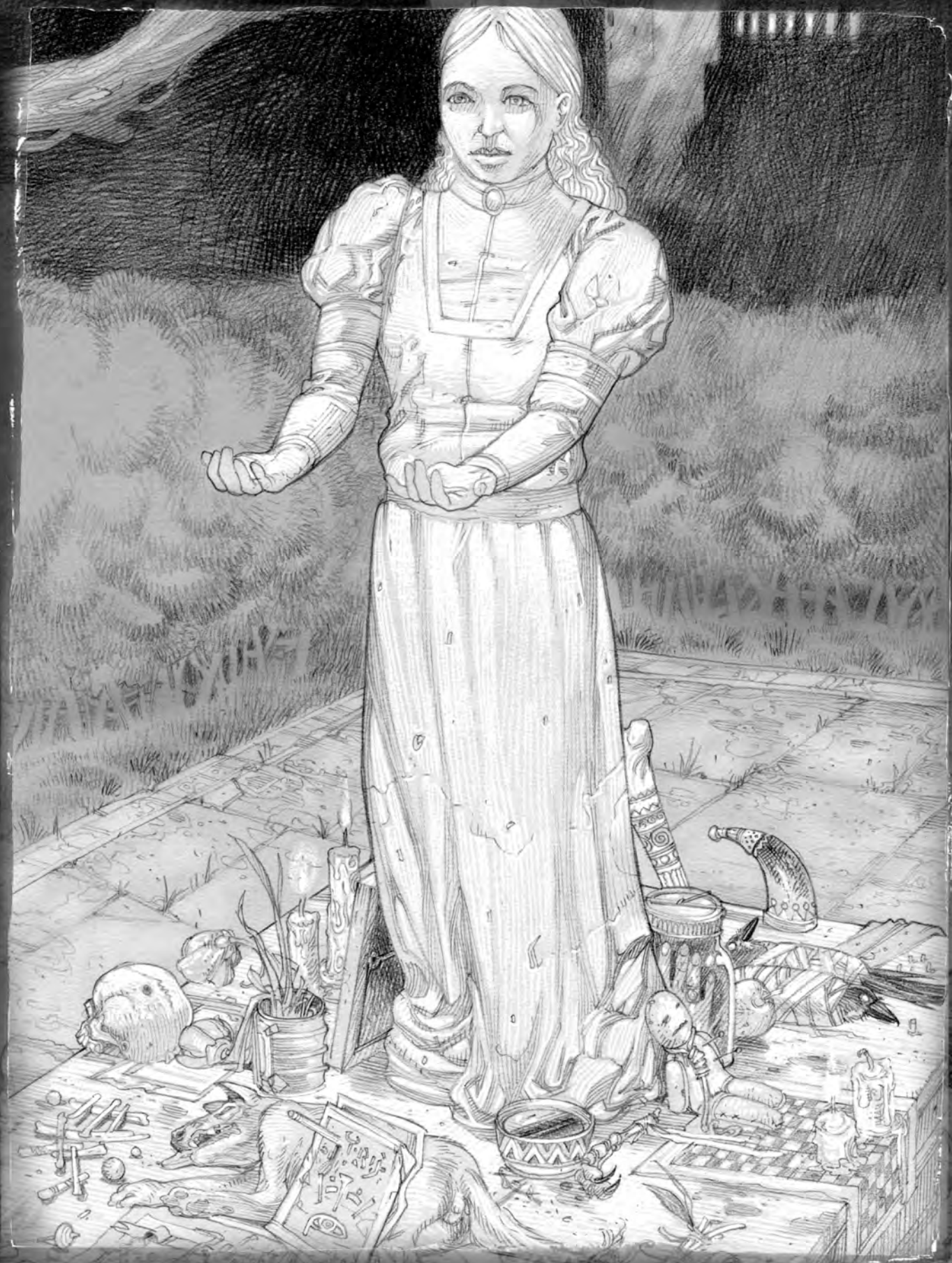
In this variant, the village *used* to be a distant, inaccessible place, but no more. The rapid spread of humanity to every corner of the globe has made a place that was once quite remote easily accessible. The caverns are still hidden, but they’re hidden in plain sight. They’re located next to an old Roman fort in England, under a bathhouse in a suburb of Buenos Aires or near an exclusive spa resort in northern California. The villagers are still the villagers, and they continue to perform their role of keeping the secret. In this case, they might be more of a secret society working to keep the caverns accessible to only those who take the oath of guardianship. It could be an old gentlemen’s club whose members always seem to stay young and vital, or a women’s club whose members use their eternal, flawless bodies and seductive mystique to distract and divert those who get too close.

The caverns could be on private property, in the basement of an old family estate or beneath an old Mason lodge, private clubhouse or other ancient building carefully constructed to hide the true nature of the site. The upper floors might house a perfectly normal business, but the basement leads to the pit.

This approach is perfect for a Gothic mystery. Intruding characters could be chosen to be the next generation of “villagers,” once the old guard tires of its duties. Indeed, being part of this old sodality could link characters as the game begins. Just beware of free access to the caverns among characters. It’s great to have a source of quick healing in the initial stages of a chronicle as characters are established, but it also undermines the threat and danger that underlies the horror.

Even in this scenario, a mood of paranoia should prevail. This variant borrows less from *The Wicker Man* and more from *Rosemary’s Baby*.





The Statue of Weeping Alice

If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, what does?
— Vladimir Lenin

Nothing is gained without sacrifice. Good things, it turns out, do *not* come to those who wait. They come to those willing to pay for what they want. A young girl named Alice knew that, once upon a time. She knew the nature of sacrifice and surrender, and the price she paid was very high, indeed. The land was hungry, so the Indians said, and she became its meal for the good of all.

But the locals have forgotten her lesson and legend. The town has fallen on hard times, and people don't have time anymore for sweet stories, however tragic. Even Alice's statue standing in the center of town does little to remind folks or to make them care. They mostly think of it as a curiosity. Few try to remember what their parents told them about Alice and how the town pulled itself out of that awful drought about 200 years back. They see only a stone figure, her hands outstretched in a pleading gesture, her gray eyes wide and entreating. The nameplate below the statue fell off long ago. People don't even recall the figure's name, much less the nature of her sacrifice.

Soon, though, they'll remember. A tragic act committed on her marbled shoulders jogs public memory, and the blood spilled there wakes the land again, delivering a miracle. Like all things in life, however, the miracle is not free. The statue of Alice — and all the land around her — grows hungry for sacrifices once more.

Characters

A man kills himself on the statue of Alice, and the next day she starts weeping. Tears run down her face in a genuine miracle, and people are amazed. But other things happen, too, things that people don't associate with the miracle at all, things that are too good to be true. The town, recently on a downward spiral toward a seemingly inevitable demise, pulls itself back up by its bootstraps. Everybody thinks it's just part of the natural pendulum swing that all towns and cities go through.

Of course, it isn't that simple. Good things don't just happen. Miracles have their cost. The town changes for the better for a reason, one few understand. This fact is emblematic of one of the World of Darkness' greater truths, that good comes only from sacrifice, but most everybody is ignorant of that fact until it's far too late. The truth is, they get what they pay for, and that can be a terrible case of *caveat emptor*.

When creating characters for use in this setting, it's important to link them immediately to the central mystery as well as to the plight of the town. Characters might be local businesspeople who have a vested interest in the town. When things go well, they don't have any good explanation for it (but certainly want to see it continue). They might be witness to small or large miracles, ones purportedly unconnected to the mystery of the weeping statue. Perhaps a loved one's cancer goes into remission. Or a marriage on the rocks is suddenly turned around and mended. The characters don't pay the cost for such good fortune — not directly, at least. Somebody does, though, which characters soon find out. Indeed, characters should be capable of exploring the concepts of faith, sacrifice and cost, because all of those things are fundamental to this setting.

Where?

The nature of the miraculous “Weeping Alice” phenomenon requires it be located in some kind of population center. This setting is most likely a town, where cause and effect is somewhat measurable. (Sacrifices to Alice increase, local prosperity rises.) That said, it could easily be set in a major city (Chicago, New York, London) with minimal tweaking. All events simply happen on a larger (and hence more convoluted and inscrutable) scale. If in a city, it’s recommended that the miracle and offerings affect a single neighborhood to keep matters manageable. The themes of sacrifice are still intrinsic to the statue and the land.

History

The land of your setting has a history, both before the town was founded and during its existence. The background discussed below is important, but not easily accessible by characters. Along the way, we discuss how characters can (or fail to) uncover the realities of their surroundings.

The Drought

About 200 years ago, the town and land suffered a terrible drought. Crops failed and livestock perished. Many locals fled, unable to make any kind of a living in the dry, dusty place. The drought lasted for nearly a decade, at which point the town was pushed to the brink of ruin. And then, one day, the drought simply — ended. Rain came slowly and steadily for days, and, over time, the town found its way once again.

Characters researching these events (see the sidebar for ideas on how they might investigate town history) can find that information pretty easily. Any success on a history-related roll reveals this piece of the past, often as little more than a footnote or casual aside. Characters who plumb deeper into the story might find that there’s more to the tale.

Research

Characters can find information from a number of sources — libraries, newspaper archives, web sites, historian blogs, journals or conversations with appropriate locals. Such locals might include history buffs, museum caretakers, journalists, people with Indian heritage or the elderly. Characters are subject to the research rules (p. 55 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Those looking to glean historical tidbits from conversation may do so with Social rolls (which are likely to involve Intimidation, Persuasion, Socialize and Subter-

fuge), unless you allow that exceptional roleplaying negates the need for rolls.

You may also want to allow certain modifiers. For example, characters using a paid library data source such as LEXIS-NEXIS may gain a +2 bonus. Characters searching the Internet may combine Computer with Intelligence. Characters with Indian heritage may gain a +1 bonus to uncover the history of the area, as their legends are better preserved than those of the townsfolk.

The Curse

If a player gets an exceptional success on any roll related to the history of the town, her character learns about the so-called curse. The land of the town was once inhabited by Native Americans who were pushed out by whites. The newcomers were well fortified in the settlement they built, and the Indians could do little to reclaim their land. The two groups had terrible relations. While they never resulted in direct violence, both sides felt a great deal of resentment toward one another. That was only made worse by the drought.

The Indians claimed that the weather was proof the whites had angered the spirits by stealing the land. The townsfolk accused the natives of putting some kind of “curse” on the town. (Neither side seemed to recognize that both groups were affected negatively by the weather.)

Alice

The story of Alice and how she ended the drought is a mixture of myth and fact. It’s so far in the past that few can sort truth from fiction. Characters doing research are sure to come across pieces of information about Alice, as old history ties her closely to the town. This particular period should be spotty and incomplete. Assume that each success accumulated on research or conversation rolls grants *one* piece of information, as listed below. These pieces needn’t be discovered in order. In fact, they may be all the more mysterious for being discovered in confusing disarray.

- Alice was a young girl, about 14 or 15. She lived in town with her parents and brother.
- The Indians lost a beloved child of the tribe. The nature of this child’s death is unclear. Some suggest the child died in an attack by the whites, while others note that the child perished from disease or as a result of the drought.
- Alice went to live among the Indians as a “replacement” for the lost child. Whether she went on her own volition or she was forced to go by her parents or the townsfolk remains unknown. The whites hoped to appease the Indians, and the natives hoped the exchange would appease the spirits and fill the void of their own dead child.

- Not long after she went to stay with the tribe, Alice got up one night and wandered off into the woods. She was never seen again.

- Alice's disappearance is shrouded in a number of legends, the first being that her footprints led up to a spot and then simply stopped. A few swatches of her clothing were left behind, as were a few drops of blood.

- One of the Indians (per the legend) saw what happened to Alice, but was unable to speak of it. All she was able to say was that "The land was hungry."

- After Alice disappeared, the drought ended.

- The Indians wanted nothing more to do with the area. Some tales suggest they had successfully appeased the spirits. Others imply that something far deeper was wrong. Regardless, the tribe moved away, even going so far as to dig up its burial mounds to relocate them, as if they had lost their sanctity.

You might want to offer variations on these tales to keep them imprecise and clouded by fable. Some records (diaries of townsfolk, for example) might note that Alice didn't disappear, but was burned alive by the Indians to appease the spirits. The natives might have oral variations that indicate the white men took Alice back and killed her because she was "unclean." Other embellishments suggest that the rain came with more fanfare than records suggest — frogs or fish falling from the sky, a terrible thunderstorm or a rain of 40 days and 40 nights. None of these embellishments is proven, of course, but such is the nature of legend.

Native Peoples

The use of Indians here implies that this town and statue are set in the Americas or Canada. That needn't be the case. Every region of the world has its indigenous peoples, any of whom could be introduced to this story and given a sacrificial history and relationship with the settlement. You could use Celtic Druids, Laotian tribesmen, Lithuanian pagans or Aztec warriors. Whatever suits the location of your game.

The Statue of Alice

If players make successful research rolls on local history or folklore, characters can learn the following about Alice.

- After she left town, the locals took to giving her family small gifts to console them for their loss and thank them for their sacrifice.

- Eventually, family members died or moved away, and their house was destroyed.

- Both history and legend connect (or coincide) Alice's sacrifice to the end of the drought or curse. Years later, locals continued to leave small offerings (pieces of fabric, bits of food, buttons) behind on the spot where Alice's house once stood.

- A few decades later, a sculptor (Alfred Gleick) used town funds to erect a statue of Alice on that piece of land. The town physically grew around the statue.

Modern Day

While the World of Darkness is rife with superstition, it doesn't offer much room for faith or charity. Even though the drought was lifted, the world declined and, with it, so did the town. The modern world dawned, fast and sweeping, and brushed such insensible whimsy as legends and offerings aside. Gifts left to the statue of Alice dwindled as the years passed. Tens of coins became one. A little cross-stitched ornament became a spool of discolored thread. Eventually, nothing was left behind. Someone stole the gilded nameplate from the statue's brick base so that even Alice's name left the minds of the citizens.

Maybe it was the severity of the modern world, the abuses inflicted by a selfish, soulless humanity, or maybe it was the neglect of the statue, but the town, like the rest of the world, inched toward hard times. Crime, debt and terror rose. Hope dwindled, and faith faded.

The town as characters know it today has gone through hard times. The following are some first-hand experiences of those trials that characters may have:

- A nearby factory is going belly-up and laying off most or all of its workforce.

- There seems to be a spate of bad flu cases going around — some kind of "new" flu (bird-flu, for example).

- The newspapers all say it: Crime is up. Interest rates are up. Infant mortality is up. Everything bad is up, everything good is down.

- A local apartment building or townhouse development has some big problems — termites, rats, fire-code violations. It's being condemned, and its residents are expected to move, whether they can afford to or not.

- A nearby watering hole (i.e., bar, restaurant, hotel) — one possibly frequented by characters — has closed its doors. It didn't get enough business or it fell prey to health-code violations.

- Things look dirty. The trash men have gone on strike a few times in the past year, graffiti is on the walls and trash blows around the streets.

Suicide

Everything changes in town with a suicide. One night, someone goes up to the statue of Alice and kills himself. One option is to connect the suicide directly to one of the characters. It could be a relative, a loved one, an old flame or an old friend who's fallen out of favor. Or the suicide victim could be a complete stranger. Below are a few options from which to choose, allowing you to customize this grisly event to your story and characters.



- Roger Bloom just can't get a break. A lazy depressive, Bloom has lost his job, wrecked his car, and is dumped by his girlfriend all in the course of a month. His drinking problem doesn't help either. Roger, hoping to send a "message" to his ex, climbs up on the statue in front of a number of people and shoots himself in the mouth.

- Alice Henley was going to be a single mother, and that was fine by her. She needed nobody but herself, and the thought of having a child warmed her heart immensely. But then, in the bathroom at home, she has a bloody miscarriage. Not only does the baby die, but so do her chances of getting pregnant again. Devastated, Alice goes to the statue in the middle of town (she remembers some silly story about her having the same name as that girl, whoever she was), swallows a bottle of prescribed Lithium and sleeps into death.

- Derek Blatt is as a smart kid, a good kid, sure to get into a good college and grow up right. Except, he's got a real dark streak. He gets picked on at school, abused by the jocks and mocked by the girls. His father's a real prick, and his mother — well, she just doesn't care. Derek seems fine on the outside, taking it all in stride, but one day he leaves school, goes to the town square, stands by the statue with a pistol and starts shooting. When he's done, he turns the gun on himself.

- Florence Growicki is old. Her body is frail, but her mind is worse. Recently, she's been leaving the house when she's not supposed to and wandering around town. Unfortunately, she wanders off in the dead of winter one day and disappears. They find her in the morning, curled up at the base of the statue, frozen to death.

The Miracle

The day after the suicide, the statue of Alice starts to cry. Actual tears run down her stony cheeks in little rivulets. Not many people notice at first. Those who do likely remark at how weird it is. But over time (days or weeks), someone (one of the characters, if possible) notices that it doesn't stop. No easy explanation exists for the *crying* of the statue. A lot of people don't believe it and blow it off, but others aren't so sure. A few people come to see the statue every day, curious about and amazed by the phenomenon. A tabloid might report on it as if it's some kind of bona fide miracle, even if most of the locals can find one of a dozen ways to dismiss it. Other things begin to happen, too, but people don't connect the disparate events. Not yet, anyway.

Offerings

People leave little offerings at the statue again, like they used to in the "olden days." Some folks leave coins, little girls leave old dolls, little boys leave be-

hind candies or shoelaces. It's silly, really. Weirder still is that nobody knows why they do it. It just seems right, and they don't think to examine themselves about it. (You may ask players to make Resolve + Composure rolls. If they fail, characters go out of their way to pass by the statue during the day. They leave a coin or some other small token at its base.) Also, it seems that someone has made a new nameplate for the statue — except now the name reads "Weeping Alice."

Change for the Better

In the days and weeks that follow, little things happen all over town to improve people's lives. Such events aren't drastic. Nobody really thinks anything of them besides being generally pleased. (Most are reminded of the saying, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.") What follows are a few examples of minor improvements. For best results, be sure to tie some of these events to characters' fortunes. They are therefore intimately connected to — and invested in — the central mystery and miracle of the setting. (Players might be required to succeed on Wits + Composure rolls for characters to notice *some* of these changes, at your discretion.)

- Walls or storefronts once covered with graffiti are now clean. People assume that the cops or some neighborhood group has cleaned things up.
- Here and there, people's cancer goes into remission. By and large, that isn't unusual. It's the goal of treatment, after all, and the medical world can't explain every good thing that happens.
- The streets seem a little bit cleaner. Less trash, no bad smells, the air isn't so smoggy.
- Local businesses that were about to go under see a slow reversal of fortune. The bank gives them a second chance, or maybe they simply start doing more business. Money doesn't fall from the sky; recent luck is assumed to be the providence of mundane developments.
- A local sports team (high school, college or professional) starts winning every game, turning a losing streak around.
- The weather is mildly unseasonable (in a good way). Summers are cooler than usual. Winters are sunnier and warmer than expected.
- Taxes drop or characters hear that they're subject to a tax break. Just a hundred bucks or so, but that can't be a bad thing, can it?

Murmurs

Not everybody is convinced by the town's seeming reversal of fortune. A few people aren't necessarily suspicious, but they might mention some strange things to characters in passing. Old people are suddenly nostalgic, ready to talk about folktales about the town. Some local's blog claims that this is all because the statue started crying. An EMT, cop or librarian mumbles something about "that old legend" coming up again. Characters may note that people start remembering the legend of Alice — something that they may have never heard anything about,

yet folks here and there are talking about it quietly, like they share a secret. Such hush-hush speculation isn't pervasive — only a rare few even entertain such ideas. But those who do might whisper such suggestions in a character's ear, giving her the impetus to regard the town and its newfound fortune in a different way. It's at this point that characters might be inspired to investigate the town's history, or they might stop by the statue for the first time to check out the strange tears dripping from those stone eyes, or to leave an offering.

Secret History

Town history, as offered above, may be enough to uphold the supernatural element in your story. If, however, you'd like to illustrate the area's subtle paranormal influence on multiple fronts, you can allow characters access to a "secret history" of the region: The land is hungry. The story of Alice and the present circumstances are not the only evidence of that underlying truth. Feel free to introduce any or all of the following three aspects into the history of the town:

- Even before Indians inhabited the region, animals came here to die. Historical records, Indian legends and archeological records show an abnormal abundance of animal skeletons throughout local geological layers.
- The first Indians (the precursors to those who eventually adopted Alice) used to send their sick and elderly to the area to die in hopes of having good hunting, fruitful crops and healthy livestock. One side effect was that the tribe was blessed with generous health: the numbers of sick and elderly dwindled. But that meant that the Indians had to sacrifice hearty tribe members to sustain their good fortune. (This particular tale can allude to what may be in store for the town and its citizens.)
- The earliest towns in the area (mid-to-late 1600s) drew a lottery every year with an assembled crowd. Townsfolk picked stones out of a basket. One stone was a different color than the rest. He who drew it was stoned to death by the mob.

Characters should not be able to discover any of this information cheaply or easily. Uncovering it should require an exceptional success on a research roll, and may even warrant a separate extended action unto itself. Ten or more successes are required, with each roll requiring three hours' time.

Alternatively, such information may be portrayed in a narrative to characters through such devices as waking visions, nightmares or lunatic townsfolk.

Motives

Ultimately, characters in a story about Alice can be anybody. A simple proximity to the setting certainly hooks them. Townsfolk have a vested interest in checking out this so-called miracle, whether they believe it's a genuine wonder or are skeptical of its veracity. That said, what's best for a story is if characters are created with strong,



authentic ties to the phenomenon. Characters should be affected personally by the “miracle.” During the prelude, you could ask about characters’ concepts of faith, sacrifice, God or even utilitarian ideals. Are they opposed to any and all harm to people and animals? Or do they favor an “ends justifies the means” approach to life and spirituality? Following are some specific motives to get characters involved in this setting.

- **Faithful:** Characters of some kind of faith may find this miracle particularly engaging. Their style of faith needn’t be limited to one religion. Those dedicated to one of the major monotheistic institutions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) are likely to be intrigued by events since those followings have a core mythology of miraculous events. Devotees of other faiths don’t ignore events, though. Neo-pagans and witches surely believe in magic, and Weeping Alice *seems* to be a mystical occurrence. Agnostics might wonder if the statue answers their questions, and atheists might suddenly question their lack of faith (or seek to discredit the statue’s miracle). Also consider abstract concepts of faith. Say, characters with an unswerving faith in the town or in mankind in general may pay close attention to the local wonder.

- **Downtrodden:** The town has been in the pits for the last few decades. Characters are likely to be as demoralized and beleaguered by urban life as other locals. Characters may, therefore, have particular interest in sudden prosperity, because it serves them as much as anybody. The town doing well means *they* do well. Locals see only short-term gains and revel in them, but characters may ask at what cost such prosperity comes. Small offerings to the statue seem fine, but what happens when those apparently aren’t enough? The old legends forecast a dim future if matters persist in their current direction. Are more suicides needed? How much blood must be shed? Do others have to be killed to placate the statue, the town or the land?

Characters aren’t the only ones tied to local prosperity. They have friends, family and loved ones who likely live there as well: people who may have been similarly poor, sick or otherwise disadvantaged. Characters might be willing to forego their own wellbeing for the greater good, but are they willing to give up on the dreams of their nearest and dearest?

- **Out-of-Towners:** Characters may come to town to witness the reported miracle, or perhaps to partake in its growing success. The miracle hasn’t attracted much credible attention abroad, but it does attract tabloid reporters and generate word of mouth. Outsiders aren’t as likely to be intimately tied to the success of the town, so they may act as impartial observers. Or maybe the influence of the statue has yet to affect them. Being objective, they could be the first to spot strange effects. And yet, what happens when characters (who are now in the town’s borders) become subject to local good fortune? Are they willing to dash it all for fear of the cost, or go along for the ride?

- **Investigators:** The spectacle of the crying statue is sure to bring uncomplimentary attention. Journalists

(likely from tabloids, web sites or other fringe media) are likely to report on it. Scientists and other “myth-debunkers” can show up, ready to investigate and demystify the events. Whenever purported miracles happen, whether it’s Hindu milk-drinking statues or Jesus’ face reflected in a microwave door, people come running to partake in — or frown upon — the sensation.

- **Personally Connected:** Consider characters who aren’t so much connected to the town as they are connected to the people involved in the local phenomena. Are characters tied to the suicide victim? They could be his family or friends. One character might be Roger Bloom’s ex-girlfriend. Alternatively, what if characters are distantly related to Alice? She was survived by two parents and a brother, any of whom could have continued the line of descent. Are descendants privy or susceptible to weird events? Are they afflicted with disturbing visions or haunted by the girl’s ghost? Another possibility is that characters are of Indian heritage. Could they know something that others have forgotten, or be given information from the tribe that the “white man” isn’t meant to know?

Preliminary Events

The townsfolk are unlikely to question their good fortune. Most of them are just glad to have their heads above water. Some are concerned about the suicide, of course, but that’s water under the bridge. Others think about “that old legend,” perhaps for the first time in years or perhaps spontaneously, not knowing where word of it was ever heard before. But none are wise to the larger mystery: that the land itself is hungry, and it grants its favor as payment for offerings.

Characters pick up on the strange and subtle phenomena going on around them. Things are not precisely right. Even in the face of serendipity, characters probably question the value of events at hand. The incidents described below are meant to help pique characters’ interest and caution, and to deepen the overall supernatural mystery.

- **Odd Offerings:** It was bound to happen — someone decided that offering such things as coins or other knick knacks wasn’t enough. One or several people leave behind strange and disturbing contributions. Somebody spills a little blood in a ring around the statue. Another person leaves a dead pigeon or squirrel in Alice’s upturned hands. (It turns out that a small-caliber bullet did in the creature.) Other strange objects discovered might include a tray of fingernail clippings, a bundle of hair with blood and skin still attached or cups full of bodily fluid.

- **Addicts:** The act of sacrifice seems almost addictive to some people. They show up every morning, noon or night to leave *something* behind. At first, they leave the same things that everybody else does: pennies, prayers, shoelaces. But then they start leaving bigger and better things: Nice jewelry. Dollar bills and then \$10 bills. Some-

one leaves an envelope of \$20s. One person takes off the clothes *on his back* and drapes them across Alice's outstretched arms. Soon, people camp out by the statue, happily destitute and offering prayers and their own saliva (because that's all they have) to Weeping Alice.

- **Stolen:** Somebody was found unconscious within a hundred yards of the statue. Her body looked like it had been beaten badly, her skin swollen with bruises. In her hand were a few coins and pieces of jewelry. When she awakens, she says she just wanted to take some of the things for herself, but she doesn't remember anyone beating her up. She only remembers pain — lots of it.

- **Tear Collectors:** People have started climbing the statue and gathering Alice's tears. Most of these people are strange looking, with bedraggled hair and wild eyes. What are they doing with her tears? Someone thinks he saw one of them put the tears in a container. Another thinks she saw one of the weirdoes *drink* the tears.

- **Little Movements:** Did the statue just move? Did her eyes just blink? Did her fingers twitch?

Systems

The phenomenon of Weeping Alice may require you to invoke a few systems specific to the setting. These rules are ultimately optional. You may forego them, if you feel they detract from the mystery, by putting hard-and-fast mechanics into play.

The Tears

The statue is crying. It's difficult to tell if they really are tears or just water. Characters who test the liquid can utilize the following system.

Dice Pool: Intelligence + Science + equipment *or* Intelligence + Medicine + equipment

Action: Extended; 5 successes required, and each roll represents 15 minutes of analysis.

Determining the composition of the liquid leaking from the statue isn't too difficult. It requires a limited scientific background as well as some equipment. The character takes a sample of the liquid and runs it through the appropriate gear or subjects it to chemicals to determine its nature. Bonuses for equipment come from using only exceptional-quality tools rather than just common ones.

Characters *without* equipment may still make the attempt. The roll suffers a -4 penalty. No exceptional successes can be achieved without using some kind of appropriate equipment.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The character not only fails to determine the nature of the liquid, she breaks whatever equipment she is using.

Failure: No successes are gained at the moment. If five cannot be gathered at all, the character is unable to identify the fluid.

Success: Five or more successes are gathered. The liquid is saline-based, and contains a high protein concentration as well as manganese. It has the same composition as human tears.

Exceptional Success: A total of 10 or more successes is gathered. The liquid matches the composition of "emotional" tears. (Human tears caused by good or bad emotion have a different protein makeup than tears caused by an irritant.)

Suggested Equipment: pH kit (+1), regular compound microscope (+2), electron microscope (+4)

Possible Penalties: Distractions (-1), corrupted sample (-2), no equipment (-4)

Properties of the Tears

Aside from the specific scientific components of the tears, the liquid has a few other curious properties.

Drinking the tears causes hallucinations, both auditory and visual. Hallucinations don't take effect until a full hour has passed after ingestion. (That is, characters who experience visions can't unilaterally ascribe them to the statue's tears.) Follow the drug rules regarding hallucinogens on p. 177 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook** for the precise way in which the liquid affects a character. Visions are almost universally related to the statue, the land and sacrifices. Characters might see (or *think* they see) Indians sacrificing one another, townsfolk stoning one another, Alice being swallowed up by the ground or other strange images.

After an episode of visions (and some euphoria can accompany it, no matter how dark the hallucinations), characters come down hard (after 8 minus the character's Stamina in hours). A character enters a chemical-induced depression similar to a hangover, suffering a -1 penalty to all actions (except reflexive ones) for the remainder of the day.

Consuming more tears resumes the visions and alleviates the penalty, but a hangover is inevitable at some point. Each time a character goes back for another taste, the high lasts for one hour less (the second drink's effects last 7 minus the character's Stamina in hours, for example). After a sufficient number of drinks, a character no longer gains visions or a high at all. She goes straight to a hangover.

Sacrifices

The offerings left at the base of the statue or upon the monument itself have both tangible and intangible benefits for the town, within the following parameters:

- Offerings must be left within one yard of the statue, or must be placed upon the statue itself.

- Offerings must be inanimate or otherwise dead — living offerings do not count.

- Benefits do not affect the presenter alone but the town as a whole.

• Offerings must sit for a period of three hours before “taking effect.” See below for potential effects in conjunction with specific gifts.

• Offerings must be placed at the statue by a person. Objects that happen to be near the statue (a wind-blown piece of paper or a wallet dropped accidentally) do not count.

Effects

Certain offerings bestow certain bonuses to the town. Each effect lasts for 24 hours. Results are not cumulative within the same categories. For example, the benefits of placing one coin are the same as placing five. Both are “Small Items” and simply grant one extra Willpower per morning. Great sacrifices also outweigh small ones of any kind. Thus, the sacrifice of an animal dictates the blessing of a day, dismissing any blessings that a handful of coins would invoke.

People can’t directly connect intangible gains with sacrifices made, but everyone is aware of the notion that “bigger is better,” thus leading to larger and more extreme sacrifices.

The following effects are optional. It may be enough to simply note that more objects means greater prosperity for the town. No matter what, invoke a “Show, Don’t Tell” policy when invoking benefits. Don’t simply tell players that characters receive a bonus, explain it in narrative terms. A character who feels a sudden Physical Attribute bonus (+1 to rolls) during the day isn’t aware of a systemic dice bonus, but instead may feel “energized” or like he could “conquer the world.” The following are mechanical bonuses gained through certain sacrifices, as well as potential descriptive effects that improve the town or neighborhood:

• **Garbage:** Trash items include broken objects, debris or rotten food. All townsfolk feel the negative effect of debris placed at the foot of the statue. They suffer headaches, upset stomachs or other minor ailments. The neighborhood also grows dirtier — old graffiti re-materializes, trash blows around the streets and everything seems covered in grime. Locals suffer a –1 penalty to all rolls.

• **Small Items:** These items are of Size 1 or 2. Coins, jars of marbles, shoes, books, jewelry. Townsfolk regain one extra spent Willpower point upon waking the next morning. In effect, people get up earlier for work, neighbors seem friendlier and characters might sense a spring in folks’ step. This resultant boost causes a slight upturn in productivity — stores open earlier, construction jobs get done a little quicker.

• **Large Items:** These items are of Size 3 or higher and could include sets of clothing, pieces of furniture or pieces of art. Social-based rolls receive a +1 bonus. New land deals are brokered, salesmen sell more, people are convinced to do more charity work (like participating in one of those highway cleanup programs), or businesses on the verge of closure get new customers.

• **Personal Items:** Items of intense personal value can be of any Size. A watch doesn’t count if it’s only a

watch. A watch given to a person by his beloved grandfather who was wearing it when the sacrificer was born does count. Other personal items might include poems, journals or photographs. Mental-based rolls receive a +1 bonus. Personal relationships are mended, school test scores go up, college admissions are higher, the science community makes some kind of small breakthrough (and subsequently receives more funding); or the neighborhood establishes some kind of new technological innovation such as wireless Internet.

• **Bodily Items:** This category includes items taken from a living human body. They must be biological in origin, such as fingernail clippings, blood, pieces of skin, digests or hair. Physical-based rolls receive a +1 bonus. –Patients at the hospital make surprising improvement. The sports team breaks out of its slump. Buildings look cleaner and more sound.

• **Sacrificed Animals:** Animals of any Size can be sacrificed on or near the statue. If not killed on or near the statue, an animal must have been killed *in town* no longer than 30 minutes before being deposited at the statue. All rolls receive a +1 bonus. The hospital or college receives a sizable donation, stocks shoot up, new businesses open, the bad part of town undergoes a bout of urban renewal.

• **Sacrificed Adults:** Adults must be at least Size 5. Age range is 15 years and older. If not killed on or near the statue, the body must have been murdered *in town* no longer than 15 minutes before being deposited at the statue. All rolls receive a +2 bonus. Big effects take place: A few patients make miraculous recoveries. Hollywood decides to shoot a film in town. The local sports team wins by huge margins every time.

• **Sacrificed Children:** Children must be at least Size 3 or smaller, and *must* be sacrificed on or near the statue. (Age range is 0 through 14 years.) All rolls receive a +3 bonus, and wound penalties are ignored for the duration of the effect. Obvious, abnormal effects occur. Hospitals empty as many sick or injured recover. Profits *triple* for local businesses. Normal people seem capable of breaking records left and right. Student test scores indicate a sudden proliferation of genius-level intelligence.

Stealing Offerings

Anybody is free to steal an item meant as a sacrifice to the statue, should onlookers allow it. Such an action is not without consequence, though.

A character suffers psychologically for 24 hours following the act. She is listless, depressed or irritable. She suffers a –1 penalty to all rolls during this period. Moreover, any bonuses generated by the statue for the town are negated for the day, and people feel similarly stressed and ill-tempered (though they do not suffer the same penalty as the thief).

If the character is “ratted out” and the locals learn that she took something, she’s in jeopardy. People might eye her strangely or follow her home. They might key her car or leave threatening notes in her mailbox. Some might

engage her in a yelling match in the middle of town, or people might go out of their way to avoid talking to her. It's even possible that they kidnap her pets to use them as the next sacrifices.

Offerings may be removed without penalty *after* 24 hours has passed since they were laid near or on the statue.

Locals

The following people have various reactions to the statue, the miracle, the town and to characters. They're provided to add flavor to the setting and investigators' work.

- **Tommy Washington:** Tommy has had a drug problem for the last five years. Nothing so bad that he'll go six feet under anytime soon, but bad enough that he hasn't held a job for more than six months. Bad enough that they came to repossess his car and stereo system. Things weren't looking good for Tommy, but, hey, they weren't looking good for anybody. Yet now, things are looking up for other people. That boarded-up convenience store on the corner is open again. So is the bar next to it. And Tommy's sister just called. She wasn't supposed to be able to get pregnant, but now she's got one in the oven. It's all got Tommy thinking. Maybe he can do a little better too. He's off the drugs (only three weeks, but still), working a new job, and feeling pretty good. He doesn't think much about the crying statue ("Who gives a shit?"), but he's real happy about the way things are going and he'll do *anything* to keep it that way.

- **Jenny Cahill:** Things haven't been looking so good for Jenny, either. Her vet clinic has been suffering. Patients just haven't been coming in. In her neighborhood, animals are always getting hurt — everything from ear mites to car accidents. But now, the stream of pets coming in has dwindled to a trickle. Worse still, someone broke into the shelter next door and stole a bunch of strays. What's that about? Something's up. Jenny knows that much. If only she could figure out what it is, maybe she could do something about it.

- **A. F. Gould:** Gould's a local historian. He's written a few books on the area for a small press, and maintains a web site for the local historical society. Every day last week, he went down to the statue to leave a few items from his pockets — a couple of quarters, the fortune from a cookie, even a nice pen someone gave him. The weird thing is, he didn't think about it until later. It didn't even cross his mind that such actions were strange. People haven't left anything at the statue for a long time, and suddenly it's the thing to do again. Is it because of the so-called miracle (which is surely just some kind of salt-crystal run-off from the marble). Gould thinks he ought to examine the situation in greater depth. Yet, his books are selling pretty well again and just went into a second printing. Maybe he doesn't have time to worry about any statue right now.

- **Damon Patel:** Damon was always a little off his rocker. It's not like he wore foil on his head or anything,

but he *knew* that people were always talking about him. Whispering, really. Even when he couldn't hear them, he knew what was going on. But that's stopped, and he knows why. It's because of that statue and its tears. Oh, he's had a taste. And it's inspired the most wonderful thoughts — images of pain and suffering that have strangely delighted him. He goes back when he can, but it's getting harder to sustain the visions. The police have tried to keep him away, but now others join him in collecting the tears. Soon, they'll all know the truth. They'll all know the nature of sacrifice.

- **Theresa Sinclair-Moore:** Theresa recently ditched her waste of a husband (her fourth, each more pathetic than the last), but her lawyers didn't get her much more than a bunch of worthless stocks. Or at least they seemed worthless. Except now they're steadily rising. It's only pennies a day, but, with all those shares, it's getting her quite excited. Her sister (that idiot crystal-waver) says it's some karmic thing tied to the offerings at the statue. She's probably wrong, but just in case, Theresa's going to encourage her housekeeping staff to go down to the statue and leave a few little things — buttons, yarn, whatever. Will that be enough? Or is bigger truly better?

- **Carla Strezewski:** Carla had a stroke five years ago. It left her with poor motor functions, and she hasn't been able to vocalize anything more than incoherent mumbling since. Until now. She can talk again. She's regained some motor function. A couple days ago, she sat down at her first family dinner since the stroke! And she knows what the source is. Oh, the family doesn't want to hear it. They always tell her she's got so many "silly superstitions," but it's that "Weeping Alice." The statue is crying, and people are leaving things again like in the old legends. People will realize it soon enough.

Stories

This setting is about the need for sacrifice, about how all good things do not come free. All of the stories below regard the point at which the means outweigh the ends (for some, at least). Each story stands alone, although they could coincide, portraying an array of events surrounding the statue. You could also have almost any other story underway in town, and evoke the power of this setting in the background. Characters might be involved in (or plagued by) ghostly or otherworldly forces when somebody kills himself at the statue. They may then hear bits and pieces about the miraculous phenomena occurring, and wonder if it's tied to their current problems. While this approach requires juggling two or more plots, it's a good way to "sneak" this setting into play.

Lethal Escalation

The act of offering things to the status is relatively harmless. A handful of nickels here, a favorite toy there. Of course, it all started with a suicide, but people don't like to think about the bad side of things. Why worry about



events you have no control over? Besides, if that person committed suicide, he got what he wanted, right? Unfortunately, the attitude of ignoring the bad while seeking the good sets a dangerous precedent. The intensity of offerings escalates. Someone leaves a few dead pigeons. A few days later, people find a cat, its throat slit, draped over the statue's shoulder. A hog is butchered there at midnight. They're horrible acts, and yet the town is doing well. There's an unspoken commitment to ignorance, a quiet understanding of "If *that's* what it takes." But then, over the days and weeks that follow, it gets worse. After some more cats and a golden retriever (surrounded by the same smattering of coins, bottle caps and other small items), someone murders a homeless man at the base of the statue. Again, it's awful, but, as the saying goes, ignorance is bliss. Do characters stand in the way of this lethal craze? What happens when one of their friends or family ends up at the sacrificial statue? What happens when the next victim is a child? Can characters learn to accept these grisly examples of how the end justifies the means?

The Authorities

It's important to gauge exactly how local authorities deal with the offerings at the statue. At first, they're harmless, but as items pile up, the police may order folks to move along and have public-works employees clean up. Does the local chamber of commerce get involved? Do they meet with an alderman to discourage police interference? Eventually, in accordance with the horror of the setting, the sacrifices escalate and turn scary. Cops surely want to get involved, but what if the chief's son makes a surprising recovery from a serious illness like leukemia? Do some cops try to clamp down while others follow the chief and attempt to protect any and all offerings? Where do characters fit in? Do they secretly help one side of the police against the other? Do the police invent trumped-up charges to get characters thrown in the drunk tank for days or even weeks? Ultimately, the authorities should be around to complicate characters' efforts, but not to wholly stop the progression of events at the statue.

Mindless Throng

The tears running from Alice's eyes are a curious phenomenon. People collect and drink them, and some claim they cause visions and euphoria. People even seem addicted to the tears, coming back daily. Also addictive is the act of sacrificing. People grow attached to the idea that they give away little parts of themselves (or of other

people) for the greater good. At first, it seems like no big thing. Folks come and go. The statue is surrounded by people at most hours of the day (and some in the night). But soon, the numbers grow. More and more people attend the statue, offering items and licking the tears from its stony face. They grow wide-eyed and slack-jawed. Some speak in tongues. Others have ecstatic seizures. Do characters themselves get addicted? Or do they attempt to curtail the growing obsession, knowing that such manic infatuation is no longer helping the town, but *hurting* it? Can they stop the movement before the crowds grow too large? What happens when the crowd goes from two dozen to four dozen? From 50 to 100 overnight? These people aren't dead, but they sure act like zombies. Soon, the mindless throng leaves the statue for a time, desperate to offer *new* things to glorious Weeping Alice. Will they invade hospitals looking for invalids to sacrifice? Do they attack pets and their owners? How do characters stop this mass hysteria?

John Carl Kane

In this story, it's assumed that townsfolk do not have the will or desperation to offer "sensitive" offerings (animals and humans). Oh, some think about it, but none are willing to take that step. Except one man. John Carl Kane becomes something of a serial killer for the town. He stalks families at night, and kidnaps children and teenagers to surrender to Weeping Alice. He packs their mouths with silk, slits their bodies open and stuffs them with dried flowers. He does it about once a month, though the frequency probably increases over time as he grows to love what he does. He's a killer, a terrible menace, at least in theory. Publicly, the town speaks out against his atrocities, and people hide in fear. Privately, a lot of folks believe that he does it for them. He's taking the bullet that they won't, because this John Carl Kane knows the meaning of sacrifice and hard work! Do characters accept this madness to a point? Or do they attempt to track and capture the elusive killer (who somehow manages to evade most investigation and leaves bodies at the statue regardless of who is after him). What happens when characters find out that the police aren't doing all they can? The authorities have a "hard time" catching the killer, destroying evidence and compromising crime scenes seemingly on purpose.

Opposition

Once characters realize that something strange is going on, they might take steps against the statue. Maybe they try to stop the weeping, steal some of the offerings or keep people from the statue. Perhaps characters are local police, firemen or even those of native heritage who have heard the awful legends. Once they speak out against the statue or stage some kind of opposition, the locals agree that the characters' disruptions are unacceptable. Characters' pets disappear. Their tires are slashed, mailboxes are destroyed and windows are broken. Some of their own possessions are stolen and left at the statue. Do the characters fight back? Do they become paranoid and lash out

(even at people who are not involved)? Does the passive-aggressive war escalate to the point where people carry concealed weapons “just in case?” How can characters shake this loose federation of locals? Does destroying the statue break the spell, or does it only stir the hornets’ nest?

Investigation

Here, players get the chance to portray characters who have less personal and more professional investments in local events. They’re investigators of some kind. The phenomena warrant a great deal of exploration from a number of sources. Police might have to get involved. People surely steal other’s stuff to use as offerings, and others sacrifice pets and people, acts that demand police investigation. Journalists from fringe or Internet sources may get involved to detail the so-called miracle as well as the general weirdness surrounding it. Local religious figures may show interest. Weeping Alice isn’t a religious icon, but miracles fall under the auspices of faith and spirituality. Other types of investigators might be writers, documentary filmmakers or even professional skeptics whose careers are dedicated to debunking the supernatural.

Characters are the same kinds of investigators or different ones all converging on the setting. Can they work together? If some are from town and some are not, do the locals have a vested interest in keeping the miracle safe? What happens when sacrifices get out of control? Do the objective-observer characters feel compelled to intercede? Do they take a more proactive — and potentially violent — role?

Territory

Someone claims control of the statue — and, by proxy, its offerings. Local dirty police, the bureau of land management or even a gang might claim authority or possession. They allow offerings, but at a cost or for favors. Such a group doesn’t care about the “greater good,” only about personal power and wealth. Do characters pay the price? Or are they the ones who take control of the statue? Do locals roll over, or can characters rile them up and make the statue publicly accessible? Do several groups fight over the territory? Gang versus police, gang versus gang, rich land developers versus a mob of homeless? This kind of story shows that not everybody is willing to be egalitarian about the statue’s supernatural effects. When everyone’s prosperous, all become equal in a way. And in this country — where capitalism reigns in a supposed meritocracy — rewards are doled out to a few elite shepherds, not the herd.

Delusions

For a variation in theme, perhaps the whole affair — the miracle of the tears, the effects of the offerings, the visions — isn’t real. Something in the water or food supply, or even in the air itself causes mass hallucination. The town is real, as is the statue and the act of offering. When someone sacrifices a child — that’s unfortunately genu-

ine. What isn’t real are all the seemingly supernatural effects that occur. People are being mind-controlled, the characters included. But it’s the characters who eventually see reality revealed. Maybe the tears (or tap water) contain unusual fungi or other natural psychedelics (peyote, mescaline). Or possibly people from out of town don’t experience the effects. They don’t see the tears, they don’t feel any different and they don’t notice any improvement at all (that is, until they start drinking the water). Has a local factory started putting something in the water table, whether by accident or on purpose? Has the descendent of a native shaman decided to harness his nascent power and *truly* curse the town? Or is the land itself hungry for sacrifice and it simply fools the pliable townsfolk to get what it wants? Once characters realize the truth, they may want to do something to stop it or get out of town. Can they convince locals of the truth? Is there some way to purify the environment or do they have to destroy whatever source causes the delusions?

The Hungry Land

The very land is alive. It’s aware and *ravenous*. This story allows characters to take a combat-oriented approach to the problem. Assume that the lead-in is still the same. There’s a suicide, then some minor offerings and some seemingly unconnected town prosperity. Over time, offerings escalate, pets and people get hurt and crowds gather at the statue. At this point, however, the land has more power than it’s ever had. It has a whole town or city feeding it. The land is no longer metaphorically alive, but quite literally reveals a gaping, hungry maw. The trick is to keep this manifestation subtle — it shouldn’t just open in the middle of town and start eating people. It might materialize somewhere outside of town (keep in mind it’s not the statue or town center that’s corrupt, but the whole *region*). Or maybe it shows up in the sewers or in the sub-basement of a local parking garage, airport or high school. Or it might manifest spiritually. Only people who drink the tears can see it or fight it. Some locals actively venerate the force. What do characters do? Fight the locals? Attack the mouth itself? Or do they just try to escape town, an act made all the more difficult by zealous cultists?

Ending it

Any of the stories listed above (or any you come up with) are likely to feature characters seeking to end the horror. They may or may not want to end the *miracle* itself. Ostensibly, a miracle is a good thing. And yet, the town simply cannot get *enough* of a good thing, and the sacrifices worsen as the locals get weirder and more protective about their crying statue. If characters want to end the madness, what are their options?

Destroying Alice

Destroying the statue is one option. It’s arguably the most obvious. So, what happens if characters try it?



The town *loves* the statue. Now that someone has killed himself at it, the townsfolk remember what Alice represents to them. They intuitively know that she grants them favors and allows them to prosper. She is their martyr, their patroness. During daylight hours, people line up to see the miracle and leave behind a few tokens. At night, locals offer strange and grotesque sacrifices. Should characters find a time when nobody's at the statue (or are able to somehow keep people away for a time), attacking it still makes a lot of noise, regardless of whether they hit it with sledgehammers or rig explosives. No matter what happens, characters meet bodily resistance. Locals stand in their way. Cops try to arrest them. Someone might even try to kill the characters and sacrifice them to the statue! To locals, attacking the statue is the same as attacking the town.

Say characters destroy the statue. Then what? While you can certainly allow this to end the phenomena, it probably shouldn't. Consider that long ago, the town might have stoned people to death before the Weeping Alice statue ever came along. Natives before that may have sacrificed their weak, sick or old there. The power is in the land itself, not in the statue (though the statue remains an avatar for such supernatural energy).

Destroying the statue might have one effect: people might stop sacrificing there for a time. Although supernatural power is tied to the land and not strictly to the statue... the locals don't know that. They might stop sac-

rificing. Or they might not. They might still make offerings to the wreckage of their beloved Weeping Alice while a mob goes after the perpetrators. If the mob can't identify the perpetrators, can the characters stand idly by while a scapegoat suffers?

Weeping Alice

"Weeping Alice" is a marble statue of a young girl in a pleading stance. The figure stands atop a circular brick base and is (base included) 11 feet tall and five feet wide at its broadest (arms outstretched). The monument has the following traits:

Durability 2, Size 9, Structure 11, Damage 2

Assuming a character has the time or inclination to damage the statue, roll for the attack (likely Strength + Weaponry + a weapon or tool bonus, though Strength + Crafts + tool bonus may be similarly applicable). Each success achieved in excess of the statue's Durability reduces the object's Structure. Obliterating all of its Structure points reduces the statue to rubble. Should a character use explosives to damage the statue, refer to p.137 and p.179 in the **World of Darkness Rulebook**.

Control the Offerings

Another option in solving the local problem is moderating the nature of offerings made. If townsfolk would just donate the bare minimum — objects instead of corpses — the place could prosper, and none would be harmed.

Of course, *how* characters accomplish this is the question. If they're police, they might be able to patrol the statue. They can certainly attempt to regulate the sacrifices from the shadows. But what happens when a mob shows up with a wriggling child gagged with duct tape? Or if the characters are lured away so that a few sly townsfolk can sneak in and hack up somebody's german shepherd? The point is, even if characters can moderate or deny such offerings, someone always tries to offer Alice something bigger and better. Something with a pulse.

How can characters show the townsfolk that there's a price to their sacrifices? Can they do something to shake locals' perceptions? Does it require the sacrifice of a complete innocent (a child, perhaps)? Does someone who was once revered by the neighborhood or city have to fall victim to citizens' fervor? Something has to be done to show the locals the madness at hand. Perhaps characters are required to act like the Alice of so long ago and sacrifice themselves to the land to break the spell.

Abstract Solutions

Characters might also seek abstract solutions in an effort to stem the horror. No matter which method is used,

the outcome of the story should never be shiny-happy. The characters have to either stop the madness entirely or have to live with some "acceptable" degree of evil to allow the greater good to prevail.

- Characters take control of the sacrifices, and, like the native tribe long ago, allow only *certain* sacrifices. The sick, the elderly, criminals. Of course, with the town's reclaimed prosperity, both sickness and crime diminish, raising the question of who to sacrifice next.

- Characters seek some kind of occult solution. They pore through mystical or religious texts (in libraries or on the Internet) in an effort to attempt some kind of amateur banishment of the area's power. It isn't easy, of course, and is likely to have a number of side effects when characters clumsily wield power beyond their control.

- Characters stage a guerilla campaign to undermine people's faith in the statue. They leave garbage out as offerings, perform criminal acts or otherwise try to make the town look bad.

- Characters attempt to sacrifice a truly evil man to the statue. Does sacrificing such human evil cause supernatural offense? Does it cause painful repercussion throughout the community? Or does it still work its magic and help the town prosper?

- Characters try to "poison the well" in a different way. Maybe they sacrifice something so foul or damaging that the land becomes spiritually tainted, and the supernatural effect is killed. What kinds of offerings are so foul? Disease-ridden livestock? Biological waste (feces, infected blood, bags of rotten fat)?



Hillcrest Center for Elder Living

Summary

The Hillcrest Center for Elder Living is a self-contained home for senior citizens. Its services range from the bare minimum — where seniors simply live in apartments attached to the Center — to intensive and possibly unique care for seniors requiring round-the-clock medical attention.

You can use the Center and its residents for a variety of purposes. Hillcrest varies from many of the other mysterious places in this book in that it isn't itself inherently supernatural. Instead, some of the residents, staff and visitors are exposed to the supernatural. They may drive stories or be foils, Contacts or Allies within your chronicle.

The easiest hook for a story at the Hillcrest Center is for a member of the group to have a parent, grandparent or other aged relative residing therein. The apartment levels are affordable for a middle-class senior couple, and wealthy seniors live there as well. As described below, several residents were involved in crime in the mid-to-late 20th century. Reporters and police investigating old cases might trace a lead to Hillcrest. To turn things on their ear, an elder character might actually live at the facility.

Although it seems calm, pleasant and even soporific on the surface, Hillcrest is a desperate setting, filled with bastards and bitches at the ends of their lives. A few of them seek redemption for past crimes. Others hear Death's knock and are prepared to do anything to avoid Final Judgment.

Depending on your needs, Hillcrest can be located either in the countryside or in a city. If the former, it is surrounded by about 50 acres of well-tended parkland. If it's in the city, the building is located in a mixed-use neighborhood (some commercial, some residential). In either case, it is a five-story building, wide and squat, in a functional 1950s style.

History

Every character knows (or can easily learn) the basic information provided in the first paragraph of the summary above. Various other pieces of information can be gleaned from Contacts or Allies, or through research.

Intelligence + Streetwise rolls can provide the following information:

Dramatic Failure: The place is a Mob hangout. Nobody's in there who isn't "made."

Failure: No more information than listed in the summary.

Success: The Center was built in the 1950s as a retirement home for members of the DiGelli crime family. The idea was a disaster. In 1958, four Mafiosi who'd never gotten along in the first place were killed in a shootout not far from the building. The Hillcrest Shootout nearly closed the Center, but it was bought and sold and sold again. In the end, the Center survived by focusing on more peaceful clientele and satisfying special needs for special clients.

Dramatic Success: No one is entirely sure who owns the Center at this point. It is managed by a Ms. Carla Patrick, who allegedly takes orders by letter through a law firm.

*It is autumn; not
without*

*but within me is the
cold.*

*Youth and spring
are all about;*

*It is I that have
grown old.*

*— Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow, "Autumn
Within"*

Intelligence + Occult rolls can provide the following information:

Dramatic Failure: The place is full of vampires. The entire closed-off fifth floor? Vampires. They feed on other residents when they wake up at night. They're the ones who own the place.

Failure: There's nothing unusual about the Hillcrest Center from a mystical perspective.

Success: There are a few spirits lurking around Hillcrest. The ghosts of the Mafiosi who died in the late '50s are nowhere to be seen, though.

Dramatic Success: The entire structure of the building is adorned in a wide variety of oracular motifs. The architecture is Greek, the décor a peculiar mix of Asian astrology and early Victorian spiritualism. You never have to open a door yourself — someone always seems to get there ahead of you. This place expects you.

Intelligence + Investigation rolls can provide the following information regarding criminal activity:

Dramatic Failure: No information, but Carla Patrick becomes aware through contacts that someone is investigating the Center.

Failure: No information.

Success: There have been a few recent deaths at the Center, but that's to be expected in a home for the aged. There have been a few stranger deaths in the vicinity — one involving sexual abuse and mutilation, and one in which the body was partially devoured by animals.

Dramatic Success: A long-suspected Mafia hitman by the name of Marc Rocca lives at the Center.

Layout

The Center is a five-story building, with parking either onsite (if the Center is in a rural setting) or at discount rates in a garage nearby (in the city). In the second case, there is no parking garage or underground parking available on the grounds — even managers Mr. Hillenbrand and Ms. Patrick park outside.

The basement is clean and well lit, with a huge boiler dating back 50 years, along with more modern equipment. No corpses hidden here.

The first floor is filled with administrative offices, public visiting areas and the security center, all mundane. To enter the building, visitors must pass a guard desk. During daytime hours, this is no challenge. Nighttime visitors must enter with a resident or be allowed in by a resident. There is a loading dock and freight elevator in the back of the building. These are kept locked after hours and are watched by a camera at all times.

Security is an ongoing concern at Hillcrest, as an unusually high number of residents have security concerns of some kind. Security staff is well trained (see below), and there are cameras in public cafeterias and stairwells. There's a restaurant (the "Hill House Café") open to the public and residents on the first floor, as well as a convenience store (the "Hillcrest Handi-Stop") and pharmacy for residents. Doctors and registered nurses are on call at all times.

The second and third floors are dedicated to apartments of one to three bedrooms with their own kitchens. These are for mostly self-sufficient residents. There is also one restaurant on each of these floors (the "Meadowlane" on two, and the "Hillcrest World Café," on three).

The second floor has a number of residents with violent tendencies. Security on this floor is more concerned with protecting residents from one another than from external threats. Georgia Jackson (see p. 90) lives on the second floor, along with a flock of admirers (Christopher Scott, Harry Evans, Daniel Forrest and Dale Reed). These four men in particular see one another as rivals: Harry Evans' wife Reba mistrusts Georgia Jackson as a result. Rivalries on the second floor could erupt over a bridge game or simmer for weeks at a time.

The fourth floor is dedicated to assisted living, with nursing staff available across the floor. There is a restaurant (the "Bistro"), or meals are delivered. The fourth floor is less like an apartment building for the aged and more like the traditional idea of a nursing home. Fourth West is a ward almost entirely composed of patients who cannot care for themselves directly and who need round-the-clock or waking-hour care.

The fifth floor is for "special-needs residents" — wealthy clients who can demand whatever they like from a staff prepared to give them almost anything. Marc Rocca and Mary Lewis (described below) both live on the fifth floor, but this floor can also serve as a catchall. Need the building to house a vampire? Put it on "5."

Fourth Floor West

Officially, the ward "Fourth West" is known as the Total Care Unit. Among staff, however (out of earshot of residents, visitors or Ms. Patrick herself), it's most often called "Ms. Patrick's Garden," or simply "The Garden." All residents of Fourth West are in vegetative states and deemed medically "unrecoverable." These patients require constant, extensive and very expensive medical attention to stave off death. Most are sustained by fortunes built in life. Similarly, most have no kin or heirs to speak of. That is, no one to come to their rescue and grant them the sweet release of death. They are assets, guaranteed streams of revenue for as long as the staff can keep their hearts and lungs working well enough to satisfy inspecting physicians (paid a generous stipend by the Center) who come once a week to verify residents' health.

Though certainly reprehensible, cruel and cold-heartedly cynical, the bilking of those unable to speak out for themselves isn't the strangest thing going on in Fourth West. In addition to orders to cultivate and maintain her "cash crop" of wealthy invalids, Ms. Patrick has been directed by her superiors to accommodate in all ways a small staff of transcriptionists.

At all times there are at least three and as many as seven reporters, all dressed in the same distinctive purple scrubs, on duty on the floor. Their responsibilities, as far as Ms. Patrick can discern, consist solely of transcribing every utterance her "turnips" make. If there is more to

their functions, Patrick has not been able to discern it. It was made clear early on that these agents were in no way beholden to her, and they exist entirely outside the scope of her authority. That galls her to no end and she has sought some way to discover what their purpose is since their assignment here at Hillcrest. Transcriptionists arrive for their shifts without fanfare, go directly to the ward and work without interruption or comment. They leave precisely eight hours later, taking their work with them when they are replaced by the next shift. No recording devices of any kind are permitted on or off the floor. The medical staff is under strict orders to remain utterly silent outside the confines of the nurses' station, and to speak only as loudly and as often as absolutely necessary at it.

Three months after the transcription staff arrived, Patrick convinced one of the aides assigned to the floor to steal one of the many notebooks they fill. A week after the aide succeeded, he was found raped and murdered in his bed. The notebook, which Patrick had hidden in a small safe in her home, was retrieved, and a note was left in its place with just two words on it: "No peeking." She has not tried to interfere with the recorders since, but hasn't stopped scheming to do so. The little that she did see of their work was written in a form of shorthand with which she was unfamiliar. What little she could make out seemed like nothing more than gibberish, but she's convinced there's more to it than that.

Security

The few visitors to Fourth West are required to make an appointment in advance. Only close kin and those granted legal guardianship of residents are permitted. All doors in or out are locked and require a key card to open. All residents are equipped with anklets that set off an alarm when brought within 10 feet of an exit. The alarm automatically sets off an audible alert at the nurses' station and invalidates all key cards until such time as the director herself disables it. Notably, there are no cameras of any kind on the floor. (See above regarding recording devices.)

The Real Deal

Fourth West is, among other things, a divination tool. Its accuracy and effectiveness are matters ripe for speculation, but it is clear that Patrick's benefactors believe it to be worth considerable investment and concern. The product of the transcriptionists' labor is collected, collated, indexed and interpreted by a large staff of professionals on a daily basis. The prophetic mechanism does not seem to be particularly dependent on the patients themselves, but on their condition. Despite the staff's best efforts, residents do die. When that happens, one is simply rolled out and replaced shortly thereafter by another in a similar state. To what end these products are directed is up for grabs. Do they use them to chart the ebb and flow of financial markets and maximize their own profits? Do they use them to plot the course of some impending apocalypse? Do they offer the fruits of their harvest to any who have the means, financial or otherwise, to pay for the privilege?

Regardless of how the patients are used, it is clear that the powers behind the Hillcrest Center for Elder Living are more than willing to go to great lengths to protect them. Those who would seek to "liberate" the prophecies and prognostications made by the residents of Fourth West are wise to do so with the utmost care and caution. A healthy measure of gall doesn't hurt, either.

Systems

Breaking in

The Center is open to the public during the day. Visitors must sign in at a desk manned by a guard, but are otherwise free to come and go as they please on the first two floors.

At night, Hillcrest is closed to the public. Residents have their own keys, and characters may be able to break in or steal a resident's keys.

Stealing a resident's keys shouldn't be hard in theory. A purse-snatching, pickpocket or mugging would work. Unless the characters perform a con of some sort or otherwise keep a victim from realizing that her keys have been taken, the mark alerts police and/or security. Such attention is sure to make characters' lives far harder at the home than they would have otherwise been.

Breaking in after dark forces the characters to overcome locks and alarms on exterior doors, and to move around the building stealthily. A small medical staff is on duty after hours (mostly on the fourth and fifth floors), but the bottom three floors are quiet. Administrative offices on the first floor are closed at night, and those belonging to Mr. Hillenbrand, Ms. Patrick and Dr. Johnson are locked.

Guards roam the halls in the evenings, usually on solitary rounds. A circuit of the building takes about 40 minutes, and a guard makes the trip every hour or so. Unless a character appears to belong (that is, appears to be over 55), a guard who notices any characters stops them, attempts to figure out what they're doing and tries to escort them out of the building.

System: It's trivial to enter the building during the day. Only if characters make idiots of themselves, going in and out of the building repeatedly or otherwise calling attention does the day guard even notice them. No roll to enter is necessary.

Should characters try to steal keys from a resident, few old folks have Brawl dice pools exceeding three.

Guards are typical Security Guards as per p. 204 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**. An exceptionally unlucky character may encounter Mr. Hillenbrand or Ms. Patrick, described below.

Breaking through the building's exterior locks requires 10 successes on an extended Dexterity + Larceny roll (see p. 74 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Coming through roof-service hatchways is much easier (only five total successes are required in the Larceny action), but requires a way onto the roof (which calls for a total of six successes in an extended Strength + Athletics action to climb up; ziplines, helicopters and other gear provide



modifiers at your discretion). A contested Dexterity + Stealth versus Wits + Composure roll is also required to avoid alerting guards on the fifth floor.

Faking a Way in

With the various illicit activities going on at Hillcrest, there's a great deal of staff turnover as employees get involved, are caught and are fired (or they see something they can't rationalize and quit in fear). Employee turnover usually occurs on the lowest levels, among orderlies, kitchen staff, registration-desk attendants and, occasionally, security. Residents provide pressure to maintain a reasonable staff level. After all, the majority of residents are self-sufficient (and well-off), so they could leave the Center in favor of a home more to their liking.

Hillcrest remains a for-profit enterprise, so keeping resident levels high is important to the Center's management. This in turn leads managers to be somewhat slipshod when it comes to hiring temporary employees. The Center doesn't hire anyone obviously incompetent or dangerous, but federally required background checks and referral calls are almost always faked or glossed over.

Indeed, faces and names change so quickly in certain staff areas that a character could easily pass himself off as an employee.

System: If a character tries to fake her way into a temp job, her player needs to succeed at a contested roll of Wits + Subterfuge versus a hiring manager's Wits + Subterfuge (four dice). Neither references nor backgrounds are checked. Success results in the character being offered a job. Exceptional success guarantees an offer on the spot. Failure results in a "Not now, thanks," while only a dramatic failure results in the hiring manager getting suspicious about the applicant.

A character trying to pass herself off as an employee is subject to the disguise rules (Wits + Subterfuge; see p. 87 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Characters caught away by supervisors from their assigned duty areas may have to make successful fast-talk actions (Manipulation + Persuasion) to avoid further suspicion (p. 83 of the rulebook).

Characters

Marc Rocca

Quote: "That was a long time ago. I don't do that anymore."

Background: Marc Rocca retired from the Mob about six years ago, when the life finally got to him. He was a killer — one of the best. He nailed about 15 guys over the years and was never caught. Hell, he was taken in for questioning only once, and then because they thought his cousin might have done it.

But it got to him. Fifteen guys dead. Sure, they were bad guys. They were nasty motherfuckers. Every one of them deserved what they got. But it ate at him. Fifteen lives. He smoked too much and drank too much to cover it up, but he saw those 15 guys no matter which bar he stumbled into.

So he gave it up and walked away. God knows he made enough money, and he *was* getting old. Younger guys wanted to be him. He decided to let them. He extracted a promise from his uncles that they would let him go so long as he stayed walked-away.

Now he plays poker with insurance salesmen from Buffalo. Father Mike from the local church tells him he's gotta make peace with his past if he wants God to forgive him. Father Mike's the first guy who's believed that God might forgive him if he really, really repented. So Marc is trying. It's a pain in the ass.

Description: Rocca is a thick-set, aging Italian whose poise, choice of dress and general look combine to scream "made man." He laughs that off and pretends to enjoy *The Sopranos* with all the guys on the second floor.

Storytelling Hints: Rocca is an expert marksman, but he isn't willing to get involved in characters' disputes, whether on their side or another. He does keep some weapons on-site, because he doesn't trust his uncles to keep their bargain. Characters looking for instruction in shooting or sneaking may be referred to Rocca by contacts in the Mob, but Rocca is extremely leery of such arrangements. Characters must earn his trust before they can get his instruction.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3, Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Presence 2, Manipulation 1, Composure 4

Skills: Academics 1, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Crafts 1, Drive 2, Firearms (Sniper Shot) 4, Intimidation 2, Investigation (Casing a Target) 2, Larceny 3, Medicine 2, Politics 1, Socialize 1, Stealth 3, Streetwise (Mob) 2, Subterfuge 1, Weaponry 1

Merits: Contacts (Police, Mob) 2, Danger Sense, Resources 2, Quick Draw, Status (Mob) 2

Willpower: 7

Morality: 4

Virtue: Temperance

Vice: Pride

Initiative: 7

Defense: 3

Speed: 10

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Range	Shots	Special	Dice Pool
Heavy	3	30/60/120	7+1		10
Pistol					
Rifle	5	200/400/800	5+1	Tele- -scopic Sight	12

Health: 7

Derangements: Depression (mild), Avoidance (mild)

Victor Allen

Quote: "I remember you. Would you like a piece of candy?"

Background: For 26 years, Victor Allen ran the Corner Stop, a soda-and-porn corner store in the city's downtown. A typical independent convenience store, the Cor-

ner Stop's magazine shelves were well stocked, the coffee was fresh-brewed and there was plenty of cheap candy. After 26 years, Victor decided he'd saved up enough money to realize his life's dream. He sold the store, bought an RV and traveled the country, kidnapping and murdering young girls for his sexual gratification.

He was never caught. Most nights he was in and out of town, the deed done, well before the authorities even realized that a girl was missing. Nineteen girls died all over the country throughout Allen's 10 years of wandering. He ranged far enough between attacks that no one ever connected the dots.

Now even that's done. He's retired to a nice home for old folks, believing himself able to control his urges. He's wrong.

Description: Allen is in his early 70s, but his round face is unlined. He's mostly bald now and wears an ingratiating smile when first introduced. He isn't good at conversation with adults and tends to resort to "Gotta go!" after just a minute or two.

Storytelling Hints: Victor believes himself to be stronger than he really is. If police or others show up and he believes that he's being investigated, he makes grandiose plans such as kidnapping a child or staffer to buy his freedom and overcome his "attackers." In practice, however, he may lack the gumption to carry out such plans — a good Intimidation roll scares him into surrendering or fleeing.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 1, Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Skills: Academics (Retail Business) 1, Athletics 1, Brawl (Grappling) 1, Computer 1, Crafts 1, Drive 1, Empathy 2, Expression 2, Intimidation 1, Larceny 1, Medicine 1, Persuasion (Children) 3, Socialize 1, Stealth 1, Subterfuge 2, Survival 1, Weaponry 1

Merits: Eidetic Memory, Resources 2

Willpower: 4

Morality: 2

Virtue: Fortitude

Vice: Lust

Initiative: 5

Defense: 2

Speed: 10

Health: 7

Derangements: An array of psychosexual disorders

Mr. Hillenbrand

Quote: "Please step outside, sir. I don't want to get the police involved. I'm sure you don't, either."

Background: Michael Hillenbrand grew up in a fundamentalist evangelical-Christian household. By any plausible standard, his childhood was one of abuse and humiliation. His unstable parents took the least disobedience as a sin against Christ, and punished Michael far out of proportion to the severity of his offenses.

In adulthood, Hillenbrand has drifted out to more and more radical branches of Christianity, and at this point might well be considered a cult of one. He believes in an angry, cleansing God, and awaits a second deluge to sweep away the wicked of the earth. He masks these fervent beliefs with a calm hospitality. Most of the time, anyway.

Hillenbrand is director of security at the Hillcrest Center, and his solemn authority prevents security issues from getting too far out of hand. He defers to Ms. Patrick in most matters, but is quick to take control of a situation if she is unavailable.

Description: Severely underfed in his youth, Hillenbrand remains gaunt today despite his height (he is well over six feet tall). His voice is mortuarial in most circumstances, and he moves swiftly and calmly even when a security matter is at hand. Only when truly enraged or in the throes of religious ecstasy does he betray any emotion.

Storytelling Hints: Hillenbrand represents top-level security at Hillcrest, but he isn't the only security presence. Most of the rest of the Center's officers are the equivalent of security guards (see **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 204).

Hillenbrand isn't entirely ignorant of the supernatural, but his own involvement with it is extremely limited, taking the form of his obsession with the blood of Christ and its redemptive power. Approximately once a week, he takes some of the blood drawn from residents before it's sent out for tests. The staff is aware of the missing samples or seeming discrepancies, but chocks it up to negligence. If suspicion does arise, Hillenbrand will be put in charge of the case, when the disappearances will stop thanks to his "thorough" efforts. He will then be driven to acquire blood from other sources. Hillenbrand uses the blood in religious rituals performed at his home. These typically have no supernatural effect, but they do occasionally take unexpected turns (see below).

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 3, Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4, Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

Skills: Academics 1, Athletics 2, Computer 1, Brawl 2, Drive 1, Firearms 1, Intimidation 2, Investigation 2, Occult (Christianity) 2, Weaponry 2

Merits: Giant, Resources 2

Willpower: 5

Morality: 5

Virtue: Justice

Vice: Wrath

Initiative: 4

Defense: 2

Speed: 10

Health: 10

Ms. Patrick

Quote: "I assure you that Hillcrest's staff is cooperating fully with the police to investigate this matter."

Background: Carla Patrick is the director of the Hillcrest Center. She doesn't own the facility, but manages

it on behalf of its owners, whose identity she doesn't know in any detail. Should any special instructions come to her from the owner(s), they're passed via a local law firm. For the most part she's on her own, which suits Patrick just fine.

She had a relatively ordinary childhood, punctuated only by her own bouts of ruthlessness as she manipulated other children into giving her what she wanted, whether they knew they were being manipulated or not. She chose to enter the army after graduation, and gravitated toward the military police.

Her outstanding work among the MPs led her to work at a few internment camps for captured enemy troops, where she learned how to extract information from detainees without leaving the least hint of injury.

Upon leaving the military about three years ago, she got an offer to run Hillcrest without any indication as to who set her up or why she'd been chosen. She has grown into the position, positively thriving on her influence over the inmates — er, residents — and staff. Her interaction with the supernatural has, to date, been minimal — little more than occasional complaints from residents about screams and voices in the night.

Description: Patrick is a severe, sharp-faced woman who seems reluctant to allow a smile. She is slender and short, but hardly petite. She is still in excellent physical condition. Her voice crackles with a northeastern accent, but she rarely spares time for conversation with lower-level staff, visitors or ordinary residents, reserving her attention for those on the fifth floor.

Storytelling Hints: Patrick is the primary obstacle characters face when trying to solve problems posed by any Hillcrest residents. She doesn't trust outsiders and pays little attention to short-term staff — thereby inadvertently providing outsiders with a relatively easy way to become insiders.

Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 3, Resolve 3, Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Skills: Academics 2, Athletics 1, Brawl 2, Computer 1, Drive 2, Firearms 2, Intimidation 3, Larceny 2, Medicine 1, Occult 1, Persuasion 1, Politics 1, Stealth 2, Subterfuge 2, Weaponry 1

Merits: Fighting Style: Boxing 2, Mentor 3 (owners of the Center), Resources 3

Willpower: 6

Morality: 5

Virtue: Prudence

Vice: Greed

Initiative: 6

Defense: 3

Speed: 11

Health: 7

Ed Hill

Quote: "Youth is wasted on the young."

Background: Ed Hill spent three minutes dead five years ago. He doesn't really remember much of it. There

was no white light, just a big, yawning black chasm, and a sense of falling. Doctors brought him back with CPR. Ever since then he's been... tired. He doesn't sleep a lot, but has felt ever more strongly the tug of old age, and it has left him unusually lethargic.

Last year, Ed made a discovery. His wife's nephew, Brian, was visiting at Hillcrest. The boy had come for a wedding in town, and paid Uncle Ed and Aunt Karen a visit out of courtesy, but was fighting a cold at the time. He fell asleep on the couch while Karen was out shopping. Ed checked the boy for a fever — and saw Brian age before his eyes. Meanwhile, Ed himself felt invigorated. When he looked in the mirror, he saw Brian's face, 19 and full of life, and he saw ancient Ed asleep on the couch. Had he switched bodies with the boy? Or just stolen his youth? Ed had no idea, and didn't really care. He ran for the exit from the Center.

Ed spent the next couple weeks carousing around town — drinking, screwing women young enough to be his granddaughters and generally having a grand time. When the next new moon came, Ed found himself sagging and tired once again. He wasn't Brian anymore, and Brian was himself — having been all but trapped in Hillcrest for two weeks.

Karen was terrified and confused. Not only had her husband seemingly fallen horribly sick, and then was morose when he recovered, but news came that Brian had suddenly fallen into a catatonic state and died.

Ed has figured out how to repeat his performance just two other times — both times taking advantage of student lounges at the local university. He crept into the lounges very late at night and looked for sleeping students. Through these means he discovered that the new moon was the key. He afflicted the most recent student just one day after the new moon and had almost a full month in a youthful body.

What Ed doesn't know is that his victims do not acclimate to the change the way he does. The shock of waking up in an old man's body is a wound to their souls. At best, they might manage to croak out a few words. The weak ones — those who don't manage to assimilate the terrible jolt of the transformation at all — can't even control bladder or bowels. If the initial transformation is shocking, the return is even more so. Ed doesn't leave a clean house when he's drawn home. Most of his victims die within a week of returning to their bodies. And they're the fortunate ones. Those who live may as well have no life at all, either slipping into catatonic stupor, raving madly of a "violinist" and "being taken" or facing an array of people angry with the supposed perpetrator of various heinous acts.

Description: Ed Hill is an unattractive, short, balding white guy with a paunch and a limp. He's in his mid-70s, with a Chicago accent and an odor of Old Spice.

Storytelling Hints: Ed is only slightly remorseful about his actions. He has no idea where his gift comes from or if it's supposed to be "for" anything. He just isn't that self-analytical. Mentally, he's something of a 19-year-

old himself. He's got the ability to have fun now, and he wants to use it.

Karen is terribly frightened. After the first episode, she had them run every test in the book on her husband. Ed's inexplicable recovery was just one more baffling symptom of what the doctors could only call "non-specific, geriatric dementia." They advised her to put him in a ward and all but guaranteed future episodes. Clearly, they were correct. With each absence, Ed's lapses get longer. The only thing that prevents Karen from having him assigned to another floor of the Center is her own fear of being alone, and her stubborn refusal to admit that he's beyond her ability to help him. And even that withers with each month that he spends abroad.

Abilities:

Steal Youth — By placing his hand on the closed eyes of a sleeping mortal, Ed Hill can briefly take the victim's young body, forcing the target to take his old one. Ed gains none of the Mental or Social Attributes of a target (nor does the victim gain any of his). He gains none of the knowledge or Skills of the target. The effect lasts until the next new moon. Neither Ed nor his victims realize that if either of them dies while switched, the other dies when the effect ends at the next new moon.

Typical Hillcrest Resident

Quote: "I've fallen, and I can't get up!"

Background: She's lived a long and fruitful life, and now she's moved somewhere she can be comfortable in her old age. Or maybe her uncaring children and grandchildren have stuffed her in a home so they don't have to worry about her anymore. Regardless, at Hillcrest most of her needs are met, and she has peers her own age with whom to play cards (or flirt).

Description: She may be lively or barely alive. She's 55 years old or older. Fewer men than women survive past 70, but the Center is full of men and women who vary in energy and activity level. Social butterflies are active in numerous Center events, helping put up poster boards advertising Prostate Awareness Month after enjoying early-morning aerobics. Quiet or depressed residents just want a few years of peace.

Storytelling Hints: Residents of Hillcrest represent the gamut of human personality and interests. Many distrust strangers, while others are happy to chat at length with anyone who's got something interesting to say. Remember that residents have a lot of life experience under their belts and may be able to provide considerable wisdom or guidance. And yet, some are just crotchety old bastards who hate having their daily routines interrupted. Some residents of Hillcrest may even serve as Mentors.

Abilities:

Awareness (dice pool 4) — Residents' life experience has taught them plenty about human motivation, and they can glean quite a bit from brief observation.

Dr. Johnson

Quote: “We’ll get that EKG scheduled for you right away, Mrs. Connors.”

Background: Bob Johnson has never been the most ethical guy. He bribed other students in med school. He took bribes to provide prescription meds when he was a resident at a hospital. Now he’s happy to serve the highest bidder in his role as chief of medicine at Hillcrest.

Description: Johnson is in his early 40s, arrogant as hell, and still considers himself a catch. He’s single (after a second divorce) and flirts halfheartedly with wealthy patients.

Storytelling Hints: Johnson may be one of the characters’ best “ins” at the Center. He knows plenty about what goes on, and he’s utterly without scruples. So long as he’s confident that the secrets he betrays won’t be traced back to him, he’s happy to part with them for a few thousand dollars or the equivalent in favors from the well-connected. He’s been looking for an invite to the local downtown club....

Abilities:

Medicine (6 dice) — Whatever his faults, Johnson is an excellent doctor.

Georgia Jackson

Quote: “Oh darling, have you had a chance to read the latest from Samantha McFadden? *Shameless Prairie*? I cried my eyes out!”

Background: Georgia Jackson is a second-floor resident of Hillcrest. Sixty-seven and recently widowed, she’s one of the hottest catches there, and is happy to play the men of the Center against one another. She hasn’t felt so desirable (or desired) in years.

Georgia is a romantic at heart — something her departed Thomas never really understood or appreciated. She’s always got a convenience-store romance novel on hand, and weeps at all the right parts. Her fixation with romance has made her easy prey for Driala, a spirit of lust and manipulation. Driala (see below) hasn’t quite possessed Georgia yet, but it does give her ideas and pushes her in certain directions.

For now, Georgia has a stable of four men — mainly divorcees and widowers — whom she plays against each other: Christopher Scott (74, widower), Harry Evans (69, still married — lives in the Center with wife Reba), Daniel Forrest (age unknown, bachelor — see below) and Dale Reed (80, divorced). She hasn’t slept with any of them yet (“A little too old-fashioned,” she’d say), but Driala ushers her in that direction for reasons of its own.

Georgia isn’t entirely aware of Driala’s presence. She quietly believes that the spirit is nothing more than a dream that has unlocked her younger self.

Description: Georgia has auburn hair, glasses and far more laugh lines than any other sort. She is slender and quite attractive for her age. Her voice is low and holds a hint of a Southern accent.

Storytelling Hints: Georgia is just a vivacious old woman enjoying the sort of attention from single men that she hasn’t known in 40 years. She may well be a character’s mother or grandmother. Over time — unless someone interferes — Georgia is driven further and further by Driala, working her way through every conscious male she can get her hands on in order to appease the spirit. At the same time, her appearance and behavior become increasingly unearthly.

Abilities:

Empathy (dice pool 4) — Georgia considers herself to be particularly attuned to the emotional states of those around her, and genuinely feels an impact when a friend suffers.

Seduction (dice pool 4 or higher) — Her talents in seduction are a little rusty, but then, so are those of most of her playthings. When Driala helps, this pool improves considerably.

Driala

Background: The lust-spirit knows little of time or its own history. It knows it has possessed four other mortals in the past — three females and one male. It takes its power directly from the seed of mortal males. It has stolen its way into the mortal world once again and found a willing, if ignorant, host in Georgia Jackson. By hiding itself away from the Church and the most capable mortal hunters, Driala hopes to increase its power substantially before it’s forced to abandon its current host.

Description: When driven from its host, Driala appears as a translucent and nearly featureless female form, with greatly exaggerated breasts and hips (similar to mother-goddess statues found at ancient archeological sites).

Storytelling Hints: Driala has subtlety when it’s weak, but it quickly grows arrogant as it gains power. Driala has no idea that Daniel Forrest (see below) is not entirely mortal.

Attributes: Power 2, Finesse 4, Resistance 3

Willpower: 5

Morality: 4

Virtue: Faith

Vice: Lust

Initiative: 7

Defense: 4

Speed: 16

Size: 5 (special)

Corpus: 8

Numina: See the *World of Darkness Rulebook*, pp. 210-212, for all Numina not described in detail here.

• **Compulsion (1 Essence, 6 dice)** — Driala can force its chosen host to do as its commands, but it drains its power. This power works only on Driala’s chosen host.

• **Seduction (1-3 Essence, 1-6 dice)** — For every point of Essence spent, Driala can contribute up to two dice to its host’s Seduction dice pool.

• **Consumption** — When Driala's host consummates unprotected intercourse with a mortal male, the spirit steals one point of Willpower from the man and converts it to a point of Willpower of its own or three points of Essence. The male finds the experience to be pleasurable, if exhausting.

• **Possession (1 Essence, 10 dice)** — After Driala's host has allowed the spirit to use the Consumption Numen on four different males, it may possess the host fully. The spirit gains a +3 bonus on this attempt due to its previous close association with its host.

Mary Lewis

Quote: "..."

Background: Mary Lewis was hit by a limousine outside of a neighbor's funeral service in the late 1980s. She has been comatose ever since. She is now 94, yet her body shows no sign of weakness. Indeed, her heart, brain and lungs show remarkable vital signs. She simply can't wake up for long.

A trust set up long ago funds her continued stay in Fourth West. She seems to rouse every few months, occasionally opening her eyes or saying a few words. She is active just frequently enough that her grandchildren can't have her declared brain-dead and take her trust fund for themselves.

Mary isn't asleep, and isn't entirely comatose. Her spirit has been dislodged from her body, and she can't get back for more than a few minutes at a time, no matter how hard she tries. She'd like to return to her life, though by now nearly everyone she cares about is dead or thinks she is. At this point, she'd also accept dying and getting on to Heaven or whatever comes next.

Instead, she roams. Occasionally she finds a ghost or willing spirit with which to chat, but for the most part she watches mortals live their lives, never getting to live her own. It takes her months to build up the energy necessary to enter her body for even a few minutes. To her horror, when she does awaken she can't remember what's happened — just that something horrible occurred to her and it wouldn't stop. Her memories flood back when her time awake ends. It's as though her body now rejects her spirit entirely and wants nothing to do with it.

Description: A sleeping, wizened woman with a feeding tube taped to her mouth and numerous monitors attached to her body, Mary is otherwise quite healthy, especially considering her age.

Storytelling Hints: Characters with the Unseen Sight Merit attuned to ghosts or the dead may notice Mary's spirit, or notice that her spirit isn't in her body. If characters can figure out a way to genuinely communicate with her (perhaps allowing her to possess one of them), they meet a cantankerous old woman who is rather tired of being overlooked. Generally invisible and intangible, Mary's spirit may occasionally provide insight into problems that characters face. She doesn't face danger on their behalf, nor does she function as a one-woman detective agency for them. She is around occasionally to dispense

bits of wisdom and then wander off irritably. If the characters can figure out a way for her to re-enter her body for good, she is grateful for the rest of her life — all three months of it.

Abilities:

Awareness (5 dice) — By this time, Mary is used to poking her nose in wherever she feels like it. She has no compunctions about leaning into a private conversation if she finds it interesting. After all, all this time half-dead has shown her that just about no one notices her.

Occult (3 dice) — Mary's time as a half-ghost has taught her that there are ghosts and other spirits out there. She doesn't know much, but may occasionally be able to dispense a tidbit.

Daniel Forrest

Quote: "Why, aren't you a sight for sore eyes, my dear? Come give an old man a kiss, won't you?"

Background: Daniel Forrest doesn't remember where nor when he was born. He doesn't remember anything of his childhood. He has no recollection of his parents, nor whether or not he had any siblings. He does, however, distinctly remember voting for McKinley. He remembers the day Frank Poole died in the Battle of the Marne. He was in Peoria the day the Japs hit Pearl Harbor, and in Berlin when the bomb fell on Hiroshima. And he vividly recalls the way Martha Newman's liver tasted after he'd fried it up with onions and a red bell pepper.

Daniel Forrest has been alive a very long time. How long, not even he knows. He has a difficult time remembering anything before 1900, though there are bits and pieces that return to him quite vividly from time to time. He doesn't know how or why he's lived this long. He's not particularly strong or smart. He has no powers that he's aware of. He just keeps on living. And sometimes, he gets hungry.

As far as he can recall, he has killed eight people (other than those he killed in war, only one of whom he ate in a foxhole). He killed them, removed their kidneys, livers or hearts, and ate them. The fog of years prevents him from saying for certain where it all started, but the first one he recalls is Laura Miller, a sweet, beautiful dancehall girl in Boston, 1918. The hunger pangs drove him mad. It was over before he knew what happened.

He shipped out the next day. It was 20 years before he felt that hunger again. He held it off for a month before it overtook him, and then he murdered and ate Lonnie Kerrigan, who was walking home from his father's tavern in Chicago. By 1956, Daniel knew what to expect. He held off the hunger for three months while he hunted a likely meal. In 1971 he had taken up residence in Wilson's Home for the Aged in Duxbury, Massachusetts. His body had begun showing the years. Though his health never failed nor gave any indication that he was any closer to death, his hair went gray and his face grew seamed. Nature, or whatever passed for it in Daniel's case, had provided him with the perfect disguise. He lurked among those



on the edge of death, knowing that sooner or later his appetite would overtake him and he would need to feed. He smothered Larry Hilliard, a fellow resident, in his sleep in '73. Larry was 89 years old and spent most of his time strapped to a chair to keep him from wandering off and hurting himself. Though Daniel would never feel good about doing it, at least he could tell himself that what he did to Larry was mercy... after a fashion.

It has only recently occurred to Forrest that the lull between meals might have something to do with the vivacity of his victims. Since he began feeding exclusively on the elderly, his period of latency has shortened dramatically. In the past 25 years he has had to feed four times, the last just a year and a half ago, and he already feels the pangs again. His body just keeps on living, and his hunger keeps on growing.

Description: Tall and dapper. His hair, gray through and through, is still thick and lustrous. His blue eyes are moist and clear and the marvel of his lady friends. He dresses well, if modestly, and he's always smiling.

Storytelling Hints: Daniel Forrest is a good man, appetite aside. He is charming, affable and gracious. He is genuinely remorseful about what he's done over the years and fears what may come if he doesn't find a way to quench the terrible hunger growing in him now.

Daniel has never lacked for feminine company, but since coming to Hillcrest he has developed an infatuation with Georgia Jackson. She seems to have similar feelings toward him, but they have yet to consummate their inclinations, at least in part because Daniel fears what might happen should he lose control in a moment of passion and make her his next meal.

Abilities:

Subterfuge (Dice Pool 5) — Like it or not, Daniel has learned how to tell a good lie over the years. He doesn't like what he's done, but he's not ready to get caught, either. Years of practice are buoyed by a natural likeability that leads people to trust him. What could such a sweet old man have to hide?

Motives

There are some strange, mysterious and bizarre individuals at the Hillside Center, but what inspires characters to visit or be nearby to discover them?

- A character's parent, grandparent, Mentor or what have you has recently moved into the home. The character makes a visit. Particularly sensitive or supernaturally aware characters might hear alarm bells just walking into the place. Otherwise, any number of cast members could lead them to sense that something is amiss. Maybe it's the weirdly compelling invitation to tea from Georgia Jackson or recognition of Mark Rocca's face from old news stories and books about the Mob.

- The mental condition of a relative residing at Hillcrest deteriorates a few months after moving in, and a



character makes an appointment to discuss her condition with staff. Ms. Patrick gives the hard sell on moving the elderly woman to Fourth West. In fact, Patrick's uncomfortably insistent. Patrick is short of bodies to fill the beds in the Garden and under pressure from above to fill the roster at any cost, even if it means forcibly inducing the deterioration of otherwise healthy residents.



- Dr. Johnson has had a sudden bout of conscience. Perhaps he's taken a bribe from the wrong person or spoken out of turn about things he ought not mention. Or maybe one of his former patients — one who died a mysterious, horrible death at the home — has returned to haunt, harass or generally terrify the doctor for standing by and letting it happen. Johnson needs the characters'

help to expose the Center's dark dealings and to lead the restless soul (and himself) to peace.

- To spin things entirely differently, one or more characters may reside at Hillcrest. Residents must be 55 or older, unless they are staff or regular visitors. Most of the stories listed here still work for such a group, but the hooks may have to be turned on their heads.

Preliminary Events

Once characters are at the Center, what kinds of circumstances or phenomena suggest that all is not as it seems?

- Rumor has it that some residents simply vanish from the Center, never to be seen again. These are never residents with families.

- There have been two recent murders within blocks of the Center. One was the sexual molestation and murder of a young girl. The other was committed by a murderer who seemed to have hacked the internal organs out of his victim and destroyed or moved them.

- A character remembers a photo of his grandmother and a friend in Times Square on New Year's Eve, 1942, posing with a pair of soldiers, one of whom is Daniel Forrest. By rights, the man should be somewhere in his 80s by now, but he certainly doesn't look or act it.

- Georgia Jackson issues an unusually compelling invitation to tea to one of the male characters. Shortly thereafter, the character is attacked by one (or more) of Georgia's suitors.

- Mary Lewis accidentally "intrudes" on a séance (or similar occult ritual) that one or more of the characters attends/performs, and drops a hint or two regarding either Daniel Forrest's next meal, Ed Hill's debauched wanderings or Georgia Jackson's passenger.

Stories

The following are game-session events that may occur at or near Hillcrest.

- A nine-year-old girl, Ellie McDonald, was recently kidnapped and murdered in the area. Police or journalist characters may discover that the MO of the crime matches that of a series of murders that occurred in several nearby states during the 1990s, although almost no one ever tied the murders together. The killer is Victor Allen, resident of Hillcrest. The following clues lead to him.

His RV is still up for sale at a used-car lot a few blocks from the Center. An RV matching that description is mentioned in newspaper articles describing two of the murders (requires a successful Intelligence + Investigation roll at a -2 penalty after a full day of research with newspaper articles on the killings).

If the characters know Allen, they may also know (or learn) that he takes a curious interest in the past murders, keeping an "RV Killer" scrapbook. Allen secretly wishes that the police and media had realized that his crimes had a common perpetrator, so that he could have been given a cool moniker and been the subject of a nationwide man-hunt.

Allen was sloppy at the most recent crime scene — sloppier than ever before. He left footprints (but has since bought new shoes, disposing of his old ones in the Center's

dumpster). He left badly smudged fingerprints on the knife he used. As for the CSI-types, he washed a great deal of blood off his clothes and body after the murder, leaving residue in the Center's drains and washing machine for a clever, perceptive (or maybe just damn lucky) investigator to find.

- A character receives a call from a friend of a friend. Their mutual acquaintance (one of the character's Contacts) has been hospitalized and is deteriorating rapidly. Before becoming insensible, the Contact gave the caller instructions to get in touch with the character. The Contact is a victim of Ed Hill's. For the past month, Ed has been gallivanting around in the Contact's body: drinking, screwing and generally making an ass of himself. Diligent investigation leads the characters to Moorman's Tap, an establishment frequented by the Contact and, lately, by Ed Hill. Once they've figured out what's happening (or at least that Ed is somehow behind it), do they confront him with the consequences of his actions? Do they enact simple, brutal revenge? What about the Contact who lies at Death's door as a result of Ed's spiritual joyriding? Is there a way to heal the wounds Ed has caused before it's too late?

- A small number of Hillcrest's residents are known as "loners" or "solos." These people are never visited by family or friends. Some have outlived their families, others have alienated their families and friends and still others have simply slipped through the cracks. These residents rarely socialize or dine in the public cafeterias. Many have financial difficulties. From the perspective of an outsider, loners don't exist at all.

Carla Patrick has enacted a protocol to deal with long-term loners: they disappear. After one has gone six months without a visit or inquiry from outside, he goes on a list. After 18 months on the list, Patrick fabricates documentation suggesting that the loner has left the facility permanently, under his own recognizance, with no forwarding address.

At that point, the loner is sold. Patrick knows of a few crime cartels and other even shadier organizations that pay well for whole, live humans.

Three loners have been sold in the five years since Patrick took over Hillcrest. Four others are currently on the list.

This story begins when characters hear from a friend or loved one that a distant relative has gone missing, having moved out of Hillcrest. Characters who investigate the disappearance by checking out the Center meet a low-level functionary who provides the aforementioned fake paperwork.

- In the course of an investigation into a suspicious death on the premises, characters discover that blood specimens have disappeared from the Center. While the thefts do not pan out in regard to the mysterious death, they do lead investigators to the curious habits of the head of security, Mr. Hillenbrand.

He engages in bizarre, ostensibly Christian self-scourgings and blood rituals in his home in an attempt to

evoke the Second Coming of Christ. His efforts have yet to yield the desired result, but they have had an effect: all those from whom the specimens were taken have become entirely invisible to the paranormal world.

In fact, not one of those affected has any spiritual presence to speak of. Characters with the Unseen Sense Merit or other means of spiritual perception may notice this absence. In the course of his devotions, Hillenbrand has stumbled on an ancient technique for stealing souls from the living. What's worse is that he has no idea what he's doing. He thinks that the swell of ecstasy he experiences at worship is a result of being in the presence of the Holy Spirit, when in fact it's the euphoria that comes from capturing and consuming the spiritual essence of a victim.

There is no way to return what Hillenbrand has unwittingly taken. The ritual burns a soul like oil in a lamp, leaving the body empty (ripe fodder for the Garden!) and without any seeming harm. If the thefts are exposed, Hillenbrand is forced to stop, at least until he can find a safer source of blood. If the characters can somehow convince him of the effect of his rituals, he collapses into despair and quite possibly kills himself.

- Christopher Scott, who lives on the third floor, is convinced that there are "hidden spaces" in the building. He's certain that he has heard voices and gunshots to the east of his room, even though his room is the easternmost one on the floor. He has begun surreptitiously digging a hole in the wall of his bedroom, hiding it behind a painting. He doesn't want anyone to think he's insane, but he's *convinced* that there's something beyond.

The voices could be anything. Perhaps there are burglars casing the place. Maybe it's as mundane as employees taking a smoke break on the rickety old fire escape. Or the voices and gunshots may relate to the shootings that took place near the Center some 50 years ago.

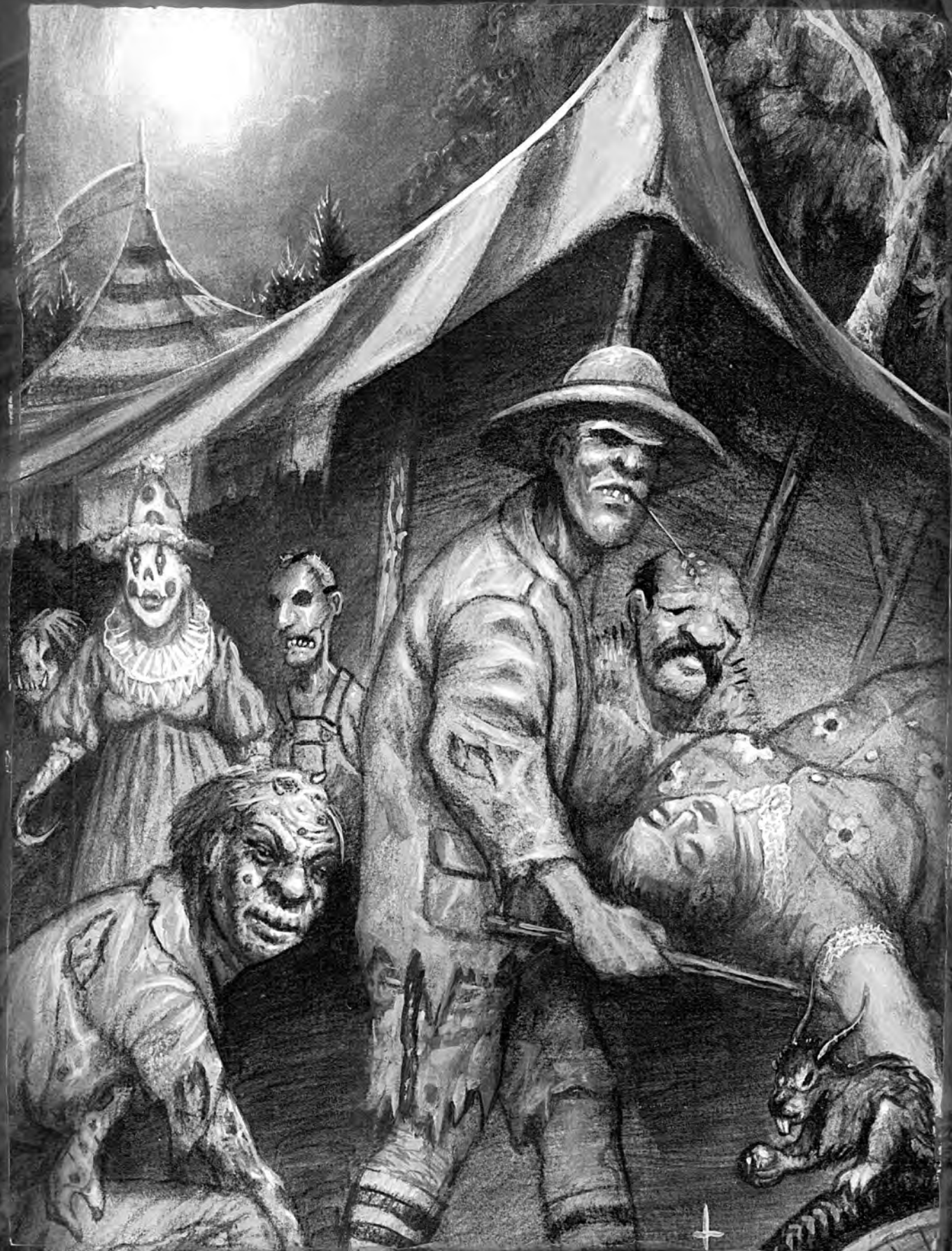
- Reba Evans is tired of Georgia Jackson. She's tired of the way the woman looks at all the men on the floor as though she owns them. She's tired of Georgia's cultured nonchalance. She's tired of the damned romance novels piling up in the second-floor library. And Reba is convinced that her husband Harry is cheating with Georgia.

Perhaps Reba is an aunt to one of the characters, or maybe they're private investigators whom Reba has hired. The characters investigate Harry's relationship with Georgia (and, in so doing, may realize that something supernaturally strange is going on with Jackson — Drialia, through the woman, may try to seduce a male character, for example).

- Thorough as they are, the transcriptionists from Fourth West are only human. They make mistakes from time to time, and any power capable of marshalling the resources to maintain a place like the Center is bound to have competition. Transcription teams can be kidnapped or involved in car accidents. In such a case, Ms. Patrick is frantic in her efforts to find or help them before her superiors discover the matter and levy retribution. Then again, perhaps she hires the characters to make a transcriptionist disappear. In the last case, the job is an invitation to disaster as Patrick turns the characters into her patsies to cover up her own duplicity.

- Though many residents of Fourth West have no kin to speak of, some may still have concerned associates on the outside with an interest in their welfare or the conservation of their estate. Such a person might hire the characters to investigate Hillcrest to discern the resident's true state of health and to stem the tide of funds. Just getting onto the floor is characters' first obstacle. Without a demonstrable blood relationship with a resident, they need legal proof of guardianship before they're allowed visitation rights. Their primary adversary is Ms. Patrick. Potential allies might include Dr. Johnson, given a sufficiently large offer of compensation.

- Daniel Forrest is cursed. His curse, however, carries with it certain benefits for which others might consider the occasional meal of human flesh a small price. Just such a person might hire the characters to "extract" Forrest from Hillcrest so that he might be relieved of the burden of his longevity. Perhaps the characters' employer (or even a character herself!) is a relative of one of Forrest's victims. What do the characters do when they finally discover his secret, but rather than being a monstrous killer and cannibal, he's a sweet, friendly old man haunted by a hunger over which he has no control?



The Whispering Wood

*In the middle of
the journey of our life
I came to myself
within a dark wood
where the straight
way was lost.*

— Dante Alighieri,
The Divine Comedy

Getting lost is a part of life. Sometimes we turn down a road we don't recognize and can't find our way back. Boats get lost in the ocean. Kids let go of a mother's hand and go astray in a crowded mall. We lose cars in parking lots, get turned around amid tangled city streets or get off on the wrong subway stops. Everybody gets lost. Of course, most people get themselves back on track through luck or skill, or end up being found by someone else.

But what if you got lost and never got found?

In every forest of the world, there lies the possibility of losing one's way. Trees don't have markers; trails don't follow any kind of logic. In every darkling wood lives something primeval, a hidden heart that beats with ancient blood. This primordial place exists outside the scope of our perceptions, always beyond the borders of civilization. Few people ever see this place, but those who enter the woods with questions in their hearts may find themselves turned around. Trees grow thick, thorns bite at clothes and nip skin and every rotten log is another false landmark. Those who have forgotten their principles or are otherwise troubled hear a soft voice on the wind, whispering for them to come closer. Those who follow arrive at a clearing where others have come before. And then they are truly lost, never to be seen again.

Characters

Losing one's way isn't just physical, not when it comes to the Whispering Wood. Becoming lost in the woods, while frightening in its own way, isn't the real dilemma. The real problem is when one loses sight of the *moral* path, when emotions form a labyrinthine tangle and one cannot see the way out of inner turmoil. Losing the way in the woods is temporary. Being unable to climb back up the slippery slope of moral degradation may be permanent. A dark forest is bad; a dark heart is worse.

Players assume the roles of characters who are lost in the woods. Any forest will do, whether it's Thetford Forest in Norfolk, the Allegheny Forest in Pennsylvania or the acre of trees just past a backyard. But the characters aren't just physically lost — first they must be figuratively lost. A criminal who steals for a living, a woman who cheats on her husband, a man who kills another out of passion or revenge. These people have all lost their way morally and emotionally. They have already vanished in the shadow of their souls. Now they become lost in the forest, for the dark heart of the Whispering Wood mirrors the dark places in characters' own hearts.

The protagonists can be anyone who is capable or likely of being lost in a forest — park rangers, children, campers, vacationers, police or FBI agents, journalists or other types of investigators. Each character must be created with an inward journey in mind, one who has suffered a breach of her own principles and who must find her way back to the light. Perhaps characters have recently lost a Morality dot, or even succeeded in preserving that trait but they still wrestle with the issue that endangered it. To find their way out of the physical forest, the characters must first be prepared to follow the trail of breadcrumbs out of their own hearts and minds.

Note that it is not necessary for characters to know one another — they may encounter each other for the first time in the Whispering Wood. However, this setting later suggests some ways for characters who *do* know one another to come together and get lost in this bad place.

History

In 1964, the Tremblay and Sons Circus lost its way. It shouldn't have: the journey between Brewigstown and Killdare was only a matter of a few miles. Plus, one circus employee always went ahead and marked the way, putting up yellow arrows on street signs and trees so the caravan knew just where it had to go. Getting lost simply wasn't an option.

And yet, the convoy — 11 trucks and three cars — could not find its way. Drivers no longer saw the signs left behind. Had someone removed them? Did the wind sweep them free and carry them away? The man who had put up the markers and returned said he didn't even *recognize* the dark woods that bordered the tiny back road on which they traveled. With much consternation and difficulty, they turned the caravan around, one vehicle at a time, and backtracked. It was to no avail. Despite turning onto a different road or going past unremembered curves, they wound up in the same place, driving down that same desolate little road that wound through the dismal forest. They tried again and again, knowing that they had to be in Killdare before dark to set up for the next day's festivities. But soon, the gas gauges all bordered on E for Empty, and twilight settled.

It was about then that the whispering started.

Circus Folk

Every group of people has its own pecking order, and the Tremblay and Sons Circus was no different. At the top of that social food chain sat one of the eponymous Tremblay Sons, an old man named Delvin who had his own trailer and who hoarded money. (He remembered the horrors of the Depression and upheld greed as a sacred principle.) Below him was the Ringmaster of the big top, a booze-sodden *braggadocio* with a narcissistic streak two miles wide. Down another step were the acrobats (the Soaring Strawcoats) and the animal-tamers (Safari Joe and his wife, Matilda). One rung below them were the five clowns, beneath them were the teenagers, runaways and ex-cons hired to setup the circus and clean up animal waste. At the very *nadir* of this pecking order were the circus freaks.

The freaks — featuring the likes of Sheehara the Wild Girl, Roderick the Rubber Lad, and Blubberfats, the "World's Fattest Man" — were a huge draw. Some came to the extravaganza just to see them, eschewing the big-top events altogether. The circus freaks (along with jars of fetal freaks in formaldehyde) were a smash success, but therein lay a grim and eventually fatal problem. The freaks, for all their morbid allure, were poor. Tremblay didn't pay them half what the boys cleaning up animal waste got. This iniquity would bring them all great pain.

The Whispers

At first, the whispers were hardly words at all. They were indecipherable murmurs in the distance. Most of the

nervous circus folk either disregarded the sounds or attributed them to the wind. But as night fell, the whispers grew louder, and soon the carnies could make out words spoken by soft voices. At first, everybody heard the same thing, but in different voices. Some heard a mother's voice or the voice of a friend long dead. Others heard no individual identity, but intuitively sensed a genderless caretaker. A few even thought they heard the voice of God and His angels.

The whispers told them all: *Bring your goods, come into the woods, I will show you the way.* It did not tell them just once, but repeated the message over and over again. Soon, the sibilant reiteration made sense, as if it were good advice. It wasn't long before the circus folk packed up what items they could manage. They picked up tents and the poles to support them. They grabbed several tools, food items, rope and personal effects. And then, believing that the whispers from the forest offered not just good advice but infinite wisdom, they all went into the woods and disappeared from the world.

Wayward Cycles

The employees of Tremblay and Sons Circus were not the first people to go missing in the woods and sidestep reality. They were only the latest in a very long line of poor, lost fools with troubled souls. The following are only just *some* of the people from varying places and periods to go missing in the woods of the world. All of them wound up in the same place, trapped in a clearing just past the membrane separating this world and the next.

- At the end of the first century CE, a caravan of corrupt Roman officials and soldiers traveled through the Epping Forest on their way to London to Dunmow in ancient Britain. Suddenly the road was no longer clear, disappearing into leaves and thickets both in front and behind. The whispering drew them past the tree line and they were never seen again.

- Countless legends among Native American tribes tell of poor Indians who were "swallowed by the hungry forest." Bands of hunters, women gathering food, even entire *tribes* supposedly went missing. Such tales were common before America was even colonized. The Indians often spoke of such a place as punishment for betraying one's own people.

- In 1790, a Virginian minister and his young scribe purportedly kidnapped a girl in the town of Norfolk, claiming she was a witch. They went into the woods to "punish" her, but she got away. When they followed her, they got confused and could not find their way out. The girl alone made it back to town — proof of her pact with the Devil....

- In 1855, a group of drunken vintners left the town of Utley in Germany's Black Forest. Only a few minutes outside of town, a wheel on their cart broke, and they attempted to go back to get help, but town was no longer there. When they turned again, they couldn't even find their cart. They were lost, and the whispers drew them deeper.

• In 1929, a train traveling from the East Coast of the United States to the West Coast jumped the tracks. Connectors between cars snapped and sent boxes slamming into one another, killing most aboard. Some survived, and those of questionable morality heard a soft voice on the nighttime breeze coming from the woods, promising aid. They disappeared, their bodies going unaccounted for.

• In 1953, an entire classroom of schoolchildren vanished. The students, all part of the Brechthouse Academy (a private school in Connecticut), had conspired to cheat on a test. When outside after class, they heard whispers drift from the woods. They wandered off, out of the sight of teachers, and were never heard from again.

Research

Characters may enter this setting purely by accident. For example, campers who go exploring in the woods can't find their way back. Others character types, be they journalists or investigators of some kind, may do research on the phenomenon itself. They may try to solve a missing-persons case, might investigate local disappearances for the newspaper or might research the paranormal properties of nearby forests to determine whether the urban legends are really true. If characters conduct research *before* getting lost, the "Research" rules on p.55 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook** apply. Research can be performed at local libraries or newspaper offices or archives, through Lexis-Nexis searches or by interviewing locals or relatives/friends of the missing. Interviewing might require Social rolls such as Presence + Persuasion or Manipulation + Intimidation. The results can be tales like those told above.

For characters who go missing spontaneously, you might allow players' Intelligence + Composure or Intelligence + Academics rolls for characters to recall vague bits of the above stories. (Composure rolls are likely to allow memory of legends and myths, whereas Academics rolls might help someone remember historical facts such as dates or specific instances.) Characters might even recall a tale told by parents or cruel babysitters about a circus that disappeared and left an empty caravan and a few unattended animals in some modern version of the *Mary Celeste*.

Note that these stories are not the only ones about missing people that may apply. You can tailor others to suit the needs and interests of characters in an effort to personalize the story. A character is more engaged by remembering stories about local people or familial descendants than she is by legends of some German vintners.

The Clearing in the Woods

All who are summoned by the sibilant whispers, no matter where in the world, wind up in one place: a wide clearing in the middle of a forest. This tract of land is mostly devoid of trees, though it does feature some dry scrub and thicket. The area itself is about 100 yards wide and maybe 200 yards long, an imperfect oblong shape,

ringed by a strange mix of thick pine, white aspen and black oak trees. A small stream burbles through the end of the clearing. Its waters stink of sulfur and taste similarly foul. Near the stream are some knobby, anemic-looking fruit trees (pear, apple, cherry). The fruit is edible, but bitter. Anyone attempting to leave the clearing is in for an unpleasant (and as yet unseen) surprise about a quarter or half-mile out. Past the trees is a crooked ring of tortuous thorn bushes, abnormal in height (each is thick and grows over 10-feet tall) and in their sting (each thorn is easily an inch long, and a scratch causes excruciating pain). This twisted, barbed barrier encircles the entire clearing and the woods beyond it.

Other things seem wrong about the area as well. At night, the moon is always bright and full. During the day, the sun is a pale, whitewashed orb. Sunlight shines down at low angles regardless of season, and is bright but gray. The shadows in the clearing are long, deep and don't always correspond to any light source. The wind always blows, and the air is slightly chilly — about 52°F. Sometimes it rains a little or the sky drops a few flurries. All in all, it's a gray swathe of forest surrounding an ugly clearing. The world feels oppressive and strange here, as if perpetually on the edge of winter. The seemingly constant whispering on the wind does little to bring comfort.

Dark Urges


The circus folk — and all those who came before them — learned an unfortunate lesson. Once the whispering had lured them to the clearing, the message changed. It was no longer a benevolent (though creepy) promise of safety. It became a call to one's own darkest desires. The whispers (still in familiar or venerable voices) brought to mind the listeners' awful urges — forbidden lusts, inappropriate hungers and murderous compulsions.

Worse was the division caused among the circus folk. The freaks and human oddities were told that they were abused and mistreated, and needed to rise up against their oppressors. The "normals" heard voices telling them that the freaks were not just physical curiosities, but abominations in the eyes of God, mortal manifestations of *evil*. The people came to the clearing as co-workers, but stayed as cohorts complicit in dark deeds.

The feud that would end in murder began simply enough: muttered invective and a few inappropriate gestures. The regular circus folk blamed the freaks for their predicament, while the freaks argued that their oppression didn't allow them any choice at all. The conflict turned physical as Edgar the Dog-Faced Boy picked up a sharp stone laying in the waxen grass and pitched it at the others. It hit Matilda in the forehead, cutting her and bringing blood to her eye. Safari Joe wouldn't stand for that. He drew a knife and lunged at the Dog Boy, driving the blade deep in Edgar's side.

The disparity between the freaks and the normals was fatally evident. The regular folk were the ones holding most of the caravan's goods. The freaks "couldn't be trusted" with such valuables. That meant the normals had





access to the tools, such as sledgehammers used to pound tent stakes or hatchets and machetes used to cut rope. They had the weapons and set upon the freaks.

Murderous Stains

The bloody fracas didn't last long. The freaks did their damage. Edgar bit off Joe's ear before collapsing to the cold ground. Roderick the Rubber Lad had a penknife in his sock and managed a few quick stabs before catching a hatchet to the chest. In spite of all their attempts, the freaks fell quickly. Sledgehammers crushed heads; rusty machetes bisected muscle. Blood soaked the ground, and, as the whispers receded into the background, the surviving circus folk felt horror at what they had done. They had never treated the freaks with much dignity — if any at all — but they had never considered murder a reasonable option. Some fled the clearing, while others collapsed and wept. Those who tried to escape found the wall of thorns and could not get past. The rest felt something in their hearts give way, a tiny internal movement that resigned their souls to the place.

The freaks' murder didn't just wear on the minds of the remaining circus folk. No such action had ever been taken on the soil of the clearing. The freaks were not the first murdered there, but they were first murdered in such number and with such passion. Their blood soaked the ground, leaving a permanent mark both physical and supernatural. It was a stain on the very soul of the forest, and it would drastically change those trapped there.

Metamorphosis

Over the days and weeks following the massacre, the survivors underwent... changes. Their musculature shifted, and their bones reworked themselves painfully. Horns sprouted from Safari Joe's forehead, while his wife grew fatter and fatter, her body bloating into a morbid sack of gelatinous flesh. The Ringmaster's eyes grew thick with milky cataracts, and a leathery tail emerged from the base of his bowed spine. Old Delvin Tremblay found himself with an extra pair of arms and webbed fingers, and his skin became slick and warted like that of a frog. Sins from past and present rose to the surface as the stains on souls manifested themselves. All the circus folk suffered deformities; none were left unchanged. To their horror, they had become the freaks they had destroyed.

Freaktown Forest

It would be cruel to suggest that these newly deformed "freaks" lived happily ever after. But live they did, though with little mirth of which to speak. They used what they had salvaged from the circus trucks and built a makeshift shantytown. They set up the big-top tent to sleep under (though some of the rigging poles were damaged and the tent sat lop-sided on one side). They were able to start a fire and keep it burning beneath a few pieces of corrugated metal that once served as part of the big top's

sidewall. (It's worth noting that wood harvested from the nearby forest is difficult to burn.) They chopped timber and made ramshackle lean-tos as well as a number of signs etched with old circus sayings such as *Accidents Happen in Threes* or *Never Look Back During a Parade*. As a mean and ironic joke, they also carved messages on the trees outside the clearing using the old P.T. Barnum joke: *This Way to the Great Egress*.

Food was easy to come by, if unpleasant. The sour, moldy fruit fed them all, and the stream provided water (which was also foul to taste). For protein, meat was available for those willing to catch it. Animals wandered into the clearing or the surrounding woods from time to time. No one knew where the animals came from. Did they wander in somehow, looking for food and water? Did the animals lose their way as well? The creatures were sickly, scrawny and covered in uneven patches of fur. Some had cataracts like the Ringmaster. Others were missing one or two limbs. They were easy to kill (+1 to all Survival rolls), but the meat was greasy and gamy.

It wasn't long before the residents found the remnants of those who had come to the clearing before. In the woods, the circus folk found the bodies of children (the class from Brechthouse Academy), many of them stuck to the thorny wall, their bodies pin-cushioned by the hook-like barbs. They also found some of the bodies (mostly skeletons picked clean by insects and starving animals) of the train passengers from years before. On these bodies were some trinkets that the circus folk took — a gold watch here, a broken and empty suitcase there. It was also rumored in the clearing that some circus folk found other items from older times, like Indian arrowheads and corks from wine bottles. The Ringmaster himself stumbled blindly across an old Roman helmet, and has refused to take it off since.

The freaks moved all the bodies to an improvised "graveyard" at the far end of the forest, outside the clearing. They hung all the corpses and skeletons on the thorn wall, bedecking their dead faces with clown paint. Some did it as a kind of "worship" of their prison, believing that the forest and clearing had some kind of unseen sentience. Others did it as a warning: trying to escape meant death on the brambles.

Mythology

Over the years, the circus folk (with the help of Tremblay and later the Ringmaster) developed a kind of demented mythology about the Whispering Wood. At first, some speculated that it was Hell, a prison brought about by their awful actions. But many found that they grew to grudgingly love the clearing, and saw it as their home. Plus, the whispers had to come from somewhere, didn't they? Soon, the freaks began ascribing a kind of mystical sentience to the area, assuming that it must have been some of divine or cursed place. Set apart, it deserved worship.

The Ringmaster became a "priest" of the woods, organizing haphazard prayer sessions to venerate the Whispering Wood. Such homage took various forms, but often



involved sacrificing animals, drinking each other's blood, self-mutilation with thorns.

Now, newcomers to the clearing emerge from time to time and are regarded as potential converts who do not yet know the "glory" of the place. If newcomers refuse to listen and pray, they are made to suffer until they bow down and worship.

What Is It?

So what is the Whispering Wood? It's certainly not something that can be explained by science, and there's no tour guide to give the complete history of the place. Still, characters who get trapped there and hopefully escape might look for some kind of closure via explanation. None of this should be so obvious as to hit them over the head, but it might be something that's hinted at through research or by talking to some of the more "rational" inhabitants of the clearing. Here are three possible explanations from which to choose.

- It's not Hell, but an extension thereof. The characters have recently slipped in their Morality and have lost their way. This Hell is a warning, a message to them that their behavior may damn them if they aren't careful.

- It's a place like the Bermuda Triangle: one of those strange parts of the world that seems to swallow travelers alive. It's an example of a primal connection to a time before civilization, a pocket of the universe kept away from

humanity. The moral of the story might very well be to *stay out of the woods*.

- The clearing isn't real — it's a mind trap. Once characters are free, all evidence of the place disappears. Regardless of time spent there, not a day passes outside the clearing. It's a prison of the mind and soul, a non-corporeal confinement meant to test victims' moral mettle.

Present

The freaks still reside in the lost clearing. Some have died. Others have mated and had little deformed children all their own. Occasionally, one of them decides he just can't take it anymore and tries to get over the thorn wall — and dies there, pinned to the brambles, so much bloody tinsel on the barbed foliage.

Tremblay died about 10 years ago at the improbable age of 113. They don't keep his body with the rest of the corpses, though. They stuffed him with leaves and mold-erling fruit and made him a rickety throne with carrying poles. From time to time, the freaks dance around the fire and bring out ol' Delvin Tremblay's stuffed and ragged body, parading him around the clearing in an impromptu celebration.

Safari Joe lives, while his wife has died. The Ring-master, now nearly 80, is the self-proclaimed King since Tremblay's passing. Some of the clowns have perished; most of the young folk working for the circus live.

Occasionally, someone else gets lost in the woods somewhere in the world. When they do, they end up in the clearing at the end of the Whispering Wood and find themselves trapped with the freaks, fenced in by a wall of thorns. They, too, grow strange freak bodies and curious deformities over time, and, when they do, the freaks accept them grudgingly. They're all a part of the same "family." The freaks have made the clearing their home and aim to keep it that way. Escape, after all, is a kind of betrayal.

Systems

This setting has a few special systems intrinsic to it.

Losing the Way

The clearing at the end of the Whispering Wood summons only those who are lost emotionally as well as physically. Just being turned around in the woods isn't enough. A character has to be internally confused. In game terms, the clearing summons only those who have recently dropped in Morality. This provides the proper conditions (i.e., moral ambiguity) for the clearing to be a lure. It is appropriate to have players create characters who have recently suffered such a trait loss; it may even be wise to play through the event that caused the dot loss, whether at the beginning of the game or as flashbacks throughout.

With your approval, characters don't *need* to have lost that Morality dot. There are other ways of being emotionally "lost," such as the following:

- The death of a friend or loved one (child, best friend, parent)
- A recent divorce or painful breakup
- Mental illness (development of a derangement through hardship or stressful circumstances as opposed to losing Morality, or intensification of an existing condition)
- Terminal disease (cancer, HIV)
- Bankruptcy

Point A to Point B

One option is that characters become lost when engaging in some action that is a result of their recent Morality loss. For example:

- A character who has recently committed impassioned manslaughter may lose her way when hiding in the woods or when going into the forest to hide the body.
- A family that recently engaged in a terrible and insulting argument may look up from their mean-spirited quarrel to find that the road doesn't look familiar, and what's that whispering sound...?
- A man who hit his wife or verbally abused his child may go out back to have a smoke, clear his head and think about what he did. He turns around to find that his house is no longer there.
- A car thief and his buddies jack a car, then go to hide it in a garage located down an old woodsy back road,

only to find that the garage isn't where it's supposed to be, and the woods seem darker and deeper than they used to.

- A character in a psychotherapy session as the result of overwhelming guilt (due to a recent unpleasant action or choice) hears the whispers calling her outside and into the woods just beyond the hospital parking lot.

Whispered Summoning

In a Whispering Wood story, characters are sure to experience the grim allure of the soft voices murmuring through the trees. The whispers manifest themselves as something personal to each listener — the voice of a family member, a dead friend, an ex-wife. Sometimes the voices aren't directly personal, but are abstractly tailored to a listener's desires. To a perpetual womanizer, the voice might sound like a beautiful woman. To a devoutly religious soul, the voices might sound like the declarations of God or Goddess. At first, when the whispers are weak, characters probably blow them off, unconvinced by their authenticity. Before long, however, the voices sound very compelling, almost hypnotic. At that point, appropriate characters (see below) become lost. The trail looks different or is gone altogether. Landmarks have moved or disappeared. Any direction-finding equipment (compass, GPS) proves useless. Characters at this point may attempt to escape the whispers and find their way back.

Dice Pool: Wits + Survival versus a pool of 20 dice for the forest

Action: Extended and contested. Each roll represents one hour. The first to achieve 10 accumulated successes wins the contest. If the forest wins, the character succumbs to the summons and goes to the clearing. If the player wins, the character resists the whispers and finds that the way is clear once again. If you want to ensure that a whole group of characters makes its way to the clearing or escapes the allure, rolls can be made for the character with the lowest Wits + Survival total, and apply the results to the whole group. Perhaps that individual wanders off and the rest won't go anywhere without her, or they split up in search of her and unwittingly rendezvous in the clearing.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: A dramatic failure on any roll made for a character means she loses the contest immediately. The wanderer succumbs to the voices so completely that she does her level best to cajole or drag others deeper into the woods. (No penalties apply to rolls made for the woods, so dramatic failure is not possible for it.)

Failure: No successes are gathered in the latest roll, diminishing her chances of resisting. If the overall contest goes to the forest, the character emerges in the clearing.

Success: The character wins the latest roll, and those successes are added to the total accumulated for her. She feels confident (for now) that she can find his way back, and those noises are just some kind of hallucination. If successes rolled for the character reach 10 first, she does

find her way back and resists the voices — this time. All equipment functions normally again.

Exceptional Success: A character for whom 15+ successes are gathered and who wins the contest is never fooled by the supernatural guile of the Whispering Wood again.

Suggested Modifiers: Character has Meditative Mind Merit (+1), has Danger Sense Merit (+1), has Direction Sense Merit (+2), has mild derangement (–1), has severe derangement (–2)

Freak Mutations

Upon arriving at the clearing and becoming trapped, characters (whether Storyteller- or player-controlled) soon experience the physical transformations intrinsic to the place. Mutations evolve over the course of three days, a little at a time. Horns might start as bruises and bumps on day one, bleeding sores on day two and bona fide protuberances on day three.

These changes are associated uniquely with a character's Vice. This trait, representing the side of a character inclined toward sinful behavior, materializes as a physical quality. Each mutation applies bonuses and penalties depending on its nature. A character suffers *one* of the mutations listed below for his Vice. (As an optional rule, characters with a Morality that has dropped to 5 or lower may manifest *two* such abnormalities.) You get to choose which mutation affects a character as best represents his personality or that will be entertaining or frustrating for a player.

Should characters escape the clearing, changes fade at the same rate at which they appeared, over the course of three days.

Envy

Envy is about coveting what others have: looks, abilities, objects, relationships. In the clearing at the end of the Whispering Wood, Envy manifests in one of the following three ways.

- **Dog-Faced:** Early Christian theologians associated the sin of envy with the dog. As a result, the character's countenance develops into a "dog-face." It isn't the literal head of a dog, but a human mockery of a canine face — fur, puggish nose, distorted facial topography, sharp teeth. The character gains a +1 bonus to any bite-attack roll, and suffers a –1 penalty to all Presence and Manipulation rolls (excluding Intimidation-based ones). Bite attacks are lethal and do not require a grappling hold.

- **Strange Eyes:** Envy involves a lot of staring at others with longing, unblinking desire. The character's eyes go "strange" in some fashion (huge, no pupils, blood-red, a slight glow). Eyelids shrivel and the character cannot blink. Gain +1 to all Perception-based rolls involving sight. The character suffers a –1 penalty to all Presence and Manipulation rolls (excluding Intimidation-based ones).

- **Roadmap of Scars:** Some suggest that the sin of Envy is due to a hidden (or not-so-hidden) self-loathing. With this mutation, a character's *entire* body manifests a painful latticework of puffy, red scars. He also loses hair. Gain +1 to all rolls involving Intimidation. The scars cause constant pain, so the character suffers –1 to all Stamina rolls.

Gluttony

The sin (and Vice) of Gluttony involves consuming far more than one's body and mind requires (usually food and drink, but any consumptive substance is fair game). Gluttony deforms the body in one of three ways.

- **Swine Body:** Hogs are associated with Gluttony. The character exhibits the physical traits of a boar or pig. Her nose becomes a snout, her lower teeth growing thick and upward like tusks, and her body showing the coarse hair of wild swine. (Plus, she emits a rather rancid odor.) A character gains +1 bonus to all rolls involving Stamina as her body becomes tougher. She suffers a –1 penalty to all Presence and Manipulation rolls (Intimidation-based ones excluded).

- **Freak Fat:** Obesity is an undeniable sign of this sin. The character doesn't just become overweight, he becomes *morbidly obese*. Her flesh swells and distends as her corpulence puts him over the 400-pound mark. The character gains +1 Size (and subsequently gains +1 Health), but suffers a –1 penalty to all rolls involving Dexterity or Stamina.

- **Huge Mouth:** The bigger the mouth, the more things that can be stuffed in it. This gluttonous effect causes the victim's jaw to distend unnaturally, and the teeth to grow and jam together like a row of yellow pebbles. Speaking becomes difficult, so any Social roll involving speech is at a –1 penalty. The character gains a +1 bite attack that is lethal and does not require a grappling hold.

Greed

Avarice is all about the unhealthy need for material goods and status. The darkness of this sin materializes in a few possible ways.

- **Toady:** Ancient Christian theologians attributed the sin of Greed to frogs and toads. The character assumes the qualities of such amphibians — bulging eyes, green or yellow skin, webbed fingers and toes, long legs and short arms. The character gains a +1 bonus to armor as her skin is thick and rubbery. She also suffers a –1 penalty to all rolls involving Strength as her muscles become rubbery and weak.

- **Vestigial Arms:** How better to make a grab for that prize than with two extra arms? The character grows two new arms beneath his existing ones, except these arms aren't actually *functional*. By and large, they're just flippers with rubbery hands at the ends. He gains +1 bonus to Defense as well as to Brawl rolls (the arms can be flailed about to prevent or cause attacks). He suffers –1 to rolls involving Dexterity as the extra arms sometimes get in the way.



- **Sticky Tongue:** The character may not become fully toad-like, but still gains a long, sticky tongue that can grab items. It grants a +1 bonus to attempts to initiate grappling holds, and adds +1 to Initiative rolls in close combat (items can be picked up from up to a yard away, but must be Size 1 or smaller). The tongue also obstructs the mouth; the character suffers a -1 penalty on all conversation-based Social rolls.

Lust

Lust is the province of abnormal desire, usually sexually related.

- **Rubber Body:** The body is the domain of the lustful: it is a tool of pleasure and pain. The character's form becomes uncharacteristically pliable. Joints can bend the wrong way, limbs and fingers can contort in bizarre directions. The character gains a +1 bonus to all rolls involving Dexterity, but while her body becomes more nimble, her muscles weaken. She suffers a -1 penalty on all Strength-based rolls.

- **Horns:** The satyr is the mythological representative of this sin. The character manifests horns; sharp, Pan-style bones grow from the forehead. They allow the character to make a +1 "headbutt" attack. Damage is lethal, but requires a grappling hold first. The horns also press flesh and bone downward in the skull, and the character's eyes narrow to a squint. All vision-based perception rolls suffer a -1 penalty.

- **Gender Neutral:** Most bodies are temples of flesh devoted to one gender or another. A character with this mutation develops the qualities of *both* sexes. He effectively turns androgynous, either becoming a hermaphrodite or losing any genital identity. The character is eerily attractive; Presence and Manipulation rolls gain a +1 bonus. The character's body is a bubbling cauldron of hormones, however, causing a haze of the mind. A -1 penalty is suffered on any Resolve or Composure rolls.

Pride

The sin of Pride is an excessive, narcissistic belief in oneself.

- **Horse-face:** Theologians associated the horse with this Vice, believing that it was the proudest (and most stubborn) animal. The character's face becomes equine in shape: bones shift and pop as the face is elongated and the ears grow outward. The character's head isn't literally that of a horse, it just calls to mind deformed equine features. The character suffers a -1 penalty on all Presence and Manipulation rolls (excluding Intimidation-based ones). He gains the stubbornness of a horse, though, and receives a +1 bonus on all Resolve and Composure rolls.

- **Cataracts:** They say those with the Vice of Pride are blind to the truth. Such blindness manifests in the form of thick, white cataracts. The character isn't completely blind and can make out shapes and some detail. Any rolls requiring sight are at a -1 penalty, but the other senses compensate. Rolls involving other senses (smell, taste, touch, sound) are at a +1 bonus.

- **Macrocephalic:** A prideful soul thinks quite a lot of herself, and her head swells commensurately with this deformity. The character gains a +1 bonus on all rolls involving Intelligence and Wits. Her head is abnormally heavy, though. Any rolls involving Dexterity are at a -1 penalty as the character must balance her aberrant skull on unconditioned shoulders.

Sloth

Sloth is a sinful aversion to any and all effort — work is best avoided at all costs.

- **Dead Limbs:** The slothful love to do nothing. This deformity helps fulfill that desire. One pair of limbs (arms or legs) atrophies somewhat and "goes dead." This pair of limbs becomes nearly useless. The other set of limbs, curiously, overcompensates for the weakness. Any Strength or Dexterity rolls involving the dead limbs are at a -2 penalty. Any Strength or Dexterity rolls involving the other pair of limbs are at a +2 bonus. The character may be ascribed the *Lame* or *One-Arm Flaws*, as well.

- **Microcephalic:** Thinking is work in its own way. It requires effort on the part of the brain, and the slothful eschew effort whenever possible. The character's head shrinks (like a circus-freak pinhead) and tapers to a point. Her brain is crowded, and thought is challenging. Rolls involving Wits and Intelligence suffer a -1 penalty. In compensation, the character's body is preternaturally tough and gains +1 to Stamina (and to Health).

- **Sore-Covered:** Those expert with this Vice do little more than stay in bed, with the resultant deformity of bedsores. Regardless of whether she actually stays in bed or not, the character's body is covered by pock-marks, open sores that weep turbid fluid. The sores do not hurt, but weaken the body. The victim loses one Health regardless of trait dots. And yet, the character gains +1 to all Presence and Manipulation rolls used to strike fear.

Wrath

Wrath is the Vice of vengeance and anger. This sin may manifest upon a character's body in one of the following ways:

- **Claws:** Wrath is represented by a number of animals, including bears, tigers and wolves. Each of these creatures sports terrible claws, and the character manifests them as well. The talons grow from the tips of his fingers and extend an inch or more. They offer a +1 bonus on Brawl attacks and inflict lethal damage. They get in the way of manual Dexterity, though; such rolls suffer a -2 penalty.

- **Primitive Body:** The sin of Wrath comes from a primal place within, from dark anger in a wild heart. With this deformity, such feral being is no longer contained. The character's body sprouts coarse hair, and her hirsute form bows with a Neanderthal-like spine. The character gains a +1 bonus on all Strength rolls, but suffers a -1 penalty on all rolls involving Presence or Manipulation (excluding Intimidation-based ones).

• **Angry Flesh:** The character's body develops bruises and seeming birthmarks that look akin to images of fire, knives, lightning and predatory animals — all concepts associated with the Vice of Wrath. Whenever the character is enraged or experiences pain, he suffers a –1 penalty to all Resolve and Composure rolls. Whenever that penalty applies, however, he can also *ignore* all wound penalties. Both effects last for a scene.

Other Effects

The Whispering Wood and its clearing are subject to a number of other special systems.

Wall of Thorns

The circle of brambles surrounding the clearing and adjacent forest is a cruel and curious barrier. It doesn't seem impossible to conquer — at first. Yes, it's over 10 feet high and is clearly a snarling tangle of sharply thorned vines, but characters are likely to assume that there's *some way* of getting past it. (Self-destructive but determined characters may be able to, depending on dice rolls and other circumstances.) Those who attempt to get past suffer unpleasant side effects.

- A scratch from even a single thorn is unusually painful. Each thorn is preternaturally sharp and nearly as large as a bear's claw. Thorns cut through clothes and other shielding with nary an effort, and rip clean through muscle and sinew as if cutting tender meat. No attack roll is required. For every turn exposed to the thorn wall (i.e., bodily contact), a character suffers one point of lethal damage.

- Armor offers some protection, but only so much for so long. All damage from the wall is ignored for a number of turns equal to the rating of the armor worn. After that point, the armor is damaged and destroyed and no longer provides protection.

- While the damage is bad enough, each thorn is like a little hook that catches skin or clothing. A successful Strength roll must be made as an instant action for a character to escape even a single thorn. Failure to extricate one's self means continued damage from turn to turn until freed. Others can help to extricate a character (see "Teamwork," **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 134). Typically, no more than two others can help get a snared person free.

- Hacking or chopping at the thorns is problematic as well. A player rolls his character's Strength + Crafts in an extended and contested action as an "attack" roll. Ten dice are rolled for the brambles in response. Each roll is an hour's worth of work, and a character needs a total of 15 successes to hack a man-sized path through the wall. Every roll suffers a –2 penalty for potential tool entanglement, though. Also, in any given roll in which the wall's successes outnumber the character's, the wall's excess successes are inflicted as points of lethal damage to the character. (Example: If Marty rolls three successes and you roll five for the thorn wall, Marty's character suffers two points

of lethal damage.) So, basically, a chopping character weighs her desire to escape (successes accumulated for him) against the harm she suffers while hacking away. If a dramatic failure is ever rolled for a hacking character, her tool is permanently ensnared in the brambles, in addition to any damage she suffers.

An hour after a character stops hacking away, the hole he created is filled again. That doesn't necessarily mean he's trapped inside; he does maintenance to his path throughout the effort. Soon after that effort ends, however, the bushes close. If the character is unconscious for more than an hour, he will be closed inside and suffers more harm for turns of exposure.

Hacking through the bushes is also subject to teamwork. As many as two others can assist a single working character.

- Thorn scratches burn. Each cut feels like someone unleashed bleach-covered fire ants into one's skin. A character stung or scratched acts at a –1 penalty to all rolls for the subsequent 12-hour period. This penalty is not cumulative for the various wounds a character might suffer.

- The closest trees to the thorn wall stand over 10 feet away, and offer very few handholds or branches to aid in climbing. No boughs extend over the bushes, so characters cannot simply climb and drop down on the other side of the wall.

- Characters may improvise ways or devices to get over the wall. Some kind of rickety bridge, a trampoline built from pieces of tent, or even some "human tower" of bodies (alive or dead) to clamber up and over. Creating any kind of apparatus requires an extended action involving Wits or Strength + Crafts or Athletics (target number of successes set by you — probably somewhere between 15 and 20.) Each roll may represent one turn or one hour's effort, depending on what feat is attempted. The danger to any such effort, of course, is falling into the bushes.

Through the Thicket

If a character makes it through or over the thicket, what happens? Where does she find herself? Depending on the type of story you're telling, you may choose from one of the following:

- The character is right back in the mundane woods where he began. But if he hasn't reconciled the burgeoning darkness in his own heart, (i.e., his Vice and/or his lost Morality), the whispers affect him all over again. If he cannot resist, he ends up back with the other characters.

- The character gets through or over the wall, and ends up — on the other side of the clearing, opposite where she began. She has not escaped at all and remains trapped.

- The character escapes and is free. Perhaps only characters who successfully make the attempt are free. All others are still trapped. If a free character wants to get "lost" again to help his companions, he must commit a deed that warrants a potential lost of Morality, and attempt to become lost in the woods and be summoned by the clearing all over again. Of course, characters are un-

likely to recognize all of these criteria for returning, so they may lose considerable time in returning. Or perhaps their despair at failing to return is grounds for the woods' resumed call.

Characters

The clearing is home to a number of strange inhabitants. Two of them are detailed here, but this list is by no means comprehensive. There can be as many as 15 to 30 human aberrations in residence. There simply isn't enough room to describe them all here, but you can come up with any whatever freaks best suit your story.

The Ringmaster

Quote: "I can smell you coming. Have you paid homage to the clearing yet, outsider?"

Background: Growing up, the Ringmaster wasn't well-liked in school, or even popular among his numerous brothers and sisters. When he found the circus, however, he found a place that accepted him. Over time, he worked his way up from lowly dung boy to the showman of the big top, but it did little to ease his self-loathing. He turned to alcohol, and lots of it. It didn't affect his performance — much. Now that he's the self-proclaimed King, he's off the drink (obviously) and considers himself some kind of priest in service to the Whispering Wood.

Description: The Ringmaster is an old man who's off his pot. Most of his body is thin and sallow except for his gut, which hangs over his pants like a deflated tire. He rarely removes the Roman centurion's helmet he found, and stares out from beneath it with white, turgid cataracts smothering his sunken eyes.

Storytelling Hints: The Ringmaster doesn't even remember his name anymore. His mind has slowly eroded over the decades trapped in the Whispering Wood. He fluctuates between violent anger and tearful nostalgia. One minute he's throwing a tantrum and flailing about with a machete, the next he's gathering the freaks around to tell stories of the "good old days." At night he stays awake and prays to the clearing for wisdom.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3, Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 1, Presence 4, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Skills: Brawl 1, Empathy 3, Expression (Monologues) 4, Intimidation 2, Investigation 2, Medicine 1, Persuasion 2, Politics 1, Stealth 2, Subterfuge 2, Weaponry 1

Merits: Allies (Freaks) 3, Barfly 1, Status (Freaks) 3, Unseen Sense 3

Willpower: 6

Morality: 4

Virtue: Faith

Vice: Pride

Initiative: 5

Defense: 2

Speed: 8

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Machete	3 (L)	2	Rusty; breaks on a dramatic failure	5

Armor:

Type	Rating	Def.Pen.
Centurion helmet (archaic)	2/1 (head only)†	—

† Armor rating is reduced by one in general combat to 1/0. If attacks are aimed at his head, full armor ratings apply.

Health: 6

Derangements: Anxiety (severe)

Deformity: Cataracts

The Feral Boy

Quote: "Cut you. Bite you."

Background: Feral Boy is the son of Safari Joe and his wife, Matilda. The woman died during childbirth, her bulging heart failing not long after this strange, coarsely hirsute creature crawled from her womb. Safari Joe wanted the boy to be named Matt (after Matilda, in a fashion), but the Ringmaster vetoed it and insisted on Feral Boy, as befitting the carnal world into which the child was born. Feral Boy is haunted by the absence of his mother, and it brings him terrible grief and anger.

Description: Feral Boy's growth has been stunted. While he is nearly out of his teens, he stands only five feet tall and weighs only about 100 pounds. His body is covered in a patchy pelt of bristly hairs, and his face is almost exaggeratedly primitive (sharp teeth, obvious under-bite, extended brow).

Storytelling Hints: Feral Boy is initially hostile to outsiders. After all, new people invade his territory. Most of the time, his father or someone else keeps him on a leash made of old tent rope. Once characters manifest their deformities, Feral Boy may be more accepting of them and isn't immediately aggressive. He responds better to females than he does to males, and silently craves some kind of motherly influence.

Attributes: Intelligence 1, Wits 4, Resolve 2, Strength 3, Dexterity 4, Stamina 3, Presence 2, Manipulation 1, Composure 2

Skills: Animal Ken 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Intimidation 2, Stealth 2, Survival 3, Weaponry 1

Merits: Brawling Dodge, Danger Sense, Fleet of Foot 2

Willpower: 4

Morality: 6

Virtue: Hope

Vice: Wrath

Initiative: 6

Size: 4

Defense: 2

Speed: 11 (13 with Fleet of Foot)

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Sledgehammer	3 (B)	3	9 Again; requires Strength 3	8 (+1 from deformity)

Health: 7

Deformity: Primitive Body

Motives

It's unlikely that characters *willingly* become lost in the woods, or choose to be trapped in a freaky forest clearing outside of normal time and space. That said, going into a forest is the springboard for this setting, as one cannot be lost in the woods without being in some woods. What motivations can you use to get characters there?

- **Missing Persons:** Sometimes people disappear and the authorities never find them. Friends and loved ones may not accept that possibility and try to track down the lost soul themselves. Characters have lost someone to the woods. It doesn't matter who, necessarily; it might even be a person of strong accountability and common sense whose disappearance is highly unusual. Or maybe the missing person was irresponsible — an alcoholic, heroin addict or gambler. The characters (who may not know each other, but who all knew the lost soul) try to do what the authorities cannot. The trail eventually leads to a mundane forest, and they go in search of clues or a corpse. Or consider that the authorities haven't yet failed in the task and the characters *are* the authorities (local or state police, or the FBI).

- **Vacation:** Not everybody vacations at the beach or Disney World. Some take trips camping, skiing or hunting — all places where “getting lost in the woods” is a distinct possibility. Some people stay at a bed-and-breakfast where the morning activity is a “nature walk” through the nearby old-growth forest. Even those people going to the beach or Disney World might somehow get lost in a forest — the Everglades aren't too far from Disney World in Florida. A car could break down in the middle of the New Jersey Pine Barrens on the way to the shore. Characters might be family members or friends, or might be complete strangers staying in the same lodge or inn. It's all the same once landmarks disappear and the whispers sound.

- **Exploration:** Forests are all over the world. Some are huge, like the Boreal Forest of Canada. Others don't even qualify as true “forests” and are just a clump of trees over a few acres. The woods might be beyond someone's backyard, along a highway or behind the building where one goes to school or works. Sometimes people explore such places for various reasons. Kids go out there to play games of imagination, to climb trees or to build forts. Teenagers go into the woods to get high, have sex or just avoid adults for a while. Adults go into the woods looking for stuff (arrowhead-hunting, bird-watching) or just to take a walk. Any of these poor souls are subject to the whims of the Whispering Wood (provided they are morally or emo-

tionally lost), and may look back at the deer trail they've followed and realize that it's gone.

- **Evasion:** Forests make a good place to hide. The trees and thickets provide plenty of cover. Only experienced trackers can make any reasonable effort to find someone deep in the woods. But who tries to hide in a forest? Criminals, for one. It's not the coziest hiding spot, but vandals, bank robbers, kidnappers or killers all might try to hide out in the trees until the heat cools down. Escaped mental patients might wander into the woods beyond an asylum or past a highway, attempting to elude doctors or police. Finally, runaways are likely candidates. Children or teens might think that they can survive in the woods for a few days (and maybe they can with some canned food and a tent), and leave home one night for the nearby forest.

Preliminary Events

Once characters become lost in the woods and potentially trapped in the clearing, they are likely to experience some of the strange phenomena of the area. What follows are a few possible events that immerse characters into the paranormal of the Whispering Wood:

- **Empty Village:** The characters stumble through the woods, lost and summoned by the whispers, and come upon the clearing. In it they find the freaks' shantytown, but it's devoid of life. Where are the inhabitants? Are they out hunting? Praying or sacrificing animals at the graveyard? Do the characters steal some tools or food? When the freaks finally come back, do they attack characters on sight? Trap them? Welcome them with a bizarre party, throwing animal blood upon them in celebration?

- **Hunting Party:** Consider what happens if the freaks find the characters *first*. The characters haven't yet made their way to the clearing, but are otherwise hopelessly lost. Perhaps the freaks have set traps (pits, snares, shit-covered spikes), and the characters become stuck. Or maybe the freaks ambush them, having heard the newcomers stomping loudly through the brush. Do characters attempt to flee? (Probably.) Are they harried like prey to the thorn wall, or do the freaks attempt to lure them in with sweet talk and promises of food and shelter? Are the freaks all robed and seemingly human until they reveal their true selves?

- **Freak Changes:** How quickly do the characters' deformities manifest? If they form immediately (horns budding, hair sprouting, limbs withering), characters are likely to associate the change with the setting in general. If the changes don't manifest until *after* meeting the freakish inhabitants, newcomers might blame the *freaks* for the change, which could influence any relationships profoundly.

- **Circus Weirdness:** Even before characters get to the clearing, strange stuff happens. The freaks have truly imprinted the area, and new arrivals sense that not long

after getting lost. They smell the sickly sweet odors of cotton candy and funnel cake drifting through the woods, and hear the distant discordant music of a Calliope organ. Perhaps their feet crunch on busted peanut shells, or they come across the graveyard with corpses decorated with clown paint. Maybe the whispers recite common circus sayings like the aforementioned *This Way to the Great Egress* or *Come See the World's Fattest Lady!* Do characters run for their lives? Or are they drawn in by these disturbing circus-related phenomena, hoping they at least represent some kind of civilization?

- **Witnessed Escape:** Characters are introduced to the concept of escape as they are confronted by one of the inhabitants trying to do that very thing. (Perhaps it's one of the "newer" occupants of the clearing, or some old freak who has simply snapped.) It's possible that they meet the escapee even before they get to the clearing, and are warned away from its denizens. Maybe characters hear the individual's strangled cries as he tries to scramble over the thorn wall. Or they find him just moments before the other freaks come and "reclaim" him, dragging him — and, likely, now the characters — back to the clearing to teach all to



respect the Whispering Wood and to venerate its dark power.

- **Strange Nature:** Characters at all familiar with nature might notice some strange things (this may or may not require an Intelligence + Animal Ken, Science or Survival roll). The trees might not be indigenous to the area where the characters became lost. The forest they were in wasn't home to white aspen or black oak trees. Or maybe they encounter the sickly animals who somehow wander into the Whispering Wood. Frail white-tail deer, rabbits with patchy fur and sores or freakish, ragged crows.



- **Thorn Wall:** It's possible that the characters come across the thorn wall first. After all, once they're lost, they're trapped within its brambled circumference. They might follow it and come full circle a whole day later, realizing that, sure enough, they're trapped. Or maybe they discover some of the bodies stuck upon (or within) the thicket, with vines growing out of corpses' mouths and eye sockets. Alternatively, the thorn wall might provide a good (if disturbing) meeting place for one or two freaks. Maybe Safari Joe is at the wall, cutting free some thorns to make weapons. Or maybe the Ringmaster is there, uttering nonsensical prayers to the Whispering Wood. Do characters engage the freak? Attack? Hide and follow him back to the clearing?

The Whispers

The soft voices of the Whispering Wood are likely the phenomena to which characters are first exposed. The sounds are a means to slowly reveal characters to the overall weirdness of the place. The voices can be used a variety of ways.

- Characters first hear the whispers in places *near* the forest, but not yet within it. Maybe they hear them while driving up to the campground, or hear sounds floating into their workplace or school from the nearby woods. At that point, the whispers are largely indecipherable.

- Characters hear the whispers in voices related to their emotional or moral problems — in some context connected to the recent loss of Morality. If a character stole some money from her mother, she hears her voice. If another character hit a young girl with his car in a drunk-driving accident, he hears *her* voice, or the voice of the bartender who sold him the booze in the first place.


- At first, the whispers simply lure characters to the clearing. Over time, the whispers develop into a disturbing narrative. They invite characters to engage in their Vices, remind them of the awful things they've done and incite them to be suspicious of companions. The sounds caution against escape and demand reverence. (Indeed, the whispers provide hints to the nature of the setting. Encouraged to indulge in their Vices, characters might realize that it's prudent to perform acts in keeping with Virtues, instead.)

- The whispers change identity throughout. Maybe characters hear the voices of their fellow wanderers or of freaks. Maybe they hear their *own* voices spoken back to them.

- When characters do something effective in an effort to escape the clearing — such as when they commit to virtuous action (see below) or damage the thorn wall — the “whispers” scream bloody murder or stop entirely for a time. Or consider that the whispers quiet after the characters are trapped, and resume only when characters are on track to solving the mystery of the place.

- The whispers might lie. They could suggest ways out of the clearing, egging on characters to do vile deeds to “free themselves.” The whispers may encourage them





to harm one another, to kill the freaks or to even hurt themselves.

Stories

As a setting, the Whispering Wood offers a number of potential stories for any troupe playing a bizarre World of Darkness game. Most of these stories involve the primary themes of the location: desperation in being lost and fear of the labyrinthine primeval realm that exists outside our “normal” civilization. Some of these stories vary from those principles, allowing you to tell a whole other type of tale.

Escape

This is likely the most accessible and anticipated story a troupe can tell. The story is told in three “acts”: becoming lost in the forest while hearing the dreaded whispers, getting trapped in the clearing and then escaping (or attempting to escape) the grip of the forest. This story is all about breaking free from the *physical* reality of the Whispering Wood. Characters must overcome their own freakish bodies, must negotiate with the deformed inhabitants of the clearing and must somehow find a way to destroy or circumvent the wall of thorns. The resident freaks are likely to be a mixture of threatening (hating those who dare to defy the clearing) and helpful (secretly aiding the characters’ escape or even trying to go with them). Can characters survive long enough without going mad? Do the freaks try to imprison them and keep them bound? Is there a way over the thorn wall without tearing one’s body to shreds? (For ideas on escaping and/or destroying the Whispering Wood, see below under “Ending It.”) This is a challenge of physical and emotional survival.

Virtue Versus Vice

Whereas the first story idea is about breaking free of the dark heart of the forest, this one is about characters shattering the chains of their *own* dark hearts. Astute characters may notice that their newfound deformities in some ways correspond to their own overarching Vices. (If they don’t notice it within the first few days of being trapped, you may allow players Wits + Empathy rolls to help them realize the truth.) The malevolence of the clearing is tied to the weakness within each character. In this morality tale, victims must find a way to overcome their own Vices — and, in doing so, defeat the supernatural authority of the Whispering Wood.

The exact parameters of defeating this inner darkness is up to you, though it’s recommended that it involves exploring and acting upon Virtues. If a character performs deeds in keeping with her Virtue, the power of this setting weakens. A certain number of virtuous acts (perhaps

three) allow *that* character to escape the clearing. (Note that virtuous acts are those that award a character Willpower through the Virtue rules — see **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 100.) Each deed should manifest some kind of small reward to give the character a hint that her actions can influence the clearing’s power. Perhaps with each deed, the thorn wall shudders or shrinks, or maybe each virtuous endeavor causes the character’s freakish deformity to fade a little bit. Once the requisite number of virtuous acts is performed, the character is free. Maybe she simply fades out of the clearing and reappears at the spot in the woods where she first heard the whispers. Or maybe the thorns part for her, but threaten to close again on any others who haven’t committed to such righteous exploits. Either way, she untangles the thorny darkness within herself.

Bad Freaks

If your players are disinterested in mystery or moral complexity, the freaks can pose a clear threat. Twisted and deranged, they’re intimately connected to the clearing. Destroying the freaks means obliterating the trap, and hence characters free themselves. Of course, characters have to find a way to destroy what amounts to a whole shantytown — freak numbers may be in the dozens or higher. Direct confrontation is unlikely to end well, so newcomers have to stage a covert fight. Can they poison the stream or cut down the fruit trees? Do they hide in the miles of forest surrounding the clearing and inside the thorn wall, setting traps or luring the denizens out from the safety of their tents? Are some freaks — perhaps the most recent “visitors” to the Whispering Wood — willing to turn against the others? Characters may have to steal weapons or fashion their own, perhaps even improvising weapons from the tangled thorns around the clearing.

Existence

This story allows for a bit of a switch-up. Instead of players controlling characters who become lost, they control characters who are *already* trapped in the clearing. They might assume the roles of the original circus folk (or their offspring), or might be those poor souls who came afterward (Canadian loggers, American campers, British hikers). Regardless of the characters’ origins, this story is less about being lost and finding one’s way again, and more about exploring the strange lives of the shantytown. You create lives and jobs for all the freaks trapped in the Whispering Wood. Some hunt, others build, some watch the fire, others collect water. The clearing’s inhabitants are sure to have their own forms of politics and religion, however twisted. Do they all ascribe to the weird religion that venerates the clearing, worshipping the Whispering Wood with animal (or human) sacrifices stuck to the thorn wall?

Do they vie for command with the Ringmaster? How do characters react when more lost souls come stumbling in from outside? Do the characters treat them with disdain or welcome them and greedily devour tales of civilization? It's possible that at some point the characters realize how futile and meaningless their lives are and try to escape (or alternately stand in the way of others who try the same). What happens when these poor characters *do* manage to return to society and find that it abhors their deformed bodies?

White Lights, Black Eyes

This story starts off much like the others. Characters go into the woods, get lost, hear whispers and end up in the clearing. But here's where the head-trip starts: imagine that when the characters respond to certain stimuli (they're scratched by thorns, they commit a virtuous act, they indulge in a Vice), the clearing and its inhabitants fade away for a short time. In their place is a stark-white laboratory, and the characters find themselves strapped to tables, their mouths and eyelids wired open. Figures move around the periphery of the room — small, pale creatures with broad, black eyes or tall, oddly angled men in ill-fitting suits. Then, as soon as this revelation comes, the image fades and characters are back in the clearing.

What's happening? Is this just some other bizarre effect of the setting? Or is the clearing itself an illusion, a mind-trap created by fiendish creatures, government agents or some other beings? Can characters free themselves by engaging in the designated (or prohibited) stimulus-response actions? Does freeing themselves from one horrific place only lead to a whole other nightmare?

Ending It

The Whispering Wood can't be destroyed. Characters will want to, of course, and they probably try. But the supernatural forest is unyielding. The wood doesn't burn well, and the trees are usually slightly damp. The thorn wall is immense: it ensnares tools and rends flesh. Characters can chop down trees, but the forest inside the wall contains thousands of them. Resistance from the freaks and fatigue are two other major obstacles. Even if the characters somehow manage to do serious harm to the forest or clearing, what changes? Unless they open a way through the thorn wall (unlikely), they're still stuck. They might be able to eradicate the shantytown, but then characters are trapped in a hell of their own making. Escaping requires greater intuition and innovation than just razing the place.





The Junkyard

I also went to other yards. One, where I bought a 312 Ford-Y-Block V8 for \$114, had nasty, scruffy dogs that lunged at you, only to be rudely snapped to a stop by their chains, and a rickety shack with a table inside where a grimy deck of cards was in constant use. I never felt at home there.

— Bob Freudenberger, Junkyards I've Known

Americans love their cars and make great sacrifices to afford them. For some, automobiles are status symbols, compensation for inadequacies or a way to recapture lost youth. For others, a car represents freedom — the power to be hundreds of miles away when the sun rises next. Many people personify their cars, giving them names and imagined identities. A car becomes a second home, even a trusted friend.

What, then, is a junkyard? Is it a resting place for automobiles, somewhere for these all-important objects to go when they're damaged beyond repair or rendered inoperable by the march of time? Is it a scavenger's delight, a place where spare parts sit openly on the ground, ready to be plucked and reused by anyone with the money and skill to do so? Possibly. But if cars have their own personas, and even souls as some aficionados suggest, then a junkyard is a truly ghoulish place, piled with corpses and dismembered remains.

One junkyard in the World of Darkness contains more than rust and memories. A walk through the maze of stacked cars and spare parts is frightening, even in broad daylight. After dark, the junkyard is truly deadly.

Summary

Junkyards are dangerous places, even in the absence of the supernatural. Large piles of wrecked cars and metal debris threaten to topple over, the ground is littered with broken glass and the operators of such places are unscrupulous at best. This particular junkyard, however, holds dangers far worse than mishaps and swindles. The inhabitants (human, animal and even machine) turn aggressive and violent even as their physical shells decay. Visitors learn that the deeper into the junkyard they venture, the more dangerous the landscape is. The heart of the place holds secrets that shouldn't see the light of day, buried amidst the rotting carcasses of machines.

Where Is the Junkyard?

This setting isn't placed in any particular state or even country so you can put it wherever you like. That said, consider the following when deciding where the junkyard should be.

- **Cars:** Obviously, to have a junkyard you need junk. This scenario assumes the place is made up of automobiles and related parts. Such junkyards are common in the US, where most of the population owns cars, as opposed to people in other countries in, say, Europe. Such yards tend to appear near areas with high population densities. More people means more cars, and more cars means more debris.

- **Outside of Town:** Junkyards sometimes crop up in urban areas, but they are more common on the outskirts of cities. Large, open areas make good dumping grounds for disused vehicles. Some junkyards are adjacent to impound lots. A car that goes unclaimed for a certain amount of time is simply moved to a junkyard and either sold or torn apart for scrap.

Characters

What kinds of people have a reason to go to a junkyard? Anyone who needs a part for his or her vehicle. That said, what most of us think of as junkyards — huge lots with stacks of cars where one can buy vehicles or parts



at extremely cheap prices — aren't as common as they once were. Spare car parts are available online without the hassle of finding a yard and haggling over a price (to say nothing of braving the dogs, surly owners and physical hazards of such a place).

People who go to junkyards to find auto parts are likely to be interested in cars and auto repair. Gearheads, whether professional or hobbyists, as well as mechanics enjoy venturing to junkyards just for the sake of it. Likewise, people who, for one reason or another, don't trust goods purchased on the Internet or who aren't savvy on how that sort of commerce works or who have always bought cars and parts at salvage yards could venture to a yard.

This particular junkyard also holds some allure. Rumors about the place have circulated for decades. It has reputedly been a burial ground for mob hits, for instance (more about these rumors can be found under "Motives," on p. 118). Students of local history, opportunists or TV-crime fans might therefore visit in hopes of finding a memento.

And, of course, for a long time local teens have scaled the fence, outwitted the dogs and made out or got high amidst the wrecks. The fact that they sometimes don't return doesn't seem to deter their peers.

Theme and Mood

The junkyard can serve as the backdrop for several different kinds of stories. It's a superb setting for straight horror stories, especially if characters are mortals rather than supernatural beings. The creatures lurking in the yard (and the site itself) can very easily kill or maim normal folks, so the goal might be to survive a night inside or to escape before the dogs or the owner catches up.

The junkyard can also hold clues to other mysteries. Characters might investigate a decades-old murder and learn that evidence lingers in the rusted-out hulk of the victim's car. This locale can serve as a repository for the dirty secrets of the city. The owner's territorial nature can therefore be oriented toward keeping the past buried, which means keeping the curious out of the yard or preventing them from escaping with any discoveries.

On a thematic level, consider what a junkyard represents. Cars are complex and expensive, but entropy and time render them useless. Junkyards are emblematic of a culture that has resources to burn on trinkets. Stories involving memory, regret, materialism and waste are appropriate for such a location.

The mood of the junkyard varies depending on when and why the characters are there. During the day, they might marvel at the towers of metal, and flinch when the dogs stretch their chains, lunging. The mood is menacing, but not truly dangerous — it's one of *potential* harm. The characters might momentarily consider what would happen if the dogs slipped their chains, or if a stack of cars were to topple, but then shake off those fears and continue looking for whatever brought them there. And therein lies a second mood, one of potential treasure amidst the trash.

At night, the junkyard isn't safe for anyone except the owners. Loose dogs attack trespassers on sight, and the towers seem unsteady, as though waiting for exactly the right moment to fall. A sense of danger is unmistakable and constant. And yet, the other prevalent mood, that of something valuable waiting for characters if they're brave or persistent enough, doesn't wane. Indeed, with greater risk comes greater reward. The junkyard could be a treasure trove, assuming characters can survive it.

History

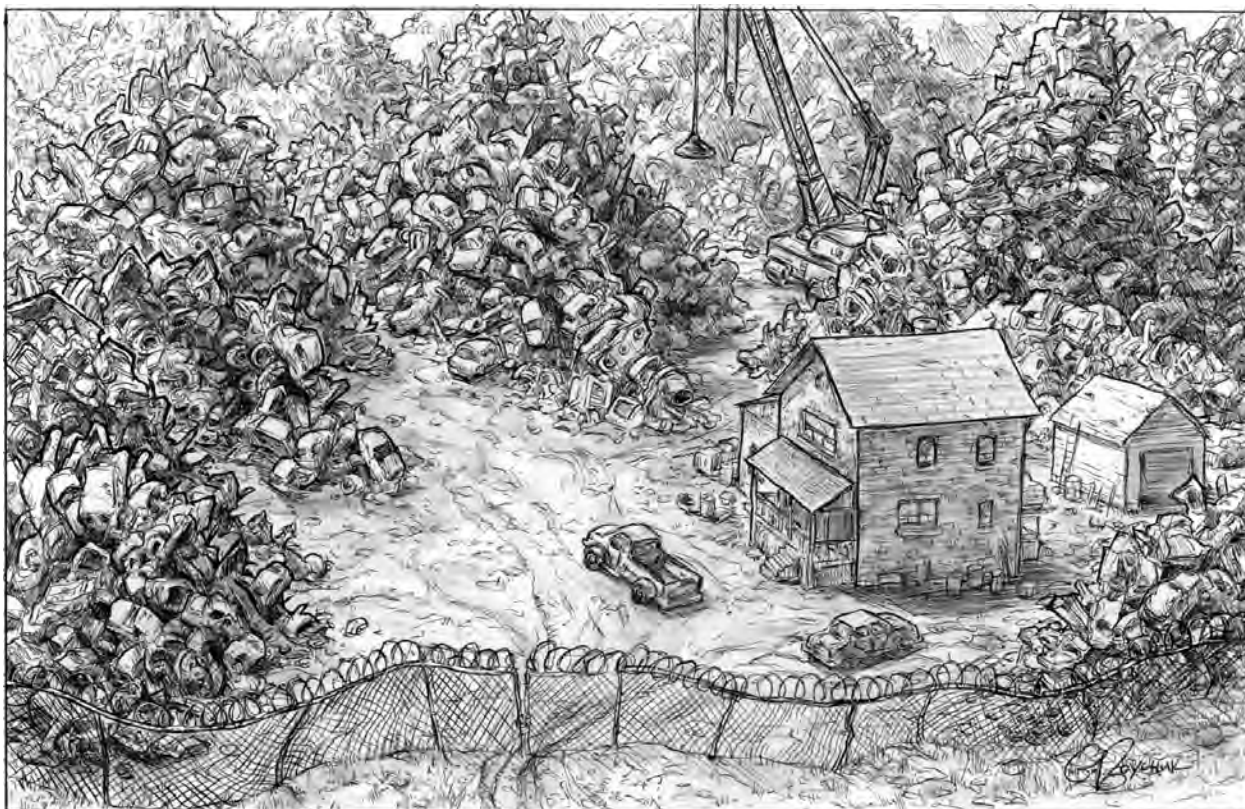
The junkyard sits outside the city. The surrounding area was once farmland, but pollution and economic problems have forced most family farmers out of business over the years.

One of those family farmers, Dennis Odell, had knack for fixing cars, and made money on the side doing repairs for locals. Never much of a farmer, he trained his sons as mechanics rather than as growers, and his family's land slowly fell into decline. Roughly 30 years ago, Odell filed papers with the city government and became licensed to sell cars and car parts as well as operate a junkyard. The Odell family officially left the farming business, and Dennis became a full-time mechanic and yard operator.

The junkyard grew considerably in the 25 years that followed, until most of the land once used for growing crops was occupied by wrecked cars, a small lot housing used but still operational vehicles and a huge crane to stack hulks. The farmhouse fell into disrepair and was demolished (Odell was a good mechanic, but not much of a carpenter or home repairman), and the barn had long since been converted into a machine shop. Odell had a small house built near the road that ran by the junkyard. His wife had left him, and he and his two sons stayed to run the business.

Dennis Odell died five years ago and left the business to his eldest son, Byron, better known to his friends as "Red." Red married and moved into town for a short time, taking work at a car dealership as a mechanic, but, about a year before his father died, he moved back to the family house and brought his wife and three boys with him (at Dennis' request). Younger brother Steven (who had not left the house and was deeply resentful of his father's decision) left shortly after Red returned and hasn't been seen since.

Red's wife died three years after her husband inherited the business. Neither her death nor Dennis' was by natural causes. Dennis Odell's body was found one cold winter morning, facedown in the dirt between two stacks of cars. The police reconstruction of the scene indicated that he had been in the yard the night before, slipped and cut his neck on a jagged piece of metal. He had managed to crawl nearly 50 feet before bleeding to death. Interestingly, neither the guard dogs nor the numerous indigenous rats disturbed his body, a fact that lives on in local lore. ("Denny Odell was so mean, the rats were scared to eat him.")



Natalie Odell (née Mayhew), Red's wife, met a similarly gruesome fate. According to Red's emotional recount, they had an argument, and she ran from the house in tears, fleeing into the yard. As she walked amidst the stacks, a part from a car (the story varies as to what part — some people claim it was a tire, others a bumper) fell. The debris struck Natalie on the head, killing her instantly. Like Dennis, Natalie wasn't found until the following morning. Red claims he was too angry from the fight to go chasing after her. In this case, however, animals had no compunction about feeding on Natalie's body. The dogs and rats had rendered her unrecognizable by morning.

Red Odell now owns and runs the junkyard, but visitors and customers rarely see him. He's developed a particularly unsavory reputation among locals. They say he hasn't left the house since the day his wife died, and that he's ordered his boys to shoot anyone who comes to the yard after dark. Whatever the truth of these and other rumors (see below), Red definitely deserves his reputation of being unpleasant and territorial.

Day-to-day operations are left to his eldest son, Dennis, now 20. The other two boys, Roger and Byron Jr. (17 and 15, respectively), assist their brother in the shop and sometimes deal with customers, but, for the most part, they just skip school and hide out in the yard, shooting rats with BB guns and reading stolen porn magazines.

Red and His Family

The following are some rumors that characters might hear if they ask around about the Odells. The truth of these rumors is noted where necessary.


- **Red killed his wife and father.** This is a persistent rumor. Despite the fact that both deaths were investigated and ruled accidental, folks like to talk, and the notion that Red murdered his father ("For the money and the land") and his wife (motives for this vary — some people feel she was having an affair, others that she was thinking about leaving him) makes for some superb front-porch gossip. No one has any evidence to actually implicate Red.

- **Red is under house arrest.** One of several rumors that crops up to explain why Red never leaves the house is that he pleaded out a charge of murder (sometimes his wife, sometimes a trespasser) and is bound to the property by law. This rumor is false, of course, and is easily verified as court rulings and arrests are a matter of public record.

- **Red is a drunk, and a violent one at that.** This rumor isn't so much a rumor as generally accepted truth. Red *does* drink and is violent when he drinks, but he isn't a habitual drunk.

- **Red beats/molests his boys.** Red Odell certainly isn't one to spare the rod and spoil the child, and has occasionally raised a hand to his sons after a few too many beers. His sons are doggedly loyal to him, though, and there's no evidence at all to suggest systematic beatings, abuse or molestation.

- **Red has shot several trespassers and hidden their bodies in cars.** The Odell boys like to scare folks by saying that trespassers will be shot and their bodies hidden in trunks. Sometimes, the boys point out cars buried under several other vehicles and say, "That's where Pop hid the body of that long-haired guy in the sandals." No one really believes the kids, but it's true that at least one tres-



passer has been shot, though not fatally. The intruder climbed the fence to steal a car part. One of the boys (they all claim the credit) gave him a .22 slug to the leg for his trouble. He managed to climb back over the fence and reach help. No charges were pressed.

- **The dogs kill and eat trespassers.** The tower of cars in the center of the yard serves as a den for the guard dogs. Locals say unlucky trespassers are killed, dragged into the den and eaten. By some accounts, the interior of the “cave” is littered with bones, clothes and personal effects from trespassers, but no one actually admits to seeing the place.

- **The ghost(s) of Dennis Odell and/or Natalie Odell haunt the junkyard.** This is something people say if they don’t like Red or have never met him. No one has ever reported anything at the junkyard that seems even remotely like a ghostly visitation. Still, the gruesome deaths and the fact that Red grew so withdrawn leads people to the conclusion that unquiet spirits haunt the yard.

Description

The junkyard sits by the side of a rural road. The closest “neighbor” is a dilapidated farmhouse three miles away, and the road joins up with a state highway roughly 15 miles from the Odells’ land.

The house is visible from the road, but the stacks of cars and the crane beyond dwarf it. A 10-foot-high chain-link fence topped with barbed wire encircles the junkyard (though not the house). And yet, the fence sags in many places due to the family’s practice of cutting and widening it when the yard needs to expand. Stacks of cars are highest in the very center of the site. The cars comprising them have been rusting for nearly 20 years. Reaching that tower of cars involves climbing over or through a pile of sharp, unstable debris (see “Systems”). Not even the Odell boys dare do that (they all remember how their granddaddy died).

The remainder of the yard is nothing short of labyrinthine. Piles of cars create pathways, but the Odells certainly don’t have any kind of plan in mind when they pile wrecks. Paths split off from each other, dead-end and double back with no rhyme or reason. While the Odell boys (and presumably their father) know the place backward and forward, a visitor can easily get lost. It’s always possible to climb over cars, of course, but that presents dangers of its own.

The crane is a beast, a construction-site device that Dennis Odell bought damaged and spent more than a year repairing. It sits near the front entrance of the yard, but can roll on treads along wide paths. (It doesn’t have the space to turn around, so the driver must put the machine into reverse or drive it all the way around the central tower to get it back to its resting place, which takes at least an hour.) Only the eldest Odell son is skilled enough with the crane to back it up. The crane uses a huge magnet to move the car hulks about.

Junkyard Dogs

Between two and five dogs roam the yard at any given time. The Odells don’t bother to give them names (or shots, for that matter). The eldest boy feeds the dogs when he remembers, but, for the most part, they subsist on rats. The dogs are thin and antisocial. While they don’t bother any of the Odells or anyone accompanied by a member of the family, anyone in the junkyard alone, especially at night, is fair game.

The dogs are mutts, dingy brown or gray and white in color. They aren’t especially large, but are fast and lean, and can wriggle through cars after their prey or can escape an enemy much quicker than any ordinary person can.

Information

Characters can investigate the junkyard by visiting it, looking through business records or talking to local residents. Visiting the junkyard allows characters to learn its geography and to talk with the Odell boys if they go during the day, or experience the true horror of the place if they sneak in after dark.

Business and police records show the history of the junkyard as presented earlier. With a successful Intelligence + Academics roll, a character learns when Dennis Odell changed the land from a farm to a junkyard, the circumstances of his death as reported in the local papers (a character with the means to investigate police reports finds that the information there corresponds to what was reported), Red Odell’s inheritance of the property and the details of his wife’s death. An exceptional success on this roll also reveals that shortly after Natalie Odell died, her older brother Timothy Mayhew brought a civil suit against Byron Odell, alleging that he was responsible for the woman’s death. Mayhew dropped the suit after a closed meeting with Odell and his lawyer. No other official complaints have been lodged against Odell or the junkyard, and the only other notable incident to be reported in the press involved the man who was shot while trespassing.

Talking to locals about the junkyard nets investigators a plethora of information, most of it in the form of gossip and rumors. What the characters learn depends on their method of questioning. Knocking on doors and asking about Odell and the junkyard is likely to put people on their guard, while striking up a conversation at a local watering hole (and buying drinks) makes people more loose-lipped. In any case, you might ask for Manipulation + Persuasion or Presence + Intimidation rolls, depending on what characters do. Success on one of these rolls means that a subject relates what he knows (or at least believes) about Red and the business. An exceptional success means the subject has a tidbit of information that is not only true, but helps the characters’ investigation in some way. (What that tidbit is depends on your troupe and what the characters are trying to accomplish).

Systems

The possible supernatural components of the junkyard do not demand any particular game systems. The specialized environment of the setting itself does require a few special rules.

- **Climbing over/through Wrecks:** Characters may find it necessary to crawl through or climb over junked cars in order to escape a pursuer or reach a goal. (In fact, this is the only way of reaching the interior of the central tower, short of using the crane.) Climbing over wrecked cars requires a successful Dexterity + Athletics roll. Success means a character suffers no injury. (Exceptional success has no extra effect). Failure means the character slips and suffers three dice of bashing damage (armor-pending, if applicable). A dramatic failure means the damage is lethal. A new roll must be made every time a character climbs from solid ground over a wreck.

Crawling through cars or debris is more dangerous. The roll is the same (though characters with the Giant Merit suffer a -1 penalty). Success means a character covers distance at a rate equal to half her Speed in one turn, while an exceptional success means the character moves at normal Speed. Failure means she is cut on jagged metal or broken glass, taking one point (no dice are rolled) of lethal damage. Dramatic failure means the character suffers two points of lethal damage and runs the risk of infection (see p. 176 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). A new roll must be made every time a character crawls through a wreck, or if more distance still needs to be covered. Reaching the center of the main tower involves an extended action requiring five successes, with one roll per turn.

- **Working the Crane:** Operating the crane is difficult. Not only does such heavy machinery require training, but the crane is old and not very well-maintained. The roll to work it is Wits + Drive, but unless a character has been trained in operating such equipment, a roll suffers a -1 penalty. Backing the crane up imposes a -2 penalty, regardless of whether the character has the appropriate expertise (for a total of -3 if the character is untrained). Failure means the crane stalls out. Dramatic failure means the crane crashes into a pile of cars, which can spell disaster for anyone on the ground nearby.

- **Climbing the Fence:** This isn't especially difficult, as the fence is loose and sagging in many places. A successful Dexterity + Athletics roll is sufficient to get in or out of the junkyard by climbing under or over the fence. Doing so while being chased by vicious dogs might impose a penalty at your discretion. Failure on this roll means the character falls from the fence or cannot squeeze underneath this turn, while a dramatic failure results in one point of lethal damage from barbed wire.

- **Navigating the Junkyard:** The junkyard is a maze. A successful Wits + Survival roll every few minutes is enough to keep a character from becoming lost. Failure means she has taken a wrong turn and lost her bearings, while dramatic failure means she has run afoul of one of

the dogs. The Direction Sense Merit negates the need for such rolls.

Supporting Characters

The most important supporting characters in the junkyard are the guard dogs and the Odell family. Game traits are provided for Red Odell and Dennis Odell (Red's oldest son), but the traits of the other two boys are left to you. The dog statistics on p. 203 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook** work just fine for the junkyard hounds.

Byron "Red" Odell

Quote: (*menacing glare*)

Background: Red almost got away. He was married, he'd left the junkyard and had a wife, kids and a house. And then his father did the one thing — the *only* thing — that could have brought him back to that scrap of dirt. The old bastard apologized.

Dennis Odell told his son that he was sorry for the beatings, sorry for the long years of forcing the kids to work the same hours as he did. He was sorry for raising them to be workaholics, tired all the time, and only able to find rest when drinking. But that was all past, Dennis said, and now he needed Red's help. Red came back, brought his wife and kids with him and took over the family business. Of course, that involved hashing a few things out with Steve, his younger brother, who felt that he deserved the "honor" of running the place. Red and Steve went out into the yard one night and settled their differences. By the next morning, Steve had packed up and left. He didn't even say goodbye, and no one questioned it.

Red set about running the operation, but tragedy befell him twice in five years. First, his father and then his wife died in bloody accidents, and Red became a recluse, leaving the operation to his eldest son, Dennis. Now, he rarely leaves the house, peering out from shuttered windows and lurking behind half-closed doors. His sons find him cleaning guns, watching TV and drinking most evenings. Few words pass between them anymore. All of the boys know Red sometimes leaves the house at night to wander the yard and that he carries a pistol and a hatchet with him.

Description: Red is short and stocky. Though he rarely leaves the house during the day, his face seems perpetually sunburned and his once rust-colored hair is graying. He wears overalls and well-worn boots, and rubs his wedding ring when agitated.

Storytelling Hints: Red hates his life, hates the junkyard, hates what he has become and, most of all, hates his father for dragging him back to the place. He would like nothing more than to get into the crane and smash everything to pieces, but he can't bring himself to do it. He has come to think of himself as part of the yard, an inmate in this resting place for broken dreams and forgotten feelings, though Red could never articulate his thoughts as such. He knows the bodies of human beings



lie buried in the junkyard, stashed in trunks, but he doesn't have the courage to go looking for them, as he isn't sure how they got there. He knows he goes walking at night, but he never has any memory of it-or of how his hatchet gets stained with blood.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 2, Strength 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 1

Skills: Animal Ken (Dogs) 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Crafts (Car Repair) 4, Drive (Crane, Off-Road) 4, Firearms (Pistol, Shotgun) 3, Intimidation 3, Larceny 2, Persuasion 2, Stealth 3, Survival 2, Subterfuge (Con Jobs) 3, Weaponry 2

Merits: Direction Sense, Brawling Dodge, Iron Stamina 2, Resources 2, Unseen Sense

Willpower: 3

Morality: 3

Virtue: Fortitude

Vice: Wrath

Initiative: 3

Defense: 2

Speed: 11

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Hatchet	2 (L)	2	N/A	8

Type	Damage	Range	Shots	Special	Dice Pool
.38 Special	2	20/40/80	6	N/A	8
12-Gauge	4	40/80/160	5+1	9 again	10
Shotgun					

Health: 8

Dennis Odell

Quote: "No trespassin'!"

Background: Dennis dropped out of high school at 16 at his father's behest. The senior Dennis Odell, his grandfather and namesake, died a year after the family returned to the junkyard, and Red said he needed his son to help run the place. Though his mother disapproved, young Dennis was thrilled to be able to leave what he saw as a useless pursuit (academics) and be a mechanic in the family tradition. For three years, he stayed at his father's side, learning to fix cars, operate the crane and bilk people for money on repairs.

And then his mother died, and his father withdrew completely. Dennis knows that his father had long talks in private with policemen and lawyers, but refused to believe that Red could have had anything to do with his mother's death. The young man lived in fear of the day the police would show up to arrest his father, partly because he was afraid to lose him, but mostly because he wasn't sure that Red would go quietly. Fortunately, that day never came. But after Natalie's death, Red effectively turned the business over to his son.

It was difficult at first, but, as the years have passed, Dennis has grown comfortable in his role as overseer. His two brothers want to follow in his footsteps and drop out

of school, but Dennis refuses, insisting that someone in the family should have an education. When they argue he quietly reminds them, "It's what Mom would've wanted."

Description: Dennis, like his father, is barely over five-and-a-half feet tall, but, unlike Red, he is rail thin. He is missing two teeth due to a mishap with a wrench a few years back, and his face is perpetually smudged with grease. He alternates between overalls and carpenter pants and wears a stained leather tool-belt.

Storytelling Hints: Dennis begins to understand how his father must have felt. Red is the owner of the junkyard and the name and face that people associate with it—even though the amount of actual work Red puts into the place is minimal, and he hasn't shown his face to a customer in years. Dennis doesn't consider killing his father, but he does wonder if his life would be any more satisfying if his name were on the deed, if he were the one officially running the place, if he could walk into the local bar and be greeted with "How's the junkyard, Denny?" instead of "How's *your father's* junkyard, Denny?"

For the most part, Dennis is fairly well-adjusted. He deals with customers and puts on his best "grease monkey" act. The truth is he's fairly shrewd and usually winds up with the better end of the deals he makes. Dennis is highly protective of his brothers, but a little frightened of his father. He knows that Red goes wandering in the yard at night and is always armed. He's trying to work up the courage to ask Red what he hunts.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 2, Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Skills: Animal Ken (Dogs) 2, Athletics 1, Brawl 1, Crafts (Car Repair) 3, Drive (Crane) 3, Firearms (Rifle) 2, Intimidation 2, Subterfuge (Con Jobs) 3, Weaponry 1

Merits: Direction Sense, Fast Reflexes 1, Mentor (Red) 3, Resources 2

Willpower: 5

Morality: 6

Virtue: Hope

Vice: Greed

Initiative: 7 (with Fast Reflexes)

Defense: 3

Speed: 10

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Wrench	2 (B)	1	—	5

Type	Damage	Range	Shots	Special	Dice Pool
.22 Rifle	4	200/400/800	5+1	N/A	10

Health: 7

Motives

The junkyard is a remote and specialized locale, and thus requires some work on your and the players' parts to get characters there.

• **Bodies:** An old urban legend tells of two semi-trucks totaled in a head-on collision. With both drivers dead, the trucks were towed to a junkyard (sometimes a vacant lot) until some other arrangement could be made. The owner of the lot later pried the trucks apart to find the source of a terrible smell — a crushed compact car that carried passengers.

Leaving aside the nonsensical logistics of towing two semi-trucks without separating them, this foundation can make a good backdrop for stories involving the junkyard. A crushed car might contain the body of a murder or kidnapping victim — someone for whom characters search. Of course, telling any member of the Odell family that the junkyard houses a corpse is only likely to spook them, and certainly doesn't inspire any offer of help. The characters might well have to sneak into the yard, and find and open the car under the cover of darkness.

Car accidents aren't the only reasons that bodies might be found on Odell land. Rumors circulate that the mob (in whatever form it exists in your chronicle's city) once used the place as a graveyard. What famous or infamous men might lay buried beneath the junked cars, and what might they have that characters need?

• **Off-Limits:** Sometimes the notion of going where one isn't allowed is incentive enough to go. The junkyard might be a tantalizing lure for characters young enough to want to skip school. Older characters might be intrigued by the idea that Red Odell hasn't been seen in a long time and might try to slip under the fence to catch a look at this Boo Radley-like person. A dare is also a possible reason to enter the junkyard after dark. More stupid things than trespassing on a dare are certainly on record.

Better (or at least more concrete) motives for entering the junkyard exist. Dennis Odell swindles people regularly, raising the costs of his car repair and altering cars so that even though the original problems are fixed, owners need other repairs soon. Someone who lacks the money or wherewithal to pursue the problem legally might sneak into the junkyard with the intention of getting revenge. And, of course, a character might need a car part but be unwilling to pay for it. Surely the Odells wouldn't notice if a few parts went missing? If the characters need a bigger lure, remember the supposed mob connection. Perhaps they hear rumors of crime money stuck in the trunk of a car.

• **Bad Luck:** Characters passing by the junkyard might suffer from car trouble, or a character brings her terminal car to the yard to have it repaired. Reasons to be stuck near the junkyard don't have to be so mundane, of course. The characters might be kidnapped by a group of people (perhaps criminals, perhaps even vampires if you want to introduce them), and manage to escape into the yard in hopes of losing their pursuers. If characters are stuck in the yard after dark, they are effectively stranded. The nearest neighbor is several miles away (and nothing says that neighbors are at home or at all helpful). The Odells have no interest in aiding anyone on their land

after hours, and cell phones might not get a signal out in the sticks (or gaining high ground to receive a signal means climbing the tallest stack of old wrecks). The convention of being stuck in a dangerous and unfriendly place and having to escape or survive is very much in-genre for the *World of Darkness*.

• **Official Business:** While Dennis doesn't like dealing with city officials, they're part of his life. Policemen, insurance investigators, dogcatchers, safety inspectors from car companies and even reporters may visit the junkyard in the course of their duties. Sometimes they take cars away. Sometimes they bring along a crew and dismantle a vehicle on site. Any of these people could see something in the yard that compels them to return later, either in an official capacity or on their own (depending on the bent of the individual). Likewise, the junkyard is a maze. It's not unthinkable for a character to become separated from the troupe and lost within the stacks.

Characters with official status can order that car trunks be opened, ground excavated—or that Red Odell must leave his house to give a statement. And yet, a character who initiates official proceedings to solve a problem probably finds that the system works too slowly. Say, getting the site condemned to buy time for an uninterrupted search of the grounds. The bureaucratic machine grinds slowly. Meanwhile, the character needs something from the site *now*.

• **The Monster's Den:** The junkyard is home to some violent and dangerous beings. Red doesn't leave the house during the day, but his "hunts" at night might range beyond the yard's confines (see "Red's Hunts," p. 122). Likewise, the two youngest Odell boys get into all manner of mischief, ranging from vandalism to petty theft to armed robbery. Even the dogs might leave the yard in search of prey. Any of these events could lead trailing characters back to the junkyard.

Of course, once Red, the boys or the dogs clear the fence, they're on their own turf again and have a clear advantage. If the characters in pursuit are focused or confident, they might follow all the same.

As a variation on this hook, something might chase characters *into* the junkyard. They then have to contend not only with the inhabitants, but also with whatever chased them there in the first place.

• **Lost and Found:** A character needs to retrieve something left in his car before it was towed to the yard. Or perhaps the car was totaled, the character is the driver's next of kin and the deceased had something of the character's in the vehicle. Maybe the car was simply sold for junk, and the character didn't realize until later that something was still inside. In any case, the Odells aren't interested in helping the character find the object. One conversation should convince him that giving the family too much information about the prize isn't conducive to seeing it again.



Preliminary Events

Below are six occurrences that showcase the ghastly nature of the junkyard without making the otherworldliness of the place obvious. While these events are horrific, grisly and certainly terrifying, they all have mundane explanations and suggest that something is very wrong with the site and the Odell family.

- **Pet Heaven:** Guard dogs and rats aren't the only animals living in the yard. Dogs and cats belonging to local residents turn up among the cars, living in backseats and staring at visitors, only to slip away into the debris when approached. A concerned customer calls the authorities, who send out an investigator to check for animal cruelty. She finds no evidence of animals beyond guard dogs. (She insists that those be given shots and a proper shelter, an order that the Odell family promptly ignores.) But stories grow more persistent. People driving by the yard sometimes see animals wriggling under the fence, and visitors spot hungry yellow eyes staring at them from beneath cars and inside open trunks.

More disturbing is that customers insist they recognize some of the animals. They say neighborhood dogs and cats prowl the stacks, even though the animals in question have been announced or presumed dead. Interestingly, all of the reportedly dead animals were taken away and destroyed by the city or a vet's office, not buried on private property. Perhaps the Odells make some money on the side running a pet cemetery? But how has it gone wrong?

- **Rats:** Naturally, a place with so many tiny spaces attracts rodents. The junkyard has a huge rat population. The pests serve as food for the junkyard dogs, birds of prey and snakes.

But what do the rats eat?

Rats eat anything they can catch and kill. They swarm any helpless or trapped victim. Characters might find a body in the junkyard that has been completely stripped of flesh, with clothes torn away and any jewelry taken away to the rats' nests. A character trying to crawl through cars might get stuck (rather than injured) on a failed roll or a dramatic failure, which doesn't seem like too big of a problem until the rats descend. Perhaps the Odells take grisly revenge on enemies by shooting them in the leg and leaving them in the middle of the junkyard. If the dogs don't finish them, the rats will.

The traits listed for Bats on p. 202 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook** work equally well for rats, save that rats can't fly.

- **Chew Toys:** Half-starved, vicious dogs are a staple of what makes junkyards threatening and scary. The dogs that patrol the Odells' place are perfect examples. They aren't satisfied with merely snarling at visitors or attacking intruders. They like to keep souvenirs.

The characters talk to someone who had a violent encounter with the Odells' dogs (or perhaps one of the

characters experienced the dogs firsthand). Although the victim escaped with her life, the dogs took something. Maybe a piece of clothing, a cell phone, a weapon or even a finger. Depending on the nature of the characters and their interest in the yard, they might disregard this information or try to learn more. Either way, they hear similar stories from other people.

Where do the dogs take these objects? The center of the main tower would seem the most likely place, but perhaps each of the dogs has its own den somewhere in the morass of cars. Why do the dogs collect these trinkets from victims? What treasures — or horrors — might investigators find in these miniature junkyards?

- **"Cursed" Cars:** Car parts purchased from the junkyard are reportedly cursed. Transplanting a part, so stories say, causes one's car to get into a serious accident soon afterward. Of course "serious" and "soon" are relative terms. If characters investigate these stories, they find that an unusually high number of people who have bought (or stolen) parts from the junkyard have died or been badly injured in wrecks.

More interesting still are the reports of these accidents. Most survivors describe their vehicles malfunctioning in some way, as if possessed. Steering wheels lurch, pulling a car into oncoming traffic. Brakes fail or apply themselves at critical moments. Transmissions throw cars from third gear into reverse during rush hour. And yet, whenever these claims are investigated, no fault with the vehicle is ever found. The official report in all cases is "driver error."

Stories of the curse haven't hurt the Odells' business yet, and, if anyone brings the tales to Dennis' attention he just laughs them off, saying it's not his fault that people don't know how to drive. He also points out that many people buy parts from the junkyard but install them on their own, so it could well be that folks just don't know what they're doing.

Is there a real curse on junkyard parts? If so, where did it come from? Is Red somehow responsible, or does the very essence of death and misfortune simply saturate everything in the yard?

- **There but for the Grace of God:** Cars stop working near the junkyard. Ever since the county put a stop sign at the intersection a half-mile up the road, people have complained about their cars stalling. They usually start up again after a few tries, but sometimes they quit altogether and require a jump or even a tow (both of which Dennis is happy to provide, for a price). It doesn't happen to everyone. It seems to affect locals more often than visitors, for example, and it never seems to happen to anyone driving a truck or an official vehicle of any kind (police, postal, even pizza delivery).

No one's car has actually shut off while it's still moving, but it's becoming less of a local joke and more of a concern. While most people just feel that it's symptomatic of cheap gas, the weather, shoddy engineering or some other explanation, some locals mutter that their cars are afraid they might be taken to the junkyard.



• **Blood Red:** Kids in residential developments miles from the yard tell stories of a “mean guy carrying an ax and covered in blood.” This story makes the rounds of local public schools, where it merges with rumors about Red Odell. The man thus gains the name “Blood Red.” Tales of deaths at the junkyard circulate through the rumor mill. Before long, most youths are convinced that Red Odell leaves the junkyard at night to find kids to hack up with his ax. His own sons beat up anyone spreading such lies about their father, but that just exacerbates the problem.

Then one night, police respond to a call from a group of panicked teens having a party. The kids describe seeing a man appear at their door wearing bloody overalls and carrying a hatchet, glaring at them. The police find boot prints and drops of blood outside, but no other evidence. They don’t bother questioning Red (after all, everyone knows he never leaves his house).

Two days later, one of the teens from the party is reported missing. Rumors spread again: pieces of the kid have been spread throughout the junkyard. How much of these rumors is fact and how much is fiction?

Stories

Below are five stories set at the junkyard. Up until now, the supernatural has been hinted at, but nothing overt has been presented. These stories show how to inject the truly unknown based on the seemingly mundane.

Nothing Ever Rests

The junkyard is a place of unquiet death. And yet, no ghosts (not even those of the senior Dennis Odell or Natalie Odell) haunt the place. The dead do indeed rise, but it’s their bodies that roam the junkyard, not their souls.

So far, only animals have been re-animated. When junkyard dogs die on the property, they remain inert only until the rest of the pack drags their carcasses to the lair in the central tower. There, they enter a state of undeath and emerge ready to kill and feast upon anything that crosses their paths.

Not all of the dogs are undead. A few are still alive and guard the junkyard during the day. After the sun goes down, the walking corpses emerge from their dens to hunt, and the living dogs find shelter where they can, as not even they are safe from the undead canines’ hunger.

What is it about the junkyard that brings the dead to this state? The land might be cursed, might harbor an evil spirit powerful enough to animate flesh, or perhaps a more scientific explanation (such as toxic chemicals buried in the junkyard) is appropriate, depending on the tone of your game. Whatever the truth, the dogs are extremely difficult to kill. They don’t suffer wound penalties and have an additional number of Health dots equal to their Strength. During the day, they crawl beneath cars, into trunks and other dark spaces and wait, silent and unmoving. Sunlight doesn’t harm them — it merely makes them uncomfortable — so they flee deep into the junkyard if exposed during the day.



Combining this story with “Pet Heaven,” above, introduces the possibility of undead dogs and cats, though it begs the question of why local pets are being dragged to or buried in the yard. Perhaps resident dogs leave the yard at night and drag dead pets back, or perhaps the Odells make some illegal money “disposing” of such animals.

Consider whether or not the Odells know about this phenomenon. If so, did Red cause it willingly or accidentally? If so, how? Were the deaths of his father and wife in fact intended as sacrifices to some dark power meant to cause this abomination? What if a dead human were dragged to the central tower or buried in the junkyard?

Junk Film

Emulating a popular independent movie, a group of young filmmakers sneaks into the junkyard at night with cameras and sound equipment. Their motive might be as simple as “It would make a cool, creepy movie” or as complex as investigating the truth of any of a number of rumors about the place. Of course, in the course of making the film, they could be attacked by dogs, bitten by rats, shot by Dennis or his brothers, or hacked up by Red. They could also be arrested for trespassing, but the Odells don’t like to involve the police.

In any event, the footage somehow finds its way into characters’ hands. They could just give it to the police, but something on the tape might inspire them to investigate the junkyard personally. That crucial factor is up to you, since you know your players’ buttons best. If characters are interested in monetary gain, maybe someone on the tape talks about mob money. If characters have an interest in the supernatural, maybe they see something that they recognize as otherworldly but that the police will dismiss.

As another option, perhaps players would like to assume the roles of the filmmakers as a kind of “prequel” to the main story. The characters meet gruesome and perhaps uncertain fates during the course of the story, and it falls to the “main” characters to uncover the truth of what happened during shooting.

Red’s Hunts

What does Red Odell search for when he leaves the house at night? Does he truly not remember his activities? To whom or what does the blood on his hatchet belong? The answers to these questions can easily be the basis for a story. Consider the following possibilities::

- **Unknown Madness:** Red suffers from fugue states during which he stalks the junkyard. He doesn’t remember anything he sees or does, which is fortunate, because he’s a cold-blooded killer. He has already murdered several trespassers and hidden their bodies (sometimes in pieces). He knows the junkyard’s layout flawlessly and can run across hulks or crawl through cars with no risk of injury. (No dice rolls are required, and Red can move at his normal Speed at all times.)

What causes Red’s fugue states? How long has he suffered from them? Did he kill his father and wife? Why has he not murdered his sons, or slain any of the dogs?

- **Protector:** Red knows very well what he does when he leaves the house. He protects his family from anyone who would do them harm, steal from them or even set foot on their land without permission. Red has killed several people for sneaking into the junkyard, and has hidden their bodies. He remembers where they are and has used the crane to bury the “coffin cars” at the bottoms of stacks.

Whether or not Red killed his father and wife for some perceived slight is up to you. It could just as easily be that those deaths were “trigger events” that sent him over the edge. In any case, Red grows paranoid, seeing anyone who shows too much interest in the junkyard as a threat. He hasn’t started hunting beyond the fence, but considers it.

- **Inhuman:** If you have access to **Vampire**, **Werewolf** or **Mage**, you might consider that Red has become one of those beings or a related type of character, such as a ghoul. This brings up all sorts of interesting questions and possibilities, such as how he underwent the transformation, how he keeps it to himself and whether others of his kind know or approve of his activities.

- **Righteous Fury:** For a different spin on the hunts, Red is not an evil man; the people whom he’s killed deserved their fate. The junkyard acts as a sort of Venus Flytrap for corrupt and maleficent people. Murderers, rapists and other despicable folk are drawn there, especially after dark. Red awaits them with his hatchet, his gun and his vicious dogs.

This begs the question of who or what empowers Red in his activities. Does the junkyard attract evil because it is itself evil (like attracts like), or does some cosmic or divine force empower the place? Does Red merely *believe* he is doing the right thing, but in reality is he being duped by a powerful force? Is the junkyard’s purpose to capture and slay evil? Then what sins did Dennis and Natalie Odell commit? What about those of any “trespassers” whom Red may have killed and dismembered since?

Mayhew’s Revenge

This story works best if the characters have had some negative experience with the junkyard, or if they are for hire in some way.

Timothy Mayhew lost his sister Natalie to the junkyard. The police report says her death was accidental, but Timothy never believed that. He’s convinced Red Odell murdered Natalie — he just isn’t sure why. He brought a civil suit against Red to try to prove that he was responsible (since there was no evidence for criminal charges), but dropped the suit after a sit-down meeting with Red and their respective lawyers.

It wasn’t a lawyer who convinced Mayhew to back off. He’s a successful physician, so money wasn’t the problem. What convinced him to drop the case was a quiet conversation with Red while the lawyers were arguing.

Red made it clear to Timothy that if he didn't back off, his nephews — his sister's children — would suffer.

Mayhew didn't want to believe that Red would actually harm his own sons out of spite, but he didn't want to test the man, either. After years of keeping tabs on the junkyard through private investigators and watching the boys become more like their father, he has decided that he needs to remove his brother-in-law entirely. He looks for people who have a grudge against Odell or a reason to investigate the junkyard to be his accomplices.

Another possibility is to involve the characters with Mayhew in a professional capacity before ever introducing the junkyard. This is easy if characters are mortal and have been wounded in encounters with the supernatural. In treating them, Mayhew knows they lie about the sources of their injuries, which might be the basis of a relationship with him as a Contact or Ally, or he could blackmail them into helping him.

Mayhew knows the rumors that circulate about the junkyard and its owners. He doesn't believe in the supernatural, meaning that he, like the characters, is probably in for an unpleasant surprise.

Wrecking Ball

The junkyard isn't a classic "evil" or "haunted" locale. It's only as supernatural as you decide to make it. Gruesome things happen there, rather than the place *making* them happen. But what if characters decide to get in the crane and start smashing everything to "remedy" the place, or resort to fire or explosives to do the same?

If that's their plan and they manage to pull it off, that's fine. Of course, doing so is destruction of property, at the very least, and characters can expect serious repercussions if caught or implicated. Ultimately, though, it's a *junkyard*. It's already composed of broken and damaged goods. All the characters can hope to do is smash cars some more. Destructive solutions probably don't alleviate the problem or the sinister history of the place, although they might expose more truths.

A Few Short Hours

A very effective one-shot or prelude story involving the junkyard is to simply escape from or survive it. This has already been mentioned briefly, but it bears further examination.

- **How did the characters get there?** Why are the characters in the junkyard after dark? See "Motives" for some ideas, but a major consideration is whether they're present by their own free will. If the characters decide to break in, you can be a bit more brutal when considering what they have to face, because they're probably prepared for trouble and because it's only fair. If they're kidnapped, thrown in the trunk of a car, picked up by the crane and left on a heap, you probably shouldn't throw swarms of rats, slaving dogs and homicidal maniacs at them (at least not all at once).

- **Why don't they just leave?** The junkyard covers a lot of ground. The dogs can't be everywhere at once, and neither can the Odells. A few Stealth rolls and characters should be able to find an exit, or at least make it to a fence, right?

Obstacles present themselves. The first is that the characters can't see the fence through the maze of cars. Climbing over heaps is always an option, but it presents its own dangers. Navigating the junkyard at night probably imposes additional penalties due to darkness, and if characters bring or create a source of light they advertise their position.

If you need another way to keep characters in the junkyard, one of the Odell boys might sit on the crane as a sniper. A bullet whizzes by a character's head whenever she makes a break for the fence. The characters might avoid this fate if they find a blind spot or climb the crane to disarm the sniper.

- **Can they call for help?** Cell phones, as discussed, don't always work well outside their normal calling areas, but recent models function almost anywhere (and somehow players' characters seem to have the best available technology). This isn't a problem if characters are forced to the junkyard (in that case, their possessions might be taken away). If they enter of their own volition, you might need to think of clever ways to hamstring them. A failed roll while crawling through cars might damage or lose a phone rather than do a character harm, or the dogs might hear a phone ringing and attack. As long as you don't make it too heavy-handed, you should be able to cut the characters off from easy rescue without any problems.

The only other phone on the premises is in the Odells' house. Getting to it can take up much of a story.

- **When are they safe?** At what point is the story over? You might decide that characters are safe if they make it out of the yard, whether over the fence or out the main gate. If they manage to call for assistance. If they make it to the nearest neighbor. Or if they survive until morning. Or maybe they aren't safe until they've killed or incapacitated the Odells and/or the dogs. Perhaps the Odells follow the characters if they leave the junkyard, and are perfectly willing to murder the people down the road to keep everyone quiet. It all depends on what you decide about the junkyard and its true identity.

GET OUT

GET OUT

GET OUT

GET OUT



ChWilkins

The Empty Room

Introduction

People get lost. Things get lost. And sometimes places get lost. The wandering phenomenon known as the Empty Room presumably began as an ordinary structure of walls, floor and ceiling. But somehow, whether by accident or design, its connection to ordinary time and space was severed. Now the Empty Room fades in and out of reality, inserting itself into the real world temporarily and then vanishing without a trace. The room's incursions into reality often go unnoticed. But should anyone enter the room during a brief visit, she regrets it. The vanished room removes its recent visitors from reality as well. Those caught up in this curse reappear in the Empty Room again and again, and must find a way to break the spell before their imprisonment becomes permanent — and lethal.

History

The Empty Room is a 12-foot x 18-foot chamber with a 10-foot ceiling. The room has no windows and, once it's claimed its victims, no doors. Its construction is simple and unadorned: whitewashed plaster walls and ceiling, and random-width plank flooring. The walls, floor and ceiling show signs of wear. Cracks, stains and worn spots give the room a definite used, lived-in appearance. There are no electrical outlets. The room is usually lit by a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, but this is sometimes replaced by a chandelier of lit candles. The room stays at a constant 72 degrees Fahrenheit. There are no vents or other sources of fresh air, but the air remains breathable no matter how much time passes (though the room does get stuffy during prolonged absences from the real world). The room's visible construction suggests that it was put together with pre-20th century technology. (The nails in the floor are not factory made; the planks seem hand-milled.) Beyond that, it's hard to be certain how old the Empty Room really is.

Characters who are caught in the room's trap may try to research the phenomenon as they attempt to escape its recurring grasp (they are intermittently returned to the normal world and then transported back to the room). They find that there's not much information available. The room appears sporadically at various locations, and, once it has trapped a few souls, it's not likely to appear in the same place again (though it could, if that suits your story). As a result, it hasn't left much of a trail for investigators to find. Careful searching, however, may yield some accounts that seem related to the room's past appearances.

Locating these facts (more like anecdotes) requires use of the Investigation, Academics or Occult Skill in an extended action, with each roll representing a few days' work. Alternately, you might use accounts of the room to warn characters before they encounter the place. Such stories might be dug up by characters while they research another mystery, or are told to them by an eccentric cast member in the midst of another story. Obviously, characters don't recognize the significance of the information until later — and probably regret not paying closer attention. (Of course, no rolls are needed for research if you want the information to be found, but players needn't know that.) Here's what characters may find out:

*Now it's dark and
I'm alone,*

*But I won't be
afraid...*

*In my room... in my
room.*

— "In My Room,"
written by Brian Wilson
and Gary Usher



- An early description of colonial life in Salem, Massachusetts, describes a “witch house” with a “haunted room.” The homeowner claimed his youngest son would vanish into the room for hours at a time, but no one could ever find the entrance. Later, the man claimed the room had disappeared completely, taking his wife and son with it. The man was hanged for murder when their bodies were found in the basement. (Found after five successes are accumulated.)

- In the late 1800s, an architect was found dead at the construction site of an office building he had designed. The cause of death was ruled to be starvation. A search of his possessions revealed numerous blueprints of the building, altered so that an extra 15-foot x 18-foot room was incorporated into the third floor. Oddly, the blueprints could not have been executed, as the added room would have no structural support. (Found after 10 successes are accumulated.)

- Early in the 20th century, a series of suicides occurred at a facility for the criminally insane. Apparently, several inmates became obsessed with a painting of an empty room that hung in a hallway, and claimed they were “trapped inside the painting.” The facility was closed down soon afterward. (Found after 15 successes are accumulated.)

It’s the room’s recent history that characters find most helpful, though there are no records of those events. Some 30-odd years ago, the Empty Room attached itself to the attic of an unassuming brownstone. The children of the house, Krista and Mason King, discovered the room and it quickly became their secret haven. They found out that no adults seemed able to find the place, or find them when they were in it, despite the fact that its entrance was in plain sight. As they grew, finding their way in and out of the room became more difficult. After an incident in which it took them hours to find the exit, the children decided to never return. Soon after, they found that the room no longer had a presence in their house.

The children grew up. Krista became an artist and her memories of the Empty Room had a strong influence on her work. Her paintings and drawings of the room had a haunted quality that gained her the praise of art critics, and a small but dedicated following among collectors. One evening, she, Mason and some friends admired her latest rendition, and then the impossible happened. The group realized that they were no longer staring at a painting, but were actually in the room itself. It was exactly as Krista and Mason remembered it — except that now they were unable to leave.

Their time in the room was brief that night. After several minutes, the group found themselves back in Krista’s studio once again. Terrified, they destroyed Krista’s painting and tried to tell themselves that the whole thing was some sort of group hallucination. Unfortunately, the room was not finished with them. The next day, the group found themselves transported into it once again. Each of them was mysteriously “teleported” from their separate locations. This time they were trapped for an hour. After

a third and fourth incident, they realized that each stay lasted twice as long as the last. If that rate kept up, they would be trapped there for days, then weeks and then months. Since the room seemed to impose limitations on how much food and water its unwilling visitors could bring with them (being kidnapped by it became almost anticipated), a slow death by starvation or dehydration seemed inevitable.

But Krista had a plan. Unhinged by the most recent, prolonged confinement, she resolved to slake her hunger and thirst by whatever means necessary. She kept several razor blades with her at all times — even taping them to her leg while she slept — and found them still with her upon her next imprisonment. Krista might have waited for her friends and brother to die before feeding on them, but she couldn’t be certain that she wouldn’t die first. So, she saved her strength as best she could. When the time came, she crawled to her semi-conscious companions and slit their throats, one by one. When the deed was done, she had all the food she needed to wait out her entrapment.

Eventually, Krista opened her eyes to find herself back in her own home. The others — their corpses — were likewise returned to where they’d been when the room last took them. The FBI was saddled with a gruesome mystery: multiple victims, murdered and similarly mutilated in various locations. They questioned Krista, who knew all the victims, but there was nothing to tie her to the deaths, so law enforcement moved on and Krista was never considered a suspect. Krista proceeded with her life. She stopped selling her art and lived off the assets of her *supposedly* deceased brother. The room never summoned her again, but her memories of that last terrible episode strained her sanity even further.

Krista now believes that she’s the only one who knows what happened, but she’s wrong. Her brother Mason actually survived the massacre and seeks revenge.

The room itself can provide some clues to the existence of the Kings, as addressed below, motivating the characters to search for either sibling. Or the characters may come across one of Krista’s paintings and recognize the room that’s become the stuff of their own nightmares. Learning the story of the King siblings helps characters come up with strategies to break the room’s curse. Since Krista is distrustful of strangers and mentally disturbed, it takes considerable effort to elicit the truth from her. In fact, should you choose, just finding Krista could be a major challenge. Krista’s brother Mason keeps an even lower profile, but he might approach the characters while they search for her. Mason is more willing than she is to share what he knows, but he does so only in exchange for favors, most of which are morally questionable, if not downright profane.

Motives

When the Empty Room appears in the real world, it fits itself into the architecture of an existing structure. A



formerly blank wall “acquires” an unassuming doorway that leads to a windowless room. The room seems to favor low-traffic areas or unoccupied structures for its appearances, almost as if it deliberately keeps a low profile. When placement requires the room to cut into the space of other rooms, existing walls shift to accommodate the new space. But unless someone is familiar with the original floor plan, there’s no evidence that the new room hasn’t been part of its host building since its construction.

The room maintains its presence in a host building for several hours to several weeks. During that time, any visitors may wander in and out without incident. Yet, the room does seem to have an effect on some people. Those who spend time in it may have recurring dreams about the room, or find themselves thinking about it in idle moments. The room might echo with faint sounds that could be voices, or cause visitors to feel a sudden chill or bout of nausea. Furniture or other items moved into the room might be found just slightly out of place. Such effects are usually subtle and don’t affect everyone who enters.

After a matter of hours, days or weeks, the room breaks its connection to the material world and vanishes. (Anything that had been stored in the room is left behind in an adjacent space in the real world, but it might return intermittently to the room while victims are trapped there.) When the room disappears, the real-world site reverts to its original state, with no sign that there was ever a doorway or other entrance. Even dust and cobwebs, if appropriate to the setting, seem undisturbed. Previous visi-

tors who return to the site may doubt their sanity, or if the room was located in unfamiliar territory conclude that they must misremember its location.

Soon after disappearing, the room makes its existence known once again. Without warning, those who entered it during its recent manifestation are transported back into the Empty Room. Or the room seemingly selects particular people who passed through as its victims. People who crossed the room’s threshold during its last attachment to reality appear in the room at the same time, even if their original visits to the room occurred separately. (Sometimes the room also manifests briefly in several successive locations before it summons any victims, in which case those who encountered it in different places appear together.)

The instantaneous transition from the outside world to the room is a dreamlike experience. A subject feels lightheaded and a bit dizzy. When she regains her faculties, she finds she’s in the Empty Room again. Only this time, there’s no doorway, no exit of any kind.

Since the room can appear almost anywhere in a relatively modern, urban or suburban setting; and doesn’t appear particularly threatening, it’s not difficult to arrange for players’ characters to enter it. Once they do, they’re snared, and have to figure out a way to break their connection to it if they want to survive ongoing returns. It might be a bit tricky to ensure that various characters get caught in the trap, if that’s the story you’re going for. (Indeed, the room might be the trigger that gets your players’ characters together for the first time in a chronicle.) The



following are some suggestions for drawing one, some or all of the characters into the setting:

- **A Room of One's Own:** The Empty Room might attach itself to a character's new house in an out-of-the-way place like a basement, attic or garage. It seems to be a room that went unnoticed during earlier inspections of the property. If the room appears in a house a character has lived in for years, the entrance might be "revealed" during renovations or uncovered when an old, heavy bookcase is pulled from a basement wall for the first time.

- **Just Visiting:** You could start the story by having characters stay at the same old hotel or bed-and-breakfast. The room attaches itself to the hotel, and characters wander into it at various times while looking for the ice chest or the cloakroom. If characters aren't already acquainted, they may not even meet each other until later, when the room's curse activates.

- **On the Job:** Characters whose professions require them to enter others' properties — plumbers, real-estate agents, police officers, architects, movers, painters — may enter the Empty Room while working. Anyone who has reason to be in an unfamiliar building, such as a student trying to find her classroom or a businessman meeting a client, might enter it because it corresponds to their directions. ("Second floor, third room on the right.") You can use multiple circumstances of this type to draw in characters who are geographically distant from each other, or who are otherwise unlikely to cross paths.

- **Minor Detail:** You might introduce the characters to the room while they're in the midst of another story. Perhaps they try to find their way out of a warehouse without being caught by the owner. Maybe they've broken into the restricted area of a large research library. They might duck in and out of the Empty Room and forget all about it. Later, when that story is over, the room's curse begins.

- **Picture at an Exhibition:** Images of the Empty Room sometimes ensnare the unwary, especially images created by those who have been trapped there. Characters might go to an art exhibition or gallery show, or attend a party at an art collector's home when their attention is caught by one of Krista King's paintings. (Perhaps the painting triggers the Unseen Sense Merit, encouraging someone to examine it intensely.) Later, they — and perhaps others who were intrigued by the piece — find themselves transported to the room depicted.

- **Death's Door Ajar:** A friend or relative of one or more characters is found dead in her home, either from suicide or starvation. While the authorities don't turn up any useful clues on her death, the characters find information — a letter lost in the mail, fragments of a hidden diary — that leads them to the Empty Room.

- **The Will:** One or more characters might receive an unexpected inheritance from a distant relative or benefactor. The character(s) are saddled with an old house or other property that's fallen into disrepair. Upon inspecting their unexpected windfall, they come upon the empty

room (which seems to be just another useless space in an undesirable building).

Systems

Once the room's unwilling guests adjust to their peculiar situation, they discover that the space has some unusual properties. First, any damage or physical changes made undo themselves, like a video scene played in reverse. The time required for repairs depends on the severity of the damage. Scratches in the floor "heal" slowly over a half-hour or so, while a chunk of plaster knocked out of a wall reforms in a minute. The light bulb, if shattered, pulls itself together in two or three seconds (the room is dark during that time). Words written on a wall or floor may take an hour or more to fade. Blood or other bodily fluids spilled in the room vanish in a minute or two, though odors may linger. (Should someone die while in the room, his corpse won't return to the real world until the entire group does. Blood or tissue that oozes from a body does disappear, however, as if the room brooks no soiling.) The room's self-repair leaves it looking exactly as it did before, including any pre-existing cracks or stains.

Another distinctive property of the room is that it manifests objects, sounds and other products of previous (and possibly future) visitors. Sometimes these manifestations await characters when they arrive. Other times, the manifestations come and go during a period of confinement. Some of them are obvious relics of past victims: desperate notes scrawled on scraps of paper (or the floor), cries for help, snatches of conversation (perhaps in other languages), strong odors of sweat or vomit. Others are inexplicable. The floor is covered with dozens of dead, black moths. A live rattlesnake slithers out of nowhere. The ring of an unseen, old-fashioned telephone continues for hours. Characters may even hear fragments of discussions they themselves had previously. (Jot down some things characters say or do during early visits and use them later. Or if there's a Storyteller-controlled character in the group, she might be used late in the story to make some distinctive scream or sound that the characters heard when they were first transported to the room.)

Objects in the room tend to appear and disappear when and where nobody's looking. A character might turn around and see a potted geranium that wasn't there earlier, but that is now sitting against a wall. Later he realizes that it's gone again. Sometimes large or numerous manifestations appear in motion, as if they've been tossed into the room from outside. An overstuffed parlor chair slides from one side of the room to the other (possibly knocking someone over). A hundred brass keys fall from the ceiling like rain. Characters who try and keep every inch of the room under surveillance may find that no objects come or go on their watch, or that things appear or vanish while someone rubs his tired eyes or sneezes.

Room Service

Strange sights, sounds and objects in the Empty Room can help characters find an escape, make each confinement different or just contribute to an unsettling ambiance. Here are some suggestions for what characters might experience. Remember that less is more. Subjecting the characters to an ongoing parade of phenomena dilutes their overall effectiveness.

- A child's drawing of the room, with the name "Krista" scrawled on the bottom. On the other side of the paper is a drawing of a city brownstone, with a street address written on the top of the page.

- The word "HUNGRY" scratched into the floor. Later, two more words are added: "EMPTY" and "THIRSTY."

- A note written in childish pencil: "Krista meet me in the room after school. Daddy cant find us there no one can. m"

- Several bloody razor blades that slide down the walls onto the floor.

- The strong odor of human waste.

- The sound of a woman sobbing hysterically.

- An empty bird cage. The sound of fluttering wings fills the room, but no bird can be seen.

- A list written on the wall in black ink:

1	1/2
2	1
3	2
4	4
5	8
6	16
7	32?
8	64?
9	128?

Coming and Going

The first involuntary visit to the Empty Room lasts exactly 30 minutes, assuming characters bother or have the presence of mind to time it. It ends with another brief period of disorientation, after which visitors are back in the real world where they were before. At that point, another surprise awaits them. Not only has no one noticed they were gone, no time seems to have passed. Even their own watches — which functioned normally and showed that 30 minutes had passed inside the room — now indicate that no time has elapsed. Anyone present during a character's "disappearance" claims to notice only that the

character seemed a little woozy for a moment. (Perhaps she dropped a glass or had to steady herself against a wall.)

Only small objects kept close to the body, about the size and weight of a wallet, travel with a character when he's transported to the room. Even if said objects are smashed or are not on the character's person when time in the room is up, they're back in place and undamaged when the character is back in reality. The same is true for clothing: it always remains in the state it was before the character disappeared, even if it was stained, shredded or removed while in the room. Objects that appear in the room don't generally accompany characters when they leave, but you might make an exception if it advances your story. (Maybe you want characters to have a faded photograph of the house that originally contained the Empty Room, so they'll know the house when they find it.) The lack of any physical evidence to back up claims makes it nearly impossible for characters to convince friends or family that their experience was real. Indeed, characters themselves may wonder if it wasn't all in their heads. (And maybe it was.)

Those entangled in the curse are transported to the room again and again. Each visit lasts twice as long as the last: a half hour the first time, then an hour, then two, then four — a pattern that probably becomes apparent to any characters who watch the time while they're confined. After a few stretches in the room, it's likely to occur to some that if the pattern continues they'll eventually face prolonged confinement without food or water. To make matters worse, their ability to bring provisions with them proves limited. Trial and error reveals that only objects kept close to the body — in a pocket or held in hand — are transported. And, except for clothing, each person can bring only about a quarter-pound of extra weight with him.

In Through the Out Door

Characters may make deliberate or accidental changes or inflict damage to themselves or each other while in the room. The impact of this upon their return to the outside world varies. (Recall that as far as any onlookers are concerned, no time passes and a character never went anywhere.) Minor physical changes like a haircut or five-o'clock shadow are restored. Hunger, thirst and fatigue are carried over. Characters who've been in the room for days are appropriately stressed, malnourished and tired upon their return to reality. Bashing, lethal and aggravated damage likewise carries over, but the physical expression of it takes a bit longer. As a rule of thumb, characters injured in the room manifest those wounds at a rate of one bashing point per hour, one lethal point every 30 minutes and one aggravated point per minute (once they're out of the room). Injuries manifest in the order in which they were received. So, wounds remain on a player's character sheet upon returning to the world. They just take time to actually appear in the real world as cuts, abrasions and bruises. Even though characters know they're coming, the wounds can't be treated until they manifest,

though they can use the time to get to a hospital or otherwise prepare.

Of course, the psychological implications of knowing that one is going to be, say, stabbed not just once but twice could trigger a derangement in a character. Awaiting the injury to manifest a second time could be mind-numbing. If a person trapped in the room is killed there, he returns to the world as a corpse.

Visiting Hours

It's up to you to decide how frequently the characters are summoned to the Empty Room. If visitations happen according to a predictable cycle — say, at 1:17 a.m. every three days — characters have a deadline that hangs over their heads as they search for answers or ways to escape. Or maybe figuring out the pattern is part of the story. It might be tied to the phases of the moon, or depend on a mathematical formula found scrawled on the ceiling of the room. On the other hand, never knowing when the room will summon characters next creates its own kind of tension.

Also consider how the time between visits affects your story. If the gaps are noticeably shorter each time, the stress level rises as the stakes get higher. A lengthy lull might encourage characters to hope that the room won't call for them again. You might allow weeks or even months to pass before characters are kidnapped again. Subsequent visits could take place between or even in the midst of other stories. The search for a solution might lead characters to strange places and on interesting wild-goose chases. And what if they face some dire threat when the room's unpredictable summons occurs? They have, say, eight hours to discuss what to do about the real-world threat. But when time is up, they have only seconds to act.

Krista King

Quote: “No, I haven't had a very interesting life.... Let's talk about you.”

Background: Krista has been making drawings and paintings of the Empty Room ever since she was a little girl. Once her images brought her some renown and success, but now she keeps most of them locked away and lives off an inheritance left by her brother. Most of the art world has forgotten her, but a few devoted fans remain, treasuring her work all the more because of its rarity. Krista senses that something stalks her, something that wants to punish her for the awful deeds she committed in the Empty Room. She doesn't know — or won't admit to herself — that it's her supposedly dead brother Mason. After a few close calls, she's developed talents and resources to protect herself. She usually keeps a firearm on her person as well as a sharp knife or two, and knows how to use them. Krista tends to travel, believing that a moving target is hard to hit. When she's not on the road, she divides her time among various well-fortified properties that she owns, never adhering to a predictable schedule.

Description: Krista is a fit-looking woman in her late 30s, whose slightly bohemian wardrobe reveals her artistic roots. She's stylish, but her eyes betray the fact that she rarely sleeps. She chain-smokes and never sits where she can't see a door or window. Krista prefers noise to silence and usually insists on leaving a radio, television or stereo on. While she's loquacious, she rarely talks about herself.

Storytelling Hints: Characters might become aware of Krista by finding notes, drawings, photographs or other evidence she left in the room as a child. If such clues don't include her full name, they might get characters as far as her childhood home, necessitating further legwork. Investigators may also discover Krista by coming across one of her paintings: an unmistakable image of the very room that's now their prison. A character with an art background may even have seen Krista's work in the past, causing the Empty Room to seem somehow familiar once he's trapped inside.

Tracking Krista down is a challenge. Her contact information is not available to the general public. Her allies among the local police discourage anyone who attempts to invade her privacy. (Those allies were gained through suspected run-ins with her stalker; the police pity rather than believe the “disturbed” woman.) Only her agent has any idea of where Krista is at any given time, and even he isn't always sure. Once found, Krista is paranoid, and the fact that something really is out to get her makes it difficult for her to trust anyone or to let her guard down. If characters question her directly about the Empty Room, she denies any knowledge of it and refuses to have further dealings with them. If they persist, she may decide that they're a danger and does what she can to avoid them or obstruct their investigations. If pressed, she may be convinced that the characters mean her harm and responds with violence.

A character's best hope of finding out what Krista knows about the Empty Room is to gain her trust over time. (Helping her escape an attack by Mason is a good start.) Characters who can prove (or fake) their good intentions find that she's desperate to unburden herself. And yet, encouraging Krista to revisit her past could push her deeper into madness. Characters who are desperate to escape the room's curse are sorely tempted to hound and pressure her for information. In that case, they may obtain only a few hints before Krista breaks contact. At your discretion, she may return to a story later and offer limited advice, feeling pity for those trapped in the same nightmare she once endured. Or characters may have to suffer the consequences of scaring her off.

Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3, Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Presence 3, Manipulation 4, Composure 2

Skills: Academics 2, Brawl 3, Crafts (Painting/Drawing) 4, Drive 3, Firearms 3, Persuasion (Fast-Talking) 4, Weaponry 3, Socialize 2, Stealth 3, Subterfuge (Hiding Emotion) 4

Merits: Allies (Police) 1, Danger Sense, Fleet of Foot 2, Iron Stomach, Quick Draw, Resources 3

Derangements: Hysteria (cannot tolerate enclosed areas or rooms without windows), Paranoia, Phobia (rooms with the closed doors)

Willpower: 5

Morality: 4

Virtue: Fortitude

Vice: Pride

Initiative: 5

Defense: 3

Speed: 12

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Knife	1 (L)	1	—	6

Type	Damage	Range	Shots	Dice Pool
Lt. Pistol	2	20/40/80	17+1	8

Health: 7

Mason King

Quote: “Do me a favor and I’ll show you how to get out. Cross me and I’ll make sure you stare at those blank walls forever.”

Background: Mason King was a tall, skinny kid whose height made him feel awkward and freakish. Only his sister Krista treated him with kindness. With her encouragement, he embraced his physicality, developing into an athletic, well-muscled young man. Mason spent time drifting through various shady undertakings until he found he had a knack for real estate. He became successful quite quickly, thanks to ruthlessness and a willingness to skirt the law. Mason was devoted to his sister, providing for her needs when she was a struggling artist. When she committed her awful deeds in the Empty Room, that devotion was replaced by a burning desire to punish her — not just for her heinous acts, but for her betrayal of him.

Mason survived through a combination of luck and endurance. Krista wasn’t thorough enough with her razor to kill him, though she mistook his weakened state for death and later fed on the flesh of his left arm. When the imprisonment was over, Mason was returned to the remote location to which he’d fled, and availed himself of the medical supplies he’d stored there. In the time it took him to recover, he was declared missing and eventually presumed dead. Krista inherited control of the considerable wealth he’d amassed.

It’s not Krista’s appropriation of his worldly goods that Mason resents, however. In fact, he believes he’s done with luxuries and creature comforts. Mason is convinced that he was spared death in order to bring retribution to his sister for her crimes. But she is resourceful and has become increasingly difficult to track down. While waiting for a window of opportunity, Mason spends his time tracking down and destroying the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of renditions of the Empty Room that she has created and

sold over the years. By doing so, he hopes to eliminate any chance that the Empty Room will claim him again.

Description: Mason is far from ordinary-looking. He’s close to seven feet tall, keeps his head shaved and bears horrendous scars along his throat, left arm and hand (the latter two where Krista removed strips of his flesh). He’s lean but solidly muscular and looks a bit weaker than he actually is. Because clothes in his size are hard to come by for someone who eschews money, he wears the same outfits until they’re ragged.

Storytelling Hints: Mason prefers to act without being seen, gathering what information he can by phone or the Internet. He has access to some cash and other resources that he stashed away while alive, but is not above stealing what he needs. He’s not malicious, but doesn’t hesitate to inflict harm on anyone who gets in his way. He’s relentless in pursuing his goals, but can be extremely subtle. If brute force won’t work, he’ll manipulate, bribe or blackmail others to get what he wants. Mason was quite a talker once, but he now prefers to remain silent. He speaks in a soft, calm voice when speech is absolutely necessary.

If the characters thwart or obstruct his attempts to attack Krista or destroy one of her paintings, he considers them an obstacle that needs to be removed. If the characters present themselves as victims of the Empty Room and don’t act against him, Mason may share information. He’d be willing to deal, but has no qualms about lying, tricking or betraying the characters if it brings him closer to his goals. If he senses desperation in the characters, he uses them as long as he can, getting them to spy on his sister and lure her to him.

Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 2, Resolve 4, Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 5, Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

Skills: Academics (Real Estate) 3, Athletics 3, Brawl 4, Crafts (Carpentry) 3, Firearms 3, Intimidation 3, Investigation 3, Larceny 3, Streetwise 4, Weaponry 3

Merits: Brawling Dodge, Giant, Iron Stamina 1, Strong Back

Derangements: Fixation (destroy Krista’s paintings), Fugue (trigger: staying in any room without windows for more than 30 minutes; behavior: pounds the walls and screams incessantly)

Willpower: 7

Initiative: 6

Defense: 3

Speed: 13

Size: 6

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Knife	1 (L)	1	—	8

Type	Damage	Range	Shots	Dice Pool
Hvy. Pistol	3	30/60/120	7+1	9

Health: 11

Preliminary Events

Once the characters begin their recurring appearances in the room, the story gains its own momentum. They need to find a solution, or else. But before that happens, you may want to raise tension gradually with some less overtly supernatural story elements. This might also be a good time for a few clues about the room that suggest a solution later. The following are a few ideas for moving the early part of your story forward:

- **Ghost Story:** The room may produce strange phenomena even before it's fully active. Odd noises seem to echo from it at night, or is that the wind? Small objects like keys or shoes go missing, only to be found in the room later. Some characters, if they've had previous supernatural experiences, might suspect that there's a ghost haunting the room and could recruit colleagues to help investigate. The group may even perform an exorcism or banishment, and when the room disappears it seems they've succeeded.

- **Did you see that?:** The room's attempts to summon its latest roster of prisoners does not work at first. Characters may have brief hallucinatory flashes in which they see the room's walls and floor superimposed on their surroundings. Or they may get a glimpse of the room in a mirror. Or the room that they're actually in may suddenly appear devoid of furniture, carpeting and windows for a few moments. If not everyone in the group has gone into the room at this time, such experiences might keep them from doing so, sparing them the fate of their companions.

- **S.O.S.:** It's possible that previous victims — or their disembodied souls — are still somehow connected to the room. Or maybe the echoes of their torment spill out while the room is attached to the real world. Once the characters discover the room, they may receive warnings or desperate pleas for help: a barely audible phone call, a sentence written in steam on a bathroom mirror, a strangely scorched note that's found in the morning mail. Such messages may motivate characters to examine the room more closely or try to research its past. The signs may lead to overt clues that will be helpful later, or they could just help you establish a mood of dread. Characters might even experience flashes of previous victims trapped in the room. Waking dreams, nightmares or visions of Krista, Mason or others could help the characters find such survivors later on.

Marking Time

Say the players' characters are trapped in a room for 12 hours. They spend the first three pouring over every inch of the floor and walls that they can reach. They experience and react to four strange phenomena. So, what now? Rather than saying, "Nothing much happens, nine hours go by and you're back on your front porch," follow-

ing are some ideas to encourage roleplaying among players to make time pass dramatically:

- **Stir Up the Pot:** Characters who are hungry or fatigued misinterpret something they see or hear. Until evidence proves the contrary, they take the misunderstanding as reality. If you whisper to one of the players, "You see Carla slip something into her pocket. It looked like a candy bar," how does his character react? Does he demand that Carla share (perhaps as all agreed they would do with any food they had)? Is the accused character incensed? What if the characters already have a history of distrust and animosity?

- **Play on Virtues and Vices:** While characters are imprisoned, their players might not pass up a chance to recover some spent Willpower. You might remind a player with a wrathful character that it was his colleague who bought the "stupid painting" that got everyone into this mess, and see if a fight ensues. You might tell a charitable character that there appears to be fresh water trickling from a crack in the wall. Several ounces of water have pooled on the floor, but the flow is already drying up. Does she share?

- **Trigger a Flashback:** If there's a defining event in a character's past, perhaps related to the room, being trapped could trigger a re-enactment of the scene, with the other characters or players swept up into supporting roles. (See the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 195). As a shared vision, the flashback could reveal telling information about a character whose past is not well-known to the group. (Be careful not to share more than that character's player is comfortable with, however.)

- **Give the Players Time:** If your players are even the least bit interested in roleplaying, time spent in the room can be a chance to exercise it. When there's not much going on, try stepping back and letting the characters talk to each other. Sometimes just staying quiet encourages players to fill the silence. If players don't take it upon themselves to interact, you can spur them on by playing on the differences between them. "You notice that Jim has an unusual tattoo on his upper left arm." "You hear Alice hum a foreign-sounding melody under her breath." "You see Greg scratch a scar on his wrist."

- **Check for Derangements:** Characters may develop derangements if their Morality scores drop. They can also develop conditions if they're exposed to undue pressure, and hours or days of forced confinement and starvation fit the bill. You might decide that at some point, a successful Resolve + Composure roll must be made for a character to avoid suffering the effects of depression, a phobia or another mild derangement for the remainder of that period in the room. As imprisonment time increases, such rolls might be required any time that characters attempt to work or reason together in the room. If characters already have such derangements, rolls need to be made for them sooner rather than later, if they've been exposed to their ailments' usual triggers.

Stories

How can the characters escape the Empty Room? How do they figure out the answer? Below are some solutions that you can mix and match. You might even let your players' decisions determine the outcome. If they seem to be interested in finding the children whose notes and toys they keep finding in the room, you could decide that Krista King holds the solution to their dilemma. If you want a longer, more challenging story, you might require characters to exhaust multiple sources of information before seeing the big picture.

Escape Strategies

- **Just Survive:** It's possible that the room releases its victims once they've been through one entire cycle of visits. Those who live through the longest imprisonment are then free from the curse. Letters or photographs found in the room might help characters track down Krista, Mason or other survivors whom you create (or the documents lead to a diary or other account written by a survivor centuries ago). Such survivors or the records they left behind might give characters reason to think that surviving, say, the tenth visit will bring an end to the nightmare. Some characters might be physically robust enough to live through an extended stay (especially if they have an appropriate Physical Merit such as Iron Stomach). Others might make it if they prepare carefully. This scenario can be an opportunity for thoughtful roleplaying. How do characters act when faced with near-certain death? Do they try to take care of unfinished business? Does a character with high endurance share food and water with those less likely to endure? How does a character's desperate behavior affect her relationships with other survivors later on?

Since the characters can bring only a limited amount of food and water into the room, they need to plan carefully. If the room is unpredictable in its summoning, characters need to keep their supplies on their person at all times (even while sleeping). Food choices are important. Ones that are calorically dense are the most helpful. (An energy bar from a wilderness-survival kit might add several hours to the time a character can go without feeling the effects of food deprivation. One purchased at the supermarket might be little more than a dressed-up candy bar). Characters who go hungry, are injured or who become dehydrated between visits to the room risk starting the next bout of confinement in a weakened state.

The room itself might provide opportunities to extend characters' survival. A live deer might appear in it. If the characters catch and kill the animal before it vanishes, they have meat. A locked strongbox might appear. If someone can pick the lock in time, they find enough water inside to survive another day.





These kinds of chances could be opportunities for characters to exercise Skills they don't often get to use (to play well on the grand piano that just appeared, for example). But too many such episodes reduce the story to the level of a video game, where energy levels are refilled as needed.

If you make survival the key to breaking the curse, review the rules in the **World of Darkness Rulebook** for “Deprivation” (p. 175) and “Fatigue” (p. 179) to get a sense of how characters are affected by prolonged imprisonment. Also consider how deprivation affects characters when they return to the real world. They're vulnerable to disease and need a sustained supply of food and water to heal Health lost to hunger and thirst.

- **Repair or Restore:** The Empty Room, by accident or design, seems to have broken loose from the real world. Is it possible to reconnect it to reality? Maybe the characters need to locate the room's original building and restore it. That could mean digging up blueprints and then finding a half-mad architect who can interpret them. Maybe an occult ritual must be performed at the site, requiring hard-to-get materials or morally questionable actions. (Grave robbing? Human-organ theft?) Perhaps the characters need to find and rebuild the room's original door, which by now is separated into pieces that are prized possessions of powerful occultists or vampires.

The room might be repaired in other ways, giving characters a chance to draw on underused Skills. Perhaps it began not as a room at all, but as a drawing or painting of a room. If the characters can find the original work, they may be able to break the spell by adding a door or window to the image. (Was it Krista who created the room, designing an imaginary refuge to protect her from abuse as a child? When she no longer needed it — perhaps her abuser was caught or died — the room began to appear elsewhere, feeding on the fear it inspired in victims.) Changing the original image might take considerable artistic skill, or require the participation of the original artist. The image may reject any alteration that's less than perfect, and respond by summoning its prisoners once again. Or maybe the room was first created in an unfinished poem, novel or stage play. The characters have to deduce or discover the ending the author had in mind, and then act it out inside the room. But dangerous elements of the story come to life — someone gets shot, a wild animal attacks, there's a fire — making it hazardous to bring the tale to a conclusion.

- **Child's Play:** When the room disappears, it's beyond the perception of the ordinary mind. Children, however, whose minds are more flexible, might perceive an entrance where adults see only a wall or floor. They might notice that characters caught in the room's curse “went away” for a second or two. They might even be able to enter and exit the vanished room from the site of a recent manifestation (as young Krista and Mason King did in their attic). Characters may be shocked to find a child — their own offspring, a neighbor, a stranger — waiting in the room when they appear there. The room's time-bending properties may even allow the child-aged Krista and

Mason to interact with the characters, though the children disappear if anyone tries to hurt them.

Interacting with children who were in the room in previous times can help characters gather information about the origins of the place and how to stop the cycle. (Young Krista, for example, could hint that she created the room so she and Mason could hide from an abusive relative). Contemporary children who enter the room under their own power may be able to lead others out (but perhaps only one person per visit). Anyone who exits this way is free of the room's grasp, but the experience may be traumatic to the child, or fatiguing or damaging to his health. The characters may need to gain a frightened child's trust before he helps.

- **Altered State:** Maybe it's not just kids who have the right mindset to find a way into or out of the room. Adults who have an altered view of reality might be able to do it. Characters who are hypnotized, entranced, psychotic, drugged or otherwise shifted from a normal mental state may be capable of leading others to freedom (or maybe they end up some place worse). Perhaps a former victim managed to escape after developing a derangement due to confinement. He might be able to free the characters, but his psychosis makes him an unreliable and dangerous ally.

- **Kill or be Killed:** Perhaps the Empty Room calls out for blood. Only death breaks its connection to those who've been caught up in its curse. Perhaps it even takes a certain kind of death, which is why particular murder weapons keep reappearing in it. Does one of the characters willingly sacrifice herself? Does she try to time the deed to occur just before time is up, and the rest arrange for her to get quick medical attention once back in the real world? Or does the group seek another solution, one that's less bloody, but (as far as they can tell) less likely to work? If there's a wanton criminal or killer among the characters, is it “acceptable” to sacrifice him for the greater good? If there is a death among the characters, does that person stay dead or return as a vengeful ghost or revenant? Or is the murder victim alive once more when the room's curse is broken, as if nothing ever happened?

Seeking Answers

The objects, sounds and other phenomena that occur in the Empty Room may provide clues to its secrets. Here are some other ways in which the characters might learn what's required to win their freedom.

- **Find Previous Survivors:** If the characters can track down Krista King, she may have information they can use to escape their fate. Her connection to the room might be brought out if the characters encounter one of her paintings, or if they find her childhood drawings in the room. If all they have is a first name and address — perhaps written on the bottom of a dated Charlie Brown lunch box found in the room — locating her may not be so easy. The first lead might send characters to her childhood home (which could be located in the characters' home city, or requires traveling a significant distance). The current resi-

dents might know nothing about previous owners, motivating the characters to break in and search for clues (like more old drawings or letters by Krista, hidden in the attic or moldering in the basement). The house might be vacant and abandoned, but watched over by Mason, who resents anyone trespassing. Once Krista is found, her paranoia makes it difficult for characters to get information from her. And even if she tells them that, say, a death inside the room breaks the curse, can she be believed? The characters may have to deal with Mason, too, and compare his version of the story to hers.

Mason King has his own observations or deductions about escaping the room, which may or may not jibe with Krista's. Perhaps nearly dying in the room has granted him some special knowledge about it, or even the ability to enter and exit it on occasion. Even if that's not the case, he might claim such a connection to convince characters to parley with him. In exchange for their freedom, he asks that they perform tasks that suit his goals. At first his requests seem relatively benign — do some research or legwork for him, or break into a gallery to destroy a painting. But when he asks someone to infiltrate Krista's current residence and learn her schedule, can the characters guess why?

You might create other survivors. Those who manage to escape the Empty Room rarely do so without a damaged psyche. A survivor might have repressed all memory of the incident. He may despise the characters for making him relive the trauma, or fear that speaking of what happened will cause him to be ensnared once again. A survivor may spend all his time on the run, fearing that staying in one place too long will cause the room to reappear. Or a survivor may have been a willing participant, who hid in the room to escape a traumatic childhood, and she doesn't want to relive old memories. A survivor may even be a dangerous occultist or vampire who entered the room in search of power (and possibly found it). Survivors might have all sorts of reasons for giving characters bad or deliberately false advice.

• **Call In an Expert:** Characters who've experienced strange situations before may have Contacts or Allies with knowledge of the supernatural, divination abilities or unusual expertise in the bizarre. Such sources probably don't have specific information on a phenomenon as singular as the Empty Room, but they might be capable of making an educated guess or unearthing a fragment of the truth. They don't, for example, know that the room will cease its activity if the characters paint the image of the original door on one of the walls and open it with a key buried at the room's original site. Yet, seers may guess that finding the room's point of origin helps, or divine that "a tall stoneworker has the answer." Occultists might intuit that some great wrong was committed that broke the room's reality, and the characters' only hope is to find out what happened and put things right. Such advice never comes without a cost, though it may not be demanded until a later story.

Variations

The Empty Room is something of a blank slate, a framework that you can dress up to tell whatever sort of story you want. Here are some variations to consider.

• **High Action:** What if characters find something nasty waiting for them each time they're summoned to the Empty Room? The length of imprisonment might remain the same, but each visit traps the characters with increasingly dangerous antagonists: a rabid dog, a Bengal tiger, an armed serial killer, a half-mad vampire. If the room summons the characters on an unpredictable schedule, they need to keep weapons and first-aid gear with them at all times. Perhaps the room summons the characters only when they kill or destroy an antagonist in another story. Maybe they have to face the enemy they just defeated, only this time inside the room, and the opponent remembers what tricks or strategies were used to defeat him. Until the curse is broken, powerful foes that were destroyed by sheer luck have to be beaten again by some means. Or maybe the room is a dying curse levied on the characters by an enemy, forcing them to face her again and again until they break the spell.

• **This Time It's Personal:** Instead of characters finding that no time passes in the real world while they're trapped, it passes normally and their absence goes unnoticed because something takes their place and lives their lives. Maybe they're replaced by exact duplicates, or their bodies are possessed by other entities. At first the doppelgangers just go through the motions, performing tasks that characters would anyway. But as the story progresses, the replacements wreck the characters' lives. Perhaps the duplicates try to learn about humanity by walking among people. Or maybe they're malicious spirits, committing increasingly atrocious acts for the pleasure of it. Even if characters put an end to the room's curse, it may take months or years to undo the damage done to their reputations and personal relationships. Some characters may even be wanted for crimes committed by their duplicates.

• **Unexpected Consequences:** What if the Empty Room isn't a trap for the players' characters, but for something else. Some unseen, unfelt entity dwells in the room, unable to escape, but capable of luring others into its prison. Should the characters find a way to break the room's curse, the mysterious prisoner is also freed. The characters might not find this out until it's too late, which could lead to another story in which they search for a way to put the genie back in the bottle. Or they may receive clues about the room's true purpose and must decide whether saving their own lives is worth releasing something dangerous into the world.



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